Encoding the Dreaming – A theoretical framework for the analysis of representational processes in Australian Aboriginal art

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Australian Aboriginal cultures are rich in artistic traditions. If their art took a more permanent form Aborigines would be living in a forest of paintings and carvings that would be a visual testament to their artistic heritage. As it is, most of their art works are temporary, many almost transitory – body paintings that hardly outlast their production and sand sculptures that begin to weather before completion. Apart from certain sacred objects, only the paintings on sheltered rock walls, rock engravings, stone arrangements and tree carvings survive from past generations, and not all of these occur across Australia. Art exists for most of the time in people's heads waiting for a purpose to call it into being: a ceremony to initiate young men, or a mortuary ritual to farewell the dead and see them to their spiritual home. For art in Aboriginal Australia is seen as a form of spiritual power; it is an intervention of the world of the mythical past in the present. It is a means by which knowledge is passed from generation to generation about the creative forces that shaped the world and will enable it to continue into the future. Art in Aboriginal Australia is, in this respect, information: one of the main ways, if not the main way in which individuals are socialised into the Dreaming – the Ancestral Past – is through art. People learn about mystic events through learning meanings that are encoded in paintings and explained in song and dance. In the case of many non-European indigenous art traditions referential meaning is absent from, or at best a secondary component of, the system (see e.g. Forge 1973; O'Hanlon 1989), but in Aboriginal Australia referential meaning is primary.

Aboriginal art is certainly much more than the encoding of referential meanings and not all aspects of its form can be explained on such a basis. A full study of the art must also include consideration of the expressive and aesthetic dimensions of the work (see Sutton 1988; Taçon 1989; Morphy 1992). The pattern of stylistic variation across the continent needs to be studied and the extent to which this in turn reflects processes of attachment to place and the development of concepts of self, at a level more general than the particular actions of ancestral beings, needs to be analysed. Although in many cases these other dimensions of works of art may be integrated within systems of referential meaning, they are unlikely to be fully explained by their referential function alone. However in Australia 'what does the art mean?' is not only an outsider's question; it is an insider's question too. And it is this dimension of Aboriginal art that is the primary focus of this paper.

The referential meanings of Aboriginal art partly explains its sacred nature. However art objects are not only sacred for the information they encode about the Ancestral Past, they are also sacred for what they are: they are manifestations of the Ancestral Past (Morphy 1991). The design forms are believed to have originated through the actions of Ancestral Beings, often first occurring as designs on their bodies or on an object associated with them. For example a design may have originated through the mark left by the tide as it washed over the body of an Ancestral Being lying dead on the beach, or it may have been etched into his digging stick or spear thrower caught in the path of a passing bushfire, or it may have been a design that the Ancestral Being painted on his body for the purposes of a ceremony. People say that this Ancestral origin endows the designs with power, for in using the objects or design people are recreating mythic behaviour and are able to participate in, or at the very least establish contact with, the Ancestral domain. However, in this paper I am not so concerned with these phenomenological aspects of Aboriginal art as I am with its power to encode meaning, for it is in the elaborated nature of its encoding system that Aboriginal art is so remarkable.

In analysing how an artistic system can be said to produce objects that have meaning one has to consider both the abstract properties of the encoding systems and the interpretative context. This is especially so in Australia and other areas where art is incorporated into a system of restricted knowledge. In many Australian Aboriginal cultures men acquire increased access to secret knowledge as they grow older. This knowledge is revealed or released to them in closed contexts, such as the men's ceremonial ground from which women and uninitiated men are excluded. Theoretically women are denied access to all but public interpretations of designs, dances and ritual acts. Hence women will in many cases have a different basis for interpreting a particular painting than an adult initiated man. In parts of Australia women have analogous systems of restricted knowledge from which men are excluded (see e.g. Munn 1973; Hamilton 1980; Bell 1983).

Although I have argued elsewhere (Morphy 1991) that the role of secrecy *per se* in Aboriginal cultures has at times been exaggerated, there are, perhaps universally, systems for controlling access to knowledge including access to the meanings encoded in paintings. In analysing Aboriginal art it is important to bear in mind that the 'how' of meaning is just as important as the 'what'. We shall see that the structure of Aboriginal art systems is ideally suited to encoding multiple meanings within a system of restricted knowledge. I will begin by examining, in abstract, the properties of the two main representational systems used in Australian Aboriginal art. These two systems reflect ideal types of representational system that can be found in most cultures throughout human history. One system is iconic (I will label it figurative), the other is non-iconic (and will be labelled geometric). I begin with some simple examples to show the key differences between the two systems (Fig. 1).

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Figure 1 illustrates the most significant difference between the two systems. System 1 is based on a look-alike criterion: the relationship between the signifier and the signified is on the basis of formal resemblance, and indeed interpretation is often possible cross-culturally. This is not invariably so, however, because particular figurative traditions employ schema and techniques of representation that are associated with culturally specific ways of interpreting or 'seeing' the image (see Forge 1970). Nonetheless the point of contrast with the second system remains valid. The geometric system requires information which is external to the representation and knowledge of the object represented, in order to be interpreted in the way the producer intended. Geometric art in prehistoric traditions has been notoriously difficult to interpret precisely because the relevant contextual information is absent. In the case of Australian Aboriginal art we have knowledge of the way geometric art is interpreted and can therefore begin to develop an understanding of how meaning is encoded. In every case the key is that there must be an external factor limiting the possible interpretations of the design elements. There are three possibilities:

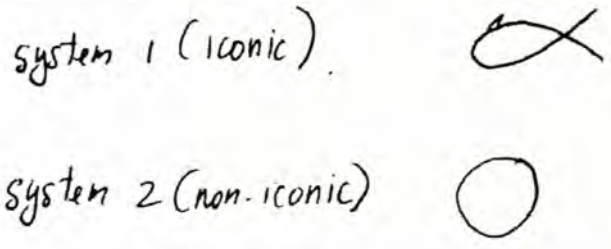

Figure 1 System 1, figurative representation of a fish, based on a Yolngu schema. System 2, geometic design, based on a Central Australian graph.

1. that the interpreter was present when the drawing was done, and saw or was shown how form related to content in the particular case;
2. that there is a fixed relationship between form and content which the interpreter already knows because he has been told before;
3. that the person is familiar with the system and knows something of the context of the object or something of the meaning of the design, and is able to deduce or guess at further meanings.

I now give examples of all three.

In Central Australia the most frequent context for geometric art, and the context in which people are most commonly socialised into that art, is casual drawings made in the sand or earth (Munn 1973). Throughout Central Australia sand drawings accompany stories to form an established genre of story telling. Before telling a story to children or recounting the events of the day women, and sometimes men, smooth an area of sand and illustrate the tale as they go along (Fig. 2).

The representations in Figure 2 accompany the following narrative:

Two women are sitting in camp beneath dunes by a fire (1);
they see a goanna running into a hole (2);
The women get up, grabbing a digging stick, and walk towards where the goanna went into the hole (3);
they grab their stick, dig up the goanna and bash it on the head (back to [2]); they walk back towards camp carrying the goanna in their carrying bowl (4);
they walk back through some dunes (5);
and sit down again by the fire (back to [1]); they see their husband is still asleep (6);
'I'll soon wake that lazy man up for his dinner' one of them says. She throws the goanna onto the fire where it sizzles and spits hot fat onto the lazy husband, waking him up.

Now already in this case two important features of the system should be apparent. Firstly, the geometric elements are multivalent. Each element can mean a series of different things and may be interpreted differently according to context. Secondly the graph is likely to be uninterpretable by anybody who was not present while the story was being told. In the case of women's sand drawings the graph is likely to differ each time the story is told, so there is no possibility of establishing a constant relationship between form and content. But, as Munn has shown, individuals are socialised into the general sets of associations between specific elements and the range of meanings that can be associated with them.

In sacred art, however, there is a fixed association between form and content for the sacred art consists of set designs. Each place and each Ancestral Being has a set of designs associated with it. Although they may vary in detail on occasions these are always recognisable as variants of a particular design (see Munn 1973; Morphy 1988, 1991). Some of the designs are produced on objects which, in contrast to most Aboriginal art forms, are more or less permanent, such as the stone or wooden sacred objects of Central Australia. The occurrence of permanent forms of designs has two consequences:

1. it allows for a constant interpretation of the design over time;
2. it enables the same object to be continually reinterpreted over time.

These apparently contradictory potentialities of the system of geometric sacred art – that the design system allows both stability and continuity of meaning and, through the essential multivalency of the individual elements, change and variation in the meaning of a design over time – are exploited in a complementary way in Aboriginal art. Let me illustrate this with a hypothetical example.

Let us take this to be the form of an Aboriginal stone sacred object. It is kept in a secret store house and removed for

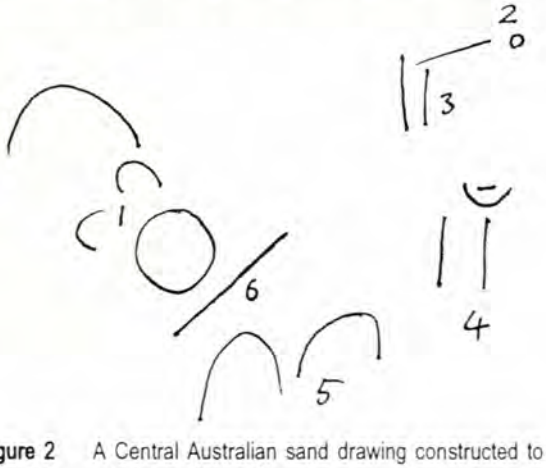

Figure 2 A Central Australian sand drawing constructed to illustrate principles of encoding.

display during certain ceremonies. The first time an initiate is shown the object he may be told that it represents a place called Wallaby Waterhole with a creek called Kangaroo Creek flowing into it. The circle represents the waterhole and the line the creek. From then on the design has this meaning to the initiate and when he sees the design on subsequent occasions he will be able to interpret it. However, although this meaning of the design will always be relevant to its interpretation, it is only the first stage of a process in which meaning is encoded into the design through revelation. Some years later the initiate may be given a further interpretation of the design. On this occasion he is told 'Yes, it does represent Kangaroo Creek flowing into Wallaby Waterhole, but that waterhole was made by the old man Kangaroo using his tail as a digging stick and digging a waterhole in the ground, and the circle represents the waterhole and the line the digging stick tail.' Many years later the same person may be told a further interpretation: 'Yes, that is Wallaby Waterhole and Kangaroo Creek does flow into it, but that old man Kangaroo wasn't exactly digging the ground. That Kangaroo spotted a female wallaby bending over having a drink from a rock hole and he snuck up behind a boulder and sent his penis along the ground and into that lady wallaby, and the route his penis took became Kangaroo Creek and the Waterhole there is really that Wallaby vulva.'

Thus over time the complex symbolic interconnections between Ancestral event and place become encoded in the object. The initiate will eventually pass on similar sets of interpretations to the generation that follows him. In actuality the meaning of the design is not built up simply through formal revelation but accumulates in a variety of different ways. The mythological events will be enacted in dances, referred to in songs, and will be alluded to in names of places in the landscape. For example dances associated with Wallaby Waterhole may include one in which dancers dig into the ground with a digging stick. Always the interpretations will be fed back into the individual's understanding of the landscape, for the mythological transformation of the landscape and the Ancestral energies inherent in that transformational process are the ultimate referents of nearly all forms of Aboriginal art.

Once an individual has learnt a certain amount about a particular design and the ways in which meanings are encoded in it then it is likely that he or she is able to anticipate further interpretations that have not yet been revealed. In anticipating those meanings the individual may go beyond those that are current among the adult initiated men – the people who are at that point of time 'fully' in the know. It is at this point in the system that the boundary between what is encoded in the design and what is possible to encode in the design becomes hazy. As Munn has shown for the Warlbiri, such designs are inherently productive and can produce interpretations quite beyond the intentions of the design maker. The potential for switching from what is encoded to what is encodable does not invalidate the statement that meaning is encoded in the system, even though the switch can occur at any stage in an individual's initiation into the meaning of the design. An individual's interpretations are patterned by what has been revealed from the body of collective knowledge, and constrained by the authority that the elders exercise over him, ensuring that he or she can only reveal the results of their introspection with caution. Eventually, however, the initiate becomes an initiator. His or her interpretations are added to the body of collective knowledge and enable it to be transmitted in modified form to new generations. As long as one recognises that the process of encoding is continuous and that what is encoded within the system at any one time is contingent on a particular state of the system, then it is legitimate to talk of the system as having encoded meanings.

Sets of paintings, core structures and generative templates

In most of Australia paintings may be viewed constructively, not as individual objects, but as members of sets. Each member of the set is an instantiation of an underlying template or core structure associated with the set. Sets of paintings are formed according to two principles: on the basis of their reference to a particular place or area, and on the basis of connection to the same Ancestral track. Such sets are readily referred to by Aboriginal people and reflect indigenous conceptualisations. A hierarchy of sets of paintings can be built up by combining the two principles: organising paintings from particular places into larger sets on the basis of the Ancestral connections between them. In eastern Arnhem Land the most inclusive set of paintings that could be built up in this way would be all the paintings belonging to one of the moieties, representing the maximal grouping of mythologically connected places. Theoretically such groupings are almost infinitely expandable through following tracks of Ancestors across Australia. The larger the set of course the less membership of the set tells you about the painting and the less members of the set have in common morphologically. At lower levels of set membership e.g. the set belonging to a single place on a particular Ancestral track, paintings belonging to the set will show formal similarity and indeed in many cases will be shown to have the same underlying structure. In an analysis of sacred objects in Central Australia, Tayler has shown how the set of objects associated with Uluru (Ayers Rock) are all founded on a particular geometric design (see also Mountford 1976). Elsewhere (1988) I have described in Arnhem Land a system of clan designs in which the geometric patterns owned by clans precisely indicate the relationship between place, Ancestral track and social group. Each Ancestral track has an associated design that marks paintings connected to the Ancestral beings concerned, yet each place on the track has its own variant of the design which differentiates it from those associated with any other place. For example, the set of designs associated with the Mangrove Tree Ancestor consists of variations on an open diamond pattern (Fig. 3). Such designs are usually one component of whole paintings which consist of arrangements of a wide variety of elements.

Paintings belonging to the same set may share more in common than a particular design element. Frequently they also share a common structural arrangement of elements. In both eastern Arnhem Land and Central Australia the paintings of a particular set often seem to be derived from the same underlying design. In Arnhem Land I have referred to such underlying designs as generative templates (Morphy 1991:

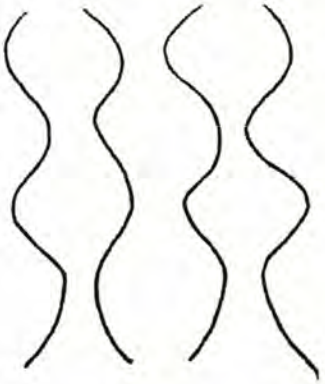

Figure 3 Yolngu clan designs.

235ff.), whereas Taylor (1979) has used the phrase core structure to refer to a similar concept. A generative template is an analytic concept which may not have any concrete expression, nevertheless in some cases there may be actual paintings which do correspond closely to it in form. The template consists of a set of loci organised within a particular spatial framework. Each locus has a set of possible meanings associated with it and a set of possible ways of representing those meanings. This spatial framework, although again an abstract entity, can as a rule be related to topographical features of the landscape, so that each locus can be thought of as a particular place or a particular component of a place, a grove of trees, a sand bank, a mark in a rock and so on. The meanings encoded at the loci refer to mythological events that occurred at the particular place or feature, and which may have resulted in the transformation of the landscape there. The meanings encoded at the loci and the relationships between the loci influence the possible structure and content of paintings associated with the places referred to. As long as the painting reproduces the structure it will be recognised as a painting of the particular place. The structure does not necessarily relate in any proportional sense to actual spatial relationships between features of the landscape. Rather it encodes mythologically significant features of that landscape and affects the way the landscape is understood and perhaps even the way that it is seen.

Each template can generate a variety of different paintings depending on the set of loci selected and on which of the meanings encoded at the loci are selected for representation. For example, if we return to our earlier discussion of the hypothetical design representing the waterhole, the circle and line could be represented figuratively either by a person digging a well (standing for the kangaroo ancestor digging the well) or by a pair of copulating marsupials. In reality a template will consist of a number of such loci and the variety of paintings that potentially exists for each place is considerable (depending on the convention of representation employed and the imagination of the artist). In Central Australia, where geometric art predominates, paintings tend to consist of geometric variants of the template with no elaboration in figurative form of the events that occurred at each place. Elaboration occurs through exegesis and through other mediums such as dance and song. In Arnhem Land today some artists produce what are, in effect, a variety of masks to cover each template by selecting different ways of representing the loci in different paintings and, in particular, by using figurative representation to isolate and elaborate on particular mythological themes.

The geometric tradition is ideally suited to the role of the template in a system of restricted knowledge. The geometric elements, as we have seen, can encode a multiplicity of meanings without giving priority to any one. Geometric designs represent a kind of mnemonic sponge for soaking up meanings that can then be released little by little in stages to initiates, revealing ever-increasing complexities in the relationship between mythological event and landform. Geometric art discourages interpretation: the task is too daunting, the initiate waits for the meaning to be revealed, even though some intelligent speculation is possible. Figurative art on the other hand positively encourages interpretation. By providing clues to what it represents it presents an obvious message, though it may do so only to mislead as it may be intended as a sign of something quite other than what it represents. A particular figurative representation may for example have a conventional or symbolic interpretation that is quite unrelated to its surface interpretation – for example the fish as a symbol of Christianity as opposed to a fishmonger. Geometric art on the other hand only becomes interpretable if it has a conventional meaning or if for some reason its meaning is already known.

Identificational versus interpretative processes

I now consider two very different ways in which Aboriginal art objects can be interpreted to give information: I refer to these as identificational and interpretative processes. While identificational processes are most commonly associated with geometric forms and interpretative processes with figurative forms, this is not exclusively the case.

In identificational processes the meaning of a design is either known or not known by the interpreter on the basis of his recognition of the form of the object taken as a whole. Most of the sacred objects of Central Australia are of this type as are the geometric paintings of Arnhem Land. The person seeing the object has either already been told the relationship between form and content, in which case he or she is able to interpret the element in question, or the element remains uninterpretable. Although there may be a systematic relationship between form and content, that relationship is not at a sufficiently explicit or precise level to enable interpretation without an external key. The process is one of moving from external key to interpretation of message to interpretation of the elements. Interpretative systems, by contrast do not require a key and the interpretative movement is in the opposite direction, from interpretation of the elements of the whole to interpretation of the message. In an interpretative system an individual who has never seen the particular object before is able to interpret the message intended by the maker. A good example of the difference between the two systems is provided by the toas of the Lake Eyre tribes of Central Australia in which both systems are used and indeed in which the 'same' message can be encoded in an identificational or an interpretative object (see Morphy 1977; cf. Jones and Sutton 1986).

Toas are direction signs that were once made by people belonging to the tribes of the Lake Eyre region of Central Australia to inform others where they had moved to. On leaving camp someone would make a toa and leave it in the ground for those who followed. Some toas had the form of sacred objects and consisted entirely of an organisation of geometric elements (Fig. 4). These objects were identificational in the sense that they could only be interpreted by those who already knew their meaning – they were probably based on the sacred objects associated with particular places and those who had been initiated into their meaning would have been able to identify the place-name concerned. Other toas operated on a quite different basis. Aboriginal places tend to be named after mythological events that occurred at them – at the very least the name has some mythological referent. The name may in addition refer to a characteristic natural attribute of a place, the shape of the river, a key resource, an abundant plant, and so on. Many toas encode in an easily interpretable way (through figurative representations or an attached object), a key feature of the mythology or topography of the place and usually one that is manifest in the place name. For example, a lake called 'where the pelican nests' may be represented by a sculpture of a pelican's head (Fig. 5), or a place where an Ancestral Being pulled out his hair may be represented by a piece of hair attached to the top of the toa (Fig. 6).

Figure 4 A toa representing Ngapakutumarapu, a place on Coopers Creek where the Ancestral Being Patjalina found that many waterholes had been washed out. The black patches represent where waterholes had been washed out in the bed of Coopers Creek which is represented by the broad white band on the head of the toa. The red and white dots represent trees along the bank. Collected by the Reverend Reuther circa 1903 and deposited in the South Australian Museum.

Figure 5 A toa representing a lake in Dieri country, Tamangarakuraterina, which means the place where the pelicans nest, where the Ancestral Being Marumaruna found many eggs. The lake was the transformation of a Pelican's foot. Collected by the Reverend Reuther circa 1903 and deposited in the South Australian Museum.

It was usually sufficient to use a single sign in order to convey the intended message but if necessary a combination of such signs could be used. For example if there were two places in the neighbourhood with the word 'boomerang' as a component of their name, then both could be represented by a model of a boomerang. If the one intended was a lake,

Figure 6 The toa represents a place in Dieri country named Idiburina which means 'to lose the beard'. It refers to the fact that the Ancestral Being Darana pulled out his beard there. Collected by the Reverend Reuther circa 1903 and deposited in the South Australian Museum.

whereas the other was an area of flat land, then the message could be made less ambiguous by adding a sign of water, for example fish bones, to the top of the toa. An interpretative system is one in which if the component signs are interpreted correctly then the message can be understood on the basis of information they contain. I do not wish to imply that the message is internal to the object: interpretation also depends on knowledge of the system and knowledge of the environment. The important point is that by using an interpretative system it is possible to create a new object that can be interpreted at a distance from the manufacturer in the way he or she intended. In contrast to the geometric system characteristic of identificational toas, the interpretative system is much more open and public. It is capable of producing a toa that can be directed towards the widest possible audience. An identificational system is only as open as the set of people who already know the object's meaning, and in Australia this can be a very small set of people indeed. The interpretative system could of course be used to direct a message to a restricted set through the choice of an esoteric mythological component of the place, and the identificational system could broadcast messages widely through the use of a form that the majority of people know. In the case of an identificational system, as soon as the specific meaning is lost with the passage of time the possibility of recovering the meaning of the system diminishes greatly.

The restricted: open contrast between identificational and interpretative systems is taken up in many Aboriginal cultures. Identificational systems are associated with restricted contexts and are used for encoding 'inside' (esoteric) knowledge. Interpretative systems are used to present public knowledge. The Yolngu of north-east Arnhem Land, for example, have a number of different categories of paintings which are used in different contexts, from the closed context of the men's ceremonial ground to the open context of the public settlement (see Morphy 1991). As one moves through the categories from public to restricted one moves from predominantly figurative and interpretative art to identificational and geometric art. Public art consists of representations of totemic animals, occasionally organised into scenes (Fig. 7), which illustrate key components of the activities contributing to the public characterisations of Ancestral Beings (Morphy 1989).

The relatively restricted geometric art, on the other hand, encodes details of the relationship between Ancestral Beings, land and clan (Fig. 8). For these purposes its uninterpretability and its multivalency are great assets. To the uninitiated, and Yolngu are quite explicit about this, the art means nothing – it contains its secrets well. Initiates only acquire knowledge of its meaning by becoming part of the encoding process – being told how to interpret the painting. The system is one

Figure 7 A painting by Welwi of the Marakulu Dhurrurunga, painted at Yirrkala in 1974. The painting represents the Ancestral woman Ganydjalala who, with others, was hunting a kangaroo through the forest. The bands of colour (red) represent the fire that she used in hunting, spreading through the forest. The kangaroo leapt on boulders (oblong figures) heated by the flames and sharp fragments from them flew back at the hunters, cutting them.

that gives power to those who already know the relationship between form and content and it is in the interests of that group to maintain power by maintaining secrecy. In the figurative art it is not so much a case of looking for an interpretation as having an interpretation imposed on one. The most obvious interpretation is what the painting looks like, a particular species of fish or animal, or a scene of people hunting in the sea or hunting a kangaroo through the forest. Yolngu label public paintings 'hunting stories' (Morphy 1989) and say explicitly that they are intended to fix interpretations at a public level, to deflect the enquiring mind. Geometric art gives priority to no one meaning: it adopts a neutral stance. Figurative art is unashamed in its advocacy of one interpretation over others.

There is however no absolute connection between figurative art and identificationality. Of course figurative art can be elusive and ambiguous; it may be given a conventional, perhaps even arbitrary, interpretation, and thus access to its intended meaning can become the property of a restricted group. The early Christians use of the fish symbol is a good example.

In Aboriginal art the figurative representation, rather than being complete in itself through its iconic reference, as a rule is part of a relationship among meanings. The figurative representation of a kangaroo, to take an example from eastern

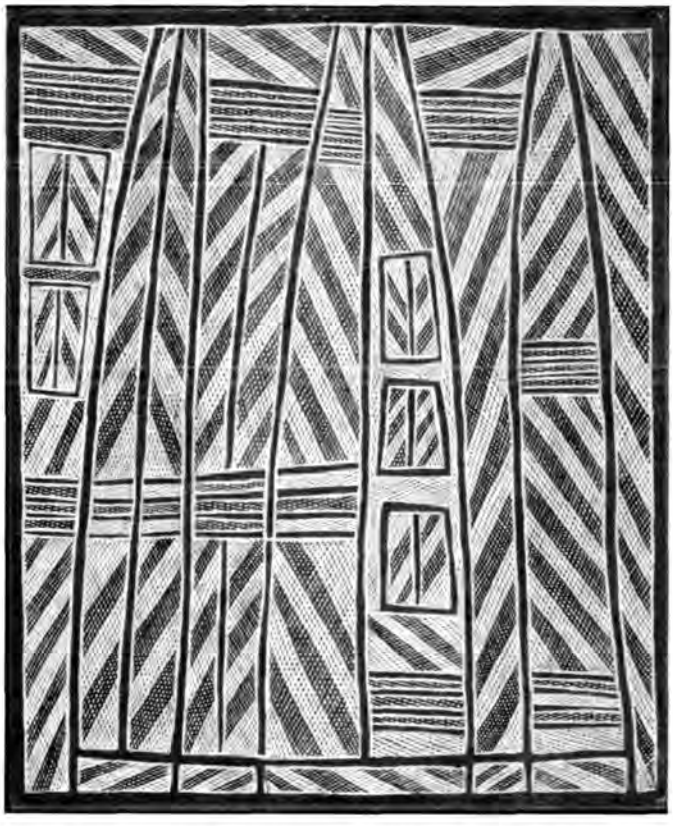

Figure 8 A painting by Welwi, painted at Yirrkala in 1974. This painting represents a regional landscape in eastern Arnhem Land associated with Ganydjalala. The various geometric components represent rivers, quarries, and ceremonial grounds created by the Ancestral woman as she hunted kangaroos through the forest, and cut down trees in her search for honey. The oblong motif for example, according to different but interrelated interpretations, represents the kangaroo, rocks, the ancestral honey, stone spears and dilly bags.

Figure 9 A western Arnhem Land X-ray figure of a kangaroo.

Arnhem Land (Fig. 7), is, among other things, a signifier for the relationship between kangaroo, stone spears, ceremonial exchange, blood, female fertility, and procreational powers. In eastern Arnhem Land the figurative representation occurs to mark a position in an abstract template or as a sign of contexts, landforms, songs, and dances in which those relationships are set out and by which its meaning is expanded. In western Arnhem Land as Taylor (1989) has shown, the figurative representations themselves contain signs, in the form of X-ray features of internal organs or the geometry of the internal designs, that refer to the relational meaning of the figurative image (Fig. 9). But in both eastern and western Arnhem Land the figurative representations are such strong signs for their own iconic reference that they become a mask for the relationships that underlie them, a blind that encourages the interpreter to look no further. The figurative representation of the kangaroo represents the kangaroo as a generic type, and only acquires the connotations that lie behind its particular appearance as the person viewing it acquires knowledge of its connotations. The way it is viewed and interpreted changes as the person viewing it learns the reason for its presence in a particular context or as part of a generative template. The more an individual acquires a formal set of meanings associated with a figurative representation that are not part of its iconicity, then the more the figurative representation takes on attributes of an identificational sign.

Likewise there are interpretative elements to the geometric art. Once an individual has been told some of the meanings encoded in various elements of an identificational sacred object, he has been given access to a key that may enable him to produce further interpretations – to infer possible additional meanings that have not as yet been revealed to him. The objects become productive of new relationships among the elements encoded at the various loci. Such further interpretations are to an extent connotations of the object as a condensation symbol rather than the consequences of interpreting the referential meaning (or perhaps the immediate referent) of signs. They are the result of the interpreter considering the relationships between the meanings that are encoded in the geometric signs and their symbolic reference. The possible interpretations are nonetheless constrained by the structure of the design, and are guided by the performance

Figure 10 Dundiwuy Wanambi pointing to a Mangrove tree on the beach at Trial Bay that is the transformation of one of the fragments of an ancestral stringy bark tree.

of songs and dances that relate to the designs and draw attention to possible connections between meanings encoded and their possible connotations (Morphy 1991:287 ff.).

Conclusion

In conclusion I will consider why the religious art of Australia is dominated by identificational forms and why figurative art is considered predominantly secular. Part of the answer has been given already: the geometric art conceals meanings and is thus highly suited to a system of restricted knowledge. But why, if the art conceals, is it necessary to keep it in restricted contexts? Part of the explanation offered by Aborigines is that it is too powerful to be allowed out in public. It is a Durkheimean sacred/dangerous object. What makes the geometric art appropriate to this sacred purpose? I can offer a number of complementary hypotheses. While the art may be obscure on the surface, once the initiate gets beneath that surface the art becomes meaningful in an almost magical sense. The initiate is given a key that enables him to see the art as a way of encoding the relationships between phenomena at different levels, between people, Ancestral Beings and land. The geometric art becomes one of the ways in which he understands the shape of the landscape and becomes aware of its transformational history.

In contrast to this the figurative art in many ways presents a false picture. From an Aboriginal perspective the surface conceals complexity, yet figurative art presents it as if it is all there is. The lesson that a person learns through the process of initiation is that the shape of the present is the result of the transformation of the past, in which Ancestral Beings continually changed shape, in which the boundaries between animate and inanimate objects were blurred. The individual in the present is the product of a conception spirit that has its origin in the Ancestral dimension to which it will return on the person's death. These aspects cannot be easily represented using the schema of the figurative system, indeed the system may produce images that fail entirely to represent these metaphysical concepts. The extent to which the kangaroo as totem is equivalent to the kangaroo as animal is an Aboriginal as well as an anthropological problem. Once Dundiwuy Wanambi was explaining to me the mythological origin of a particular tree on the beach at Trial Bay (Fig. 10 and see Dunlop 1990). The tree is a mangrove tree, but it had originated from a splinter of wood that flew from a stringy bark tree cut down in the Dreamtime by an Ancestral Being and hence was, by its spiritual connection, a manifestation of the stringy bark Ancestor. As Dundiwuy phrased it: 'it may look to you as though it is a mangrove tree but really it is a stringy bark tree.' How accurately could such a tree be represented by a figurative representation of a stringy bark tree? How much better in some ways to represent it by a geometric sign. The geometric art is very much in harmony with the metaphysics of the religious system because in many ways the mythology is not about what appears on the surface. It is always ultimately concerned with something else, with mystical powers and with transcendental essences of things rather than with surface form (see Morphy 1989).

The geometric art is congruent with Yolngu metaphysics because the meanings are not fixed. The metaphysical system is dynamic in that it involves a discourse about essences and origins which is continually being modified as it is being reproduced (see Stanner 1989). The geometric art allows this discourse to take place below the surface. The encoding of meaning in the art is a continuous process that never ends, yet meaning can always be concealed from outsiders. The geometric art is highly structured, providing a framework for encoding meaning that can in turn be related to other structural frameworks, such as the distribution of features in a landscape. But the geometric art does not finally and irrevocably impose any meaning on the world. It fixes nothing and leaves everything open-ended, for as a mnemonic sponge it is continually filled and emptied of meaning as it soaks up interpretation from the initiated and squeezes it out to the initiates.

Epilogue: 'fragments of credibility'

It is possible to interpret the analysis of Australian representational systems presented here as a pessimistic message for archaeologists and a demonstration of the limitations of archaeological interpretation. Iain Davidson has written of my analysis of Yolngu art (Morphy 1991) 'The great promise of the study of prehistoric art is that it might allow archaeologists to go beyond utilitarian interpretation to allow some understanding of symbolic systems. [Morphy's] study shows the vanity of such a hope' (Davidson 1995:891). Davidson's particular concern is that the arbitrary element in many representational systems, and the essential role of human agency in interpreting and attributing meaning to representations, means that over time those meanings become unrecoverable: 'people not things produce meaning' (ibid.: 892). He argues against Conkey's position that 'the meaningfully constituted material record is not an 'expression' or 'reflection', nor even a 'record', but an active, constructing, constituting agency, which does not express meaning, but produces it' (Conkey 1987).

On the surface my own conclusions to this paper would tend to lend support to Davidson's position: the open-endedness of present interpretations of the geometric art illustrate how difficult it is going to be for an archaeologist, without the help of exegesis, to interpret art in ways intended by members of the producing culture. In addition any system of secret knowledge that is designed to hide meaning from those who are socialised into the art-producing society is surely going to be effective in hiding meaning from the archaeologist a millennium or more later. Davidson is expressing a necessary caution, and in emphasising the role of human agency in systems of meaning and warning against endowing material objects themselves with agency, he is arguing for greater epistemological clarity in the analysis of prehistoric art. Nonetheless I remain optimistic that the 'meaningfully constituted material record' does provide some access to the meaning of art in both archaeological and ethnographic contexts. Ironically it is often anthropologists who neglect the material record and fail to demonstrate the role of art in the patterning and transmission of meaning, giving too much or too little role to individual interpretation, without ever demonstrating the relationship between meaning and form.

Aboriginal art systems are meaning-producing in the sense that they enable human beings to manufacture art objects for purposes that are in part semantic. The role that formal properties of the system play in communicating meaning is something that has to be established. A useful first stage of the analysis of any art is to pose questions about the form of the objects in order to develop hypotheses that may provide an explanation for it. This approach applies equally to the meaning of art as it does to aesthetic or functional aspects of it. Archaeologists, in particular prehistorians, are forced by the absence of exegesis to begin with the question of how something means before they turn to the question of what it means. Yet this is a question that should be posed as part of any anthropological analysis of art. It is this that reveals the nature of the system of interpretation, and enables art to be connected to its interpretative context and to the society that produces it. In archaeology this requires the reconstruction of context; in ethnography it involves taking contextual factors into account (see Morphy 1989:12 for detailed discussion). It is not sufficient to say that a work of art means something. One must ask: to whom it means, and in what contexts, and what knowledge has to be brought to bear before it can be interpreted in the ways it is. But it is equally necessary to ask of the object: what is it about its form that enables it to be interpreted in the way it is? how does the system of forms articulate with the system of meanings? and to what extent do the two operate in conjunction to contribute to the trajectory of a society?

In the most extreme case it is conceivable that meaning adheres to artworks quite independent of any formal properties of the system, that paintings are representations only in the sense that they become a locus for attributed meaning. In such a case the formal structure of the art will not reveal underlying semantic properties. In the case of most Australian art this is demonstrably not the case. Aboriginal art is in part language-like in its properties and in its potential to encode and communicate meaning. Like any language, however, it has to be learnt and in many cases interpretation requires knowledge of context or even individual specific information. As a text it may be partially closed to even the most knowledgeable interpreters and much of its meaning will be forever unrecoverable to the archaeologist. However, there are meanings in Aboriginal art that operate at a collective level.

Although Yolngu or Warlbiri art is open to an immense diversity of interpretations, and although both contain elements of open-endedness, there are also areas of greater consensus, and of institutionalised meanings which may include both core symbols and core components of the social structure. Recurrent patterns of meaning – the site-path motif, the marking of clan difference – are reflected in the structure of the art, and do provide the possibility of interpretation through the analysis of form. It is the existence of a structured relationship between the form of art and its meaning which opens up the possibility that even without exegesis the analysis of the material record will allow the archaeologist to develop hypotheses about how the art in question encodes meaning. It may be possible to demonstrate the existence of a hierarchical system of knowledge, or the existence of secular and sacred forms of art at some stage in the past, or multivalent symbols, signs of rank or status and so on. The existence of

figurative representations opens up other possible lines of interpretation both in the analysis of the content of the art and in relation to cognition and perception.

In Australia the usefulness of ethnographic analyses of art is enhanced in some cases by the continuity between the archaeological and ethnographic records. Ethnographic and archaeological data can be used in conjunction to create a broader picture of historical sequences of art in Australia and to connect them to other aspects of Aboriginal society, including myth, ritual and social organisation. Meaning can enter these analyses but the difficulty of demonstrating meaning in an ethnographic context is compounded in an archaeological one, and, as Davidson (1995:892) states, the difficulty increases exponentially with the absence of exegesis or supporting information.

While we will never be able to analyse the full interpretative context of prehistoric art or reveal the full mythological complexity of the prehistoric past, we must be careful not to close off the potential long term results – 'the fragments of credibility' (Davidson 1995:891) – that the analysis of prehistoric art might bring. The archaeology of art is not a subject for the short duration but one for the *longue durée*, one that opens up and requires an endless process of analysis and interpretation that will bear fruit in subsequent generations. This gap between the promise of results and their achievement, between the potential to provide immediate access to symbolic systems of the past and the difficult and limited nature of that access, makes the archaeology of art appear simultaneously an exciting and at times frustrating discipline. Perhaps more than any other form of archaeological data it hints at possible interpretative richness, but this richness can only be gained through interpretative restraint and analytic rigour, leavened by the imagination of the archaeological agent!

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