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The Body as Language and Expression of the Indigenous Australian Cultural Identity

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Abstract: In the Indigenous Australian oral culture, Tradition and Law are transmitted orally – through songs, tales, legends, etc. – and by visual expressions – engravings and drawings made on rocks, on the ground, on material objects, on bark and on the human body–. Drawings and engravings transform the surface on which they are made from profane to sacred, since they are the transmitters of cultural myths and beliefs, generation after generation. The body, one of the supports of visual expression, actively participates in the transmission of myths, relegating the design to a secondary place. The most important thing is the transmission of the myth and not the way it is transmitted, or the result. The mythological narrative or legend surpasses the aesthetic line of vision. This paper intends to expose the primacy of the use of the body -- human or not–, as a transmitter of the myths and history of the Indigenous Australian culture. In this way the body speaks a non-oral language full of symbolism and meaning.
Keywords: Indigenous Australian communities, body painting, oral tradition

1. Presentation

In the Indigenous Australian oral culture, Tradition and Law are transmitted by oral expressions –songs, tales, legends, etc.– and by visual expressions –engravings and drawings made on rocks, on the ground, on material objects, on bark and on the human body. Art is a central and fundamental part of indigenous life and whatever its purposes: political, social, utilitarian or didactic –and these functions constantly overlap– art is inherently connected to the religious domain. Art, visual imagery, is a means by which the Present is connected with the Past and human beings with the supernatural world. Art activates the powers of the ancestral beings, expresses individual and group identities, and the relationship between people and the land.

All early indigenous art was based on the various clans' and nations' ancestral Dreamtime –the Creation, the Dreaming-- when the earth's physical features took form through the struggles between powerful supernatural ancestors such as the Rainbow Serpent, the Lightning Men and the Wandjina. Codes of behaviour were also laid down in the Dreamtime and these laws remain the foundation of most indigenous communities today, even those that have been most affected by colonisation. Ceremonies, rituals and visual representation of specific totems and stories are interrelated elements of the Indigenous Australian culture, known as the Dreaming or

the Dreamtime.

2. Objectives

Designs and religious images, when applied to any surface, whether it is the body of a participant in a ritual ceremony or the surface of a sculpture, have the power to transform the nature of the thing from the profane to the sacred and to evoke the radiant presence of a supernatural power.

The body, one of the supports of the visual expression, actively participates in the transmission of myths relegating the design to a secondary place. The most important thing is the transmission of the myth and not the manner it is transmitted or the result. The mythological narrative or legend surpasses the aesthetic line of vision. Such an extraordinary way to use the body as a visual expression of the aboriginal culture is beginning to be gradually recognized, valued and studied. Every part of the body is used to express and say something.

Anthropologists call this art "Living Art", an art that moves, acting and transmitting permanent messages. The signs and geometric figures are there to be interpreted, even by the profane or not initiated. A correct interpretation depends on the ritual knowledge of both the artist and the spectator, and on the knowledge of the ancestral mind. Signs and geometric figures can only be fully appreciated and understood with an appropriate level of initiation.

Therefore, we would like to expose the primacy of the use of the body –human or not–, as a transmitter of the myths and history of the Indigenous Australian culture. In this culture the body has a non-oral language full of symbolism and meaning, whether it is used to express joy, pain, grief, a declaration of war, or whether it simply seeks to identify itself with the community.

3. The body as transmitter of oral culture

3.1 The Human Body

The Indigenous Peoples have painted their bodies for many centuries. We have the evidence of explorers, pioneers and missionaries who were shown them: Don Rosendo Salvado, a benedictine monk, saw them in 1852; Phillips Parker Kink in 1837; James Dawson in the colony of Victoria in 1882; Carl Lumholtz saw body paintings in Aranda in 1889, and Spencer and Guillen in 1898 and they also registered forms, contents, styles and techniques. (Martin Montenegro: 2006, chapter 9, 4).

As far as they could, anthropologists documented and studied designs, structures, contents and symbolisms, especially in Central and Northern Australia where they are still in use.

3.1.1. Body painting

3.1.1.1. Techniques

The painting begins several hours before the ceremony and is accompanied by singing to call on the spiritual powers of the ancestral beings.

First some grease is spread from head to legs; then, depending on the places, red ochre

or white as a base. Decorations are applied to breasts, across the shoulders, the upper arms, stomach, and thighs.

The designs are made with birds down, a stick of bamboo, the index finger, human hair, sticks bound with string at one end and also with a paint-brush.

3.1.1.2. Materials

The materials used are red and yellow ochre, white stone, charcoal, clay, and sometimes manganese. They also employ white bird and vegetable fluff *(Portulaca oleracea; Portulaca pilosa)* and human blood.

Each colour has a different symbolism: in the desert, red has a religious meaning; in Arnhem Land, white is associated with the ancestors. The shade of the colour is also important (in the North, for instance, red is mixed with bloodstone to make the skin shine).

3.1.1.3. Style

There are two styles of body painting, the figurative and the geometric. In the figurative style designs are realistic and spectacular; the objects and beings represented are easily identified (snakes, boomerangs, etc.). The geometric style, by means of lines and geometric designs, has a level of interpretation only for the initiated people.

Desert paintings present a close homogeneity using few elements: full or concentric circles, round or oval circles, dots, straight or uneven lines, arches and also animal footprints (Strehlow, 1964). Bird footprints are represented by arrows, tracks made by them on the sand; a tree by a circle, the diameter of a tree trunk on the surfaceof the soil.

The paintings in the North, especially in Arnhem Land, are figurative (animal, human figures). The painted men wear bird feathers.

Each set of designs is interpreted according to the ritual, social and political situation in which it is presented. The levels of interpretation of an image or design depend on the ritual knowledge of both artist and viewer, and on an understanding of the ancestral landscape. Generally artists provide a description of their work, and the many levels of interpretation permit them to present their art to an often culturally untutored public, to the public domain, without compromising its religious nature.

In some ceremonies, the body and facial designs used in the dancing do not, apparently, depend on either patrilineal or matrilineal halves; and a variety of patterns is used at each performance.

We have the descriptions of some anthropologists:

1) McCarthy (1967) says that, at the initiation ceremonies of Central and Northern Australia:

> On the legs, arms, and body of the participant the designs are formed by the

> application of white feather-down along each side of the red or black lines or circles already traced out... Often the decoration of the body is made continuous with the headdress by gumming the feather-down over the head, neck, and upper part of the body

2) Catherine H. Berndt (1950) says of the women's ceremonies in Northern Australia:

> These women, in their "tjarada", use blood from their arms to fasten, on their bodies, patterns of "down" from a small "everlasting" variety of flower (…). The white clay is moistened in the mouth, and sometimes sprayed over the dancer during the preparations

3) Roland M. and Catherine H. Berndt (1951), write of the *Ubar* ceremony in Western Arnhem Land:

> ...certain initiated young men retire to paint themselves in "waistcoat" fashion with uneven dots of white, red and black ochres

4) Reed (1974) describes the paintings used by participants in a *corroboree* to ask for abundance and fertility and in the initiation rites:

Maybe the best known image of those participating in *corroborees* in Northern, Eastern and Central Australia is the skeleton painted on the body.

The painted dancers must have a respectful attitude towards the spirits they represent. Depending on the situations for which the corporal drawings are made (initiation, daily life, festivities), the attitude of respect, silence and care with which they are made varies and adapts to the situation.

3.1.1.4. Symbolism

In all the rituals, men taking part have their bodies decorated with sacred designs that symbolize the Dreamtime person represented by the actors. The painting transforms men into Dreamtime persons. They dance and imitate the behaviour of those beings as if they were actually in the Dreamtime. Music is provided by chanting or singing the myths or the songs connected with them, usually to the rhythm of clapping sticks and a *didjeridu.*

Throughout central Australia, totemic ancestors are represented by graphic designs that have considerable importance in the visual symbol system focused on ancestral belief. Among the Walbiri, these designs are extensively elaborated, and are part of a wider graphic system with some of the structural characteristics of a "language". Each ancestor is associated with one or more designs that are regarded as surrogates for him (Munn, 1973:32).

Dancing is very much part of the indigenous life and the *corroboree* is an important medium of expression, practised by all –men, women and children alike.

Indigenous Australians use body decoration for other purposes: for camouflage in hunting, for protection in fights, for repelling mosquitoes in the tropical zones, for magical purposes, for attracting a woman or a man as a lover or, as used by the Walbiri

men with the *Ilbindji* designs, the body of the deceased is painted in red and the head in white as a sign of recognition and gratitude.

3.1.2. Scarring

Indigenous Australians did not practise tattooing but they used to carve scars as decoration of the body. But this could also be part of rituals of initiation (Isaacs, 1984) or marriage. Scarring began at puberty, continued for a year and the pain was acute.

Though this custom tends to disappear, there are parts of Australia where people still practise scarring (Kimberley, Queensland, Cap York and Central Australia).

3.1.2.1. Techniques and material

Scars were produced by making cuts with a stone knife or with a shell and rubbing/putting in ashes, chalk or in some cases ants, in order to produce a swelling before the wound was dressed.

Scars were made on the chest, on thighs, arms and backs. Men's scars were more elaborated than women's. Women used to wear scars around the neck as a necklace, on the middle of the chest, or on the hip.

3.1.2.2. Style

Seven or more parallel lines were usually made.

3.1.2.3. Symbolism

The Yolngu people of Northeast Arnhem Land perceive the land as the outcome of the transformation of ancestral bodies, and believe that the link between the ancestral land and people is expressed in terms of embodiment and the sharing of substance through conception and death signs. The significance of body scarring can thus be better understood (Tamisari 1998: 255).

On certain occasions scarring is performed mainly by women. Usually at the circumcision and the funeral ceremony of a close relative, women cut or hit themselves on that part of their body which, in sign language, is associated with that particular relative. Aborigines usually scar their bodies in marriage, too.

Scarring is also performed and shared between two people who, in spite of their kinship distance, have been particularly close during their lives.

But, following Geoff Bardon's thoughts on Papua (1979), we can establish an analogy. Indigenous Australians identify the earth with the skin of their bodies and they cut their bodies in order to represent in them the natural and physical phenomenon of the landscape that surrounds them and in which they live.

3.1.3. Adornment or personal objects

Indigenous Australians usually wear ornaments. Those for daily use are relatively few and simple, the more elaborate are those mostly worn in ritual contexts.

3.1.3.1. Ceremonial

Ceremonial headdresses: Large headdress-hats. Made with bark hoop, some string and ending in a plume of emu feathers and thin human-hair plaits. They are worn in

totemic rites by the Aranda in Central Australia.

Waninga: Tread-cross. Ceremonial emblem made of human hair, possum and bandicoot fur bound tightly so as to form a diamond-shape figure. It represents the animal totem of the clan in whose honour the ceremony is performed. It is widely distributed in Central Australia, the Northern Territory and the Kimberleys.

Ceremonial arm-bands or bracelets: Made of strips of bark, white feathers and wood, and decorated with red, white and ochre paint.Worn by the Tiwi women in the *Pukamani* funerary ceremonies.

Marie ooroo: Mourner's hoop, plaited with the deceased's hair, as well as wombat hair.

Ceremonial plumes: Plumes made of yellow, red and black feathers spread like a fan, inserted in a piece of resin where some seeds have also been inserted.

3.1.3.2. Personal ornaments

Hair ornaments: A bunch of cords bound together with vegetal fibres, painted in red and white. Or it may be a piece of mother-of-pearl with resin at one of its ends.

Nose ornament: Bone, wood or reed pins worn through the pierced nasal septum.

Necklaces: made of seeds, teeth, lengths of reed or fragments of quills threaded on a string.

Belts: made of several plaits of human hair, covered in red clay, and tied together with knotted cords.

Phalocrypts: As, for instance, a mother-of-pearl shell phallocrypt where the inner surface has been decorated with fringe designs in a reddish colour. In one of the ends there is a hole and through it a bunch of fibres have been threaded to fix a cord, made of human hair, to the shell.

Phallocrypts cannot be worn by the uninitiated and are highly valued by the Indigenous Aboriginal tribes in North, Central and Western Australia, as well as by those in Western Queensland, with whom the former barter their goods (R.M.Berndt, 1964:102).

It is often difficult to distinguish between sacred and profane, for similar objects may have different connotations in neighbouring tribes.

Indigenous Australians wear all kind of things as adornments, whatever they find in their land that is suitable. Animal, vegetal and mineral elements are used to decorate their bodies. Branches of eucalypts are also used as an important element before ceremonies or when people visit sacred places, to purify both people and places.

3.2 Sculptures

Wooden sculptures are located in the North of Australia, especially in North-East

Arnhem Land, Barthurst and Melville Islands, the Cape York Peninsula and the North-West of Western Australia. They represent the Dreamtime ancestors.

Many of these sculptures used to be stored and painted again with ochre colours and clay before rituals. They were often secret and could not be seen by non initiated people. (Burt, 1977:75).

3.2.1. Anthropomorphic sculptures

Anthropomorphic sculptures are made in Western Australia, Central Australia and in North-East Arnhem Land, Bathurst and Melville Islands as well as in Cape York.

3.2.1.1. Material

The most common material for the sculptures is wood, ironwood. But some are also made with beeswax covered with feather-down.

To paint the sculptures they apply the same colours that they use for decorating their body or for their paintings: red and yellow ochre, charcoal black and white from kaolin or pipe clay. The sites at which ochre is quarried are often of important ritual and political significance.

3.2.1.2. Style

We will comment on two styles: the Arnhem Land style and the Melville and Bathurst Islands style.

3.2.1.2.1. The Arhnem Land style

The style of the Arnhem Land sculptures is stiff with straight bodies; a sculptural type distributed throughout Indonesia and Melanesia.

After a figure is carved it is painted red to signify a spirit being in human form, and then a design is added which identifies it as an ancestral being. The paintings of the West tend towards the figurative, and as one moves eastwards, geometric designs become more prominent. The use of cross-hatched patterns is a feature of Arnhem Land which identifies clans. In the western half of Arnhem Land cross-hatching is referred to as *rarrk,* whereas towards the East the patterns are known as *miny'tji* and *dhulang.*

3.2.1.2.2. The Art of the Tiwi

The result of isolation is evident in several cultural differences between the Tiwi and the mainlanders, and in the development of a number of unique art forms, particularly in sculpture.

Spectacularly painted poles called *tutuni* are carved as replicas of the human form, since what the Tiwi intend to do is to represent aspects or associations of the deceased around whose graves they are gathered.

The Tiwi painted figurative sculpture is a development from the Pukumani pole tradition, with geometric designs. The ochre used is more friable than the ochre from Arnhem Land.

3.2.1.3. Symbolism

Sculptured figures represent, as we have said before, the Dreamtime people. They are

used in ceremonies, as the one to celebrate the birth of a male child called *Mamurrng*.

In the Bathurst and Melville Islands the sculptures are used in the funeral rites of the Pukumani.The wooden human sculptures of Cape York were introduced as part of hero-cult rituals from the Torres Strait Islands. The human figures, made of beeswax, represent a man or a woman whose death is to be brought about by sorcery.

3.2.2. Zoomorphic scultures

Zoomorphic sculptures are made in the same places as the anthropomorphic sculptures: Western Australia, Central Australia and in North-East Arnhem Land, Bathurst and Melville Islands and Cape York.

3.2.2.1. Material

As in the case of the anthropomorphic sculptures, the material used is wood, ironwood (*Acacia estrophiolata* in the South; *Erythrophleum chlorostachys* in the North) (Latz, 1995; V.V.A.A., 1993). Some sculptures are also made of beeswax.

To paint the sculptures, they apply the same colours that they use for decorating their bodies or for paintings: red and yellow ochre, charcoal black and white from kaolin or pipe clay. The sites where ochre is quarried are often of important ritual and political significance.

3.2.2.2. Style

It is the same as the style of the anthropomorphic sculptures in Arnhem Land and Melville and Bathurst Islands.

3.2.2.2.1. The Arhnem Land Style

The style is the same as the style of the anthropomorphic sculptures.

The paintings of the West tend towards the figurative and, as one moves eastwards, geometric designs become more prominent. The use of cross-hatched patterns is the same as in the case of the anthropomorphic sculptures. The artists represent: bandicoots, dugongs, pelicans, etc.

3.2.2.2.2. Art of the Tiwi

The style is the same as the style of the anthropomorphic sculptures. The artists make sculptures of birds, especially of the *Jabiru,* one of the birds found in water pools. A wide variety of geometric designs is used.The ochre employed is more friable than the one found in Arhnem Land.

3.2.2.3. Symbolism

As we have said before, most of the zoomorphic sculptures represent the Dreamtime people. They are used in ceremonies, as the *Jabiru* that is used as a *ragga* during funerary ceremonies called *Djalambu* (Allen, 1961:35).

4. Conclusion

Designs are social forms external to the individual but that are in contact with the body. On the other hand, the Dreamtime images from which the designs are believed to have originated are private experiences locked inside the body, inside individual consciousness. The designs contain the Dreamtime potency in a social form that can also

channel it back into individual consciousness *via* direct sensory contact (Munn, 1973:57).

Narrative, song, designs and storytellig are closely related and they are part of the ceremonies, a process of making visible and giving material embodiment to ancestral beings.

As we have pointed out, visual art is one of the ways through which Aborigines transmits their culture, law, tradition, ceremonies, generation after generation. Body decoration has an important place in the transmission of the culture of the Indigenous Australians, which they live in the body and the land, not in books.

The purpose of paintings is not so much representation but rather the fact of producing an effect, at the same time aesthetic and emotional, where the meaning –association of a totemic name, a mythical story and a reference place or itinerary-- is but a moment of the vision in movement of the Dreamtime's space-time (Munn, 1973:312).

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Acknowledgements

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