

Title

An Immediate And Crying Need: Adult Education And Aboriginal Art In A Remote Northern Territory Community

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Presentation description

This presentation argues that the Aboriginal arts industry in the Northern Territory is deeply connected with the history of community-based adult education.

Presenter information

Jack Frawley has had extensive experience in Aboriginal adult education throughout the Northern Territory. He has continuing involvement in adult education and Australian Studies through his research, teaching, and published articles.

Presentation requirements

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AN IMMEDIATE AND CRYING NEED: ADULT EDUCATION AND ABORIGINAL ART IN A REMOTE NORTHERN TERRITORY COMMUNITY¹

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Abstract:

This paper presents the case that the Aboriginal arts industry in the Northern Territory is deeply connected with the history of community-based adult education. The paper traces the history of Aboriginal adult education in the Northern Territory from the 1940s through to the 1960s - a period dominated by the assimilation policy. Many adult classes in Aboriginal communities during this period were art-related, which, it is argued, laid the foundation for the development of the Aboriginal arts industry. This is illustrated by examining the history of adult education at Papunya in central Australia and the beginnings of Papunya Tula. Other examples are also briefly described.

Introduction

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001) data show that Indigenous art sales through commercial galleries represented \$36 million or seventeen percent of total sales; and that of the 5,681 Indigenous artists represented by commercial galleries, over 5,000 were from the Northern Territory. There is enough evidence in the literature to suggest that adult education has played a large part in supporting community-based Northern Territory Aboriginal artists through the provision of adult community education programmes, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s. Archival research, however, suggests that the connection between adult education and Aboriginal arts has a much longer history.

A history of community-based Aboriginal adult education

The Northern Territory system of community-based Aboriginal adult education had its origins during World War Two. Up to this period, no coordinated attempt had been made by the Commonwealth Government, which had responsibility for the Northern Territory, to address the educational needs of Aboriginal people, although several religious missions had in place some limited primary school education, adult education and training, and employment opportunities, albeit of a restrictive and indoctrinating nature. There were, also, several so-called 'part-Aboriginal' institutions such as the Bungalow in Alice Springs, and the Kahlin Compound in Darwin, which provided basic education. Prior to the war there had been a number of conferences to discuss the development of more positive Aboriginal policy, but apart from the 1936 conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers agreeing to have regular conferences on the issue (Giese, 1969), nothing else much happened.

As a consequence of the war the Australian Defence Forces (ADF) established sites near Aboriginal settlements throughout the Northern Territory including Milikapiti and Cape Fourcroy in the Tiwi Islands, Yirrkala and Milingimbi, as well as the major towns of Alice Springs, Tennant Creek, Katherine and Darwin (Giese, 1969). Many Aboriginal people were employed by the ADF as labourers and had active roles in the defence of northern Australia. Because of the contributions being made by Aboriginal people to the war effort in the Northern Territory, the Director of Native Affairs E W P

Chinnery requested Major W C Groves to 'make recommendations for the educational development and welfare of the natives of the Northern Territory in connection with their present association with the Army' (F1/0 1949/420). In his report Groves made recommendations on the way in which the Army could, in the future, organise its settlements for Aboriginal personnel and provide for the educational needs of Aboriginal people residing in these Army settlements. Groves recommended that 'educational activities' fit into the organisation and administration of settlements, and that 'of almost equal importance is the need to provide interests of a broadly educational nature for the adults' (F1/0 1949/420). With the end of the war, this report was soon forgotten and the situation reverted to the pre-war status quo.

By 1948, funds for the construction of schools, schoolteachers' residences and school equipment on seven settlements under the control of the Native Affairs Branch (NAB) had been approved. The Commonwealth Government's educational policy aimed:

to give natives of full and mixed blood a training to fit them for ordinary avocations of life, e.g. artisans, mechanics, farm or station workers, etc, with a view to their absorption into the general social and economic structure and to qualify them to hold positions of responsibility in Government institution (F1 1949/684 Part 1).

In 1950, the Commonwealth Office of Education (COE) signed an agreement with the Administrator of the Northern Territory giving it the responsibility for the administration and management of Aboriginal education, with infrastructure being the responsibility of the Northern Territory Administration (NTA). Schools were established at Bagot, Delissaville (Belyuen), the Bungalow and Yuendumu (NTRS 1622) in addition to the twelve mission schools at Roper River, Oenpelli, Angurugu, Bathurst Island, Port Keats, Arltunga, Goulburn Island, Elcho Island, Milingimbi, Yirrkala, Hermannsburg and Umbakumba (Giese, 1969). In 1951, a Senior Education Officer, L R Newby, was appointed to act as a liaison officer with the NTA and the COE, and to supervise the Aboriginal education programme (Giese, 1969). A draft curriculum had been developed in 1949, trialled and then reviewed at a teachers' conference in 1953. It was at the 1953 conference that Olive Pink stressed, in a letter to the Acting Director NAB, the 'vital importance' to the 'immediate and crying need' of adult education (F1 1952/211, Pink to McCaffrey). Newby, the convenor of the conference, was condescending of Pink's letter writing style, stating that 'a reading could scarcely do the letter justice as it is difficult to convey the import of the numerous underlinings, block letters and questions marks', but supported in principle the idea of 'extending educational work among adults' (F1 1952/211 Newby to Director).

Newby proposed to the Director of the NAB, F Moy that adult education be extended in 1953 to Bagot and the Bungalow. This was based on the success of an adult education class that a Delissaville teacher had conducted during 1952. Newby raised with Moy the possibility of appointing a 'craft specialist for work at Bagot and Delissaville' and also announced the transfer of Jim Gallagher, who was later to become very prominent in Aboriginal education, to the Bungalow stating 'he is very keen to start work with adults and has already given the subject quite a deal of thought'. Newby outlined what he thought could be undertaken in adult education classes including English, reading and writing, and 'modifying traditional cultural interests such as carving' and raised resourcing, administration and management issues including teachers' pay (F1

1952/211 Newby to Moy). Moy's response was to emphasise that 'the first objective should be towards the attainment of proficiency in the speaking of English, literacy and then simple craft instruction' (F1 1952/211 Moy to Newby). By April 1953, a temporary position for an itinerant manual arts teacher had been established with the scope of work to 'include adults as well as children' (F1 1952/211 Newby to Government Secretary). In August 1953, the NTA and the COE had agreed to Newby's plan as it now was 'government policy to provide education for adult natives willing to undertake it' and arrangements were in place for teachers to be remunerated for 'teachers undertaking work with evening adult classes' (A452 1958/971 COE to Secretary). The COE approved adult classes for the remaining months of 1953 at Bagot, the Bungalow and Delissaville. In the period from 9 February to 13 May, 1954 a total of five classes were approved at Bagot, the Bungalow, and Areyonga. The Director of Education, W J Weeden, stated that he was convinced that:

this work with adult natives is an essential part ... (of the programme) ... which is being carried out by all Government Departments in the Northern Territory in the implementation of the policy of the Minister for Territories with the ultimate objective of the assimilation of the aboriginal into the Australian community (A452 1958/971 Weeden to Public Services Board).

During 1955, approval was given to the Assistant Superintendent of Yuendumu, to conduct classes in cane-work (F1/0 1954/87 Newby to McCaffery), while at Snake Bay, approval was granted for adult classes, with part of the school building designated as a craftwork area (A1361 45/10/6 Part 1 Newby to COE).

Throughout this period the concept of vocational education and training was being advanced with the suggestion of establishing Vocational Training Centres in Darwin and Alice Springs. These centres would 'act as Labour Exchanges to which would-be employers of native labour may apply in their search for native labour' (F1 1953/253 Lambert to NT Administrator). Newby later sought to make a distinction as he saw the term 'training centre' to be closely aligned with the Wards Employment Ordinance, where discussion about community-based adult classes would be 'more aptly described as "adult education" since it involves not vocational education but general education' (F1/0 1954/87 Newby to NAB).

At a wider level, the management of Aboriginal education meant that the COE and the Administrator of the Northern Territory had dual responsibilities and competing interests, which led to certain tensions. Caught in the middle was Newby:

It was always unclear who the COE Senior Education Officer in Darwin was answerable to, given the NAB was part of the Northern Territory Administration and was in charge of developing the infrastructure for the education system, while the COE oversaw the recruitment of teachers and the curriculum (Ford, 1998, p. 315).

This problem was only solved after the transfer of the control and administration of Aboriginal education to the Welfare Branch of the NT Administration as a result of the Welfare Ordinance (1953), and the Wards Employment Ordinance, (1953). Paul Hasluck, the Minister for Territories, wrote to Prime Minister Menzies and gave background on the provision of Aboriginal education in the Northern Territory. Hasluck

argued that 'education for aborigines ... cannot be isolated from other welfare activities' and that education 'must be a closely integrated part of the total welfare programme'. He supported the view of the NT Administrator, F J Wise, and the Director of Welfare, H C Giese that the control of education 'should become a function of the Welfare Branch of the Administration' (F1 1956/1331 Hasluck to Menzies). Menzies assented. After negotiation with the COE, control and administration of Aboriginal education became the responsibility of Welfare Branch in 1956 (Giese, 1969) but only after some heavy lobbying by Giese (Ford, 1998). Giese strongly believed that:

it wasn't the function of the Commonwealth Office of Education to run a state-types service in the Northern Territory ... (and what was needed on) ... settlements was not a fragmentation of services but ... a melding of services so that you could have people in that area working as a team, getting their direction from one source and not from half a dozen sources (NTRS 226 TS 7551).

From 1956 onwards, until the Welfare Ordinance was repealed in 1964, the belief outlined by Hasluck and supported by Giese of education being integral to welfare, dominated educational policy.

After the transfer of education to the Welfare Branch, the 'one source' for final approval of community-based adult education classes was the Director of Welfare, Giese, although later when the education bureaucracy had been established this was vested in the Supervisor (Publications & Adult Education) (F133/33 1964/161). In 1956, Jim Gallagher in his role as recently appointed District Education Officer, suggested that thought needed to be given to adult education, especially in relation to '(a) evaluating objectives and the progress made by Adult classes to date; (b) the future aims of these classes; (c) the part settlement staff can play'. Gallagher made the connection of the role adult education could have in the preservation and promotion of culture, and he believed that the main objective of any adult education syllabus should include the opportunity 'to discover and provide for the development of the talents and creative abilities of aboriginals' (F1/0 1970/1475).

Adult classes in several government settlements and mission stations were soon underway and by the end of 1958 the NT Administrator was able to report on adult education classes being taught across government settlements and mission stations (F1 1959/1378). These included evening classes in writing, arithmetic, oral English and discussion group at Warrabri (F1/0 1958/1782) and evening classes in English, geography and social studies on Bathurst Island (F1 1959/1378).

In 1959, Giese wrote to all government settlements and mission stations expressing the desirability of conducting adult education classes and outlining the process for seeking approval. This included the Head Teacher's consultation with the settlement's Superintendent; a course outline and the priority subjects of elementary arithmetic, oral English, hygiene and social studies; suggested teaching aids such as pictures and educational games; and, the teaching rate of 20/-d per hour (F1/0 Papunya School – Adult Classes). Such a letter went to the Head Teacher of Papunya School.

Papunya Art Classes

Papunya settlement was 'unofficially' opened in March 1959 and the school was established in April of that year. Paul Hasluck, Minister of Territories, officially opened Papunya on 1 October 1960 (Perkins & Fink, 2000). The first adult education classes at Papunya were offered in 1962 and throughout the 1960s, approval was given to a range of classes including civics, oral English, number, reading and writing, sewing, home management, hygiene and motor driving and maintenance. Although in 1965 there appeared to be very few classes, the general pattern was one of consistency in frequency and choice. Interestingly, art classes featured quite a deal throughout this period.

In 1964, school teacher I Emmerson, submitted for approval an outline of a general studies programme in which art was included. The aim of the art class was 'to further an already growing interest in art and practical painting' and would 'try to promote an interest in painting Aboriginal designs' while having 'no desire to create or change any natural talent on behalf of the Wards'. At the same time, school teacher P Lewis, submitted for approval an 'Art and Music' course outline in which the aim was 'a desire to paint and develop their natural ability'. Activities included painting a scene, copying a painting from a book, painting human figures and general painting. The outline was not approved because of the similarities between the two classes, so it was resubmitted as a combined proposal. Giese approved the class for four hours per week for a six-week period (F133 1964/161 Adult Education General).

In 1966, school teacher G Nietzsche was granted approval to conduct an adult education programme for six weeks, at two nights a week of which one and a half hours were devoted to art. Nietzsche's programme was based on a number of themes including 'the world of landscape' in which the 'Namatjira style' was studied, and adult students were able to draw with pastels, and pencils, and paint with watercolours (F1/0 Papunya School – Adult Classes). In 1967, two teachers E Bourke and P Baram, sought approval for the curious combination of art and gymnastics. Bourke, in her proposal for 'Art & Gymnastics (Women)' stated that the aim would be 'to develop existing art skills through the use of European media' in which some of the design work would be 'based on primitive motifs' with an emphasis on 'exploring colour'. Baram in his proposal for 'Art & Gymnastics (Men)' stated the aims as being:

- (1). to gather information on Aboriginal art symbols and catalogue them so that Europeans may learn them and be able to understand and preserve original Aboriginal art;
- (2). to exchange art forms, so that Aboriginals may eventually interpret their stories in European format.

Baram based the art class on a method from which 'all the stories of one skin group will be drawn by Aboriginal men and as a new symbol is introduced it will be recorded'. Of the four hours given to this class, two hours would be set aside for 'native story and drawings'. Both classes were approved by Giese and subsequently commenced, although it is uncertain about 'gymnastics' as it was dependent on 'arrival of equipment' (F1/0 1967/470 Papunya School – Adult Classes).

It is not known how many Papunya adults attended these art classes, as class list records could not be located. It is certain, though, that those who did were exposed to western art media and were encouraged to draw on their own culture for artistic expression. Adults attending art classes were introduced to paints, pastels, coloured pencils and

watercolours. It is also not known whether Papunya adult students had the opportunity to paint on canvas, but almost certainly applied paint to other surfaces, probably paper and possibly other surfaces such as watercolour board. Importantly, traditional iconography was a feature of these classes and it was promoted and encouraged as a means to explore design and as a principal aim for one class in particular. Baram saw his class as a means of cultural exchange, which would promote Aboriginal art to a wider European audience. A lofty aim, but one achieved several years later with the establishment of Papunya Tula.

A commonly held belief is that the Papunya art movement's beginnings date back to the arrival of Geoff Bardon, a teacher, at Papunya in 1971 (Ryan, 1989; Bardon, 1991; Morphy, 1998; Isaacs, 1999; Perkins and Fink, 2000; Johnson, 2000; Kimber, 2000). Isaacs (1984, p. 217) suggests that the movement began because it was 'stimulated by Geoff Bardon'. Kimber (2000, p.205) states that it was Geoff Bardon 'who, as a sensitive teacher and also an artist, encouraged the first major developments of such art at Papunya in 1971'. Bardon (1991) gives a detailed account to the beginnings of the art movement and describes his involvement with the children and eventually, through a mural project, the involvement of the men and the establishment of the 'painting room' where men would sit and paint. Johnson (2000, p. 187)) states that the 'new truth' about the Papunya Tula is not 'the stubborn colonial fantasy' but is something quite different which, in part, is closely connected to the name of Geoff Bardon who 'championed the Papunya artists cause' and was the catalyst for painting to begin at Papunya in 1971. There appears to be another 'fantasy' at work here, one that has Papunya adults picking up their brushes and painting because of Geoff Bardon. What has been forgotten in this 'fantasy' is that of prior experience. It is quite possible the interest by Papunya adults in the school mural project was stimulated and rekindled by the previous experiences of adult education classes and the influence of other schoolteachers such as Emerson, Lewis, Nietzsche, Bourke and Baram.

Further connections

The Papunya case study is an example of how community-based adult education acted, in part, as a catalyst for the establishment of the Aboriginal arts industry in remote Northern Territory communities early in the history of adult education. There are several other examples, all of which took place in an environment of shifting adult education policy. In 1977, a batik programme was established at Utopia (Johnson, 1994), which eventually gave rise to prominent artists such as the late Emily Kngwarreye. At Lajamanu in 1986, the decision to allow the painting of public versions of Warlpiri Dreamings led to the establishment of painting course facilitated by the adult educator, John Quinn. The late Abie Jangala attended these classes. At Ngukurr in 1986, a printmaking course assisted highly regarded artists like the late Ginger Riley Manduwalawala and Sambo Barra Barra to become established. Adult Educator, Brian Burkett, supported the Ngukurr artists by organising field trips to other art centres, securing continuous funding, organising exhibitions, and undertaking distribution, marketing and other management duties (Ryan, 1997). At Yuendumu in 1985, adult educator Peter Toyne facilitated the painting of thirty school doors by senior Warlpiri men, and then later secured funding from the Australia Council's Aboriginal Arts Board for the purchase of resources including canvases and acrylic paints (NTRS 226 Oral History Interview TS 665 Peter Toyne). These early Yuendumu paintings included works by leading artist Paddy Sims Japaljarri.

Jilimara and Munupi on Melville Island developed from adult education centres, subsequently becoming independent art centres (Barnes 1999). Jilimara Arts and Craft began in 1985 through the adult education centre with a programme to train women in screen-printing techniques. Successive adult educators, Ian Forster, Jane Anlesark and Ann Marchment, facilitated several art-related programmes throughout the 1980s, which eventually led to the incorporation of Jilimara as a cooperative with a Tiwi executive committee (Barnes, 1999). The late Kitty Kantilla was supported by Jilimara Arts and Crafts. Munupi, also on Melville Island, was established as a result of adult education screen-printing and pottery programmes through the work of adult educator Geoff O'Sullivan who, in 1986, secured funding from the then Commonwealth Department of Employment and Industrial Relations. In 1988, Northern Territory Open College (NTOC) adult educator Mark Lindberg was also able to secure financial assistance for the employment of a ceramicist, Sue Ostling, and printmaker, Marie McMahon. Notable Tiwi artist Maria Josette Orsto became the first Tiwi woman artist to hold a solo exhibition as a result of this programme. In 1990, Munupi artists were also able to attend an NTOC funded etching and lithography workshop at the Canberra School of Art (Barnes, 1999). On Bathurst Island in 1985, batik and poster printing were introduced as part of a Work Skills Programme with funding for wages, materials and equipment being supplied by NTOC and the then Commonwealth Department of Employment, Training and Youth Affairs. After a successful submission to the Aboriginal Benefits Trust Fund, prepared by the author, funding allowed for the purchase of a copy camera which led to the development of several projects including fabric printing, health promotion posters and limited edition prints. The latter formed the basis of an exhibition, 'The Images of Purrukuparli' held at the then Karalmurluk Cultural Centre, Bagot in 1987.

Unlike the Papunya story, these are just brief historical sketches of a selection of adult education programmes, however, they do present evidence of the nexus between adult education and the Aboriginal arts industry.

Conclusion

Johnson (2000, p. 187) states that 'a new truth is at first ridiculed, then viciously attacked, and finally agreed as self evident'. What this paper has exposed is another 'new truth', that is of adult education's role in Papunya Tula's history, and adult education's much wider role in the development of the Aboriginal arts industry in the Northern Territory. This history has shown art classes, such as those held at Papunya in the 1960s, and later elsewhere, gave Aboriginal adults an opportunity to participate in activities that promoted cultural identity and cultural maintenance, which in turn, subtly subverted the aims of assimilation.

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