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Sun Cycles and River Flows

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> It was Mawalan who, in explaining the Djanggawul mythology, told me about Djanggawul's wife Walu who was also the sun. I pointed to an irregular circular shape in the centre of a bark painting telling the Djanggawul story and asked what it was. He replied 'It is the sun'. 'But the sun does not look like that.' He then led me to a pool of water and tossed a stone in. The sun immediately became an irregular circular shape, and that was my first lesson in the many and varied facets of Aboriginal art and the layers of meaning in a single symbol.[4]
>
> James Davidson.

The small group of paintings exhibited in *Miwatj,* provide a miniscule manifestation of the knowledge embedded in Yolŋu cycles of representation. In song, painting and ceremony, cycles of representation sustain and give power and meaning to the Yolŋu people. The songs, are not static. The paintings are not frozen in time or museological curiosities of the past. These modes of representing and communicating knowledge reverberate with the authority of those from the past, continuing to resonate in the present and will forever continue to do so into the future.

Just as Mawalan describes the sun in his painting, the ability of these songs and ancestral narratives to be painted and represented in a myriad of ways, over and over, across different forms, is a testament to the strength of Yolŋu culture. These works are transformative, full of ancestral and cultural power. As non-Yolŋu, we are incredibly lucky to be invited to share in this experience, by the generations of Yolŋu artists who chose to share their knowledge, art and culture with non-Yolŋu people.

Miwatj translates to 'morning side' or 'land of the first sunrise' in Yolŋu Matha (Yolŋu tongue). Geographically, Miwatj refers to 'sunrise country', the furthest north-eastern part of Arnhem Land that receives the first morning sun, as it rises in the east.

Beyond providing a sense of geographic location, *Miwatj* acknowledges the significance of place, both land and sea country, in the artwork and lives of the five exhibiting master artists. For these Yolŋu artists and revered community leaders, representations of place extend beyond simplistic geographical meaning to encompass an extremely complex spiritual and cultural worldview, unique to the Yolŋu, linked to the ancestral events of Waŋarr.

Waŋarr refers to the period of creation, during which ancestral beings bestowed land and waters, ceremony and sacred objects and madayin miny'itji (sacred clan designs) upon the various clans of the Yirritja and Dhuwa moieties. The powerful Waŋarr beings travelled across the landscape during this time of creation. Through their activities the ancestral beings created the features of the landscape and seascape, including rivers, rocks, mangroves, mud flats,

sand dunes, trees and islands, leaving these elements of country imbued with their spiritual essence. The ancestral beings also ‘sang’ the names of everything they created or interacted with, making certain species sacred to the clan on whose land or in whose waters the naming took place. It was during this period of creation that language, law, paintings, songs, dances, ceremonies and creation stories were given to the founding members of each clan, all of which were derived from the ancestral events. Together, the land and waters and this sacred clan property, both tangible and intangible, form a clan member’s djalkiri, his or her ‘foundation’, translating to ‘foot’, ‘footprint’ or ‘the roots of a tree’ in Yolŋu Matha.[5]

Waŋarr is not bound to a linear concept of time, but requires a multilinear way of thinking more akin to the way that many currents ebb and flow in a single river.

> Time flows like a river.
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> Most cultures agree that time is linear and has a direction that cannot be reversed. But Yolngu cosmology has a different structure, one that grows from the grammar of the language. Events in wangarr, or creation tense, simultaneously occur in the distant past; now; and far in the future – three rivers in one that flow in an infinite loop.
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> The much-degraded English word Dreaming attempts to capture this shape but usually fails because the people who hear the word lack such a geometry in their minds to understand it.[6]
>
> Will Stubbs, Art Co-ordinator, Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre

There is also a cyclical motif implied in the title *Miwatj*. Each day the sun rises and falls. Each day is new, the light different, the reflections off the water unique. The next day, the angle has changed and all of this starts over. This cycle is echoed in the way light shimmers and dances on the surface of the bark paintings in the exhibition. Each painting’s unique luminescence reflects the artist’s approach to applying miny’tji, the mythology associated with their clan and moiety, but beyond markers of kinship, miny’itji acts as a title deed to country, as a marker of sovereignty, identifying the custodian who has been bestowed with the authority and responsibility for caring for that country.

The glistening light of sunrise and sunset are in some cases considered the best times of day to connect with the ancestral spirits and this quality is captured in the delicate, shimmering miny’tji applied in Yolŋu bark paintings. This glistening, dazzling quality, referred to in Yolŋu Matha as Bir’yun (shimmering brilliance; sparkle, glitter, shine) is highly important when painting miny’tji on the body in a ceremonial context. As Howard Morphy identifies, “Paintings

are used in ritual because they are meaningful objects; they are spiritually powerful ancestral designs which are the property of clans and which store information about ancestral events."[7]

Miny'tji is as an elaborate system of representation, demarcating one place from another and identifying one clan from another. Miny'tji represented in both ceremonial body painting and bark painting are the sole property of the clan and custodial responsibility for the design is earned by the artist and clan leaders. Clan designs are owned and used with great care as they have been passed down from ancestral spirits and subsequently from one generation to the next.

Rirratjiŋu artist and leader Wanyubi Marika identifies miny'tji as a force that binds the spirit, the body and the land with the creation spirits or ancestral beings and creation narratives;

> This Madayin Miny'tji, Miny'tji is a pattern that holds inside our soul, that links to the land and they identifies every clan, tribes that belongs to the country. Without this miny'tji we're nobody. We'd be changing colour, we'd be talking English. Lucky we have all this Yolŋu law, that is still existing strongly inside us and it can be educated by showing you the patterns, the design of the tribe and they not translated in the book as you usually put it in writing, but ours not, [placing hand against chest] have to keep it here.[8]
>
> Wanyubi Marika.

The 'outside' or surface of these bark paintings has an immediate visual and visceral impact on the viewer, however these 'public' paintings communicate an 'inside' cultural knowledge that can take a lifetime for a Yolŋu person to earn the right to understand. As identified by Wukun Wanambi, renowned artist, Djunggayi (caretaker) of the Marrakulu clan, Director of The Mulka Project and cultural advisor at Buku-Larrŋgay Mulka, paintings can be divided into two main categories: sacred and public. Sacred paintings contain significant knowledge and access to this knowledge needs to be earned or "built up"[9] over time.

In a formal sense, the public paintings exhibited in *Miwatj* hold visual appeal as well-balanced, contained works of art, which on the surface present well-balanced compositional elements, some of which are interlaced with figurative subject matter. The viewer is more than capable of identifying the image of a Wititj, the ancestral snake, a thunder or rain bird, a boat or a human form, depicted on top of miny'itji. However, the presence of figurative elements given context by miny'tji, which locate ancestral events in specific places, create the 'deep meaning' of a painting.

Wukun Wanambi addresses this layering of meaning directly in both his approach towards painting and in his attitude towards sharing cultural knowledge, stating;

> The other thing is, we only share things on the surface side of the water, but not beyond the water.[10]

As acknowledged, the concept of place plays a pivotal role in all aspects of Yolŋu life, both philosophically and experientially, from the vast ancestral narratives, mythology and songlines that criss-cross the land in the Miwatj region and beyond. Place is the point of origin for the artistic, spiritual, social and cultural worldview of the Yolŋu people.

In the work of Narritjin Maymuru, his application of earth pigment on the surface of the bark manifests a physiological connection between the artist's body and his country. For Maymuru, "the colours expressed the personal nature of his work. White represented his bones, red his blood, yellow his body fat and black his skin."[11] The earth pigment applied by Maymuru in his bark paintings, extracted directly from the land and representing the body, thus inextricably connect his body to the land and the land to his body. The two flow together in his painting. Like the human body, the organic materials of his paintings are destined to return to the land and waters from which they were and are a part of.

In this sense, the concept of place extends beyond geographical significance bound to the present, physical reality, to forge a much deeper connection between the body and place – one that is infinite or cyclical. This contrasts greatly with balanda (non-Yolŋu) understandings of place based on physicality and 'use-value'. Place in the Yolŋu world brings together all things past, present and future. The body, land, ancestral events and places are all bound together in multiple forms of representation, which *flow like a river.*

> When Yolŋu consider 'the population' or 'the people', they are thinking of everyone, not just those who are physically 'alive', in a body, but those persons dead or unborn who exist in the water. Everyone is always at some stage of an eternal cycle […] the purpose of many Yolŋu ceremonies is to guide the spirit through the cycle and through the water – to return the spirit back to the reservoir of origin.
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> There is a sense that the spirit doesn't want to leave. The body has components: the spirit, the flesh, the bones. The flesh melts away shortly after death; the bones are geologic, and must return to the land through the agency of the larrakitj. That leaves the eternal spirit, which must find its way through the waters, back to the reservoir of the communal soul that resides in sacred springs or rivers, and it must be assisted in that progress, guided by rituals and music, patterns and dancing.[12]

The image of time passing as a cyclical, continuous, endless event in which the past, present and future coalesce, extends to the rising and setting of the sun over Miwatj and is a useful

image for considering these paintings by ‘the old men’, for they too emerged from a cycle of representation and cultural expression that preceded them, one that continues beyond them. *Time flows like a river.*

References

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