

**"Tracking Wurnan: transformations in the trade and exchange of resources in the northern Kimberley".**

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**Trade:** buy and sell, engage in .... (in commodity, with person); have a transaction (with person for thing); carry merchandise (to place) [ME, F. MLG *trade* track, f. OS trada, f. tredan TREAD] *Concise Oxford Dict.*

The recent intensification of the demands from a range of government agencies that indigenous Australian land holders shift their focus from a previously valorised cultural identity-based attachment to land to an economic development approach to those lands has drawn upon the long-prevailing perception of a sharp division between usufruct (a rights-based model) and landed cultural identities (an underlying title-based model) in traditional Aboriginal Australia. In this overly dichotomized schema, economic use-rights occupy the unmarked position, reflecting the naturalization of market-derived notions of the alienability of property while the marked position has been occupied by an exoticised notion of indigenous people spiritually bound to country. This tendency to separate out the cultural from the economic requires an exploration of some of the underlying assumptions underpinning the supposed incommensurability of a modern economy and Aboriginal exchange networks.

In contrast to that dichotomization between land rights/economy and land title/culture, this paper explores transformations in the traditional *wurnan* trade network which over-arches a number of socio-cultural regions in the Kimberley and beyond, operating at both small scale interpersonal and larger scale inter-group levels, channelling ritual and simple economic objects of desire through pre-determined but flexible trading routes (Redmond 2001).

The conceptual and political polarity between economy and culture referred to above has manifested in slightly different forms over time, so that sometimes it has been framed as a distinction between an enduring mythic consciousness with its timeless traditions attributed to indigenes and an agent-driven history with a peculiar capacity for innovation attributed to the colonial powers, in short between modernity's focus on time as opposed to an Aboriginal focus on place (Rumsey 1994; some may also recall here the debates sparked by Tony Swain's "Place for Strangers" [1993]).

The same conceptual polarity has also been articulated in the anthropological distinction drawn between flexible economic bands, with their range of foraging grounds, vis a vis totemic clans, with their immovable estate-based sacra and descent-based identities. This last distinction was, of course, fully elaborated by Les Hiatt in his 1962 critique of Radcliffe-Brown's long-prevailing model of the horde (1930-1), which had conflated the heterogeneous economic group possessing use rights in land with the more stable descent groups holding title to lands by dint of a sacralised ancestral identity.

Hiatt's necessary clarification of that issue subsequently spawned a tendency to over-sacralise indigenous property rights so that cultural and economic property rights have often been construed as distinct. This division is reflected most clearly in the NT ALRA which defined the traditional owners for any tract of country with a double aspect: as someone with "primary spiritual responsibility" for dreaming sites, (defining such owners by means of genealogical legitimation) and as those who use that tract of country in the sense of hunting and foraging.

This splitting off of an Aboriginal high culture from the economy has been made ever more explicit in native title case law, in which the holistic beneficiary possession originally inscribed in the NTA has been reduced to a fragile and fragmented "bundle of rights" resulting in a situation in which the right to trade in resources taken from a claim area has yet to be recognised by the courts<sup>1</sup>. Opponents of such a right have generally mounted an argument that ritual objects rather than utilitarian ones were the main items of exchange in Aboriginal Australia, despite the abundant evidence that both of these kinds of goods and services were exchanged or "sold".

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<sup>1</sup> [Northern Territory of Australia v Alyawarr, Kaytetye, Warumungu, Wakaya Native Title Claim Group \[2005\] FCAFC 135 \(29 July 2005\)](#)  
The claim group comprises 7 landholding estate groups, of traditional country south east of Tennant Creek. The court held that in relation to the pastoral lease land, native title rights were not exclusive, but did include a range of rights, however, the right to trade resources is not included.

A right to trade the resources of the land may be regarded as a right in relation to land. However, in this case, there was insufficient evidence to support the finding of a native title right to trade in the resources of the claim area: [152]–[157]; *Yarmirr v Northern Territory of Australia* (1998) 82 FCR 533, *Yanner v Eaton* [1999] HCA 53; (1999) 201 CLR 351 considered.

156. The Northern Territory argued that the right to trade in the resources of the land necessarily implies a native title right to exclusive possession thereof. It was submitted that his Honour's reference to *Yanner v Eaton* [1999] HCA 53; (1999) 201 CLR 351 and the absence of any right to own flora and fauna implied a view that the evidence was consistent with a native title right to take flora and fauna but not to own it. In any event the evidence was said not to support any right to 'trade' in the resources of the land as that term is generally understood. ....The Northern Territory argued that that evidence made no reference at all to any commercial or profit motives or any level of organised business operation.

157. In his reasons for judgment the learned trial judge found that the use or exercise of the right to use and enjoy the resources of the claim area was well supported. Evidence had also been given by the applicants that they had asserted the right to use the natural resources of the claim area including water, trees, bush medicines, soakages, sacred sites and other things including ochre from various places in the claim area. His Honour said (at [160]).

The polarization of ceremonial exchange vis a vis highly objectivised barter or pure trade has been a central analytical tool of social anthropology at least since Malinowski's ethnography of the Kula trading ring (1922) which established a functionalist template for explicating the production of social cohesion and political alliance in the acephalous hunter-gather and/or small-scale horticultural societies of the British colonial possessions in Africa and Oceania.

Malinowski described various types of exchanges ranging from the "free gifts" flowing between spouses and between father's and their children, to the various types of "equivalent" and "non-equivalent" exchanges which he saw as being spread across a continuous field, with non-relational barter or trade at the far end of his gift/exchange spectrum (Malinowski 1922:177-191), a position which Sahlins later termed "negative reciprocity" (1965:148).

Mauss' seminal, comparative monograph, "The Gift" (1924), drew extensively upon Malinowski's ethnography and drafted a template got modern sociology to draw distinctions between the personalising, exchange-focused gift economies of small-scale societies and the depersonalizing independent transactor market economies of modernity.

The cultural capacity for reciprocity between persons and small groups in gift economies to "annul time" was equated with an alluring capacity to annul political power (Gell 1992:24). Annette Weiner's critique of "axiomatic reciprocity" in studies of Melanesian societies, (1992) argued that "the anthropological confidence" in reciprocity as the motivation for social exchanges in non-state societies, far from being an appreciation of marked cultural and economic difference, derived from the central place accorded to a norm of reciprocity elaborated in a political philosophy which

has its roots in the market beliefs of Locke, Stewart and Adam Smith. These in turn arose from ideas about authority and the sacred in the Middle Ages where norms of reciprocity were used to sanctify dominant political hierarchies, involving gifts of patronage and charity (1992:28)<sup>2</sup>.

This author suggested that if reciprocity is presented as "natural" to man's economic and religious life, then the give-and-take of exchanges between men and between men and gods allowed hierarchical relationships to be represented as mutually beneficial to all (ibid.). Weiner went on to show how Henry Maine's distinction between "moveable" as

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<sup>2</sup> See Freeman's History of the Norman Conquest (1876) for an exploration of the notion of reciprocity as the essence of feudal relations.

opposed to “immovable” property posited the category of “immovable” (i.e. inalienable) property as the “greatest impediment to the free circulation of objects”, the ultimate goal of an emergent commodity economy. The cosmological authentication of immovable property produced in origin myths and fictive or real genealogies gave rise to high status, “transcendent” patrilineal possessions, such as inherited landed estates imbued with a quality of “timelessness” when by being repositories of gods and genealogies<sup>3</sup>.

During her 1935-7 Kimberley fieldwork Phyllis Kaberry quickly recognised the similarities between Malinowski’s descriptions of the Kula and the regional institution of “Wirnan” noting that cosmological beliefs about Galaroo, the Rainbow Serpent, permeated and authenticated this exchange network.

A man may sicken because he has not played his part in a particular kind of exchange resembling somewhat the Kula of the Trobriands. His exchange partner compels him to dream of a pearl-shell, one of the articles of exchange, and said to have been given to a man by the rainbow serpent (1937-8:284)

Kaberry produced a sketch map (Figure 1 below) which shows the routes along which different classes of items were traded in different directions from west to east are “shells, ...mandi (stones), and sacred objects,”. From east to west run “dilly bags; fighting sticks; bamboo; wax; nagas; milinyin (bamboo shafts)”.

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<sup>3</sup> Bourdieu (1977) famously criticized the telling absence of temporality not just from objectivist analyses of social exchange, but also in the strategic expunging of time by exchange partners themselves. He argued that the anthropological notion of reciprocity is a “synoptic illusion” in which the generative tensions inherent to having and desiring, giving and generating a response, are adumbrated by exchange partners’ crucial misrecognition of a gift as irreversible into the kind of reversibility which is achieved only over time, through waiting. Bourdieu doesn’t suggest that there is an absence of an intersubjective expectation of reciprocity in gift giving but rather that it is the delayed return, the interval between gifts, which creates a spatio-temporal zone for a shared and generative nescience concerning any projected return. In this respect at least, Bourdieu’s position is in keeping with Voloshinov’s insight that the intentionality of any intersubjective exchange, such as speech, always already anticipates a response from the other which will clarify, interpret, give meaning to the first actor’s understanding of their own initiating action. These desires, tensions, expectations of a response, fundamentally rooted in the experience of temporality, become obliterated by telescoping the temporal sequences of actual exchanges into a transcendent single moment and single omniscient perspective possessed only by the outside observer. He applied the same critique to the genealogical method thus revealing underlying similarities in the quality of timelessness accorded to both exchange and genealogy in synchronic anthropological theory. This synoptic, illusion can only be maintained by the elision of time from the practices of exchanging gifts because it removes all the indeterminacy which infuses dwelling with others in time. The manifold possibilities for failed transactions (i.e. failing to elicit a return or a riposte) which would subject an inaugural gifting act to being “stripped retrospectively of its intentional meaning” (Bourdieu 1990:105) by the analyst’s “anamnesis” (failure to forget) regarding the expectation of a return, a forgetting which is itself the very *grounds of possibility* for social exchange. This anamnesis allows reciprocity to be analytically objectified as a fail-proof mechanism for the elicitation of an equivalent response, an invariable principle organizing the mechanical behavioural patterns of “automatons”. To the contrary, however, the creative work of the gift, essentially “the work of time” (ibid:1990), is exactly to attempt to negotiate the ineradicable uncertainties which prevail in all intersubjective engagements, where “the Other’s intended meaning remains a limiting concept ...and will never be precisely the same” (Schutz 1967:98). Furthermore, the problem of any such meaning always “remains one of historical Time, the consciousness of duration” (*ibid.* 12) within which the meaning of an exchange is constituted.

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**Figure 1. Kaberry, P. (1935-6, AIATSIS MS739/2 Item 14. Sketch Map of trade routes in the Kimberley region)**

At the same time, “reciprocity” was identified as a central organizing feature of Arnhem Land (“Murngin”) sociality in Warner’s monograph, *A Black Civilization* (1958, original 1937). Drawing on a functionalist model from Malinowski (1922), Warner described the “ritual and economic reciprocity” which formed the “fundamental basis of this ceremonial exchange which produces a stability and balance in the social relations of the groups and individuals. It organizes the structure of the economic group by the exchange of ceremonial objects” (1958:96). This was seen to mirror the reciprocity in marriage exchanges, together forming the ultimate basis of the local social contract. Donald Thomson’s (1949) monograph on this subject, however, eschewed strong distinctions between ritual and economic exchanges, noting that for north-east Arnhem Landers, the ceremonial exchange cycle “is not in any sense barter although circulation of goods on a large scale results” (1949:77). Thomson’s view was ultimately consistent with that of Malinowski who had noted that, while they appeared at opposite ends of a spectrum, in the Kula “it is impossible to draw any fixed line between trade, on the one hand, and exchange of gifts on the other” (1922:176).

### **Kimberley Ceremonial Exchanges and trade**

Traditional Kimberley Aboriginal ritual and economic life were clearly not experienced as dichotomous realms of social life. The transactions which occur between groups and individuals through the *wurnan* channels have always involved pragmatic, ephemeral economic objects such as meat and hunting implements as well as ritual sacred/secret objects. Frederick McCarthy noted that

the making of gifts - foods, ornaments and weapons- is really part of the kinship system, forms a necessary adjunct to betrothal, marriage and initiation, and especially to the settling of grievances and quarrels; indeed it occurs at all large gatherings of natives.....recent researches in north-eastern South Australia, north Western Australia, the Daly River district and elsewhere, have revealed that the economic customs and institutions dovetail into the kinship, ceremonial and legal aspects of social life (1934: 12).

F.D.McCarthy produced a map showing the North Kimberley trade routes and listing the objects exchanged through Ngarinyin country as "stone axes, red ochre, stone spear points, bamboo spears" (McCarthy 1939: 436). McCarthy noted that a single exchange object might

have both pragmatic and ritual qualities compressed into it such as quartz spear-tips which were used for hunting of kangaroo as well as for revenge killings involving the dangerously magical properties of quartz. Another example of the compression of ritual/economic properties into an object is in gifts of chewing tobacco which might contain ritual qualities from having been “sung” by someone seeking to make the recipient a sexual partner. It is clear that other elements of the economics of everyday life (such as the increase ritual for the supply of available foods) are intimately bound up with ritual beliefs.

Tindale later recorded that objects as diverse as songs, ochres, shells, spear tips, axes, second-hand clothes and scraps of tin and steel have made their way through the Wurnan routes over the years (Tindale 1953:1015-17;1033). As one senior Kimberley man told me:

*Man share ‘em out, give me away everything Wirnan, like selling clothes, present, all the spear, bush sugarbag, honey, that’s what they do..*

Another noted that,

*Sometimes, if I need ochre for my paintings that I sell or else for a ceremony, I can make a private wurnan. I get in touch with my gumbali (namesake) in Kununurra and he will talk to his mob to make sure that it's ok. Then we can do a private trade without going through all the partners in between. Then when I see him next I can kill a kangaroo for him. Later on he might need something from me and he will let me know.*

This confluence between ritual and economic exchanges is particularly pronounced in gifts which are due to a man's in-laws. Peter Lucich, conducting fieldwork in Mowanjum and Kalumburu in 1963, found for instance that

the system for giving gifts to a *waiia* (father-in-law) was named *embadi*..... made up of durable goods such as mirrors, tomahawks and clothes. Previously, they had included spears, spinifex wax, pearlshells and hair-belts. If a man shared food in the settlement he was expected to give portions to his wife's parents, his own parents, and his immediate neighbours, in that order (1967:196).

Akerman subsequently demonstrated the efflorescence of this trade during his field work in the early 1980s<sup>4</sup>. Akerman’s study of the Wurnan showed that cash and food were amongst the objects which were traded and that by the mid-1970s the trade routes had been re-routed through the pastoral stations and missions where the majority of people lived. (Akerman 1980).

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Strathern described this impact of prestigious new goods from the colonial commodity economy accelerating the existing cycles of trade and exchange in local indigenous gift exchange economy as “efflorescence” (Gregory 1982:115,166).

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**Figure 2. Akerman (1980).**

At least up until the late 1990s, *wurnan* remained one of the strongest traditional social institutions operating across a wide area of the Kimberley in terms of inter-group communication and organised exchange. As such it carried enormous social prestige which was enhanced by the secret/sacred nature of some of the exchanges which form its basis<sup>5</sup>.

In the foundational *Wurnan* story, the Plum Cake is stolen by a female Emu who escapes from the sphere of exchange in which the different clan animals are instituting the law for sharing. She absconds with this Plum Cake tucked under her wing only to be speared to death, finally becoming embodied in the dark hole of the Milky Way, the spears still visible in her body, forever grazing on the ground beneath the *gulang* tree which the forms the Southern Cross (see also Morton 1985:120).

**Wurnan and Karunjie Station**

For many Kimberley Aborigines, much of the significance of Karunjie station in the north east Kimberley derives from the ways in which the indigenous and settler cultures and economies have been inextricably interwoven throughout living memory. This station lease, originally taken by hard-bitten, repatriated WW1 veterans and “Afghan” (actually north Indian) cameleers, some of whom had also fought with the British Army in Afghanistan, had been the location of the one of the biggest exchange centers in the region, drawing in sometimes hundred of participants to its *wurnan* ceremonies where bolts of red cloth from the Chinese stores in Wyndham port, as well as spear tips, bamboo, shells and ochres were traded. By the early 1920s it had also become a ration depot to induce some of those who

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<sup>2</sup>. One of the consequences of the prestige arising from the secret/sacred nature of the *wurnan* is that it has become a strongly identifying feature of Kimberley Aboriginal traditional political life *vis a vis* the colonial political structures which have been introduced over the last hundred years. Amongst these we must count the “post colonial” land councils and other forms of political organisation (such as ATSIC) arising from the era in which self-determination was official Federal Government Policy (1972-1996). That policy has now been replaced by the much more conservative and market-oriented jargon of “self-management”.

were there for ceremony to stay for longer periods and to work at the station. Others were drawn into working on sandalwood finding and cutting which the Afghani camel teams then carried overland to Wyndham port from where it was shipped to SE Asia for joss stick manufacture.

In my earlier paper with historian Fiona Skyring (Redmond and Skyring 2010) we analysed the effects of the emergent frontier economy of the inter-War period, in creating an efflorescence of *wurnan* trade, not dissimilar to that discerned by Kim Akerman in the late 1970s when wages, welfare cash, vehicles and a capacity for high mobility first became available to Aboriginal pastoral workers.

One of the consequences of the ritual prestige of the *wurnan* in the twenty-first century is that it has now become a strongly identifying symbol of continuing desires for an autonomous Aboriginal political life vis a vis the post-colonial political structures such as land councils and resource agencies introduced over the past thirty years. I perceive a strong desire amongst many indigenous people to keep this distance and autonomy between *wurnan* relationships and the post-1980 corporatization of Aboriginal political life. This means always staying a diffident step ahead of the creeping tide of acronyms and acrimonies of government agencies which are now major political players in Kimberley economic life.

The indigenous desire for some forms of political autonomy, however, ought not cover the tracks of the obvious - namely that that level of autonomy which is demanded by the post-welfare state, is only likely to be possible if the indigenous right to trade in the resources of native title claim areas is recognised by the courts as a right flowing from the inextricably bound nature of economic and ritual exchanges inherent to the underlying Aboriginal title to those lands.

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