

Chapter 10

Culture Cult

Ritual Circulation of Inalienable Objects and Appropriation of Cultural Knowledge (Northwest and Central Australia)

Barbara Glowczewski

Indigenous People are entitled to the recognition of the full ownership, control and protection of their cultural and intellectual property. They have the right to special measures to control, develop and protect their sciences, technologies and cultural manifestations, including human and other genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral tradition, literatures, designs and visual and performing arts. (Article 29 of the *Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, United Nations, 1993)

Many Aboriginal cult objects collected in unclear or even unlawful circumstances have found their way into private collections or museums in Australia and other parts of the world. The South Australian Museum in Adelaide has set up a pilot program to identify sacred and secret objects in view of returning them to communities wanting to recover a portion of their heritage. Other museums have followed this initia-

tive of collaborating with Aboriginal peoples.¹ Some groups accept restitution but draw up agreements with museums that the objects be placed in their reserves for safe-keeping. Others prefer to take back the objects but then worry about their protection. Since the 1980s, “safe-keeping places” have sprung up throughout Australia, some in corrugated huts, others in sophisticated buildings. The Aboriginal communities regard them as “living museums” since the traditional cult objects kept there are used in men’s and women’s rituals. The process of repatriating objects is part of a broader movement to reappropriate indigenous culture and revitalize traditional practices, especially religious ceremonies.

“Safe-keeping places” are increasingly conceived as part of larger structures or of regional culture centers which require more costly technical means for the safe-keeping of objects whose access is restricted to their “ritual custodians.” These structures serve as depositories for written, audio and visual archives accessible only to those groups considered to be the owners of this knowledge. Other, everyday objects accompanied by public audio-visual documents are carefully selected for exhibition so as to transmit an image of the culture to the younger generations and to further knowledge of the culture among non-Aboriginal people. Some of these centers also seek to keep tradition alive through the production of crafts, art and all expressions of local culture: audio-visual recording of oral history, dance workshops, bush-food collecting with children of the community, performances and guided visits of the center and its area for schools and tourists, but also the organization of traditional gatherings of Aboriginal groups in places which may or may not be open to the public.

After recalling the international context of the contemporary claims to cultural property, I will explain the concept of inalienability which, in central and northwestern Australia, surrounds the ritual circulation of sacred objects and the cults of which they are a part. Afterwards I will examine the elaboration of a culture center involving the representatives of a dozen Aboriginal languages and organizations based in the coastal town of Broome; this initiative reflects an attempt to control the representation given of these cultures and to reappropriate their objects and knowledge. Finally, I will end with some thoughts on the notion of “keeping-while-giving” (Weiner, 1992).

1. Anderson (1990) on exchange-relations between Australian museums and indigenous people; see contributions to Part 2: “Bringing people back into the collections,” in Craig, Kernot and Anderson (eds.), 1999. See also Anderson (ed.), 1995; Clarke and Anderson, 1997; Stanton, 1999.

Cultural Property, Inalienable Objects and Knowledge

Objects are repatriated to Australia on behalf of communities led by Aboriginal people who, as citizens, should enjoy moral property rights as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

Everyone has the right to the protection of moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author. (Tsosie, 1997: 9)

This moral right, conceived as applying to the individual and being limited in time, covers only physically tangible “productions” of an author such as objects, patents or publications. Beyond the period stipulated (usually fifty years), the content of the novel, discovery, musical work or work of art falls into the public domain and is no longer protected by law. This law is clearly not adapted to cultural claims, for it does not recognize traditional property, which by definition dates back more than fifty years, or collective property, since it is shared by a group, often orally, and is therefore intangible. Nevertheless, indigenous people can use incorporated bodies in order to benefit from the repatriation of objects. In the United States, the 1990 *Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act* enabled American museums to return more than 80,000 items, including human remains. But such repatriations do not go without conflict when it comes to defining entitled beneficiaries. Zuni, Hopi and Navajo, for example, dispute the ownership of pre-Columbian bones found on one site which all three groups claim as the dwelling-place of their own ancestors.² Bones held in museums and laboratories all over the world have also been claimed by Australian Aboriginal people, who are militating against the archeological excavation of sites containing human remains.

Tangible cultural resources include historic and prehistoric structures and artefacts, as well as cultural objects of importance to contemporary tribes, such as sacred objects and objects of cultural patrimony... property may not be *alienable* outside the group. (Tsosie, 1997: 5,7)

Like sacred objects, sites bearing material indications of the ancestral presence of a culture, but also natural sites (hills, rocks, water holes) held

2. *2nd World Water Forum, Home of the Citizen and Water — Water source of culture, traditions and peace*. The Hague, March 2000, Communication by a Hopi/Zuni representative.

to be sacred to the culture, were traditionally inalienable. However, in order to register a land claim in view of restitution, Australian law requires lists of owners, who must demonstrate to the court, for each geographical site concerned, the way ownership of these sites was transmitted—in these cultures without written language. Aboriginal people have often shown judges, who were sworn to secrecy, sacred objects they regarded as their “native title,” equivalent of the Western land title. They have also invited them to listen to sacred myths and to visit the sites and attend rites—dances, songs, body painting, and so forth. Aboriginal people consider performance of the rite as proof of their status of “ritual custodians” (*kirda* in Warlpiri) of this body of knowledge, practices and cult objects; they translate this status in English as “owner,” to satisfy the Western notion of property and ownership. In the central desert, one is often the “owner” of his/her father’s land but he/she is also the “manager” (*kurdungurlu* in Warlpiri) of the mother’s or spouse’s land, its rites and its objects. In other words, men and women are owners only insofar as they share a certain use and knowledge of their possession with direct kin and affines.

For Aboriginal people, sacred sites and objects materialize culture—which we regard as something non-material, intellectual or intangible—in other words the body of knowledge transmitted via oral or gestural practices, which are therefore also inalienable: languages, stories, songs, dances, medicinal plants and so on. But for Western law, once intangible knowledge is materialized in a medium, it is alienable and comes under copyright law: a work of art, a publication, a sound or a visual recording. The content then becomes the property of the author of the production, the artist, writer, photographer and, of course, anthropologist. Today anthropologists are reproached—as are museums, journalists, collectors, etc.—for appropriating inalienable bodies of knowledge or objects and commercializing them to the detriment of their original cultural owners. Aboriginal people, like other indigenous groups, stress their need to control the distribution of their culture by recording, filming and publishing their own cultural resources. In addition to the contribution of such an approach to the patrimony and to education, the authors’ materialization of their knowledge and practices in their chosen media is supposed to protect them from dispossession by others. In many indigenous communities and gatherings, non-Aboriginal people are not allowed to take pictures or make recordings without a permit, which may be refused. Some anthropology students even agree to sign a contract with the communities, promising they will let them read and check their thesis before they publish it, or even submit it to their university. Although many non-Aboriginal consultants are hired by Aboriginal organizations, the material they collect remains the property of their employers and they cannot use it as they wish.

Aboriginal people also claim copyright in recognition of their intellectu-

al ownership of audio-visual productions or publications by non-Aboriginals (Janke, 1998). This position, modeled on the mining royalties which have been in force in Australia for twenty years, was replaced only after numerous discussions with the elders, who were reticent at the idea of drawing income from their lands. Such wariness of commercial alienation has not been overcome among Native Americans either, according to Rosemary Coombe, who objects that "copyright licenses" and other legal solutions to the problem of intellectual property alienate social relations. Indeed, Coombe appears to advocate an ethic for respecting cultural integrity, rather than a legal solution (Coombe, 1997). She advocates the "central importance of shared cultural symbols in defining us and the realities we recognize," which seems to militate in favor of overcoming the strictures imposed by intellectual property law in favor of a free exchange of ideas and expression (Coombe, 1991: 74–96; quoted by Tsosie, 1997: 10).

Several proposals have been made to avoid such alienation of traditional knowledge, including the idea of taking inspiration from "computer software licensing agreements as a potentially fruitful model for indigenous people to adopt as a means for legally protecting their right to just compensation for the acquisition and use of their intellectual products (Stephenson, 1994: 182)" (Tsosie, 1997: 11, note).

Much the same was said to me by young computer specialists and Internet users at a conference at the Cité des Sciences in Paris, where I explained the necessity of recognizing the right of control and distribution imposed by a Central Desert Aboriginal community to whom I restored the written and audio-visual material I had gathered between 1979 and 1998 in the form of an interactive CD-ROM program. After two years of work and consultation with fifty-one Warlpiri artists from the Lajamanu community and a year of trials in their school, the Council and the artists agreed to make it available to the public. At first, some felt that the knowledge should not be commercialized inasmuch as it constituted the very essence of their culture. But after long discussion among themselves, the Council members and the community Warnayaka Arts Centre decided to accept the economic benefits, provided use of the CD-ROM was confined to settings contextualized with respect to the art and teachings of Aboriginal culture, in other words, to museums and universities.

This resistance to open commercialization of their culture was already evident in the same Warlpiri community of Lajamanu immediately following the emergence of the acrylic painting movement among the Pintupi and the Warlpiri of Papunya, their neighbors to the south, who share similar mythic and iconographic elements associated with totemic sites and Eternal Beings (Jukurrpa). The Lajamanu elders decided to take up commercialized painting on canvas only several years after their neighbors' success in art galleries around the world (Myers 1994), and after a delegation of a

dozen Lajamanu men had been invited to make a ritual sand-painting at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris.³ It may be that the success they encountered as painters and dancers reassured them that the elitism of museums and the international art world would protect them against “copy cats.” On one official visit to the Australia Room of the Musée National des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie in Paris, the twelve elders identified a carved wooden slab as being connected with a secret cult and not supposed to be shown in public (Glowczewski, 1996). The museum withdrew the slab and ensured that it was not displaying any other objects regarded as sacred or secret. In France as well as in the other former colonial countries, where through the agency of national museums the State owns foreign collections, the prospect of repatriation challenges the very principle of national heritage, which has been largely built on the conquest of other peoples. The political issue is far from being resolved, but moral recognition of problems of intellectual property and cultural control has opened the way for protocols which are increasingly respected by museums.

Traveling Cults, History and Secrecy

Sandra Pannell (1994) has very astutely shown the inalienability of sacred slabs, *tjurunga* (also *churinga*), and their equivalents in other desert groups. These are abundantly discussed in the literature (see Moisseeff, this vol.) and are still the subject of speculation among collectors. For the Central Desert Arrernte (Aranda), *tjurunga* are like a spiritual and geographical ID card. Traditionally each person had his or her own slab, which was hidden and handled with the greatest care; it was a sort of spiritual duplicate, linking the person with a specific place and its totemic spirits. Slabs are said to be inhabited by a spiritual force that is animated by the esoteric design carved on the slab. This singular force of the slab is believed to be reactualized from one generation to the next into its new human duplicates. In former times, when someone died, in accordance with the taboo on pronouncing the name of the deceased found in all Aboriginal groups, the name was not mentioned for the duration of the mourning period, which was two years. Similarly, the deceased’s slab, his or her material double, was entrusted to a neighboring group until the mourning period was over (Pannell, 1994: 26). In other groups, the slabs are less individualized, but they are still associated with specific places, of which they are the materialization of the life-force, an ancestral and eternal singularity that is also embodied

3. Peter Brook’s Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord and ARC, Musée d’Art Moderne, as a part of the manifestation *D’un autre continent—L’Australie, le rêve et le réel*, organized for the 1983 Festival d’Automne.



Photo 24: Warlpiri women's ritual slabs *yukurrukurru*, painted with designs corresponding to the Jurntu (Fire Dreaming) and Miya Miya (Seed Dreaming) sites. (Photo B. Glowczewski)

in the group which shares the same totemic name: this singularity, which is named, drawn, sung and danced, dwells in people, places, totemic species and sacred objects; the Warlpiri and their neighbors in the desert call it Jukurrpa: the Dreaming (Glowczewski, 1991).

Other slabs are connected with initiation cults and travel from group to group, often of different languages, when these cults are transmitted over hundreds of kilometers as part of the chain of alliances, which are also manifested by the circulation of everyday goods and by marriage exchanges (Micha, 1970; Ackerman, 1979). After years or even decades of circulating, the rituals acquired new forms of expression and sacred objects which, having been handled by the ritual custodians of each group through which

they have passed, are believed to transmit something of the power of the Dreaming. The sacred and secret objects accompanying the initiation cults can by definition be shown only to initiates. Their revelation at the time they are handed over by the initiating group to the new initiates is part and parcel of the symbolic dramatization of the ritual.

The Central Desert Warlpiri immediately recognized the slab in the Paris museum as coming from the Western Desert and as being part of the secret cult that links them with different language groups. As the secret name of the cult must not be pronounced, it is designated by one of the public dances that is part of the cult, *Kadranya* (Moyle, 1981), on the northwest coast of Broome, or by the expression “Balgo Business” (Myers, n.d.), from the name of the desert community which introduced the cult among the Warlpiri. It took the cult over fifty years to cover the 1,000 kilometers separating the coast from the Central Desert. In 1976, the Balgo elders, who speak Kukatja, Walmajarri and Warlpiri, became the “custodians” of the objects, songs and rites that circulate with the cult and in turn passed them on to the east. However, according to these desert groups, the objects remain the spiritual property of those who, at various times, introduced them into the cult, in particular the Yawuru from Broome.

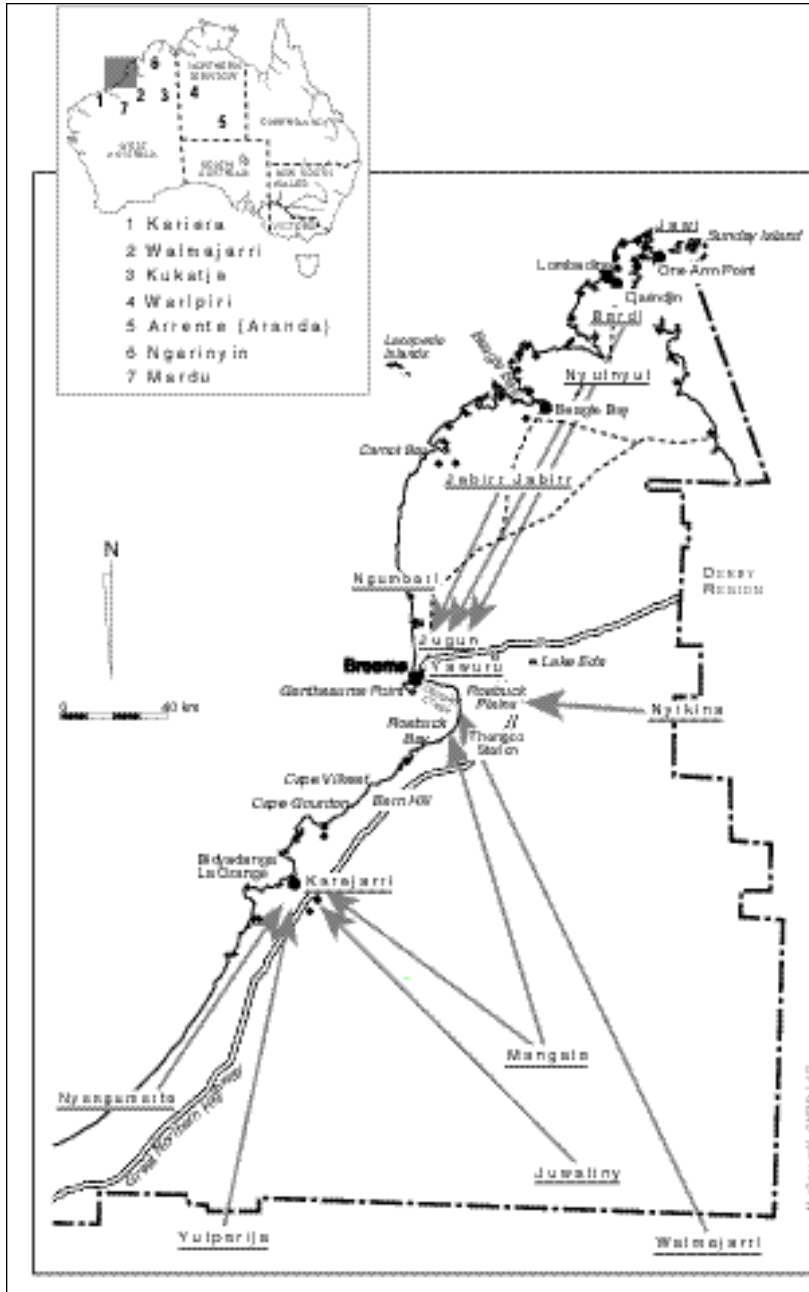
Unlike many traditional initiation cults, which in Australia assign authority to the elders and separate the sexes in view of making the young people into men and women, this cult specifically presents itself as a new mixed Law which enables men and women of some forty years of age to assume a leadership role. It seems to deal symbolically with certain role changes imposed by colonization, the violence of contact, the traumas of imprisonment and forced sedentarization, the economic changes and intermarriage with Europeans and Asians. The secrecy surrounding initiation into the cult excludes—on pain of severe punishment—Aboriginal people who have not yet received the cult, on the one hand, and, on the other, non-Aboriginals, who are not invited to attend. In an earlier article, I defined it as a “cargo cult”:

Aboriginal Law resides in sacred objects (or places) inasmuch as they are metamorphoses of the same “essence” (life-forces) which makes humans, while White Law resides in “wealth,” which does not share any essence with human beings (wealth represents a power that people must appropriate). In the new cult, Aboriginal people do not seek to identify with White wealth, or even to integrate it into their traditional system, as they did with the circulation of the early objects from the West. Instead, an absolutely new intention is brought into play: this new power would allow people to affirm a separation from the commodities which mediate matter in the West. (Glowczewski, 1983b: 12)

As symbolic work on “cargo,” that is the Western commodity system, this historical cult is highly secret because it provided Aboriginal peoples with their own way of resisting the harmful effects of the colonial system. Many missionaries regarded it as “devil business” on the pretext that it opposed their influence. For Aboriginal people, the accusation was inadmissible: syncretism between Christianity and traditional spirituality is found in only some regions (Kolig, 1979); elsewhere it is above all a case of seeking to create the conditions for a sort of spiritual retreat in which, as in a collective psychodrama or theatrical catharsis, the ritual with its emotional charge enables new initiates to reenact the violence experienced by their mothers and fathers, and to find ways of coping with it.

The Central Desert Warlpiri claim that part of the cult was dreamed in the small town of Broome, on the northwest coast. When I went there in 1980, I was told that the cult dated back to the wreck of the *Koombana*, which disappeared in 1912 off the coast of Port Hedland, a town further to the south, in the Pilbaras, where a dreamer is said to have received a message from the shipwrecked men.⁴ A Broome elder told me about the cult as he had seen it in the 1920s at La Grange Bidyadanga (100 km south of Broome): he added that he was a Nyikina, raised by the Karajarri, and that he had been made the spiritual custodian of the region north of Broome which belonged to the Jabirr Jabirr, who, he claimed, had died out without descendants (see map). When I returned to Broome in 1991, I found that this monopoly of the custody of the land and the ritual was contested by some Jabirr Jabirr families and above all by the groups speaking the traditional language of Broome, the Yawuru-Jugun. Those local groups intermarried heavily with Europeans and Asians, but had constituted a Yawuru Aboriginal Corporation and had resumed initiation of their young men in the 1980s. The secret cult, including a dance relating the Japanese bombing of Broome during the Second World War, was probably added onto an older Yawuru initiation ritual. In the 1970s, a Yawuru elder, custodian of

4. Swain (1993) reported a connection between this cult and the Aboriginal resistance movement in the 1940s, in which a certain Coffin, from the Port Hedland region, persuaded the Aborigines to walk off all the cattle stations in the Pilbara. I have shown (Glowczewski, 1983b) that it was also a certain Coffin from the same region who, according to the Warlpiri, dreamed part of this cult. The strike movement was extraordinarily well organized thanks to another Aboriginal man, who made the rounds of the cattle-stations distributing little pieces of paper divided into squares and asking the Aborigines who did not know how to read or write to cross out a square every morning until the day they were to leave their workplace. The cult reported in three regions includes several points at which little papers are exchanged: it is my hypothesis that this now-ritual act is related specifically to this historical event which, by the Aboriginal people's refusal to go on being treated as slaves, threatened the whole cattle-station system in Western Australia.



Map 2: Some Aboriginal language groups and migrations in Northwestern Australia.

the initiations in the region, transmitted a new version of the secret cult to some groups living 500 kilometers to the east, around the town of Fitzroy Crossing, who themselves adapted it in the form seen by Kolig (1979) and later transmitted these rites, together with the sacred objects they had received from the Yawuru, to the desert groups.

The Kimberley Aboriginal groups differ in geography, culture, social organization and language (McGregor, 1988), but also in their colonial history and its consequences on contemporary politics (Glowczewski, 1988a). However an exchange network, known as *Wuman*, already linked the coastal groups with the river and desert groups before colonization: these exchanges involved everyday objects (shields, spears, tobacco, food, red ochre and kaolin), cult objects (pearl-shells, sacred objects, hair strings, stone circumcision knives, objects used in love magic), and rites and their attendant myths. Phyllis Kaberry (1939) demonstrated that some of these circulations occurred in her time as chains linking together homonyms of the same sex (*narrugu*). These gendered exchange chains tied together individuals having the same first name or having only the same classificatory "skin" name. It was then necessary for groups with different languages and social organizations (with two, four or eight skins or sub-sections) to deduce equivalences between the different (skin) names: in this way, Aboriginal kinship systems informed and ultimately transformed each other through alliances between their respective owners. In all events, individual members of the same chain, because they bore the same name, were considered as exchange "brothers," or "sisters," which is remarkable inasmuch as the notion of exchange usually suggests alliance rather than siblingship or filiation.

There are other kinds of exchanges as well between same- or opposite-sex affines or kin, ranging from restricted family or marriage exchanges, notably with real or potential affines, to the large-scale ceremonies marking the entry of young people into the adult world or of the dead into the spirit world. Initiation, like death, entails ritual gatherings which require the presence and therefore the travel of allies from other linguistic groups: in both cases hair strings circulate, often between men through their sisters. Ackerman (1979) has mapped the circulation of traditional objects from Western Australia, showing that the circuit extended far into the Northern Territory—which includes Central Desert groups such as the Warlpiri—and progressively integrated spear heads cut in glass from bottles or telegraph-pole insulators, fabric and money. I too witnessed the replacement of traditional artifacts by introduced materials, notably hair strings by fabrics, clothing or blankets, not to mention the acacia-seed cakes, replaced by impressive quantities of cans of flour, sugar, tea and even cellophane-wrapped loaves of bread. The arrival of new, highly prized goods, such as video machines and four-wheel drive vehicles brought these, too, into the gift-exchange circuit. At the domestic level, it should be noted

that it is still unusual for Aboriginal people who carry on ritual exchanges to hoard consumer goods for their personal use.

With the advent of pioneer pastoralism in the nineteenth century, many men and women were taken onto cattle stations as itinerant stockmen who ranged over hundreds of kilometers in the Kimberley, the Pilbaras, the Northern Territory and Queensland. Alliances between tribes intensified and expanded owing to new encounters in the course of these travels and to an apparently tacit resistance to the ill treatment suffered by all (Micha 1970). Two hundred kilometers to the north of Broome, the Beagle Bay mission, created in 1890, was used as a receiving center for Aboriginal children forcibly taken away from their families throughout the Kimberley. Trained as domestic help, they were placed with the white pearlers of Broome, and many local women contracted unions with Asian workers, despite the prohibition on interracial cohabitation. It was against this backdrop of unlawful mixed unions and solidarity with the “chain gangs”—prisoners chained together by the neck—that certain secret cults with their sacred objects (Worms and Petri, 1968) spread from group to group: symbolic attempts to mobilize ancestral powers against the upheavals introduced by European domination.

After the 1967 referendum, which obliged cattle-station owners to pay Aboriginal workers a wage, the latter were driven off the stations and took refuge in the fringe camps around the towns. At this time, the young people around Broome were initiated among their various neighbors, who had managed to preserve their ritual life better than had the Yawuru, who had been hard hit by the pearling industry and the missions since the 1880s. Marriages bolstered the ritual alliances and gave responsibilities to members of groups from outside the region: thus, in the 1970s, it was a Karajarri man married to a Yawuru woman who was custodian of the sacred objects in Broome, which had been given back by eastern communities (like Looma) and were kept at the Broome initiation ground. These objects were stolen by a young part Aboriginal man, though some were later located in an art circuit dealing in traditional objects. The case sparked numerous disputes among local Aboriginal people, but after the culprit's release from prison, the affair was considered closed. In the 1990s, the Bardi of One Arm Point and Djarindjin, the Karajarri of Bidyadanga, the Nyikina, Mangala and Walmajarri of Looma, and other groups that initiated young Yawuru men or had received the secret cult from Broome, such as the Kukatja of Balgo, rallied to support the Yawuru when they resumed their own initiations and rituals on their traditional ground. These groups also formed a corporation which is striving to protect the sacred and secret aspects of their culture, in particular with the movement to repatriate cult objects as well as anthropological and historical archives: the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre, ini-

tially based in Broome and then transferred to Fitzroy Crossing, home of the Nyikina and the Bunaba, but also of many Walmajarri refugees from the Western Desert.

In 1980, when Noonkanbah, a community in this region, opposed exploratory mining in order to protect a sacred place, it received support not only from the Labor Party, the unions and the churches, but also from distant Aboriginal groups who, like the Warlpiri, had exchanged boys for initiation and marriage, and sacred objects (Glowczewski, 1996; Kolig, 1981). These exchanges followed the desert groups' adoption of the secret cult from the coast, transmitted via Fitzroy Crossing, and gathered strength in the 1990s, when the Warlpiri gave the communities of this town a fire ceremony for the resolution of conflicts between allies, a ceremony connected with the *Ngatijirri* Budgerigar Dreaming and the *Puluwanti* Owl Dreaming (Peterson, 1970; Glowczewski, 1991). Circulation of Aboriginal rites and objects thus continues to be closely connected with the political situation of a region.

The Kimberley example shows that the circulation of cult objects through the transmission of initiation-related cults is a veritable machine for producing culture(s), first by regenerating local specificities and second by asserting a common procedure which, beyond language differences, enables exchange to take place over thousands of kilometers. Each local group's identity is strengthened by this ritual nomadism, which is enriched by new religious forms wherein local variants of what Aboriginal people call their respective Laws nurture those of their neighbors. This is true of men's rituals (Wedlock, 1992) as well as women's (Poirier, 1992b), for both help create these exchanges which reinforce the bond between each group and its sacred places, and the inalienable possession of its sacred objects. Similar identity-building can also be seen in the interregional gatherings for traditional mixed dancing, commonly called "corroborees."⁵

5. Today Australian football culture provides a stage for this affirmation of identity through travel: every Aboriginal community has its team which travels several months of the year to compete in tournaments; the players' families often follow them in great numbers. This activity is particularly valorized in eastern Victoria, where the Brambuk culture center displays both the traditional history and the sporting history of the region's Aboriginal groups (Largy Healy, 2001).

The Bugarrigarra Nyurdany Culture Centre in Broome

When the government launched its watchwords, “self-determination” and “self-management,” most of the language groups of the Kimberley formed Aboriginal corporations, several of which have their headquarters or an annex in Broome: the Yawuru and the Jugun, natives of this land, the Nyul Nyul originally from around Beagle Bay, the Bardi from the northern Dampier peninsula, and the Karajarri from the south (see map). Some families also established themselves as incorporated associations in order to be allowed to build outstations on the land opened to them by the State, the region or the missions. After passage of the 1993 *Native Title Act*, which established one land-claim procedure for the whole of Australia, a new organization, Rubibi, regrouped the families of the region to help them press their Native Title applications in the face of Broome’s developing tourist industry. The federation of Aboriginal groups sought to define strategies using Western law to protect traditional law, notably in the area of property rights on land and the cult objects associated with it. But this institutional centralization of the local groups also gave rise to internal and external segmentation, against a backdrop of “retribalisation”⁶ and creolization, which were not without their tensions and disputes, especially concerning the growing influx of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal migrants to the towns and of tourists to the outback (Glowczewski, 1998b, ed. n.d.).

Various development plans showed the local desire to create an Aboriginal culture center that would at the same time support traditional activities and promote creation, make jobs for the Aboriginal people and protect the local communities and their natural environment (RMIT, 1995; Jackson, 1996). The shire and the Broome Media Aboriginal Corporation each hired an Aboriginal consultant, who put together a working party made up of delegates from Aboriginal organizations in the town as well as from two more distant communities, Bidyadanga and Djarindjin (see map). Numerous meetings were held to draw up a list of the activities people wanted the center to undertake and how it was to be managed. One expert of Tamil origin, invited to speak on his experience with culture centers in North America and Southern Australia, advised first creating the center as a network of cultural exchanges even before constructing the building, putting

6. Although the term “tribe” has been rejected for some ten years by Australian anthropologists and Aboriginal militants, who complain that it lends a false connotation to the regional, linguistic and traditional political groups, it is still often used by Aboriginal people, who distinguish themselves as “tribes” or “clans” to accentuate their cultural and social differences.

the argument for “virtual museums” which would use the Internet or CD-ROMs to give back the culture and its objects without the constraints of storage, preservation and security, which are extremely costly, especially in a tropical climate.

As an anthropologist married to a Yawuru man,⁷ I was asked to coordinate a survey with three Aboriginal representatives. The Working Party wanted to gain a general overview, with statements from people and data that could be presented in a quantified way to the people and to the funding bodies. The main issue was: what is culture for people and what is a culture center supposed to do in relation to different statements about culture? We had to be careful to have a representative sample of people. All the languages of the Broome region had to be represented, and we interviewed some people in their home communities away from town: one third of the 135 people in the sample identified as Jugun and/or Yawuru (42), another third as Bardi (40), whose traditional land lies 200 kilometers to the north, and the rest split between other coastal groups, Karajarri (23), Nyul Nyul (24), Jabirr Jabirr (11) and inland groups: Nyangumarta (7), Yulbarija (6), Mangala (4), Yamatji, Bunaba, Miriwong, Jaru, Walmajarri, Nyigina (17); three people did not identify by a language group. Some people identified to two or more languages, this is why the sum of the figures is higher than the number of people interviewed. The balance between genders was 73 women versus 62 men, and between ages: 54 over fifty, 59 between fifty and twenty, 22 under twenty. Each question listed several answers to choose from, but when, as it often happens, people answered spontaneously, the answer was written down and analyzed to fit into one or the other of the categories so as to allow statistical calculations (Glowczewski ed., 1996). Here are some of the questions discussed in the interviews.

What is Aboriginal Culture for You?

Most people defined culture as language (92), ceremonies, song and dance (91), land, attachment to place (85), old people and family (80), hunting, fishing, living in the bush (79); for less than half it was oral history (71), art and artifacts (69) and less than a third chose the common Western sense of the term “culture” as a cumulative and creative process, expressing Aboriginality with new media (39). All people felt a “loss” of culture and were worried by the fact that local languages are not spoken enough, even if there

7. Wayne Barker Jowandi, composer-musician, and film-maker, author of *Milli Milli*, documentary, 53 min., distributed by Ronin Films, Sydney and Jane Balfour, London.

are some lessons in the Broome primary schools and the community schools of Bidyadanga, One Arm Point and Djarindjin.

Asked about what culture is, most old people referred to traditional practices and knowledge: stories about the relation to land, bush medicine identification and use, techniques of hunting, fishing and bush-food gathering, the body of ceremonial Law including dancing and painting. Many stressed that culture is what you eat and how you eat—by a campfire—, your living style, your identity; others insisted on kinship and pleasure: “Going to corroboree was like today people get excited for a new movie; and all the competition between the guys for dancing!” One Yawuru Karajarri woman elder identified culture with *Kunyurrung*, a traditional ritual custom common to all the Kimberley groups through the *Wunan* exchange system, where men with the same name and women with the same name can exchange goods in gendered chains (Glowczewski ed., n.d.). (When a Karajarri child is about to be named, at around the age of four or five, an older person is chosen as his or her namesake and exchange partner. During the naming ritual, the families of the two namesakes share goods.) Other elders insisted on the fact that culture creates unity because of sharing and respecting different ceremonial Laws which connect people from different language groups: “Law spread out and they don’t jealous each other because they share. And they should *share* together.”

What Does an Aboriginal Culture Center Mean to You?

The majority stressed: respect of men Law and women Law (78), exchange between Aboriginal people (78), resources and exhibitions (78). Less than half chose: place where generations meet (72), place where culture is maintained and alive (72), training and development of skills (71), people with cultural knowledge (68), shows, concerts and festivals (63). In their comments, people insisted on the idea that a center was a place for activities (dance, song, crafts, teaching children) aimed at both Aboriginal children and a non-Aboriginal audience. Many elders stressed the necessity of involving different language groups, sharing culture with other regional Aboriginal groups, including Torres Strait Islanders (who have come to work in pearling), making the wider community understand about cultural differences. While the elders of the remote communities agreed on the need for a big “sharing” center in Broome, they also wanted to decentralize by having “keeping-places” and “culture-teaching places” in their local communities.

Men and women of different ages expressed concern that storage of cultural items in town might represent a spiritual danger and people would get sick. It should be noted that one culture center in Alice Springs, which has

a storage place containing sacred objects, is avoided by the local Aboriginal people, who do not want to go near them for fear of transgressing the Law that forbids approaching such objects outside the appropriate ritual context.⁸ Showing culture and repatriation are all right so long as secret things are kept at a distance: they have to be protected, but people have to be protected from them as well. The same applies to sacred places.

What Should the Center Do to Support Language and Culture in the Community?

For half of the people, protecting places of cultural heritage, (72) was as important as recording, protecting, teaching knowledge and language (74); other considerations were, give resources for crafts and art (70), give cultural awareness to Aborigines and others (66), provide shop and marketing for artists (61), create programs to develop skills (58), organize exchange with other indigenous people (53); less than a third saw a priority in facilitating creation (art, music, theatre, dance) (42). The need to market arts and create language-teaching resources was presented as a double movement to help communities develop resources themselves and to have a structure in town to host the culture custodians and organize relations with outsiders (art buyers, tourists, schools, etc.).

The protection of culture through the protection of country was expressed as the need to create a network of rangers who would be organized through the center: a model of decentralized cultural/natural management. Protection of country is seen as a mix of prevention of tourist vandalism or other abuses of the land : horses, boats, cars on the beach which erode the banks of the creeks and make the salt-water resources scarce. But the museum rangers also need to protect main tribal areas, secret sites, burial grounds, carved stones, places of spirit related to the reproduction of species: “*gumbali gumbali* (place of spirit), Bugarrigarra (Dreaming). Sometimes they dig it [the ground] and say special word, for snake, lizard, for *yaran-gal* (spirit) and there is plenty of them then.” Not doing this ritual “cleaning” hampers or even blocks the renewal of that species, animal, or seafood, as can be already observed with the scarcity or even extinction of some species in the reefs and the bush. Destroying spirit places, according to a belief shared by many young people too, makes the local people, especially the ones spiritually connected with these places, feel sick.

The term *gumbali* was traditionally used by the Karajarri to designate peo-

8. The Western desert elders performed a smoking ritual at the South Australian Museum from which sacred objects were removed to a new storage place so that the room could be used with no danger to the public from spirits (Philip Clarke, pers. com.).

ple who have the same name, that is people who can exchange goods. In Broome Aboriginal English, *gumbali* means “soul brother,” in the sense of pal, friend, people of the same generation that you grew up with. The relation between name, place, and spiritual brotherhood refers to an Aboriginal phenomenology which, in my experience, could be generalized to most of the desert and northwest groups: each person is the actualization of virtual names (and often related songs) connected with places. Among the younger generations, where identification with community towns of residence tends to replace links with remote sacred places, specific sacred spots in town are still recognized, and some people still dream spiritual connections between these places and their children to be born (Glowczewski, 1998b, ed. n.d.).

The existential threat to individual people from the destruction or harming of spirit-name places also applies to the wrongful manipulation of sacred objects which embody spiritual singularities: when stolen or put in the wrong place, they can threaten the community with sickness, conflict or other disorders. If the wrong people see or touch them, not can only they themselves go mad, or even die, but their behavior also jeopardizes the safety of members of the community, who can be affected in their body, their spirit and through natural phenomena. This belief in the ancestral spiritual power common to places and sacred objects is held by many people in the community, who would rather not see the storage place be located next to where people gather and work, and even prefer not to talk about it, for fear of unknown consequences. It is constantly stressed that the center has to be controlled by people—elders and ritual custodians—who can protect the others from the dangerous powers involved in dealing with traditional culture.

Who Should be the Main People Involved with the Aboriginal Culture Centre?

The survey consensus gave the first voice to traditional elders (80), then people with language and other cultural skills (71); less than a third of the people favored representatives of Aboriginal organizations (38) or people with administrative and technical skills (36). Some expressed the necessity to have representatives of each language group and community (23) and that Yawuru should be “first,” because they are the traditional owners of Broome (10).

The issue of who should be the main deciders is the key to the whole process of cultural reappropriation: how to write a constitution for the future incorporated body that will manage the center. Is the center to favor economic self-determination by becoming a place for promotion and retail, giving employment and income to Aboriginal people? Or is the center to be a

culture-sharing place without risk of “loss” and lack of traditional control leading to social disorder and supernatural aggression, which can manifest themselves in many ways, such as a cyclone? In that dilemma, many people trusted their elders as the only ones able to protect the whole environment by protecting a culture through the circulation of rituals and sacred objects over hundreds of kilometers in the ways they had learned from their forefathers.

A year after the survey was completed, the vision of the Bugarrigarra Nyurdany Culture Centre was summarized in a conference on “Planning Cultural and Interpretive Centres in the Kimberley” by the coordinator, granddaughter of the deceased Yawuru elder, custodian of the Broome initiations and secret cult mentioned above (Tarran 1997: 25):

- To facilitate the preservation, continuation and management of Aboriginal Law and Culture under the direction of the Old People with the strategic inclusion of Aboriginal Youth.
- To pursue sustainable economic independence through the development of employment, training and business opportunities within a supportive cultural and tourism industry environment.
- To provide appropriate cultural spaces and infrastructure support.

The notion of “appropriate” is very sensitive in the Aboriginal context. For instance, the fact that the possible repatriation of ancient objects in a local Aboriginal culture center and museum will give access, in terms of storage and maintenance, to other people than the traditional elders is a constant worry. At this level, even the photographic representation of such objects is considered to be inappropriate. Images, like the secret words that designate them, are believed to carry some of the power embodied in these objects. The image has this power precisely because the traditional painting of specific signs on the body, the ground or sacred objects was aimed, like the songs, at “nurturing” the medium. In the end such objects, which physically embody the power of the signs, *are* the culture because they are identified with the people. The whole problem of reviving the culture is to find a way of protecting these objects while allowing them to travel in the proper way, that is to stay a live sharing medium.

The Virtual Circulation of Non-Alienable Objects: Giving-Without-Loosing

I used the example of northwest and central Australia to show that, in the case of a traditional model in which cultural differences were produced

by the circulation of inalienable objects and traveling rites, the question of the cultural repatriation of these objects and the accompanying knowledge to a sedentary space such as a culture center raises political, economic, spiritual and ethical questions which challenge Western models of property. The unsuitability of the Western notion of property has also been noted in the case of Native American culture:

The most important difference between cultural property and inalienable possessions has to do with the distinction between property and possessions... possessions are always implicated in systems of exchange... [the] concept of inalienable possessions provides a more inclusive and potentially more effective avenue for arriving at resolution of cultural property disputes. (Welsh 1997: 17)

We have seen that it is in the discrepancy between cultural property and inalienable possessions that the problem of restitution, not only of Australian sacred objects but of Aboriginal intellectual knowledge as well, resides. If the sacred objects which circulate between groups through rituals are inalienable, then the knowledge that goes with these rituals, in the form of stories, songs, paintings and dances, is also inalienable, as are the sacred places which, for Aboriginal people, materialize this knowledge just as the sacred objects do: they are more than a representation, they are the living manifestation of this knowledge.

One Aboriginal myth from the northern coast, in Arnhem Land, tells the story of the Djangawul, two ancestral sisters who, after the men stole their bags and certain sacred objects, said: "We know everything. We have really lost nothing, for we remember it all, and we can let them have that small part. For aren't we still sacred, even if we have lost the bags? Haven't we still our uteri?" (Berndt, 1952: 58). The reproductive organ mentioned here is also symbolized by the mats produced by women in the north for use as pubic tassels. In an earlier article, I showed that the circulation of hair strings which are used, among other things, to make pubic tassels, position desert women as agents of social reproduction in a way similar to that analyzed by Annette Weiner (1976) for the production and circulation of mats by women in Samoa and the Trobriand Islands:

... hair string transmission between men occurs through women as the sisters. This transmission is reciprocal between brothers-in-law to symbolize compensating or attaching sisters with the brother or the husband. A woman shares with her brothers the ownership of the patriclan territory and at the same time she is a ritual manager of her husband's sister's territorial ceremonies... Hair string circulation thus symbolizes alliances and economic exchanges (access to another person's territorial resources), affirms a certain dependence of men

on women, and confirms women's responsibility not only as land owners or managers but also as producers of the value (their string made from their hair) which incarnates the ritual management relations. (Glowczewski, 1983a: 238)

Ten years later, Annette Weiner (1992), in her book, *Inalienable Possessions: The paradox of keeping-while-giving*, referred to my analysis of Warlpiri hair strings with respect to other work on Australian desert groups (Bell, 1983; Dussart, 1988; Myers, 1986):

... these recent data on women's controlling interests in the circulation of hair strings, rope, threads, and cloth show how essential such possessions are to men as well as women and how these possessions constitute social identities as well as rights to territorial associations. Clearly, Aboriginal women had (and in some cases, still have) access to sacred objects that, infused with potency, have significant exchange value. Whether or not some of these possessions take on absolute value and become inalienable cannot be discerned from the available data. (Weiner, 1992: 112)

Since my 1983 article, I have gathered new material on hair strings, notably a myth telling how the Digging-Stick women (*Kana*) wanted to acquire headbands and *makarra* ("womb") rope made by an ancestor from the hair of men in order to seduce them, and so agreed to give men their knowledge of initiations and hunting (Glowczewski, 1991, ed. 1991). Like the women of Arnhem Land, the Warlpiri women said that they had "lost" nothing by agreeing to this gift-exchange. In the Owl conflict-resolution ceremony—the same one the Warlpiri gave the northwest groups—men dance around with hair strings and stop in front of the mothers of potential wives, who take these strings: mothers used them to make pubic tassels, which they wore before passing them on to their daughters when they were old enough to marry the giver of the hair string (Glowczewski, 1991: 209). It is as though the hair strings constantly bound up descent with alliance through a circulation of substances that were embodied and transmitted in these exchanges. Made from the hair of men or women, by men or women, hair strings circulate between the genders, who transform them in their own way.

The hair string pubic belt of a boy who was to be circumcised could be sent in his stead to invite distant groups—sometimes from different language groups—to participate in his initiation. In former times an initiand accompanied by his guardians could spend several months traveling hundreds of kilometers to rally various allies to his initiation. Today all kinds of vehicles, even aircraft, add many more kilometers to these initiation circuits. Peterson (2000) reports that, in 1994, a boy from a Western Desert



Photo 25: Mangaya sticks connected with the ritual *makarra* (womb) hair string rope aiming at bringing the dancers into the Dreaming space-time. (Photo B. Glowczewski)

group traveled 2,250 kilometers to the north, as far as the Lajamanu Warlpiri, before returning in a ritual convoy totaling some 600 travelers upon arrival. Novice's travels are accompanied by transfers of ritual objects, slabs and hair strings, as well as marriage promises, the circumciser often being obliged to promise the novice one of his daughters. Similar convoys travel the east/west axis linking the Central and Western deserts to the Kimberley groups, as far as Broome. Interestingly, on this coast, boys and girls of marriageable age used to receive a hair string belt garnished with a large pearl-shell. Once this shell, inscribed with Dreaming signs, was transmitted to the desert groups, it became a sacred object reserved for initiated men, especially rain-makers.

Desert men use hair strings to make string crosses; these highly sacred objects are allowed to be seen by women only in exceptional circumstances. In the northwest, wool has replaced string for the manufacture of these crosses which, here, are presented to women as ritual gifts. In desert groups, the "womb" hair string is extremely sacred for women; it is strung between the two meter-high sacred sticks they "plug into" the ground; this ritual device is believed to actualize the Dreaming space-time for the duration of the ritual. Men and women alike use hair strings and rope to wrap other sacred objects, especially wood or stone slabs. Women also use them therapeutically and at times of mourning or initiation: they rub women or men, girls or boys with them in order to infuse them with a power or to extract some-

thing from them. The purpose of touching a person with the strings seems to be the same as with the slabs. Something of the power of the Dreaming and the singular identity of all those who have ever touched these objects has become consubstantial with them in the course of the different handlings which bind together all differences: genders, kin, affines, exchangers from various language groups.

Summing up I would say, in answer to Annette Weiner, that hair strings are alienable when they are given in payment for a ritual service, for example, when the temporary custodians of a slab return it to the original owners; but they become inalienable once they have been used in a sacred ritual function by either sex: to make ritual string crosses, to wrap up sacred objects or to rub a sick person, novice or someone in mourning. Then they become sacred objects. All circulations of men, women, objects and rites, which sometimes circulate together, sometimes one instead of another, seem to operate according to the same logic of giving-without-losing, consistent with giving to make what one gives desirable. A logic of desire imbedded in a relation of power, for it is when one succeeds in obliging the other to accept a gift that one can claim to be the strongest (Glowczewski, 1991: 288). This explains the complex negotiations which lead groups to mutually impose the—temporary—adoption of each other's inalienable riches: sacred objects, rites, young people for initiation and marriage.

The idea of giving-without-losing, found in all Aboriginal ritual circulations, is in its own way like the logic of certain software designers who argue for the free circulation of their product as opposed to the principle of intellectual copyright, which benefits only the big monopolies. In what they humorously call "copyleft," which consists in allowing copies to be made of a program while acknowledging the creator's origin, they see a better means of controlling their creations than in the present application of the copyright laws, which transfer the original author's rights to whoever buys the product for the purpose of commercialization. As Stephenson suggests (1994), there is certainly a parallel to be explored with indigenous peoples' claims to their inalienable possessions. Such a parallel would also evoke the similarity between the non-linear synchronous nature and the hyperlinks of the Web and the Internet with the linked-up thinking and the cognitive networks of a certain kind of mythic thought.

I would like to add here that myth does not seem to me to oppose history in the way Kolig (2000) opposes the cognitive perception of the desert groups—as mythic and synchronic—to that of the Aboriginal peoples of the northwest—as historic, diachronic and post-colonial. We have seen that, over and beyond their cultural, social and geographical differences, Aboriginal groups of the two regions exchange cults which they re-adapt to suit themselves while reproducing local differences which go beyond simple dualism. Although it is true that northwestern Aboriginal groups felt the

effects of colonization long before the desert groups did, it remains that the circulation of objects and songs as well as kinship systems between the two regions pre-dates colonization. It is this ritualized circulation of tangible and intangible artifacts back and forth on linear journeys stretching across time which enables mythic thinking to be reproduced in the form of a living network: mythic thinking manufactures transformations and connections which singularize and reposition anchor points, sacred places, in a continually evolving structure of narrative and performance. Compared with this logic, the merely encompassing West is constantly threatening to dis-authenticate those who create these anchor points. Hence the urgent need for museums, and anthropologists, not to go on “alienating these cultures” by alienating their objects, but instead to recognize their inalienability by authenticating their creators rather than their acquirers.

Translated by Nora Scott