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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/actesbranly/575>

DOI: 10.4000/actesbranly.575

ISSN: 2105-2735

Publisher

Musée du quai Branly Jacques Chirac

Electronic reference

Françoise Dussart, « Fora of Identity: From Public Ceremonies through Acrylic Painting to Evangelical Preaching », *Les actes de colloques du musée du quai Branly Jacques Chirac* [Online], 4 | 2014, Online since 13 June 2014, connection on 08 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/actesbranly/575> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/actesbranly.575>

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Françoise Dussart

1 Thanks.

Introduction

- 2 This presentation has for aim to give you a glimpse, only a glimpse of manifestations of Aboriginality in a settlement in Central Australia where I have worked for the past 30 years. I address here in a truncated manner how what is now often called “indigeneity” become locally and globally rooted and routed through particular public performances. By examining various performances, which engage publically cross-cultural audiences, I highlight different repertoires of indigeneity:
- 3 **Somet**hat privilege more traditional forms of identity politics, **Others**, which privilege newer forms of identity politics, forms which overlap but do not compete overtly with the more “traditional” expressions, **And others** which privilege forms of identity which reshape and at times reject traditional expressions. In this paper I argue that tracking the significance of public performances —ceremonies grounded in classical Aboriginal religion, acrylic paintings, and Evangelical church meetings, brings us closer to an understanding of the changing nature of social identity and kin relatedness in neo-colonial Australia.
- 4 My paper is accordingly organized in three sections. To be sure, in practice these divisions are not so neat and tidy and linear as my alliterative scheme suggests. Ever since anthropology 'discovered' Australian religion--starting with the midnineteenth century contributions of Spencer and Gillen, whose fieldwork fueled the more speculative armchair investigations of Durkheim and his heirs--much focus has been directed at the ritual manifestation of the Aboriginal cosmology known as the Dreaming. And though the frequency of ceremonial performances of the Dreaming has

diminished for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, this quantitative diminution in no way negates the analytic dividends derived from the study of contemporary uses of public ritual performances.

- 5 Among the Warlpiri Aborigines of Yuendumu, a settlement located 300 km northwest of Alice Springs, perhaps the most significant changes in public performance of the Dreaming since sedentarization are those related to gender; it is women who came to dominate the public ritual life of the settlement in the 1980s. It is women who served as gatekeepers of the public expression of Warlpiri ceremonial knowledge. And significantly, this protective role not only functions within what Fred Myers calls the "intercultural space" that conjoins Aboriginal and White society, but also extends to settings of intra-cultural exchange-- neocolonial situations in which Aborigines define "Aboriginality".
- 6 Warlpiri public rituals, however small in number are large in social significance. And up until the beginning of the 21st century, they were one of the primary arena in which the Warlpiri of Yuendumu negotiated their political identity in relation with non-Aboriginal people and other Aboriginal groups against the backdrop of non-indigenous neo-colonial hegemony.
- 7 The public ceremonies performed at Yuendumu resemble, at least on a superficial level, classic Warlpiri ceremonies conducted prior to sedentarization in the 1940s. Like their predecessors, current rituals are kin-based events that reify the Dreaming myths that link performers to their relatives, to their ancestral lands, and their past. But the rationale for these performances has undergone significant change—change that serves to highlight indigenous response to non-indigenous domination. As such, an analysis of public performance as "a field of dreams" provides a window to understand the nature of Aboriginal social engagement up until the late-1990s.
- 8 To chart the nature of change in public ritual, it is important to trace the origins of the shifts from the early days of Yuendumu Warlpiri sedentarization (1946) to the passage of Native Title Act (1993), the landmark legislation that granted broad recognition of indigenous rights. As has been documented in some of my earlier publications, that the first forty years of public ritual can be characterized by three distinct, albeit overlapping, periods of ritual activity.
- 9 The first period—one that lasted some thirty years, until the passage, in 1976, of the Northern Territory Aboriginal Land Rights Act—was principally indigenous in purpose and consequence. During that period, public rituals at Yuendumu were performed primarily by men for an audience that was exclusively Aboriginal and sedentarized. In the second period, demarcated and influenced by passage of the abovementioned Act, public ritual expanded to include female performers and an audience that extended to non-Aboriginal viewers. The performance of ritual by women and men during stage two—often (but not exclusively) motivated by new legal and societal pressures linked to the passage of the Act—followed complex lines of kinship that underlined expanded means of internal ritual representation. Earlier, wholly indigenous imperatives were less consequential during public ritual events stimulated by governmental land rights legislation. Public ritual moved from settlement to Land Claim courts, as externally politicized events generated forums and forms of Aboriginal self-representation in a cross-cultural context, and as such constituted an act of overt advocacy for new forms of kin relatedness and connectedness beyond the boundaries of the settlement. A profound change in the gender make-up of the public performances accompanied this

realignment of purpose. Male ritual performers effectively ceded the public forums (and again, forms) of ceremonial representation to their female kin.

- 10 Once land claim litigation matters diminished in this part of Australia, another cross-cultural phenomenon arose in settlement life and it, too, spurred public representation of the Dreaming for non-Aboriginal consumption. The acrylic art movement catalyzed public ceremonies tethered to exhibitions of acrylic paintings produced by Central Desert artists. The newfound demand for public performance, which began in earnest during 1980s, transported the ritual representation of the Dreaming, beyond the homes and countries of the Warlpiri Ancestors and precipitated public ritual performances tied to art openings all over the world, starting in Sydney in 1982. The stimulus for public ritual was soon linked more to canvas commissions than to courtroom imperatives. Despite the foreign locale of representation, the performances, particularly in the beginning of this third phase, followed strict ties of residential kinship authority. Indeed, public ritual became a setting in which many residential battles played themselves out. Rights to perform were closely negotiated prior to enactment and exactingly compensated afterwards.
- 11 Furthermore, prior to enactment, there was extensive training to assure proper execution at the exhibitions opening events. These public ritual, whether performed by men or women followed the patterns of restricted rituals. They necessitated negotiation and surveillance between sets of kin whose ties were and continue to be at the very core of Warlpiri ritual expression. All that began to change, however, in the early 1990s, when the processes of collaborative oversight—a key part of all ritual representation—began to wane. Increasingly, ritual performers took greater self-guided responsibility over the enactment of the Dreamings that they owned; a change that pointed to the diminished role of residential surveillance. Women started to perform less and less for nonindigenous and more and more for inter-indigenous only events. Women shifted their foci of affirmation to other female leaders and other performers from other settlements, and by doing so privileged a form of personal prestige in matters of cosmological nurturance less visibly present during the public events performed prior to this shift. In other works, I have noted that the motives for public performance among ritually active performers included: “education, compensation, negotiation, protestation, association, and identification.” Of the last motive on the list, I wrote, “The last rationale [identification] was one pegged more to camp-specific kin group pride than to broader Aboriginal declarations of self.”
- 12 That was less true than it once were, as close study of the public ritual in the 1990s attested. Chronologically, this newest phase of public ritual engagement can be broadly grouped into two subsidiary phases: a transitional period of frequent, if diffuse, ritual engagements lasting three years until the passage of the Native Title Act in 1993, followed by a period of ceremonial consolidation and relative regularity linked to the “Women’s Law and Culture Meetings,” a gathering organized annually in different Aboriginal centers throughout the Northern Territory. These gatherings have now become highly restricted events.
- 13 So what happened? A sense of alienation. Complaints regarding Western scheduling demands and the effects of invasive “chatter” on the dilution of ritual potency grew and grew. Recognizing the limited impact of public ritual on non-indigenous viewers, the Warlpiri curtailed performances for non-indigenous audiences and intensified their commitment to the broadly attended Aboriginal ceremonies that brought them in

contact with other Aboriginal groups from regional communities. Through their journeys to and performances at Women's Law and Culture Meetings, and the moral and financial help of their younger kin, Warlpiri senior women shaped a "pan-Aboriginal consciousness" linked to classical values. While such identity-performances are controlled by a dying generation, the production of acrylics as public performances is accessible to all genders and generations.

Acrylics as public performances

- 14 Here in this second section I want to examine briefly how the performances of Dreaming stories on canvas have played and continue to play a crucial role —though ever changing—in the construction of Warlpiri identities since the early 1980s. Scrutinising painters' motivations to paint Dreaming stories for sale reveals how the production of acrylics provides a site where identity politics are negotiated among generations, between genders, and among painters, art-coordinators and the
- 15 Australian society at large. In the early 1980s, Australian governmental policies of self-determination encouraged Northern Territory Aboriginal people to engage in various non-Indigenous art initiatives intended to counteract the erosion of Indigenous cultural identity. Of the various programs deployed to mitigate the negative effects of colonisation and forced sedentarization, the production of acrylic art proved the most resilient. Indeed, within five years of the program's start-up in 1983, Yuendumu acrylic art captured the attention of critics, collectors and scholars worldwide. By drawing on research at Yuendumu between 1983 and 2007 among Warlpiri painters, I trace the social significance of non-Indigenous media on a settlement at large, and explore the changing nature of social identity.
- 16 In the first decade of the so-called Yuendumu Acrylic Movement, painters at Yuendumu created acrylic artwork that mirrored the patterns of ritual obligation in evidence during more traditional manifestations of ceremonial activity. To paint the Dreaming was to reenact and reinvigorate its ritual potency and, by extension, a means of tightening the social networks of the settlement. The burdens of ownership and managerial oversight — the relationship central to the maintenance of ritual obligation — strengthened through the gender-specific collaborations of senior members willing to paint public versions of their Dreamings. As such, the first decade of acrylic art movement (1984–1994) was marked by a renewal of kinship authority. Senior men and women actively involved in the ritual life at Yuendumu looked to the production of acrylics as a way of strengthening the learning of what should matter to Warlpiri people — their connections to the Dreaming, the land and their kin — and the senior painters' places in sustaining more traditional ways and beliefs. Additionally, the settlement generally felt a rare sense of external affirmation thanks to the international attention the canvases stimulated. Travel to venues beyond the settlement, to events that celebrated the rich and seemingly robust iconography of the Central Desert cultures provided a fleeting sense of importance, though a consequential social sense of stress accompanied the non-Indigenous acclaim. In short, the acrylic canvases, as negotiated acts of translation, reconfigured both intra- and inter-cultural social relations; painters and audience both were transformed by the exchange. But by 1994, the tenor of acrylic art production had changed. Increasingly, the

- 17 Warlpiri resisted the intercultural potential of the medium, despite the encouragements of the non-Indigenous art-coordinators. The second phase of the movement was marked by less productive tensions — conflicts of an intergenerational nature. It soon became clear that there was a growing divide between the senior painters who had spearheaded the movement, and younger kin resistant to the prospect of satisfying the ceremonial obligations that came with the production of the art. The mandates of the art-coordinators did not help matters. Non-Indigenous intermediaries dealt with external pressures that compelled them first to ‘preserve’ culture, and later to make it more economically viable through a more intensely commercialized sale of acrylics.
- 18 In absolute economic terms, the acrylic movement is now perhaps more robust than ever, but this increase in commercial success has come at a price. The crossgendered and gerontologically-constituted oversight is no longer guiding its production.
- 19 By taking the measure of change in the production of canvases over 30 years, it is necessary to acknowledge the dynamic transformations of the very nature of the exchange and production of artwork. And in this morphing negotiation it is possible to identify the broader more profound negotiations of identity that have informed and shaped the social and economic identities of the painters and their relatives. In other words, although the subject matter of the canvases painted since 1984 has changed little, the social structures of the canvas-makers have been anything but static. Yet it would be wrong to suggest that the acrylic painting is a mere reflection of the erosion of the social structures associated with the traditional ceremonial life of the settlement. The act of painting has in fact provided an arena in which ever-changing and often contrary motivations and priorities can find expression. Painters of acrylics at Yuendumu are carving new values associated with the production of Aboriginalities less tethered to traditional notions of ritual prestige, to residential group membership, and to expectation from the Australian society at large. Yuendumu circa 2007 was a settlement buffeted by the competing pressures of post-industrial non-Aboriginal market forces and the resilient residues of an egalitarian ethos that once found vibrant expression in ceremonial performances.

Charismatic Christianity

- 20 With the decline of traditional ceremonial performances, the changing values behind the production of acrylic paintings, and the coming of age of the generation of men and women who should have been taking over classical ritual life, a higher percentage of young people under 20, new national policies towards Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory since 2007, Charismatic Christian Churches (such as Pentecostal and Assemblies of God) have come to occupy a greater place on the battle field of identity in settlements such as Yuendumu. In short, many members of the settlements are attracted by the charismatic Christian message orchestrated around an appealing egalitarian philosophy itself relying on strong kin relations. While few are converted, many participate in Evangelical public performances where counter-narratives to Western and indigenized modernities’ dilemma, even at times across Christianities, as well as to classical Aboriginal life, are rearticulated. A new art of gendered public performances is taking shape. In engaging with the performance of public testimonies, sermons, stories of miracle recoveries, Church music and singing, and being part an

audience, members of several generations at Yuendumu have come to challenge what Marcia

- 21 Langton recently has called the “cultural Aborigine”, —a cultural Aboriginal person often also reified in acrylic paintings— and challenged as well the image of an indigenous Christian produced by non-indigenous Christians [however that is imagined]. Such Charismatic public events provide productive spaces for their participants to think about various tensions of identity.
- 22 During weekly as well as impromptu “sing along”, members of different Charismatic churches aged between 25 and 65 years of age, along with their relatives (who are not necessarily members of the same churches) hold ceremonies during which usually men preach the word of God, men and women sing hymns both in English and in Warlpiri (or in other Aboriginal languages), and during which both men and women provide testimonies of conversion, miracle recoveries, and religious commitment. (see also Eva Keller 2005, 7). Through these diverse performances, participants not only articulate their own understanding of Christianity and what Christian precepts mean in their lives, but they do so — as they themselves note— in their own language, without an interpreter and without non-indigenous religious members. Public speaking and singing at Evangelical events become manifestations of Aboriginality perceived as orchestrated from within. They are claims articulated in both Warlpiri and Aboriginal English to Aboriginality, and to Christianity. The following quote encapsulates the points I am trying to convey here: “We did not understand before...It did not touch us because they [non Aboriginal missionaries] spoke English, we did not understand, now we have Aboriginal people preaching the bible. Now we understand by ourselves, now we speak to our own people. Now we understand our own people. Now we understand God. Now we understand that the Dreaming is part of God. It was given to us by God. God bring peace to the land, here and everywhere. We have to follow Jesus, without him we are nothing now.”
- 23 Following the life of Jesus is proposed as a superior alternative to their stressful lives, as they rearticulate relations to themselves and the society at large. Publically performing one’s commitment at Yuendumu and at any other church gatherings is considered THE practice of faith. As such members of Charismatic churches and most of their relatives (converted or not) consider attendance to meetings at local and national Church events of the utmost importance. Most travel regularly to other settlements as well as large cities, often funding these journeys with moneys they receive from selling their acrylics. Active participation to meetings small or large is interpreted back in the settlement as a proof of their religious commitment to Christianity, to their families and a more peaceful settlement. As one prominent member of an Assembly of God remarked:
- 24 When we are all together [at large meetings] it comes easy to us [Aboriginal people], we understand God, we can see clearly where we are headed. Some [people from Yuendumu] come, some do not. You cannot force anyone to come. If it does not become part of them, part of their lives, they fight, they bring sorrow for everyone.

Conclusion

- 25 Up until the mid 1990s, women’s public rituals were a means by which Warlpiri women became the gatekeepers of “Warlpiriness” to the *outside* non-Warlpiri world. *Within*

the world of the settlement, the negotiations surrounding public events were rife with struggle and competition, expressing the efforts of both men and women to gain, for their kin groups, a measure of control. For the Warlpiri, the gender-shift in the public ceremonial life of the settlement and beyond did hide a

- 26 more telling component of post-sedentary existence: the primacy of kin-based residency.
- 27 The evolution of public ritual to acrylic paintings has been one marked shifts in gender and geroncratic responsibilities, as well as of changes in the tactics surrounding the selection of repertoire. And yet there was, consonant with that everchanging nature of function and performative representation, an indigenous constant of competition and relatedness. The production and circulation of acrylic paintings shaped Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal discourses on how “authenticity,” or “Aboriginality,” have been imagined locally and globally (see Langton 1993, 2000).
- 28 The works of Warlpiri female and male painters responded—and continue to respond—to essentializing ideas held by Aboriginal people about their buyers, and by the consumers about Aboriginality and authenticity. Working through their hegemonic resistance to colonial forms of Christianity, members of Charismatic Christian denominations reshape Aboriginal worldviews and lived practices, but once again the dominant organising value remains the value of kin-relatedness. For Warlpiri people, religious affiliations, economic welfare, and political allegiances have long been governed by the principles of kin-relatedness. I am not suggesting that contemporary kin-relatedness is the same as the kinrelatedness of the past, but rather that it has evolved in relation to increased engagement with the society at large, evangelical Christianity, intercultural forms of governance, and the demands of State institutions. Charismatic Christian performances as articulated by Warlpiri people circa 2012 do not seem to offer a bridge to secular narratives of Western modernity as they do elsewhere in PNG or Melanesia, however, they provide spaces whre religious identity politics are staged
- 29 Understanding the shifting meanings and practices of kin relatedness through time may help us comprehend the meanings and limits of citizenship, and the expansion of the fastest-growing religions in the world.

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