

**Get the picture:
Central Australian indigenous paintings,
which reveal collaborative thought about
contemporary social situations**

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Thinking, listening: ‘talking story’

In central Australian languages the words for ‘thinking’ and ‘understanding’ are the words for ‘listening’ and ‘hearing’. The root verb, *kulini* (Pitjantjatjara) leads to *kulinara palyani*; ‘to plan or work out how to do something’. This is what we are doing here; looking at these paintings; trying to ‘get the picture’ and attending to what the pictures reveal.

Speaking, listening, thinking and drawing are connected. In sand drawings, flow charts, architectural diagrams and art works a thinking process can be revealed, however much we are used to seeing the finished product of deep thought set out in written words or in variations of multimedia. In Oceania there are significant groups of people who rely continuously and traditionally upon interactive story telling linked to geographical sites. The indigenous form and pattern of thinking may be displayed in a geometric coding, narrative coding and form of local iconography within which interactive thoughts are coded and understood. Australian Aboriginal culture holds a rich and intricate iconography which emanates from the language and mental processes

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of the 'First Australians'. The method used in seriously indigenous Australian education relies upon presenting apt stories within an associative discussion somewhat akin to the Socratic method. The imagery, metaphor and myth of the story are used to reveal a thought, or to lay the groundwork for a series of thoughts, and actions, to entertain and to instruct. Song cycles and the actions of ceremonies set out concepts and facts about culture and law. Ceremonial and ritual event is a method of cultural initiation shared across many cultures. We retell and repaint our myths, not because we necessarily believe such tales to be literally true but because they reveal different dimensions of our complex, imaginative, human reality. In short, certain seminal stories told with a certain intention support our capacity for thinking about reality, morality, ethical behaviours and paradox. Painting such ideas helps us to 'get the picture' and pass it on.

The practical problem daily placed before persons involved with the interaction of cultures, law and lore and pressed by crime and the resolution of offences against person, law and cultural ethos is of how one legitimate form of thinking can coincide with another. This is a complex matter, involving at least a parallel history of ideas informed by the evolution of trade, invasion trauma psychology (Singer & Kimbles 2004) and the neurological patterning of our language and thinking systems. Always within invasion dynamics there seems to be the problem of how two contrary ways of thinking can communicate and collaborate rather than simply resist and destroy each other's values.

Be that as it may, in this commentary I attend to a few representative collaborative paintings from central Australia selected from an illuminating series of hundreds of works which grew from the initiative of the Healthy Aboriginal Life Team from about 1986 and continues in other contexts today. That series reveals how significant desert Aboriginal Australians have thought about contemporary situations and establishes quite definitively that indigenous people have been actively reflecting on the existential dilemmas of our collective situation and have been consistently proposing pragmatic solutions, often in pictures. These paintings, including the ones reproduced here, show how certain

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Aboriginal thinkers have sized up our joint problems, diagnosed and predicted outcomes, provided strategic plans and proposed solutions. Some of these paintings have been influential in forming social policy, but it must also be said that some rather troubling element in the quick, restless, defensive, over literate politico-legal Australian mind finds it difficult to read, and apply the thinking which is set out so vividly in such works.

Jukurrpa and a brief history of a cooperatively generated art movement

It is well known that Australia is geographically criss-crossed with a richly imaginative weave of story tracks used in different ways for different purposes in specific locations. The Australian fabric of myth, metaphor and pragmatic environmental coding, known in some local languages as Jukurrpa or Altjirra, forms the 'nerve system' of the country. Activities of Jukurrpa / Altjirra are coded in landforms, song verses, dance actions, gestures, body designs, on rock walls and intricately carved boards and stones. This patterning underlies the contemporary thinking and works of the painters who ones sees represented in the galleries. Marcia Langton, Dick Kimber, Hetti Perkins, Fred Myers and others (Perkins & Fink 2000), Peter Sutton (Sutton 1988), and the Bardons in their wonderful summation of Pintubi painting (Bardon & Bardon 2004) have all written beautifully on the history and meaning of desert Aboriginal art, based on their direct experience and collaboration with painters. A history of collaboration might take in the water colour landscapes of the Batterbee / Namatijira line, beginning in the 1930s and include Mountford's anthropological art journeys in Pitjatjanjarra region of the 1950s. We would pass to the vitality of the Bardon/ Papunya painters' interaction of the 1970s and thence through the 1980s to note the arrival of international recognition and the popularity of the 'dot painting' phenomena and the gallery movement. Now there is an astoundingly rich and complex art bank with variations in authenticity and quality and with variations in

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collaboration between cultural custodians. The vitality and intrigue of the artistic and cultural indigenous story work is well enough appreciated, since most 'Aboriginal art' depicts a bit of a dreaming story, but perhaps few non Aboriginal Australians understand or appreciate the significance, value and vitality of Jukurrpa as an emotional and intellectual phenomenon, as Kimber so eloquently suggests in his essay 'Tjukurrpa Trails' and Langton explains in her essay 'Sacred Geography' (Perkins & Fink 2000).

The focus in this commentary is on the phenomenon of intercultural collaboration, not only in arts but also on meeting matters of law and social distress. This model of original and creative cooperation gives positive indications of a methodology for those concerned with intercultural justice. Around 1980 a subtle shift in the use of the desert painting can be seen. Whereas most art works depict variations on Jukurrpa, disguised or reshaped a bit, one epic work begins the feelingful symbolic commentary on the changing cultural conditions of desert people. This canvas is known as the *Napperby Death Spirit Dreaming* (Bardon 1989, Sutton 1989). In *Mythscapes*, Bardon describes how Tim Leurah Japaljarri and Clifford Possum Japaljarri (now both deceased), painted a 7-metre canvas for Bardon, depicting a skeleton travelling across a bushfire ravaged country set in a mosaic of local dreaming stories. In his personal comments to Bardon, Leurah passes on his sense of melancholy, defiance and the tragic vision of the coming predicted dispersal of indigenous reality. It is a kind of lament and eulogy. Bardon writes '... it is the first painting in which a western desert artist stands aside from his tribal context and comments quite self consciously, on his art, his dreamings and himself'. Around 1985 in Yuendumu, a young Andrew Spencer Japaljarri paints *Satellite Dreaming*, a blueprint of the Warlpiri Media satellite network being developed with Eric Michaels / Francis Jupurrula Kelly and company (Michaels 1986). This simple painting uses Warlpiri traditional patterns of linking dreaming sites to depict a linking of satellite broadcast sites across country — old patterns, new events. It may be the very first of its kind — a new method and updating of the tradition, which Andrew

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develops later with Hinton Lowe / Christine Franks in the context of the petrol sniffing project of HALT (Healthy Aboriginal Life Team 1991). The HALT set-up, between 1987 and 1992 gave Andrew and his group including Alex Minutjukur and kin, the scope to work and think about the same existential situation which the Leurah / Possum brothers foresaw in the *Napperby Death Spirit* vision — a painting which was based (among other things) on the pattern and metaphor of bushfire as pervasive, invasive (possibly temporary?) destruction of an established way of life.¹

The custodianship of painting-as-thoughts continued within Barry and Elva Cook's Western Arrernte, Intjartnama Aboriginal Alcohol Rehabilitation project (near Hermannsburg). This project continued to produce 'thinking paintings' until around 2000. These include Elva Abbot Cook Nangala's poignant *Fire Painting*, which uses the metaphor of children and young women being consumed by the 'unquenchable fire' of Alice Springs and alcohol. The Sugarbaby/Crow Story, discussed in more detail below, which came from a number of collaborative art and performances,² is part of this quietly developing lineage of philosophically minded indigenous painters sitting, listening in active partnership with their non-Aboriginal kin. As social and emotional statements, the paintings begin to reveal desert Aboriginal mind at work, in response to western minds, using the original iconography of the Jukurrpa, reflecting concisely upon the changing realities of our world and the actuality of present life and death in the traumatic borderline zones of black/white Australia. In almost all of these paintings there is an implicit recognition of the value to humanity of cooperation and coexistence. They advocate 'two way thinking' and intelligent application of two lores/laws. It has been my direct and long term experience that thoughtful desert Aboriginal people do not advocate schismatic and separatist solutions to our dilemmas of coexistence. Collaboration is the signature.

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The Sugarbaby/Crow Story

This story depicts the dismemberment of children, the carnivorous abuse of an infant, the destruction of innocence and vitality. The crime of infanticide. A truthful reality and a metaphorical communication about fruitful fertile life under attack. It goes like this.

This painting by Elva Abbott Cook Nangala of Intjartnama is built on a centralised plant tendril and root system pattern which you may see in many paintings by women from the Western Desert Arrernte / Pintubi regions. Quite often such paintings depict a ceremony, with the characters and layout of the ceremony set out like a stage diagram. The central circle might represent the core idea / feeling of the purpose of the event and usually it will focus upon generativity, fertility and production of that particular plant or food source. Speaking anthropologically, we are talking 'increase ceremony', with the central circle presenting the point of 'flowing out', the 'creation point' of the specific seeds, fruits. The dreaming/ Tjukurrpa story will contain some element upon which the ceremony and the painting is built as in this canvas, which depicts a scene from the performance of the Sugarman or Nkwala Story, developed between 1996–1999 at Intjartnama Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation Outstation. This particular Baby/ Crow painting is not a traditional Arrernte story but the pattern and dynamic is derived from thence. What makes this painting unusual are two factors.

First, the story is a combined Aboriginal and European mythic story, rich in symbolism and interconnectedness drawing upon two main source inspirations. From the Aboriginal side comes the sagas of the Punkalunka lonely witch-woman who steals children and young men, the Seven Sisters and erotic male hunter variations (see Kimber 2000: 271–2), Rain and Lightning stories and local Crow myths. From the European side comes Kronos' famed baby swallowing saga, Zeus' erotogenic metamorphic and lightning sagas, (usually ending badly for the women), Dionysus' traumatic childhood dismemberment and the mature erotic intoxication stories of the Maenads (as in Euripides' *Bacchae*). Second, the painting is a commentary and mirror turned upon a contemporary situation.



Elva Abbot Cook Nangala
The Performance Ground (Nkwala Ceremony)



Andrew Spencer Japaljarri
Thinking About Young People

This painting presents a diagnosis of a situation of young people in trouble, caught between two worlds, two laws, two spiritual pressures, two economic methods and with an uncertain future. A plea for a full meeting of black and white minds to think about the situation and make strategic plans based on the reality of bush life; the central image is about bringing the relevant people together to be thinking about young people, as did occur in the context of the Two Laws/Petrol Link Up projects.



Andrew Spencer Japaljarri
under the supervision of his mother Nangala
Pama

Depiction of a traditional increase ceremony for a desirable sweet native food, categorised as Pama or Nkwala. Painting used by Japaljarri to point out the absence of ceremony for managing the decrease of 'whitefeller' sugars and alcohol. His point being that desert people have no traditionally sanctioned law or concept to use as a basis for restraining intake of imported sugars and alcohol.



Elva Abbot Cook Nangala and family
The Fire Story

The central image is of a mother struck by lightning and on fire, with a baby in her womb. It represents women and children and culture being consumed by the sudden fire of intoxication. Adapted from an incident in the European myth of Dionysus.

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The painting/stage diagram depicts human generativity and spiritual fertility under threat as a direct result of toxic elements in the meeting of European and Aboriginal cultures, in particular, through the derangements of alcohol. Specifically it depicts threat and devastation coming from greed, ruthless amorality, self interest and denial of humanity. This is presented in the story in the following way.

The Setup. Yellow dotted central section represents the spring wild flowers of the August season; the white dots on dark blue grey represent the night stars.

The central concentric circle represents the generation point from which plants, fruits and babies develop. You see a baby in a cradle/coolamon. The characteristic 'horseshoe' figures represent humans 'sitting down' — the baby is watched over by three mothers sitting.

Other characters represented include the baby's father, (the lightning) in the left hand top corner, and other performers on the ceremony ground in formation, which do not directly concern us here. The specific issue requires us to attend to the four figures and circle in the right hand corners. Here you will note bird tracks advancing on the baby.

These tracks are those of the Crows, alias Kronos and the Titans, uncles of the infant, the sweet baby, Sugar Baby depicted vulnerably lying asleep in the coolamon. By deception they distract the mothers, who leave the infant in the care of the uncles who proceed to disguise themselves then to abuse, dismember and engorge themselves on the child's body and scatter the fragments across the country. The mothers return to discover the crime and in grief travel widely to pick up the scattered pieces.³ The father returns and also in grief and dismay attempts to regenerate the child. In the Dionysus myth the regeneration is successful, as in the Christian myth. In the western desert situation the future generation is in doubt.

The current 2006 media attention on sexual abuse and child neglect in Indigenous communities, along with various government reactions and solution bidding makes public the interior pathologies of our nation, facts already depicted and predicted in the many paintings-as-thought,

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as prophecy, and as pleas for solution. The scenes of child abuse, brutality, drunkenness, violence and traumatic disorder in Aboriginal communities have been made abundantly clear for at least 20 years by these painters. So have cooperative solutions. What is also made clear is the depressing impotence of western *and* customary law systems to gather resourcefulness and take consistent congruent action to contain the behaviour of 'Crows'. The painter of the picture, the instigators of the story and the performers in the related events were clearly aware of the complex system issues of central Australian turmoil. One might say that a select band of desert Aboriginal men and women and their kin and associates have been observing and depicting accurately a state of the nation for many years, since Tim Leurah's bushfire skeleton painting. They have been depicting the situation with insightful imagery, indicating also the direction of solutions based on reasonable mutual collaboration and pragmatic comprehension of the hard truths of mutual deprecations and compassion. Their solutions head in the direction of listening and thinking accurately. Thinking is aided by accurate depiction of the situation. But depiction requires attention, talking requires listening, listening requires thought. Mental work.

Notes

This commentary is based upon a joint presentation with Marlene Nampitjimpa Spencer/Ross (Walungurru) given at the Central Australian Remote Area Practitioners Association Conference, Alice Springs, May 2002. It assumes some knowledge by the reader of the social conditions in central Australia, of the contentious difficulties of reconciling culturally specific justice process and law and of problematic alcohol and drug abuse. The paintings referred to here emerge from that context.

- 1 A theological spiritual collaboration was evident in a comprehensive dot painting completed for the Yuendumu Baptist Church in the mid 1980s by several Warlpiri people including Japaljarri Spencer and possibly Jampijimpa Ross and kin. This painting is a depiction of the dramatic events of the Easter story. The Passion, death and resurrection of Christ as a mythic story is retold and enhanced by Walpiri/Jukuurpa patterns. The Spencer kinship group continue to take up the theme of death and yearned for cultural

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resurrection in their social observation paintings through the HALT period until at least 1993 in *Thinking About Young People*, a diagnostic work on the situation and future of Aboriginal youth. The method continues in the *Brain Story*, and the *Two Laws* series (for the Petrol Link Up project 1993–95) and in the preparation for the Alcohol Dreaming initiative in ‘The Sugarman Project’, a community project initiated as a response to a request from Andrew Spencer Japaljarri for a ‘story about alcohol’ which would fill a missing link in traditional Aboriginal conceptualisation of alcohol. It is based on a poetic retelling of the Dionysus myths (San Roque 1998).

- 2 These included the Sugarman performances and the Four Winds youth festivals involving multiple intercultural collaborations with, eg, The Amatjerre Janganpa group and white Australian visual artists, Sally Mumford, Rod Moss, Dan Murphy and Louis Pratt, among others (San Roque 1998, 2002).
- 3 In the Sugarman performances the women who collect the pieces are directly associated with the pragmatic Night Patrol women and with those (few) custodial men/ fathers who make an effort to save and protect human integrity from the depredation of ‘Crows’, the drunk, ruthless amoral relatives, both black and white.

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