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Remediating sacred imagery on screens: Yolngu experiments with new media technology

Jessica De Largy Healy

- 1 When I first arrived in the Yolngu township of Galiwin'ku to undertake fieldwork for my doctoral thesis at the University of Melbourne and the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales*, almost a decade ago to the day, a particular research question had been on my mind for some time. Over the past few years, I had been keenly following the development in Aboriginal Australia of several exciting projects making use of digital technologies – such as the Central Australian *Ara Irititja* interactive archive¹ or Barbara Glowczewski's *Dream Trackers*' CD-ROM conceived with Warlpiri artists from Lajamanu (Unesco Publishing, 2000). Considering the secret-laden nature of Australian indigenous religions and the complex revelatory system that still governs access to knowledge in many parts of the continent, I was particularly intrigued by the ways in which the proliferation of new media may affect the status, circulation and perception of ritual images in contemporary Yolngu society.
- 2 My ethnography focused on the activities of a newly established community organization called the *Galiwin'ku Indigenous Knowledge Centre* (GIKC), a pilot program which had just received seed funding from the Northern Territory government to develop its own “Yolngu friendly” digital archive. In a region that had been visited by a continuous string of researchers and collectors since missionary settlement in the 1920s, it had been a long time vision of many North-East Arnhem Land clan leaders to see their forefathers' recorded “traces” return to the grounds where they came from. With several dedicated computers at the GIKC, these materials could now start being repatriated in a digital form.
- 3 As most people in the audience here would know, the anthropological legacy in this region of Australia is extraordinary and can be quite overwhelming for a newcomer to the field. I have spoken elsewhere about “a genealogy of dialogue” (De Largy Healy, [2012]2007) to describe the relationships Yolngu have built with anthropologists over

time, some clan groups having fostered their own tradition of collaborating with researchers. Indeed, many of the current ceremonial leaders have developed a sharp understanding of past and present anthropological praxis. Furthermore, the existence of visual records that people have been able to consult partly as a result of these relationships, has resulted in a remarkable creative intellectual activity in the religious sphere, with some local “intellectuals” (Goody 1977) developing a critical reflexivity on their own performative traditions. Another consequence of this collaborative research history is that many Yolngu consider that anthropologists should also be working together. During my first fieldtrip to Milingimbi, a neighboring island community located at the west of the Yolngu region, sitting under the big Tamarind tree at Rrulkku, I was told to contact my fellow anthropologist Franca Tamisari, whom I had never met at the time, to obtain copies of the stories she had recorded a few weeks earlier in the same place... a sharing of ethnographic material which is not particularly well developed in our professional field but which lay at the heart of the digital archiving project.

- 4 The *Liya-ngärra-mirri* learned men with whom I worked at the *Galiwin'ku Indigenous Knowledge Centre* valued the hundreds of bark paintings produced by their fathers, grand-fathers and uncles, as the “backbones of the land and the sea”, images of great power and beauty that revealed the foundations of Yolngu being. Like other ritual images mediated on wood, stone, sand or skin, the paintings in museum collections were said to derive from ancestral precedent, as truthful expressions of the various clans’ sacred Law (see for instance Morphy, 1991). Furthermore, historical bark paintings, I came to realize, were seen as authoritative ritual interpretations that could legitimize contemporary claims to particular bodies of knowledge and of land, influence social dynamics in the wider region and affect the content and meaning of ceremonial performance.
- 5 As the first digitized sets of bark paintings and ceremonial objects, together with audio-visual recordings from several archival and museal collections became accessible through local computer screens at the GIKC, I set out to examine how Yolngu experienced these new mediated forms of sacred imagery.

Religion, media practices and the transmission of Yolngu Law

- 6 The “media turn” in recent studies of religion remarked upon in a review article by anthropologist Matthew Engelke (2010) has renewed in fruitful ways old debates about religious experience, change and imagination. Central to these analyses is the idea that religion itself should be thought of as a practice of mediation: between the true nature of things, the transcendental, mediated by particular human relations and practices.
- 7 In this paper, I make use of the concept of remediation to explore how Yolngu imagine and re-create “authorized sensational forms” (Meyer, 2008: 129) for knowing and experiencing their ancestral Law (*Rom*). According to Grusin and Bolter (2000), the theorists who coined the term, “remediation” occurs when new media emerging from within specific cultural contexts refashion earlier media which are embedded in the same context. Remediation, writes anthropologist Ilana Gershon is “the ever-changing dialogue between media-ideologies as old media affect new media’s reception (...), and

new media reconfigure how people perceive and use older media...” (Gershon, 2010: 287). In this sense, it can be said that the Yolngu have historically engaged in processes of remediation in a variety of “new” media to bring forth, record and transmit expressions of their sacred law (*Rom*).

- 8 If we consider the technological changes that have occurred historically in north-east Arnhem Land, and the ways in which Yolngu have taken up introduced media that enable “inside” spiritual forces to manifest themselves by making themselves visible, the Yolngu engagement with so called “new media” does not appear entirely like a modern development. Since the first contacts with Macassan trepanners as early as the 18th century, and increasingly after missionary settlement in the region during the 1920s and 30s, new media such as cloth, steel, concrete, paper, photographs and so forth have found their way into Yolngu religious life. More recently, the increased availability of digital recording and storing devices – such as video cameras, computers and individual smartphones linked to social networking and content sharing platforms such as Facebook or Youtube – has clearly changed the contexts in which ritual images are mediated, can be viewed, appraised and responded to. These digital forms of mediation are best thought of as part of a continuum of negotiated changes, incremental “adjustments”, in the sense developed by Berndt (1962) following the Elcho Island memorial set up, in visual modes of religious revelation.
- 9 As is the case elsewhere, the introduction of new media in north-east Arnhem Land has established new registers of mediation of the sacred, the emergence of which was concomitant to questions of authorization, authentication and contestation (see van de Port, 2006: 444). The *Galiwin'ku Indigenous Knowledge Centre* project indeed became entrenched in controversies when the sensitive issue of access to digitized knowledge arose. People were worried that their sacred clan knowledge would be freely available to all, mixed up on a computer or stolen by others for political manoeuvres. To anticipate some of these concerns, GIKC director and scholar Joe Neparrnga Gumbula designed a conceptual matrix he entitled “Yolngu Knowledge Constitution”. Materialised as a painting, this model was conceived so as to graphically illustrate how the Yolngu knowledge system should structure the digital archive. It mapped how differential access rights to religious knowledge operated, by closely following the *gurrutu* or Yolngu kinship system (rights in one’s own clan’s knowledge, in one’s Mother’s clan’s, in one’s Mother’s Mother’s clan’s etc) (see De Largy Healy, 2008; 2012; Corn and Gumbula, 2006). In addition to this social partition of access rights, the painted model also showed the distribution of Yolngu knowledge into three interdependent domains, from the most open and public, called *garma*, to the restricted and closed, called *ngärrra*. Too elaborate to be effectively put in place in a computerised environment, this knowledge constitution model nevertheless showed how digital images of ritual forms needed to be treated according to these same strict principles, under the same regime of value.
- 10 This conceptual model, initially conceived to structure the architecture and use of the GIKC digital archive, was also used by Joe Gumbula as a pedagogical tool in his own work on north-east Arnhem Land museum collections worldwide. In his contribution to the Swiss exhibition catalogue “Dream Traces: Australian Aboriginal bark paintings” (2010), Gumbula explained:
- 11 I try to negotiate a proper awareness and to inform people about the three domains of understanding that we have in the Yolngu world. I had the idea to use a universal sign,

the traffic light, to explain how Yolngu knowledge works. The green colour is for the public knowledge, what we call the *garma*; the orange, *dhuni* domain, is semi-restricted knowledge, proceed with caution; and the red, *ngarra* domain, if for secret knowledge, restricted to initiated persons. People around the world use the same traffic light sign so they can easily understand this model. If you go back to Aboriginal beliefs, you have to have these three domains of law, restricted, restricted with a caution and then public access to anyone.

- 12 This interest in the changing status of ritual images in Yolngu society has sustained much of my research until now: from studies of body painting practices, to the historical creation of bark paintings for the early collectors, the international art market and in support of political claims. I found the idea of “authorized sensational form” conceptualised by Meyer (2008) useful to apprehend what is at stakes in the reproduction of religious imagery over time. This includes the movement of paintings and of images such as films more broadly from the restricted “inside” to the public “outside” domains, as well as the implications of these social dynamics for projects of digital repatriation in Yolngu communities. This issue came to the forefront during a research trip to north-east Arnhem Land I undertook in 2009 to work on the extraordinary collection of bark paintings put together between 1956 and 1964 by legal scholar, artist and anthropologist Karel Kupka.

Authority and rights in ritual images: religious knowledge and the politics of custodianship

- 13 It was while working at the GIKC that I became aware of a large collection of bark paintings from the 1950s and 1960s that was kept in France. The directors encouraged me to look into to this collection the making of which they had witnessed as children. Preliminary work undertaken in 2009 with the descendants of the artists represented in the Karel Kupka collection led me to examine the historical transmission of rights in religious images in Yolngu society. The idea was to analyse the reproduction of politico-ritual authority in the region through a comparative study of museum collections and contemporary ritual painting.
- 14 Working closely with the men considered by each clan to be their most authoritative painters, Kupka sought to put together “representative” collections that would reflect the diversity of ritual subject matters and individual styles in each community². My intention was to work on an intercultural history of this collection, from the perspective of the collector, by using Kupka’s writings, personal archives and rich documentation, and from the perspective of the descendants of the artists, the current generation of leaders who are their sons and daughters and who continue to produce “the same” paintings today, for ceremonial purposes and for the art market (De Largy Healy, 2010).
- 15 The descendants of the artists perceive their historical collections of paintings as charters that legitimate their rights on specific ancestral events and particular ways to depict in art and perform them in ceremony. While, as I mentioned in the introduction, the paintings in early museum collections are conceived as models inherited from the ancestral past, they also present individual interpretations and perspectives – that of their authors – of particular mythical episodes. They are compared to historical

documents whose return in digital forms can influence contemporary creative activity, in ritual and artistic domains, and politics in the region. In addition to providing new and often unforeseen insights into this historical material, the accounts of the painters' descendants, the people who today can lawfully "speak for" particular paintings, demonstrated the ways in which the reproduction and circulation of ancestral and historical images partook in complex knowledge politics within contemporary the Yolngu region.

- 16 I found most remarkable at the time that people were not at all interested in discussing the meaning of the paintings. What mattered to them was to establish their kinship relation to particular paintings, examine how their forefathers had depicted particular mythical subjects, and comment on who had inherited the rights in the paintings today or whether people still painted the same way or differently.
- 17 While the men I spoke to never questioned their forefathers' authority to bring particular paintings out of the ritual context, some images had since then returned to the "inside" (*djinawa*) and secret (*ngärra*) domain. Indeed, as Howard Morphy has stressed:
- 18 There is no set and agreed body of public or secret knowledge. Certainly in specific cases, general agreement can be reached over whether something officially belongs to the public or restricted domain. Over time, however, the content of the categories changes: what was once restricted becomes public and what was once public becomes restricted... (1991: 76).
- 19 I analysed a controversy that surrounded the current status of a painting from the Kupka collection painted by the powerful Gupapuyngu leader Tom Djäwa – Joe Gumbula's father. While I had first been told that nobody painted like that anymore, and later that the painting was no longer public, I was very surprised to find shortly after in the storage room of the art centre two other paintings of Niwuda the Honey Bee almost identical to those painted by Djäwa. Those two paintings – one on bark and one on canvas – were attributed to Joe Dhamadji, son of Djäwa's first wife, a painter in the process of becoming the main ritual leader of this branch of the clan. As is often the case in these situations, a consensus was found by the main actors involved to legislate on the status of this particular image: since the painting had "come out" during a *dhapi* initiation, a public ceremony, where it has been given to a boy, it had become public and Ok for all to see. As a public painting, it then could be included on a CD-ROM of the collection I would leave at the school library (De Largy Healy, 2012).

"Making true pictures": authenticity, repetition and creation in Yolngu screen media

- 20 As a final example of the value of remediation, I would like to offer some thoughts on the perception of ritual film from the perspective of the Yolngu today. Since film media arrived in Arnhem Land, through missionaries and anthropologists at first, the ambition to "make true pictures" appears as a strong motivation for participating, collaborating and directing film projects. The idea of "making a true picture" comes from an address made by Yolngu leader Roy Dadaynga Marika, in 1970, in front of Ian Dunlop's rolling camera. The filmmaker had been commissioned by the Australian Commonwealth Film Unit to make a "record film" of the development of mining in

north-east Arnhem Land and document its impact on the local Aboriginal people. “This is our chance to record our history for our children, for our children and our grandchildren,” the old man said, “We should do this while we are still alive. Before we die we should make a *true picture... our own Yolngu picture*, that will teach our children our dances and law and everything – our singing, our own Yolngu culture”. This sequence was included in a film called *Pain for this Land* (1995) which serves as a general introduction to the *Yirrkala Film Project*, the extraordinary collection of 22 films made over a period of 30 years by Dunlop with the Yolngu of north-east Arnhem Land.

- 21 At the time of the “true picture” address, Ian Dunlop had just arrived in Yirrkala, an Aboriginal settlement established in 1935 by Methodist missionaries on the Gove Peninsula, in Arnhem Land’s north-eastern corner. A village council meeting had been scheduled by the clan leaders to discuss the filming and their decision to “open their law” to the public. The context of uncertainty and disquiet which prevailed in the region at the time of Dunlop’s arrival, following the development of the Nabalco bauxite mine and the building of the town of Nhulunbuy, is crucial in understanding this decision to record select aspects of their ancestral law (*Rom*) and sacred knowledge (*Mädayin*) “If it stays hidden, whites will wonder if we have any culture at all” (Yama, Gumatj leader).
- 22 It is clear that Yolngu saw the value of film as an instrument of education for the newcomers and of political persuasion for their government. Importantly, film was also taken up as a means of recording their culture for future generations of Yolngu and even of directly addressing those generations (Deveson, 2011 : 155):
- 23 “We want to tell you about this story before they build the township of Nhulunbuy. We tell you first and we teach you first what the old people, what our own law is, before the new law comes in, so you can know and hear our voices from every clan and you see us on this film what we have been discussing, and put the law through, our law through this picture, the movie . . . through this machine. (. . .) We are telling you, as your father’s father’s forefathers did...” (cited in Deveson, 159).
- 24 The Yirrkala elders were quite visionary in their use of recording technologies, although this trend reflects a shift in authorial control over ethnographic film that was also occurring elsewhere in Australia at the time. Reflecting on his experience as an ethnographic filmmaker and on the problematic question of “Whose Story is it?” MacDougall (1991) advances for instance that in the case of his film *Familiar Places*, also set in the late 1970s, which follows an Aboriginal family travelling across its country in the Cape York Peninsula, the film is “inside somebody else’s story”: it has become “formally part of an implicit Aboriginal narrative of ritual display” (MacDougall, 1991: 8-9). Films are thus conceived as one more “medium of reference, for ritually showing and thus giving recognition to objects and places... the film itself becomes a new story and object of totemic significance. It is not perceived merely as the filmmaker’s story; it becomes, in effect, Aboriginal cultural property (Sutton, 1978: 1, in MacDougall, *ibid*).
- 25 Many of the ritual films featured in the *Yirrkala Film Project* were literally commissioned by the Yolngu leaders who organized the ceremonies. This was certainly the case with the 1976 “Djungguwan at Gurrkawuy”, introduced on the opening screen as a “film monograph made by Ian Dunlop at the invitation of Dundiwuy Wanambi”. In accord with the ceremonial leaders’ wishes, a ten-hour film record of the ceremony – showing secret ritual sequences taking place in the sacred men’s shelter – was also created for

archival purposes, its institutional access restricted according to Yolngu knowledge protocols.

- 26 While the notion of “truth” in film has been widely debated by visual anthropologists and filmmakers alike, I am concerned more specifically with the ways in which ritual film, like ritual itself, by the evocation of ancestral powers and certain aesthetic effects, is generative of feelings of truth. The argument I wish to develop further is that, rather than being thought of in terms of the authenticity of the ritual form they display, a form that becomes fossilized through the recording process, ethnographic films are valued for the links they provide between past and contemporary performances, between the living and the dead and among the various clan groups of the region (see also Jennifer Deger’s work (2006) and her co-directed film *Manapanmirr, in Christmas spirit*, 2012).
- 27 As Howard Morphy and anthropologists working in other parts of Australia have noted, the multivalency and semantic density of Aboriginal religious forms also makes them ideal vehicles for cultural transformation. Ritual film records do not provide definitive models that need be replicated in exactly the same fashion. While Yolngu ceremonies such as initiations or funerals share a common structural core, each ceremony is ultimately a unique event, both from a semantic perspective (the meaning of the ritual action) and from a sociological perspective (the social relations at play). Through the choice of songs, dances, paintings and the revelation of sacred ritual objects, ceremonies make visible and renew social and emotional relationships as well as ritual and political links among the participating clans.
- 28 A final example of this creative use of visual media in contemporary Yolngu ritual performance is another DVD set called *Ceremony: the Djungguwan of north-east Arnhem Land*. Released in 2006, the set brings together three documentary films from 1966, 1976 and 2002 of the Yolngu Djungguwan ceremony, a regional initiation ritual used to teach the young about the ancestral law of their clans and to commemorate the dead of the organising groups³. This creative use of visual media to transmit ritual knowledge is clearly illustrated when one compares the 1976 and 2002 *Djungguwan* films. Both films grew out of the concern of the clan leaders of the time to make records of their culture for future generations. Significantly, the organisers of the 2002 *Djungguwan* are the sons of the main ceremonial leaders of the 1976 performance filmed by Dunlop. Wanyubi Marika was one of the young boys going through initiation at the time. Both men explain in the film that they want to stage the *Djungguwan* to follow in their fathers’ footsteps, to reactive their vision and pass on the ancestral law *Rom*. The ceremony is not impoverished through the record as new layers of meaning and experience are added each time, at each viewing, pending on the people present, those that have passed and those that are still remembered and cried for.

Conclusion

- 29 My research shows that sacred imagery captured in bark, film or digital format, does not freeze ritual forms and structures, but rather anchors them in a dynamic web of ancestral connections and social relations, providing a blue print for future ritual action. Contrary to common views that foresee in Aboriginal uses of reproductive technologies such as digital media the inevitable reification of ritual life, leading to situations where people just “copy” what they see on historically or scientifically

sanctified visual records, I show in my research that Yolngu ways of perceiving *mādayin* images, both cognitively and sensuously, stimulate forms of repetition that are specifically valued for their generative capacity. Visual records of *mādayin* are generative of feelings of truth, the ritual images renewing and revitalising relations amongst the living, the dead and the ancestral beings. Captured on film, ritual images have the agency to “touch the mǎrr” the “spiritual foundation” of the audience and to intervene in a very real sense into contemporary Yolngu lives.

- 30 In the past decade with the development of digital technology in the region, creative archiving experiments have multiplied across the Yolngu communities, in order to bring these images back to the place they come from and make them “perform” for the people, renewing artistic and ritual creation and general feelings of wellbeing. Films, as long and dense as they may be, can only offer an impoverished record of events. However, they have come to play an important role in the cultural process of the transmission of ritual action and meaning in north-east Arnhem Land. Considered as “traces” left for their forebears to follow, these records are used to draw inspiration for artistic and ritual creation as well as for political manoeuvres in and outside of the region. By showing ritual things and actions – paintings, objects, performances, or places – the various authorised forms of mediation of sacred imagery generate emotional responses that, like aesthetic experiences more broadly, play an integral part in the reproduction of Yolngu ritual, artistic and political creativity.
- 31 I would like to finish on a note of caution: While at the GIKC decisions to circulate particular ritual images had been firmly in the hands of the group of ceremonial leaders involved in the project – a problem in itself as the wider community became wary of a situation where everybody’s knowledge would be placed in the hand of a few –, today, with video recording devices readily available on later generation smartphones, anybody and especially the youth can and does post online, on platforms such as Facebook, photos taken during ceremonies, thus bypassing traditional lines of authority. This is an issue of considerable concern for the ceremonial leaders who, according to recent news, have tabled it as important subjects in community meetings.

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Films and multimedia

Ceremony: the Djungguwan of north-east Arnhem Land, DVD set (2006, dir. Graham T., Film Australia, 366')

The Yirrkala Film Project. A collection of 22 films made with the Yolngu of northeast Arnhem Land (1979-1996, dir. Ian Dunlop, 467')

Manapanmirr, in Christmas Spirit (2012, Paul Gurrumuruwuy; Fiona Yangathu; Jennifer Deger; David Mackenzie, 60')

Dream Trackers CD-ROM (2000, dir. Glowczewski, B. and the artists of Lajamanu, Paris, Unesco Publishing).

NOTES

1. The Ara Irititja Project <http://www.irititja.com/>
 2. Of a total of 730 objects collected during 3 fieldtrips to northern Australia for the Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie in Paris and the Museum der Völkerkunde in Basel (Switzerland), there are 204 paintings and sculptures from north-east Arnhem Land, of which more than two thirds (162) come from the Methodist mission of Milingimbi, in Central Arnhem Land.
 3. The films are The Djunguan of Yirrkala (1966, 50'/5h/17'), Djungguwan at Gurka'wuy (1976) and Djungguwan- Speaking to the Future (2002).
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AUTHOR

JESSICA DE LARGY HEALY

MQB-CREDO