

Yilpinji: The Indigenous Australian Visual Art of Love — and its Transgressions

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INTRODUCTION

Yilpinji, ngulaji yangka kujakalu watingki yunparni yampiririla yangka kujakalujana karnta waninjaku ngurrju-mani watingki, yangka kujakalujana karnta panujarlur waninja-waninja-jarri watikari-watikariki, yangka yilpinji-warnuku jintakari-mirnimirnikarikinganu yilpinji-warnukuju.

...“Yilpinji” is like when men sing in the men’s area to make women fall in love with them, and then all the women fall in love with the men, as a result of being charmed by “yilpinji” songs and each man attracts a woman for himself.

(Paddy Patrick Jangala, Warlpiri lexicographer, 1987)

The Theme of Love in Visual Art: a Comparative Approach

This article explores the little known visual artistic tradition relating to *yilpinji*, the so-called “love magic” practiced by Warlpiri and Kukatja Aboriginal people of the Central and Western Deserts of Australia.

A rich tradition of love songs, poetry, drama and other literature exists in the English language, as well as in European languages and in visual art. Many examples spring to mind, from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* to The Beatles’ popular cultural rendition of *All You Need is Love*. The same applies in the realm of the visual arts, where, for example, Italian masters have often dealt with themes relating to the mythological figures of Venus, Satyrs and Cupid, Amor and Psyche, all of whom are associated with affairs of the heart.

While in many Asian literary cultures¹⁾ the theme of love tends to be expressed in less direct terms than in Anglo-European literature,²⁾ nevertheless numerous examples can be provided, including the celebrated Tale of Genji, which is essentially a love story. By contrast with such literary indirection, Ukiyo-e, the dominant visual art movement of the Edo period in Japan, often depicts imagery of such sexual frankness and explicitness that many in the West, influenced by Christian traditions and mores, find morally and visually shocking. Woodblock prints showing sexual love and romance in the “floating world” constituted one of the most important genres of visual art during the Tokugawa era.

¹⁾ There are exceptions to this, of course, one celebrated example being the sexually forthright Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana, written in Sanskrit somewhere between the 1st and 6th centuries.

²⁾ Notoji Masako, personal communication, Tokyo, 22 June 2005.

The theme of love is by no means the exclusive preserve of Western or Asian literature or visual art traditions. It is less well known—or perhaps not known at all in some quarters—that there is an equally rich and even longer tradition of Indigenous Australian love poetry, song and related narratives as well as visual art practices pertaining to sexual love. The Warlpiri people of Central Australia call this tradition “*Yilpinji*.”

Indigenous Australians have powerful traditions of love magic rituals and ceremonies, involving the singing of secret love songs as well as other forms of artistic expression. As Paddy Patrick Jangala has written,

... *Watingki kanyanurla yilpinji yunparni karnta nyanungu-nyanguku waninja-warnuku. Manu karntangkuyijala kanyanurla yunparni yilpinjirli watiki waninja-warnuku.*

...*A man sings love songs to attract his lover to him. And in the same way a woman sings to charm a lover with powerful “yilpinji” love songs.*³⁾

Sometimes *Yilpinji* ceremonies involve the painting of special designs onto people’s bodies or the production of special, talismanic “love objects.” These ceremonies are always enacted separately by men and women as a means of attracting the object of their sometimes adulterous or otherwise forbidden sexual desires. In addition, many Dreaming narratives and associated ceremonies belonging to the Kukatja and Warlpiri peoples make powerful statements about the dire consequences of illicit or illegal love—love, that is, that offends the strict rules of their kinship structures. For example, amongst Warlpiri and Kukatja peoples the “love that dare not speak its name” may well be the love (or lust) of a son-in-law for his mother-in-law, or vice versa.

As is the case with other abstract phenomena, cultural expressions of love need to be understood by reference to the broader social dynamics and cultural setting in which the concept is embedded. *Yilpinji* narratives and visual artworks are situated within the overarching Indigenous concept of “The Dreaming.”

The Dreaming

While Indigenous Australian religion (known in English translation as “Dreaming”) lies at the heart of traditionally oriented Indigenous artistic production, “The Dreaming” is unlike Christianity or Judaism, which may be glossed as “abstract” religions, where the spiritual realm is distinguished from that of the secular or the profane. By contrast, Indigenous religion is pre-eminently practical, grounded in the land, in the earth itself. This belief system has more in common with Shinto, for example, than it has with the major mainstream world religions, to the extent that it becomes arguable whether The Dreaming can accurately be described as a “religion.” For traditionally orientated Aboriginal Australians, the sacred and the profane are not distinct, separate spheres, as is the case with many of the world’s religions. “Dreamings” and “Dreaming narratives” always relate to specific tracts of land. *Yilpinji* narratives constitute

³⁾ Paddy Patrick Jangala, Warlpiri lexicographer, 1987.

one particular genre of Dreaming narrative.

Hence, all Dreamings and Dreaming narratives are site-specific. Importantly, for traditionally oriented Indigenous Australian people, spiritual beliefs are, in fact, inseparable from the land itself, regardless of the language or cultural group to which an individual or family belongs.

“The Dreaming” is in fact an inadequate English translation. It refers to the time of the Ancestral Heroes, and the institution of the Law, and is the central core of Indigenous religious belief. People “own” or “manage” Dreamings, either as an inheritance from their fathers and grandfathers, or from their mothers’ side. Dreaming narratives operate at many levels. At one level they are Creation stories.

“Dreamings” often recount the heroic journeying or exploits of Dreaming Ancestors, who created all natural phenomena. The behavior of the Dreaming Ancestors is always exemplary; regardless of whether the way they act is “good” or “bad.” No matter whether Dreaming Ancestors behave well, or inappropriately, they act as exemplars insofar as people can always learn from their exploits.

Equally, because Dreamings and their accompanying narratives have been literally *planted* in the ground, and relate to specific geographical areas, identifiable on contemporary maps, there is a great deal to be learned from Dreaming narratives and the art work that accompanies them. They provide detailed information about micro-environments, including local flora and fauna (in other words botany and zoology), natural landmarks—that is, topography—and the vitally important matter of the availability or otherwise of permanent water.

As prominent Aboriginal artist and teacher Jeannie Herbert Nungarrayi describes it:

*The Dreaming is an all-embracing concept that provides rules for living, a moral code, as well as rules for interacting with the natural environment. The philosophy behind it is holistic—the Jukurrpa [Dreaming] provides for a total, integrated way of life. It is important to understand that for Aboriginal people living in remote Aboriginal settlements the Dreaming is not something that has been consigned to the past but is a lived daily reality.*⁴⁾

It is also important to remember that there are 250 separate Aboriginal languages and cultural groups in Australia, nearly all of which have different or in some cases, slightly different words for the concept of “The Dreaming.” Examples of these include *Jukurrpa* (Warlpiri), *Altyerr* (Eastern Anmatyerr); *Ngarankarni* (Ngarinyin) and all of which have been translated homogenously into English as either the “Dreaming” or “The Dreamtime.” In fact the word “Dreaming” is a very poor, simplistic and rough English translation of this holistic and complex concept, in spite of its being the preferred and most widely used term to describe Indigenous religion at present. The way that such English “translations” are frequently bandied around tends to erase the complexities of the concept of the “Dreaming,” by emphasizing its putatively magical, fantastic and illusory attributes or properties, despite the fact that Dreaming is understood to be *reality* by Aboriginal adherents, as Jeannie Herbert

⁴⁾ Jeannie Herbert Nungarrayi, personal communication to Christine Nicholls, Lajamanu, June 1994.

explains, and is grounded in the earth itself.

Dreaming is considered to be ever-present, evident in and on people's bodies, in ceremonies, in and on the land and landforms, and in the markings used in the creation of art. All of these aspects of existence are infused with Dreaming. All people, animals, life forms, landforms and other natural phenomena are manifestations of Dreaming activity, and they can move from one state to another—for example, from person to animal ancestor and back again to person. Shape changing and state shifting characterize Dreamings and Dreaming Ancestors, whose attributes, failings as well as strengths, provide rich material for oral Dreaming narratives. "Dreaming" also determines the precise nature of the subject matter that Aboriginal artists are permitted to paint under their Law, as well as the subject matter that is prohibited to them.

Dreaming informs the past, present and future, and establishes the parameters of moral and ethical behavior as well as people's relationships with the natural environment. While the concept varies to some degree among the many Aboriginal groups in Australia, it is central to Australian Aboriginal spiritual belief.

"Dreamings" are also Ancestral Beings associated with life forces and creative powers, knowledge of which is on occasion communicated to people by means of dreams. Invisible beings (with diverse names in the different languages) carry around knowledge of these beings and associated rituals, designs, songs, places and ceremonies that they also on occasion communicate to sleeping people via their dreams. The "Dreaming"—and the actions and behavior of the Ancestral Beings who are indeed themselves "Dreamings"—provides the model or the template for all human and non-human activity, social behavior, natural development, ethics and morals.

"Dreaming" is not conceived as being located in an historical past (as is, say, the case of the Genesis of the Christian Bible) but as an eternal process that involves maintenance of these life-forces, symbolized as people, spirits, or as other natural species or phenomena. A "Dreaming" may be an animal, a human Ancestor, a type of flora (for example, bush medicine vine or bush bean tree) or a kind of "Bush Tucker" (for example, yam, bush berry, bush tomato, bush onion) or any other manifestation of the natural world or the environment—water, or specific waterholes, stars or constellations (The Seven Sisters, The Milky Way). A Dreaming may transform or manifest itself in different iterations. People paint their own Dreamings—as has already been explained, under Indigenous Law, people may not paint the Dreaming of another person or group. This is, in part, a matter of inheritance through the kinship system and it is an extremely complex matter.

In the following section, a number of *Yilpinji* Dreamings and Dreaming Ancestors will be encountered. One Dreaming is simultaneously a burrowing skink (a small Australian lizard) and a man who is literally reptilian in terms of his unbridled sexual appetite. In the next example, two brothers are human males as well as Rainbow Men—beautiful, showy young men who love to display their (sexual) attractiveness. Their older brother is Lightning, manifest in his dangerously impetuous and flashy behavior. Rain, these young men's father, is wise,

welcome, and soothing. Above all, Rain's intervention is actually *needed* to dampen down the young men's sexual excesses. Rain eventually succeeds in restraining his sons' out-of-control, intemperate behavior, literally "cooling things down." The final Dreaming narrative explored in the next section pertains to an old man, who is shameless in his libidinous and lawless sexual desire for young, even pre-pubescent girls. The old man, who is coevally a Goanna⁵⁾ Ancestor and a human, is also the father of two sons who from time to time morph from boys into goannas. Each Dreaming Ancestor encapsulates the attributes of both human beings and of the particular species or phenomenon (for example, Water, Lightning or Rain) that inhabits that self.

***Yilpinji* Artworks and Their Accompanying Dreaming Narratives**

As is the case with other Indigenous Australian visual artworks inspired by the overarching spiritual concept of "The Dreaming," *Yilpinji* themes and ceremonies may be expressed through a variety of art forms: through visual art, music, song, dance, and extended oral narratives. Often these art forms are practiced simultaneously. They are not conceived as discrete or separate art forms as is the case with the artistic practices of other cultural groups. For example, while people's bodies are being painted with the relevant iconography, part of the narrative is sung. Once the body painting is completed, the accompanying Dreaming narrative is further enacted via song, music and dance. Indigenous Australian art is the world's original "performance art."

It is essential to note that there is always an attendant narrative dimension to Dreaming artworks, regardless of the medium of expression: whether it is a case of body painting using ground ochres, acrylic paint on canvas, or a contemporary print. Paintings and other expressions of *Yilpinji* by a range of differing art forms need to be understood in the context of these extended narratives.

The narratives deal with a wide range of subject matter, including Dreaming Ancestors' moral and ethical behavior. Sexual and other transgressions of Dreaming Ancestors often feature prominently in narratives. Like other Dreaming narratives, *Yilpinji* are always connected to specific tracts of land, extensive estates that are deemed to be owned by the artist/narrators. The often-lengthy narratives associated with *Yilpinji* paintings provide guidance about how (ideally) people ought to interrelate with one's fellow human beings, as well as providing templates for human interactions with other species and with the natural world.

The Dreaming narratives accompanying Love Magic paintings, ceremonies and themes often draw upon what could be described as "negative exemplars." These examples act as vehicles for identifying what is in fact appropriate human behavior. In practice, this means that illicit or "forbidden" activities, bad deeds, or destructive human conduct, are pinpointed, condemned and outlawed as existing outside of the boundaries of Indigenous Law. A major

⁵⁾ A goanna is a Varanid or monitor reptile.

Yilpinji theme is that of the transgressions that occur in affairs of the heart (or, in this instance, of the throat).⁶⁾ Thus, Dreaming Ancestors often hold up a kind of “inverse mirror” to what is considered desirable or proper conduct.

In the context of this introduction, I will now proceed to provide a brief overview of three *Yilpinji* Dreaming narratives accompanying specific *Yilpinji* visual artworks. It needs to be borne in mind that these are greatly abbreviated versions of much longer narratives, not all elements of which may be revealed to an outside audience.

Warlpiri artist Lily Hargreaves Nungarrayi is an octogenarian who lives at Lajamanu in the Northern Territory (see map in the Appendix for details of place names). Lily Nungarrayi did not first see a white person until she had reached her mid-twenties. As a senior Law woman,



Image One: Lily Hargreaves Nungarrayi, 2002, Lajamanu, NT. *Liwirringki— Burrowing Skink Dreaming*

Etching: Sugar lift painting and aquatint on two plates. Paper Size 560 mm × 760 mm; Image Size 490 mm × 320 mm. Black and white reproduction of Yilpinji print, courtesy of Michael Kershaw, Australian Art Print Network, Sydney, Australia. (Website: <http://www.aboriginalartprints.com.au>) Scan courtesy of Robert Wildburger.

⁶⁾ The throat, and not the heart, is regarded by Warlpiri and Kukatja people as the seat of romantic love and sexual passion.

Lily Nungarrayi is entitled to paint a number of different Dreamings, including the *Yilpinji* theme associated with the Liwirringki Jukurrpa or the Burrowing Skink Dreaming.

Wamarru, the particular burrowing skink (called *liwirringki* in the Warlpiri language, belonging to the Ierista species and Squamata order) who features in this Dreaming narrative, was a member of the Japangardi skin group. Wamarru came from a place west of Yuendumu. The burrowing skink is a rather small lizard, smooth-skinned and hairless, somewhat akin to a little snake. In earlier times, particularly in pre-contact days, this lizard, like other small game of the Tanami Desert region, was an important food source for Warlpiri people. Because *liwirringki* digs itself into a burrow, Warlpiri women would dig it out with wooden digging sticks (*karlangu*).

According to this *Yilpinji* Dreaming narrative, the burrowing skink-man Wamarru, who was already married, fell in love with Yurlkirini, a young Nungarrayi burrowing skink woman. Because the young lizard-woman was Wamarru's classificatory mother-in-law, she was in the "wrong" skin group relationship to Wamarru for any kind of love match to occur between them. According to Warlpiri and Kukatja law, any form of contact or communication between sons-in-law and mothers-in-law is strictly forbidden. In fact, the ultimate Warlpiri (and Kukatja) taboo is sex or marriage between a mother-in-law and son-in-law. Such sexual union is regarded as shocking.

Notwithstanding, Japangardi, the burrowing skink, was so consumed by his passion and sexual desire for Yurlkirini his mother-in-law that he traveled to the place where she lived. At that point, Wamarru turned himself into a man and spun some bush string and a hairstring⁷⁾ love belt. It has been noted that it is commonplace for Dreaming Ancestors to possess magical abilities, including that of being able to transform themselves from animals into people, or *vice versa*, or to segue in and out of various states. Furthermore, hairstring woven on a spindle is frequently an important *accoutrement* of seduction by *Yilpinji*, and is closely associated with a range of *Yilpinji* artworks and Dreaming narratives.

The man Japangardi put on the hairstring belt that he had spun from his own spindle, and sang Yurlkirini, that young Nungarrayi, towards him, using a powerful *Yilpinji* love charm. Powerless to resist, Yurlkirini succumbed to his advances. Japangardi repeatedly made love to that Nungarrayi woman and then he took her back to his country to live with him.

Two men made a big bush fire targeting the fugitive *liwirringki* lovers (now known as "lover-boy" and "lover-girl") who had run away together into the bush. Encoded in this scenario is a reference to a method of entrapment by fire of native fauna used by Indigenous people known as "firestick farming," and which is still practiced by Warlpiri and Kukatja today. Firestick farming involves the regular burning of vegetation to facilitate the hunting of various species. The practice encourages regrowth of scrub into more edible grasses, thereby increasing numbers of non-carnivorous grass-eating species like kangaroos and wallabies, and

⁷⁾ See Appendix for an image of woven Warlpiri hairstring, frequently utilized in *Yilpinji* love magic and other rituals.

assisting the survival of hunter-gatherers.

This print shows women, who are depicted as U-shapes—the shape that one’s buttocks leave as imprints on the red sand as a result of sitting on the ground—seated in a group performing the Liwirringki ceremony. The male and female Burrowing Skink Dreaming Ancestors are also depicted on the left side of the print. There is also a reference to a ceremonial digging stick used to excavate or pry burrowing skinks from their holes.

It is interesting to note that all male reptiles of the Squamata order, including the burrowing skink, have two penises. This can be interpreted as a metaphor for Liwirringki’s illicit and aberrant sexual proclivities when he assumes human form, as portrayed in this narrative.

Close analysis of the *Liwirringki* Dreaming narrative in its entirety reveals that it, like other Dreaming narratives, is replete with detailed information about Indigenous desert people’s traditional modes of successfully managing the multiplicity of challenges presented by their harsh living conditions, climatic extremes, acute water shortages and resource-poor landscapes. In addition, Indigenous knowledge of practical ethology, the geographical distribution of various species of edible flora and fauna, methods of long-term environmental sustainability, and the solutions that people found in order not only to survive in such an inhospitable and arid place, but to live there well, are also encoded in this and other Dreaming narratives. These narratives involve a fascinating synthesis of traditional Indigenous scientific knowledge and guiding principles for human morality.

As such, with 2006 proclaimed as the United Nations’ International Year of Deserts, and knowing as we now do that increasing desertification of the world’s surface presents a global threat for humanity, it would behove humankind to heed the precious information encoded in



Image Two: Abie Jangala, 2002, Lajamanu, NT. *Rainbow Men Dreaming* (Ngapa Jukurrpa)

Etching: Sugar lift painting and aquatint on one plate; embossing on second plate; Paper Size 560 mm × 760 mm; Image Size 540 mm × 740 mm Black and white reproduction of Yilpinji prints, courtesy of Michael Kershaw, Australian Art Print Network, Sydney, Australia. (Website: <http://www.aboriginalartprints.com.au>) Scan courtesy of Robert Wildburger.

such stories.

Abie Jangala, a senior Warlpiri man, died in 2002, by which time he was well into his eighties. Like Lily Nungarrayi, Jangala's early life was spent in the Tanami Desert, where he did not meet any non-Indigenous people until he had become a fully-grown, initiated man. The Rain Dreaming narrative depicted by Abie Jangala has generated a number of scenarios giving rise to a plethora of Warlpiri *Yilpinji* images, songs and dances.⁸⁾ This stark, minimalist image shows the male Warlpiri body adornment designs used to represent *Ngapa* (the Warlpiri word for "water" or "rain"). Pairs of parallel lines representing clouds surround two rainbows, the two horizontal wavy lines.

These long, wavy lines also represent the two cocky, oversexed young Rainbow Men, brightly colored show-offs who love to position themselves in front of rain, or who come out once it has finished raining, parading their shiny bands of color for all to see and admire. The boys come into conflict with their father, the wise Rain Man, Junkaji, who attempts to restrain his ostentatious, conceited sons, the Rainbow Men. Eventually, in the course of pursuing young girls to whom they are too closely related, the boys also come into conflict with their older brother, Lightning. Finally, Rain's wife, the mother of the boys, puts an end to their nefarious activities by feigning illness, thereby successfully distracting them away from the dangers of their sexually promiscuous, incestuous activities. Their sense of filial duty to their mother eventually acts as a means of control, in conjunction with their father's intervention. At their father's insistence the boys return to their mother's side, only to die, a reference to the ephemeral, transitory nature of rainbows. Various important themes of father/son authority flouted and mother/son duty/obligation are revealed through the recounting of this Dreaming narrative.

In Rainbow Men ceremonies enacted today, men imitate the sparkling, bedazzling qualities of the Rainbow Men by wearing shiny belt buckles or carrying small pieces of broken mirrors, or bits of glass, that glint and shimmer, reflecting the sun. Such qualities are said to make men sexually attractive to women. In turn, women cover their upper bodies with glistening red ochre rubbed into animal fat so that they radiate good health in order to attract male partners during *Yilpinji* ceremonies.

One is only really able to comprehend the immense cultural significance of this Dreaming, which focuses on water, rain, and the rainbow (*parrari* in the Warlpiri language) as a colorful, vibrant and unmistakably dramatic indicator of the presence of rain, when one takes into consideration that the annual rainfall in this part of the Tanami Desert is extremely low. Indeed, in this drought stricken area it sometimes only rains once per year—a ceremonial occasion indeed.

The artist, a senior Kukatja woman from Balgo in Western Australia, who recently passed

⁸⁾ Diane Bell has discussed this *Yilpinji* narrative in the context of the Kaytej people, near neighbours of the Warlpiri, in her germinal publication, *Daughters of the Dreaming*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

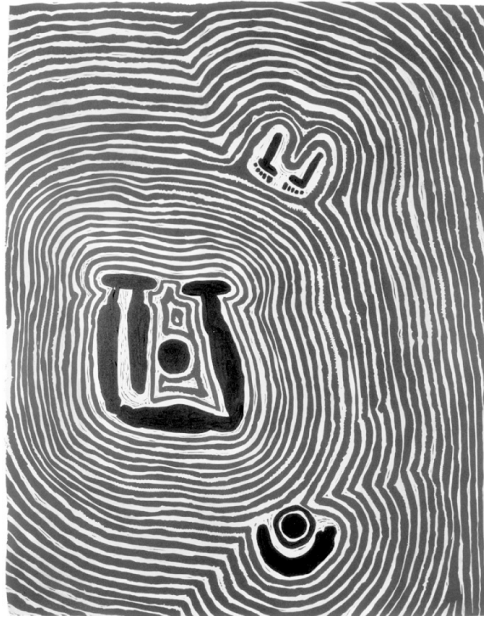


Image Three: Tjemma (Freda) Napanangka, 2002, Warlayirti, Balgo Hills, WA. *Wati Kutjarra* —*Two Men Dreaming*

Linocut: Paper Size 560 mm × 760 mm; Image Size 500 mm × 600 mm. Black and white reproduction of Yilpinji print, courtesy of Michael Kershaw, Australian Art Print Network, Sydney, Australia. (Website: <http://www.aboriginalartprints.com.au>) Scan courtesy of Robert Wildburger.

away, has depicted part of the story for the *Wati Kutjarra Tjukurrpa* or Two Men Dreaming, in the country south of Balgo. The central shapes represent the two brothers sleeping by their fire in country called Yayarr.

The *Wati Kutjarra Tjukurrpa* is an immensely significant story for a number of Indigenous Australian groups. In their ancestral journeyings, these Two Goanna Men traversed a very large expanse of land, including the country of the Warlpiri, Pintupi, Kukatja, Walmajarri and Ngardi peoples, as well as even further afield, through the Pitjantjatjara lands.

The story arose as a result of the lawlessness of a lustful old Goanna man of the Tjungurrayi skin group who lived with many women, mostly young girls, with whom he had improper sexual relations, regardless of whether or not they were in the “correct” kinship affiliation. Whenever boy children were born to any of his “wives,” Tjungurrayi would order the babies to be killed. By ordering the deaths of all newborn baby boys, Tjungurrayi was clearly getting rid of potential sexual competitors. Eventually two baby boys were born at around the same time, to two of Tjungurrayi’s many “wives.” The two young mothers defied their husband, taking the two babies far away from where the group was camping, to a place obscured by a large sand hill, where first they breast-fed their infants and then later, in a clandestine manner, smuggled food for the children to eat. In this desert area there are many

sand dunes, which are represented by the concentric shapes in this artwork.

The two youths thrived, growing up to healthy manhood. All the while, unsurprisingly, they were plotting to take revenge on their murderous, lustful old father. After some time the pair, by now young men, put their plan into action. They visited their father's brother, another Tjungurrayi man, who lived some distance away, and managed to convince him that their father intended to prey upon and steal that particular brother's own wives.

The man's brother took the bait. Infuriated by this unfounded allegation, he crept up on the boys' father until he came into very close range. At that point the boys' uncle threw a boomerang at his brother, almost fatally wounding him. The boys' father, Tjungurrayi the old Goanna Man, retaliated by killing his brother, the thrower of the boomerang. This sequence of events, or the "original sin" of the old man's sexual excesses, if you like, act as a catalyst for a further whole chain of significant Dreaming events. The narrative also acts as a moral template, in which the importance of observing proper—that is, non-incestuous—marriage laws is stressed.

In oral versions of this narrative, for example that of Peggy Rockman Napaljarri, the depiction of the transgressor's punishment for breaching the Law figures prominently. As a result, the two sons (or Two Goanna Men, now the Dreaming Ancestors for so many Indigenous desert peoples), took off into the desert, traveling over great tracts of arid land, going in and out of the ground at various places, morphing from their human form into that of reptiles and back again, creating natural phenomena, drinking from rock holes and soakages, and leaving traces of their presence in the landforms. As Lee Cataldi has written, the two sons "become the culture heroes of a whole cycle of myths concerning the Two Men ... A major sequence of the Two Men centered around a place called Yaka Yaka ... which includes typical culture hero activities as teaching people to use fire and cook their food."⁹⁾ Detailed information about local desert terrains, particularly *tali* (sandhills) and the whereabouts of permanent water, is also encrypted in this Dreaming narrative.

Apart from the fact that there is not one baby boy, but two, who later become the "Two Men" of this Dreaming, there are a number of uncanny parallels in this Dreaming to the story of Moses in the Christian Bible, with some echoes of the Oedipal drama as well. This print is a visual depiction of an event that takes place quite late in the *Wati Kutjarra* Dreaming sequence, when the two young men are fully-grown Creator Beings traveling the desert. At this later point in the narrative, the two young men re-encounter one of their mothers, who is now living in a far-flung desert location. Initially, the particular young man in question does not recognize this beautiful woman, for whom he feels a powerful sexual attraction, as being his own mother. Only in the nick of time does he come to the realization of the woman's identity, thereby preventing himself from making inappropriate sexual advances. Nevertheless the

⁹⁾ Peggy Rockman Napaljarri and Lee Cataldi, *Warlpiri Dreamings and Histories, Yimikirli* (San Francisco, London, Pymble: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), 159. For a more detailed version of the Warlpiri "side" of this Dreaming, see an account by Peggy Rockman Napaljarri—to whom I am deeply indebted *Wawarljakurlu*, in the same book, 149–161.

woman exerts a compelling hold over the young man. In Indigenous Australian societies, as is the case with all other human societies in the world, mother-son and father-daughter incest is strictly forbidden, condemned and outlawed.

Discussion

Narratives associated with the *Yilpinji* paintings therefore provide guidance about how—in an ideal world—people should interrelate with fellow human beings as well as providing paradigmatic examples of interactions with other species, with the natural world, and also with local environments. *Yilpinji* Dreaming narratives, like other Aboriginal Dreaming narratives, operate on a number of levels.

In part, the *Yilpinji* narratives provide a commentary on codes of human conduct (whether positive or negative) and implicit instruction on how to interact with one's fellow human beings and with other species. The narratives often demonstrate, in graphic terms, the dire consequences of breaking the laws governing human and interspecies relationships.

Of equal significance, Dreaming narratives, including *Yilpinji*, encapsulate scientific know-how about the immediate regional environment relating to the artist's country, especially local flora and fauna. The narratives also reveal intimate knowledge of various natural features of the local landscape, including rocks, hills, and of critical importance, the whereabouts of water. For desert people, including the Kukatja and the Warlpiri, precise knowledge of the location of water is mandatory. In pre-contact days, group survival was premised on such expertise, and upon reliable intergenerational knowledge transmission of that information. In this sense the artworks and their attendant narratives operate simultaneously as conceptual maps of specific areas of land as well as philosophical treatises on human behavior. In other words, these narratives always have a profoundly educational dimension.

In turn, the visual artworks act as mnemonic devices or as *aide-memoire* for these extended narratives, immensely valuable in terms of recalling accurate knowledge of local terrains. The underlying imperative is always that of group survival, a factor that is non-negotiable. Hence, this is most definitely not a case of "art for art's sake" as is often so with "western" visual artworks.

Furthermore, while other of the world's cultures engage in practices that have the aim of enticing or ensnaring a sexual partner, none are quite like *Yilpinji*. In Japan, for instance, the tonkori, a wonderfully resonant five-stringed traditional Ainu musical instrument made from deer tendons, possessed a range of different purposes: to control the elements, or the forces of nature, by subduing fire, as well as the wind, rain and hail, and, also, to hypnotize the Ainu's enemies before the onset of battle. While Ainu women sometimes also used the resonating tones of the tonkori for the purpose of seducing men,¹⁰⁾ this seduction technique occurred exclusively in the musical domain.

¹⁰⁾ Otake Tomoko, "Sacred Sounds of Ainu Tonkori Resurrected," *The Japan Times*, June 22, 2005, RE:VIEW Section, 9.

The Japanese custom of Yobai (“night crawling”), for the purpose of achieving sexual congress with young women, provides a closer structural correspondence to *Yilpinji* insofar as it has manifestations in visual art form and also in Kabuki drama. As Sonia Ryang has written:

...Until just before the Meiji period (1868–1912), in a number of remote mountainous villages in Gifu prefecture of west-central Japan, marriage of younger (non-heir) sons was based on customary nightly commuting liaison with a local women called yobai, or night-crawling; children born to such a marriage stayed with their mother who in turn lived in her natal family; only the oldest son lived with his wife and children and households were typically multi-generational combined with multiple bilateral mother-children units of the heir's sisters. Although prior to marriage men practised [sic] yobai or nightcrawling [sic] and had often entered the sexual relationship with multiple partners at the same time, once the child was conceived and patorship recognized, a monogamous relationship was established.

Yobai is widely reported in western and southwestern Japan. In contrast to Gifu-type yobai,

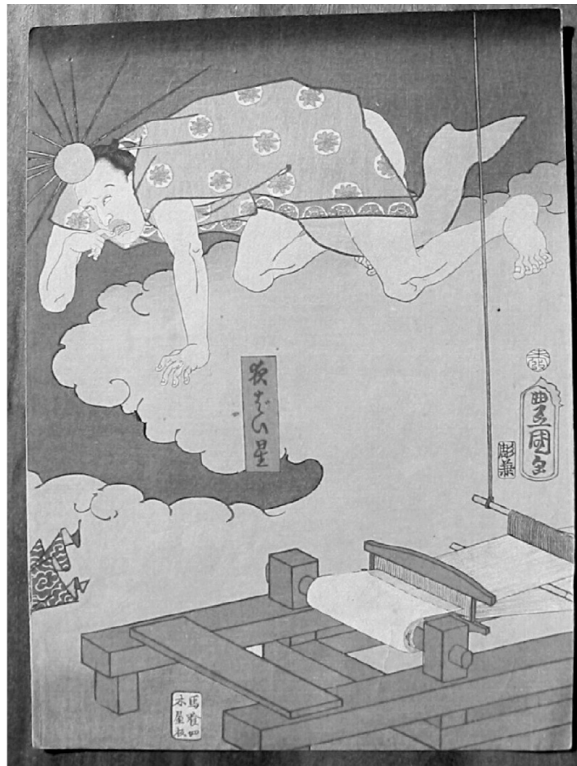


Image 4: Hori Ken, 1859, *Yobai Boshi*, Japan.

Right hand side of carved triptych: 365 mm × 250 mm, depicting Ichikawa Kodanji IV in the role of Yobai Boshi, “The Night-crawling Star” in the Kabuki play *Jitsugetsusei chuuya no oriwake*. Scan courtesy of Umezaki Toru.

*which was terminated once monogamous relationship was established, yobai in western and south western [sic] Japan has a high variety in terms of who to allow and who are involved (married or unmarried, for example) but basically, it is a form of sexual liaisons [sic] among men and women in a community that disregards the principles of monogamy and the guarding of virginity. It was practiced as late as the 1950s in some villages in south-western [sic] Japan.*¹¹⁾

As noted in Ryang's article, Yobai continued well into twentieth century Japan. Professor Masako Notoji of The University of Tokyo has explained that following the conception of a baby as a result of a Yobai union, the child would be raised, in a sense, by the entire village.¹²⁾ In Japanese Kabuki drama and in visual art, the man enacting the Yobai character is frequently depicted as a falling star—definitely falling out of the night sky into the futon of precisely the young maiden he sexually desires.

At best, however, tonkori and Yobai, and other similar cultural customs from elsewhere in the world, constitute limited parallels with *Yilpinji*. Yobai is gender-specific, performed exclusively by males, whereas *Yilpinji* is practiced by both men and women in roughly equal measure. Unlike Yobai, *Yilpinji* can be performed regardless of a person's marital status and at any stage of their lives. For example, people who are already happily married but seeking an outlet for sexual romance engage in *Yilpinji*. At least in theory, *Yilpinji* does not supplant or threaten existing marital arrangements. It occurs in parallel with, or as a supplement for such provisions, and ultimately it serves to reinforce the *status quo ante*.

Conclusion

As can be seen from this analysis, *Yilpinji* is a unique socio-cultural practice serving a range of social functions for desert-dwelling Indigenous Australians: there is no other totally analogous activity or performative practice that can be identified elsewhere in the world. Other sexual pursuits of borderline acceptability, especially Yobai, do however provide a fascinating contrast with *Yilpinji*.

This article has focused on visual artworks inspired by the *Yilpinji* narratives of the Warlpiri people of Central Australia and the Kukatja people of the Western Desert. The works that I have discussed represent an aspect of Indigenous Australian life and culture that is rarely shown in the visual arts. In the past, there has been a tendency to depict Indigenous Australians as belonging to nature, to the natural world, rather than to the cultural realm. Even today, Indigenous Australians are often presented as "children of nature", rather than as adult, cultural beings, and this has implications in terms of the hegemonic practices regarding the evaluation of their artworks. Such representations are crude and inaccurate and are the result of inadequate research methodologies and approaches.

The approach that I have taken in this paper seeks to redress narrow, clichéd stereotypes

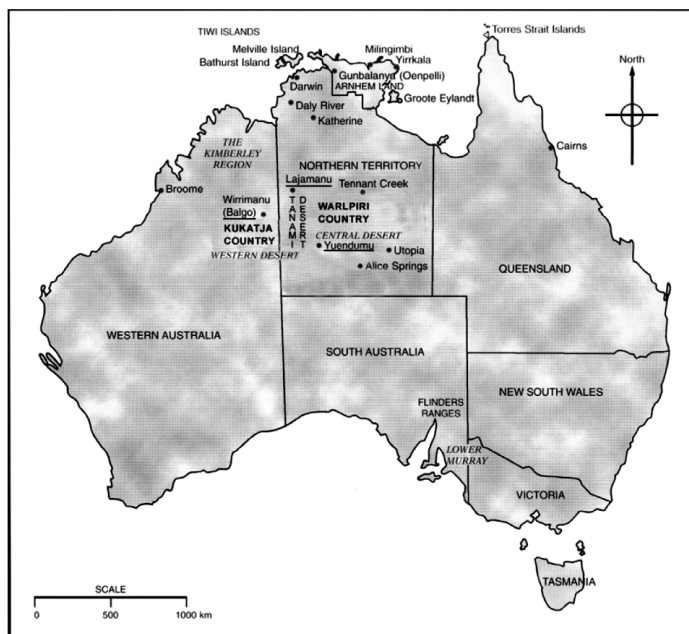
¹¹⁾ Sonia Ryang, "A Note on Transnational Consanguinity, or, Kinship in the Age of Terrorism," *Anthropological Quarterly* 77, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 755.

¹²⁾ Notoji Masako, personal communication, 2005.

about Indigenous Australians and their visual artworks. By positioning Indigenous Australian people as sophisticated cultural beings with complex Laws, rules, ethics and with unique codes of conduct governing love and its transgressions, the aim of this article has been to contribute to increased cultural awareness regarding the ontological status of Indigenous Australians, and the epistemological status of their traditional 'love' narratives. At the same time, this paper demonstrates a seeming paradox: that while many Indigenous Australians may be poor in material terms, at the same time their narratives and artworks disclose a high level of cultural capital.

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Appendix One: Map of Australia, Showing Relevant Sites

Map courtesy of Robert Wildburger.



Appendix Two: Woven Hairstring, or Hair-rope, Used in Yilpinji and Other Warlpiri and Kukatja Ceremonies

Scan courtesy of Umezaki Toru