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**University of Alberta**

**Desert Voices: Pitjantjatjara women's art and craft production  
in Ernabella, South Australia**

**by**

**Jennifer Morton**



**A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in  
partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts**

**in**

**Clothing and Textiles**

**Department of Human Ecology**

**Edmonton, Alberta**

**Fall, 1997**



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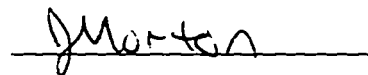
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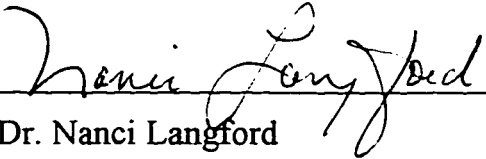
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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the adoption of the non-indigenous textile tradition of batik production among the Pitjantjatjara women of Ernabella, South Australia. A review of the current literature indicates that Aboriginal fibre art and craft are thought to be non-existent or of little importance as cultural identifiers. In combining my observations from field experience with the existing literature and theory, I determine that textile production, while marginalized by the Western market, is a dynamic and vital part of the contemporary culture of its makers. In looking at the commerce and culture of its production, I propose that such a study is of particular importance to overcoming the Western constructs of the 'static' and 'unchanging' Other, the 'romantic' Aborigine. I also argue that the human ecological approach, while being a very suitable framework in which to situate such a study, has yet to focus on art production in indigenous populations, and offer my study as a model.

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## Introduction

### I

During the past few decades, international interest in Australian Aboriginal art and craft has grown to unprecedented levels. Within Central Australia, this interest has grown in direct response to, and is continuously powered by, a growing tourism industry. A 1992 government survey indicated that nearly half of all visitors to Australia came to experience indigenous culture (ATSIC, 1996c), and quite often the only contact these tourists have with Aboriginal people comes through the sale of art and craft.

Following WWII and especially since the early 1970s, the interest in indigenous cultures has led Central Australian artists to adapt their skills and knowledge to the use of new artistic media- specifically batik, silk screening, printing, and acrylic-on-canvas painting. My intentions for this thesis are to explore the adoption of the non-indigenous textile tradition of batik production among the Pitjantjatjara of Ernabella, South Australia. Since very few studies exist which focus on contemporary Aboriginal fibre art or craft, there is a general impression that Aboriginal textile traditions are non-existent, or are of such recent origin that they do not deserve the attention that 'traditional' art forms, such as rock and bark painting, receive. However, the adoption of batik by the Pitjantjatjara provides a very clear example of the way in which Aboriginal art has transformed itself in collaboration with a foreign influence. Because batik is typically produced by women within the Central Australian Desert region, my study of its production also explores the response of Aboriginal women to their contemporary world.

Naturally, the economic importance of this textile production is a determining factor in the eventual survival or demise of the batik industry in Central Australia. However, there are many indicators that the production goes beyond mere economics to fill a more important part of the contemporary culture of their makers. Thus, my interest lay not so much with the technical aspects of batik production, but rather with the role batik has played in the Ernabella community since its introduction in 1972. Because the craft

room in Ernabella is the site of the longest continuously functioning Aboriginal craft cooperative within Australia, it presents the opportunity to document the manner in which a non-indigenous, non-traditional art form came to be so popular, and what has been the effect of its development for the Pitjantjatjara people.

## II

While batik production amongst the Pitjantjatjara still remains the main focus of my thesis, the need to take a more holistic look at the Aboriginal art and craft experience within Central Australia became clear. Art has always been connected to all aspects of religious and secular life amongst Australian Aborigines, and because Central Australia is a region where natural resources are minimal and employment opportunities limited, the sale of art and craft serves as an important form of income for the producers. The development of the arts and crafts industry is important in this region because it helps to alleviate many of the social problems which arose as a consequence of European contact (Altman, 1989; Young, 1995).

Aboriginal people in the desert regions of Central Australia are believed to have arrived some 20, 000 years ago and were characteristically semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers until Europeans arrived in the area in the early 1900s. Through legislation, the Australian government systematically disempowered Aboriginal groups socially, economically and politically (Deuschle, 1983), and Aboriginal people were moved from their ancestral lands to missions and settlements. To understand the consequences of this dispossession, one must realize that for Aboriginal people, the 'ownership' of the land carries with it specific responsibilities which require each individual to care for and maintain the well-being of the land, and any form of alienation from the land means Aboriginal livelihood and personality are lost, subsequently leading to the breakdown of families and traditional rituals and laws. High levels of unemployment, low levels of education, poor health, and dependance on government welfare programs have often been the result (ATSIC, 1996c; Bell, 1993; Bonner, 1988; Folds, 1987; Young, 1995).

According to Morphy (1991, pp. 81), “it is frequently through the sale of arts and crafts that indigenous peoples who survive the initial phases of colonisation begin to participate in the wider socio-economic polity that has incorporated them.” A study of the commercialisation of art and craft production within a community, such as Ernabella, is thus a useful starting point for considering wider cultural issues and vice versa.

### III

A century ago, there were no tourists in Central Australia; the region was regarded as barren and inhospitable. However, after Uluru (see figure 1), the great stone monolith regarded by many foreigners as being of a very spiritual nature, became accessible in the 1960s, tourism has become a very powerful economic force in the Centre. Often, tourists arrive with expectations and preconceived ideas of what ‘Aboriginality’ is, and this in turn influences what they regard as ‘Aboriginal art’; images of the ‘primitive’ and ‘traditional’ still abound. Indeed, there is a sense of romanticism surrounding the idea of the ‘Aboriginal Australian’ and visitors expect to find images which evoke the idea of the ‘ancient primitive.’ Much of the art being produced within the Central Desert region is being produced in direct response to this tourism business and, not surprisingly then, much of the art encountered by tourists is significantly a product of their own demand (see Jones, 1992; Jules-Rosette, 1984).

This thesis explores the arts and craft experience of Central Australian artists who are responding to the pressures of tourism, through a focused study of Ernabella, South Australia. Because the study of a topic such as this can be approached in numerous ways, I have chosen to limit my approach to an explanation of the following: 1) the degree to which ‘commerce’ and ‘culture’ influence the motivation behind production; 2) the importance of art production to Aboriginal women; and 3) the significance attached, by the Western art market, to art produced by Aboriginal women. My experiences with Aboriginal artists operating out of Imanpa, Northern Territory and Alice Springs, Northern Territory are also discussed to give a better perspective on the Ernabella experience.

Because of the inseparable nature of art and culture in Central Aboriginal societies, my thesis addresses both socio-cultural and economic issues which arise through the production of art by Aboriginal members within these communities. It also addresses how the growing tourism industry influences and is in turn influenced by 'perceptions' of the 'Aboriginality' of the art work being created.

I believe the common point of contact with Aboriginal culture for non-indigenous people is usually through art and craft, the Aboriginal people will benefit from its promotion, both economically and culturally, especially with the approach of the Sydney Olympics in the year 2000, and an expected subsequent growth of the tourism industry. An improved cultural industry can lead to an increased acknowledgement, recognition, and understanding of Aboriginal culture by the West and this, in turn, can promote and enhance self esteem, health and a stronger sense of well-being amongst Aboriginal people.



**Figure 1:** Uluru, also known as Ayers Rock, is one of the top tourist destinations in the Northern Territory (Photo by J. Morton, 1996).



## Research Methods

### Overview

During the months of September 1995-January 1996, I visited libraries, galleries, and museums throughout New South Wales, A.C.T., Victoria, and South Australia. I felt it necessary to increase my background and knowledge, beyond what was available in North America, of Aboriginal issues prior to heading to the field.

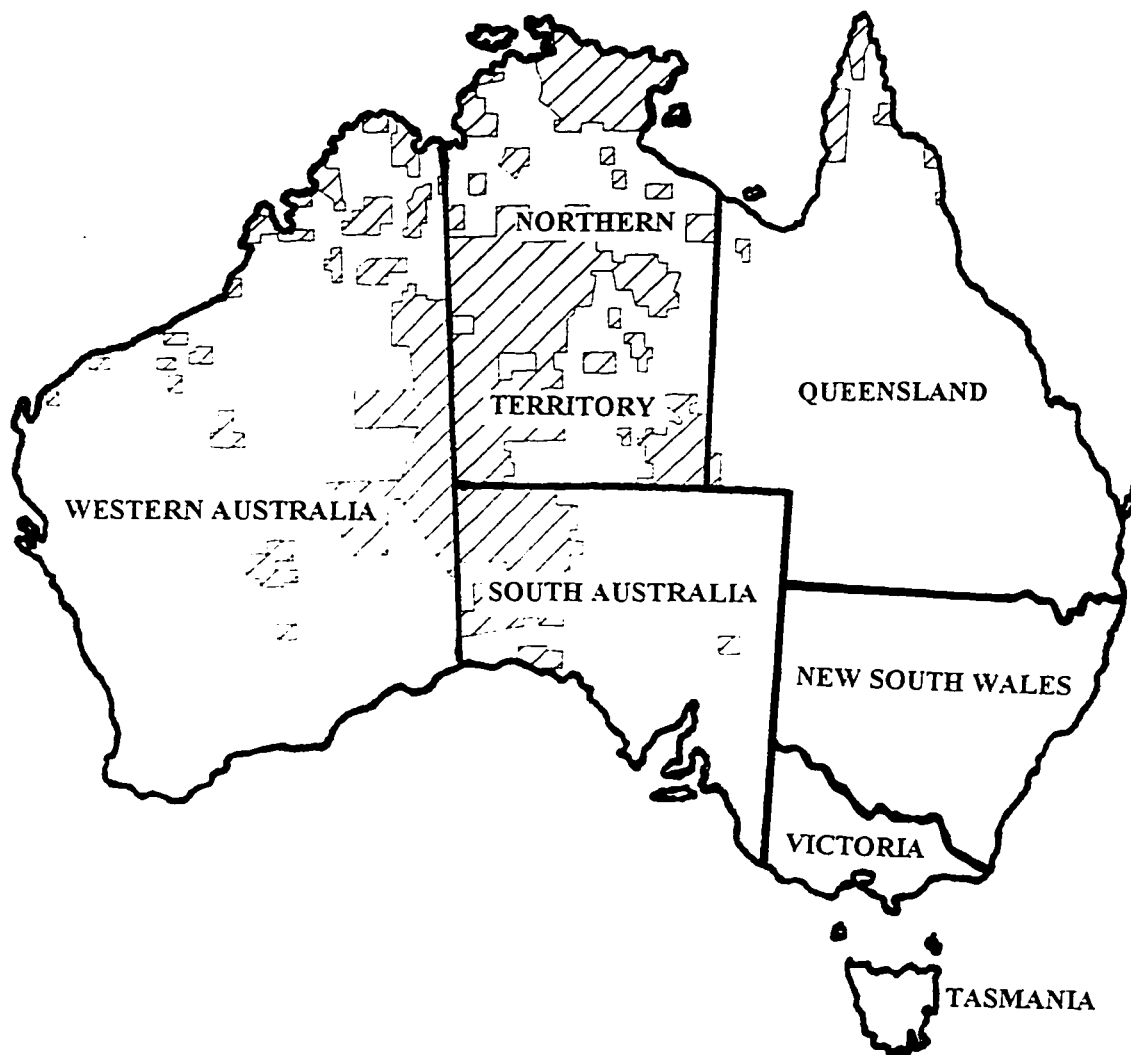
The months of January 1996- June 1996 were spent working with Aboriginal artists residing in the communities of Ernabella, Imanpa, and Alice Springs in Central Australia (see Map 2). The goal of this research was to gather information regarding the making and marketing of Aboriginal art. This involved researching community attitudes, perceptions, and opinions about these issues through participant-observation and informal interviewing, and after having been exposed to the artists' 'reality' of art/craft production, I then sought to discover how the tourists in this region of Australia regarded 'Aboriginal art' and how these views in turn influenced the communities.

Within this thesis I have tried to interweave the theories existing in the present literature with my own field experiences to try and better communicate the situation facing Central Australian artists today. In gathering opinions and views from the artists *and* the buyers, I believe I gained a more holistic understanding of the forces governing the Central Australian art experience.

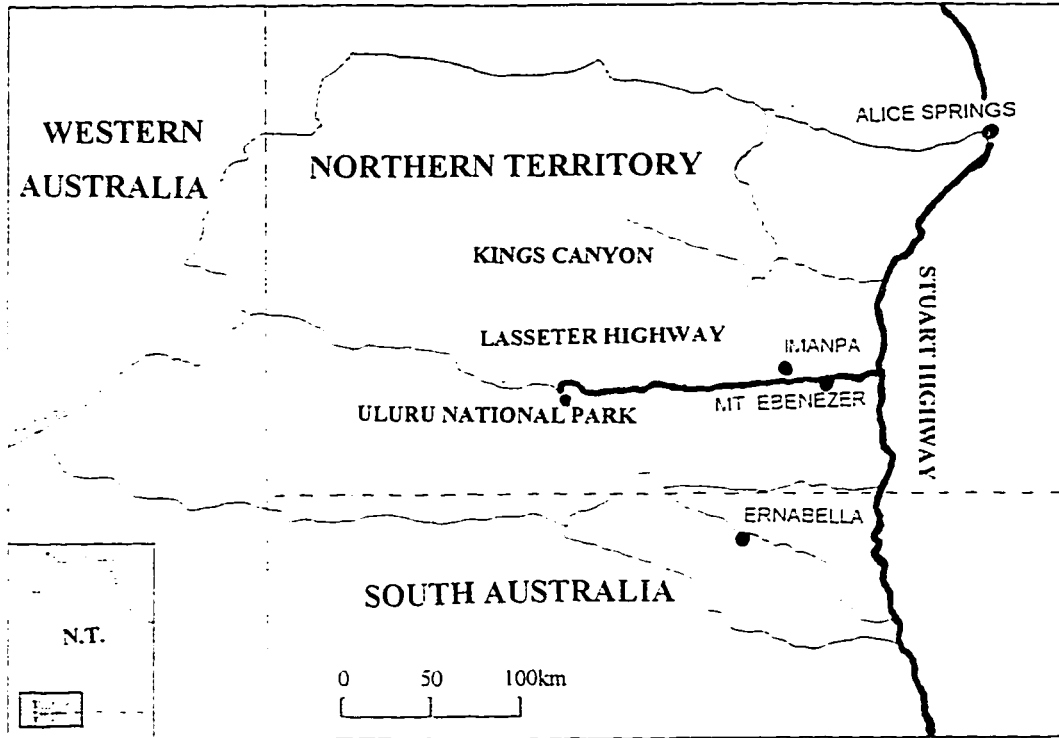
### Goals

My original interests in the Central Australian region were undoubtedly very similar to those commonly held by many other 'outsiders'. As Altman (1988, p. 6) states,

There is a direct correlation between people who continue to pursue lifestyles that are primarily informed by 'traditional' or 'pre-contact' beliefs and values, and the remoteness and tourism appeal of the land in which they live.



Map 1: This map reflects the regions in which Aboriginal populations have land holding rights (after Young, 1995).



Map 2: Map indicating the three communities I visited while in Central Australia (after Altman, 1989).

I admit to my belief that 'Outback Australia' was still a relatively untouched frontier, given its more recent contact with western-European culture, and while such a 'reality' did not materialize, I did find that I was afforded the types of experiences most tourists hope for yet never actually find. By this, I am referring to my interaction with Aboriginal groups within Central Australia, which is cited by many to be a desired end-result (Hollinshead, 1988).

In the arts and crafts arena specifically, in knowing that Ernabella is the longest continuously functioning craft cooperative in Australia, my interest was piqued as to how it could manage such a feat in so remote a region, and how this was possible knowing that it was for a non-traditional art form that Ernabella has received recognition. Moreover, knowing through prior research that Aboriginal women's voices have not often been heard, I wanted to discover as much as possible about the lives and histories of the women who operate the cooperative.

My research is timely because there have been important and recent events promoting the situation of indigenous people worldwide. With things such as the establishment of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations in 1982, the marking of 1993 as the Year of Indigenous Peoples, and the drafting of the Declaration of Indigenous Peoples' Rights scheduled for consideration by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1995 (Butler and Hinch, 1995), interest in indigenous populations is beginning to increase. Young (1995, p. 3) believes these events are helping generate a more "sympathetic understanding of the cultural and environmental knowledge of Aboriginal people", and in choosing to study art and craft, I am actually tapping into one of the main facets through which Australian Aboriginal culture is readily being expressed and shared by indigenous populations today as they try to 'educate' others about their histories and culture.

## **Approach**

I have decided to present what I feel is relevant from my Central Australian field experience within this thesis, although the decision of what to include and exclude was not an easy one. I believe, however, that I have pulled together those things which directly impact on the present Aboriginal situation in Central Australia, and how they relate to art and craft. While literature abounds on the present Aboriginal 'condition' surrounding employment, health, and education, it was not enough to rely on this information alone. An ethnographic study was necessary to uncover those things not found in the literature; in this way the individuals with whom I worked could guide me through their lives and what they deemed important and relevant. I had ideas generated through my readings, but did not want to impose them on the communities. However, in combining my observations and interactions with my knowledge gathered from the existing literature, I believe I have come to achieve a more holistic understanding of the 'art experience'.

The collection of information while interacting with Aboriginal artists came through a combination of participant-observation and informal ethnographic interviewing. To gain the trust of the artists, it proved imperative that I spend time with the artists in their daily settings; it allowed them to remain in their own environment, in a relaxed and unthreatened state. Because some of the artists I worked with had alcohol and/or petrol sniffing dependencies, it was also important that I worked with them daily, both to understand the influence and impact these dependencies had on their lives and to show the artists that I was not there to pass judgement on lifestyle.

As Burgess (1984) and Langness (1981) remark, if interviewing is combined with direct observations of behaviour, a more accurate account can be achieved. An interviewer's presence may alter the types of responses given by an informant if the interviewer is only in the community for a short period of time, but a prolonged association with the people of study will greatly increase the reliability and validity of the data collected (Langness, 1981).

Once settled in the communities, I gained much information through using an unstructured approach. While I had certain questions which I desired answered, I developed conversations with the artists as they became comfortable with my presence. Formal interviews were not considered because they would have generated feelings of awkwardness. Aboriginal people tend to be quite shy around individuals they do not know very well, and this would have perhaps resulted in a reluctance to speak or respond. Open-ended interviews also gave the artists the freedom to discuss whatever they felt important, providing me with a wealth of information that I had not initially considered, and these comments opened a window into their daily lives and their concerns.

As I came to know some of the artists, I would ask broad questions such as “How long have you been producing these items?” or “How important is it for you to do artwork?”, (for a detailed list of questions I wanted answered, see Appendix 1) and these would lead the artists to talk about a wide range of subjects, including family, finance, community development, housing, health, education, travel, bush tucker medicine, love magic, transportation, Dreaming sites and land rights. While I will not explore these within this chapter, I do wish to point out that their interplay and interconnectedness soon became apparent. ‘Discussions of art’ became everything but discussions of ‘art’.

I quite readily developed a place within the Aboriginal communities. This was due in part because I was seen as a ‘woman’ wanting to study ‘women’s art’. As well, I was not simply a tourist passing through in a matter of mere hours or days, which served to set me apart from other ‘white fellas’ and generated much excitement on the part of some. I was also regarded to be of indigenous descent myself. I told of my ties to a Mic Mac ancestry and they recognized this link to an indigenous past as being far more important than I had considered. Together, these afforded me a status which I would otherwise not have achieved so readily. On the other side of the coin, however, were personal attributes which served to limit my acceptance. Undoubtedly, being young, single, and childless limited my access to certain forms of knowledge, especially in

relation to women's knowledge where many of my attributes still rendered me a 'child'.

The very fact that I was a 'player' in the research process has shaped how I have decided to present this thesis. As an individual whose presence and interactions affected the types of information collected, I feel I cannot exclude my own voice within these pages. It is for this reason that this thesis is not presented in an 'objective' or distanced approach. I cannot deny my own role in what I accessed and experienced, and what I have decided to include within these pages.

Van Maanen (1988, p. 3) states, it is the role of the fieldworker to "hear, to see, and most important for our purposes, to write of what was presumably witnessed and understood during a stay in the field. Culture is not visible, but is made visible only through its representation", although he contends there are "very real limits to what a particular fieldworker can and cannot learn in a given setting" (p. 4). My age, gender, marital status and personal interests shape what I have chosen to include from the field. This may be a down-side of participant observation, yet I do not expect anything written within these pages to be unchanging. With any ethnographic study, we are historically situated and our decision of 'what to tell' and 'to whom' influence what is included and how it is told.

In bringing together what I believe is important for this thesis, from both field experience and diverse literature, I could not follow a 'traditional' thesis format. The inclusion of chapters in the 'introduction-literature review-methods-data-discussion and conclusion' format did not work well for what I wanted to present. Thus, I have brought together and merged field experience with literature and theory throughout the body of the text in a manner which best illustrates the points I wish to make.

As Bell (1993) indicates, academic settings may 'teach' about 'fieldwork' but it never actually prepares a person for what he/she will encounter. What became imperative during the course of my travels was flexibility and an ability to mould myself into different roles. At Mt. Ebenezer, I came to be known as 'snow girl from snow country', as well as an Aboriginal caretaker's '*kungka*' or woman. This began as playful gesting as he took it upon himself to show me how to make boomerangs from log

pieces, but soon created much delight on the part of other community members. They jokingly stated that I should return home, ask my father if I could return and marry, then go bush and make boomerangs to sell by the roadside for the rest of my life. When I replied that I had to go to Ernabella first, the men said I would be 'no good' then, since I would 'learn women's business' and come back a 'business woman'. The caretaker also told me that I would then be 'rubbish' and could no longer be his '*kungka*'. This statement was emphasised by his rendition of a women's *inma* ceremony, in which both singing and dancing are performed. He began singing and shuffling his feet in his version of *inma*, after which he shook his head and said it was all 'foolish' and 'silly'. This was to be my first glimpse into the separate spheres of men's and women's business in Central Australia. It also became my introduction to the varying degrees of importance Aboriginal individuals and communities place on the maintenance of 'tradition'.

The knowledge that I was to be heading to Ernabella generated much excitement for two women who told me it was 'their country' and wanted me to find a certain individual so I could pass along information about family (with an added request that I try and obtain *pituri* for them, a narcotic obtained from burning down leaves of the pulyantu tree that is often mixed with a plug with tobacco, for them. The use of *pituri* is commonplace and these women believed they could obtain no finer than that from the Ernabella region).

In Alice Springs, I was introduced as 'Nubalnardi', a term which denotes one of eight skin names associated with the Warlpiri people. The allocation of this skin name came because I was introduced by a single male of marriageable age. The fact that I, too, was single led to the decision that I should be of an appropriate 'marriageable' status (he was N. Jabajimba and the individuals a Jabajimba is allowed to marry according to kinship rules belong to the Nubalnardi skingroup, hence my skin name).

The importance of a skin name is still paramount amongst the Warlpiri, and with it one assumes relationships with other community members. It tells one of kinship relationships as well as avoidance relationships. Rounds of 'You're my sister', 'I'm



your brother-in-law' and 'I'm your mother' greeted me upon first introductions. Certain artists then took it upon themselves to 'teach' me the proper manner in which to smooth boomerangs or paint, as their relationship to me dictated. My 'aunties' were very influential in introducing me to their Dreamings as they sat and painted, explaining that where they were born was very important to what they depicted and because I was 'kin' I should know these things, too.

In Ernabella, my relationship with the artists never evolved into anything as personal as what I experienced at Mt. Ebenezer or Alice Springs. However, the fact that I had an eyebrow ring raised questions as to my status in Canada following the discovery that I have two great, great grandparents of indigenous descent. School girls would come visit me at lunch and ask if my 'grandma oiled and plaited her hair like on the John Wayne movies', while a local healer asked if I was learned in bushmedicine. When I responded that my grandmother knows of the healing qualities of certain moss and bark teas, I was requested to have her fly over so they could sit down, share knowledge and discuss some concerns. When I questioned what these might be, I was told about the present state of the community and how it had changed over the years. Informal meetings (i.e. bumping into people at the grocery store, school or elsewhere in town), in other words, were to be very educational for me.

While in the craftroom, however, I was regarded as an administrative assistant, and it was here that I experienced the greatest degree of shyness (on my side and theirs). This was in part generated from my 'parachuting' into the craft advisor's position while she attended conferences and meetings in Alice Springs. Still unaccustomed to the workings of Ernabella Arts, I initially found myself spending more time trying to figure out the filing system and finding goods for orders than getting to know the artists. However, by the time I was set to leave the community, certain women came up to me and told me they would very much like me to visit again. They expressed the desire to take me out hunting and wood collecting and would use these trips to 'teach me right' about their country. Additional time in this community would undoubtedly have opened a great many more doors to their knowledge.

Essentially, it was the use of observation combined with broad questioning that allowed me access to information not always available in the published literature. In being provided a glimpse of their world view through daily interactions, I was able to glean deeper information about the reasons they choose to participate in art and craft production. While I originally wanted to undertake an apprenticeship, believing this would afford me access to greater information, I found it was not necessary. Education for Aborigines is very informal and takes place continuously over the duration of many years. I did not have that time, however, my willingness to actively participate in the functioning of the craft room and interact outside the craft room afforded me great insights. Issues emerged over the duration of my stays in each community that I would likely not have otherwise uncovered, and it was in continuously reading through my field notes, that key concerns became apparent, to which I will refer in more detail in subsequent chapters.

### **Geographic area**

The geographic focus for my thesis is on the Pitjantjatjara community of Ernabella, South Australia. I also discuss events occurring within the Pitjantjatjara community of Imanpa, Northern Territory, and within a Warlpiri group residing in the township of Alice Springs, Northern Territory (see map 2). While Ernabella is the focus of this thesis, I have also chosen to address groups of art producers in the other regions for a number of reasons.

Firstly, each group has its own distinctive style of art work, which is important for the comparative purposes of my thesis. The styles and types of art work produced are all highly reflective of external/foreign influences, yet the use of certain styles and media has come to be associated with the idea of 'traditional' while the use of other media is thought to be less 'Aboriginal,' even 'non-Aboriginal.' A comparison of Ernabella producers to those in Imanpa and Alice Springs will bring to light the

uniqueness of Ernabella production in its Central Australian context.

Secondly, the making and marketing of Aboriginal art varies according to the amount of regular access and interaction each community has with a direct tourist market. This issue becomes very important to my discussion of the Ernabella art experience because, unlike Imanpa and Alice Springs, Ernabella has no direct contact with purchasers and this, in turn, has implications for the type, amount, and frequency of art production.

Thirdly, these communities provide good examples of the varying degrees to which 'traditional' life has been maintained/changed. These communities reflect a variety of social situations and living standards, and in the discussion of my findings, I will explain the importance of their residence and socio-economic situations to the production of art and craft.

## **Stages**

Prior to leaving Canada, I sent introductory letters to the Pitjantjatjara Council and Ernabella Arts Incorporated, informing them of my intents for this thesis, and once in Australia, attempts were made to create a regular dialogue with the craft advisor working in Ernabella, South Australia. However, it was not until I arrived in Alice Springs that formal steps were made to obtain the appropriate permits to enter the Anangu-Pitjantjatjara Freehold Lands.

Prior to my arrival in the Central Australian region, I made research trips to museums, art galleries, and libraries in Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne, and Adelaide. These were very instrumental in shaping my research in the Centre. While I had explored topics I felt relevant to the study of Aboriginal art and craft production before leaving Canada, it was only when I arrived in Australia that I realized my background was not as thorough as I wanted it to be; Canadian libraries did not afford me the opportunity to access information relating to contemporary Aboriginal circumstance. It

was only through further literature searches and subsequent data collection that I felt grounded enough in the present day 'situations' faced by Aboriginal groups living in Central Australia to proceed to the field.

I found it necessary to acquire information on current statistics surrounding Aboriginal health, education, housing and employment situations. I also did not have enough information on the uniqueness and distinctiveness of various Aboriginal groups, specifically the Pitjantjatjara, and did not want to transpose the 'experiences' and 'history' of other regions on to the region I was studying. I did not want to generalize so was looking for information specific to the Pitjantjatjara, and their history and culture.

Originally, my intention was to work solely with Pitjantjatjara artists located within the Ernabella community, but upon arriving in Central Australia, permission to enter the Anangu-Pitjantjatjara Freehold Lands was not readily obtained. Although a lengthy delay followed my initial request to enter these Lands, this actually served to strengthen my understanding of the art and craft industry in Central Australia, for it was while I was waiting for the required permit to be granted that I had an opportunity to undertake employment at Mt. Ebenezer Roadhouse (owned and operated by the Imanpa Community) for a two month period. During this time, I was able to work in their art gallery, which had been established three years previously, and interact with the local Pitjantjatjara woodcarvers and painters.

The importance of this experience is paramount to my understanding of tourism in the Centre because many tourist companies operating in Central Australia stop here along their drive to Uluru (Ayers Rock), Kata Juta (the Olgas) and Watarrka (King's Canyon), all of which are ranked amongst the top five tourist destinations in the Northern Territory. Through daily informal interactions with the bus loads of tourists who stop at Mt. Ebenezer, I was able to understand what they regarded as 'Aboriginal art' and how they regarded the concept of 'Aboriginality.'

I also had the opportunity to work with Warlpiri artists operating out of Alice Springs as they presented tourists with views of their culture in an organized tour setting. This included boomerang and spear throwing, bushtucker cooking, art

production and corroboree demonstrations. This occasion also arose while I was waiting for my permit to be granted, and again gave me a more thorough understanding of tourist views and opinions about Aboriginal art and life. Moreover, I was able to see the manner in which the Aboriginal people attempted to maintain ties to a 'traditional' past while enjoying greater access to the offerings of an urban setting.

### **Problems and Limitations**

I arrived in Central Australia at a time when people were concerned with the election of a new federal government. Many meetings were being held to discuss the potential cutbacks in government spending on Aboriginal interests, and this in turn affected how I was regarded as a 'researcher.' Moreover, remote communities tend to be cautious about 'outside' interest in their lives and, as Brady (1992, p. 6) notes, there is often a heightened sensitivity which results from the "many brief and often superficial investigative visits or quick surveys (mainly by government departments)" which occur. While Brady is directly referring to her research into the problems associated with petrol sniffing in remote communities, I did experience this type of wariness. It was thought I might gain access to, and document information about, the manner in which community organizations used government funds and report this to various government agencies. I also observed a tendency in remote communities for the 'white' administration and staff to believe that individuals who have not resided in the community for an extended period of time do not know how the community truly operates, thus should be in no position to comment on its workings.

My acceptance within Ernabella was also influenced by the conduct of prior researchers in the area. For a number of years, the results of this conduct (which I am not at liberty to cite) was a closure of access for other researchers interested in working with Ernabella artists. These previous difficulties in the arts and crafts arena meant I was greeted with a degree of caution on the part of both artists and the craft

coordinator. However, once daily contact and interaction was established, tensions subsided.

Although I did benefit from the delay in obtaining a permit to enter the Anangu-Pitjantjatjara Lands, the difficulty with the permit process was a cause for great concern. I incurred high costs travelling from Mt. Ebenezer Roadhouse to Alice Springs (a 500 kilometre round-trip), both to find out which branch of the Pitjantjatjara Council was responsible for issuing permits, then to arrange meetings with the appropriate anthropologists and lawyers in the 'Anthropological and Legal Services' section of the Pitjantjatjara Council for completion of an ethics review, required of anyone conducting 'research' within the Anangu-Pitjantjatjara Freehold Lands.

Ernabella itself is located in a 'remote' region, accessible only by mail plane or four wheel drive vehicle. The high cost of transportation to Ernabella meant that I could only visit the community once. While I was able to meet with the craft advisor and some Ernabella artists when they were visiting Alice Springs upon my initial arrival in Central Australia, a preliminary visit to Ernabella would have further facilitated my introduction and acceptance into the community.

Restrictions were placed upon my ability to take a photographic record of what I experienced because much of the geographic area surrounding Ernabella is considered to be sacred/secret. It is also very common to have Aboriginal people express disdain at being photographed (see Altman, 1989; Central Land Council, 1987). Further, I was not in the field long enough to establish the types of relationships that would have enabled me to use audio-recordings to document conversations. This meant I had to keep detailed field notes of daily events, to which I continuously referred, in an attempt to see emerging themes while in the field.

Given the very nature of cross-cultural research, there is always a possibility that the collected data will be misunderstood. Because English is spoken, language was not my primary concern, although the use of a research linguist or translator might have afforded me a greater access to information. The duration of my stay did not allow me to learn an adequate amount of Pitjantjatjara or Warlpiri, and the shyness of some

informants to use English did restrict their willingness to speak with me.

I do believe, however, that the total fieldwork period, which involved working with three various communities, afforded me a more holistic view of the situation facing Aboriginal artists in Central Australia today. In observing the situations each art producing group faces on a regular basis, I was better able to understand the reason behind Aboriginal involvement in art and craft production, and what this involvement means to their contemporary lives. I believe a trip to Ernabella alone would have greatly limited my knowledge of the factors which surround art production in Central Australia.

### **Feedback**

It is my intention to provide these communities with my finished thesis. I believe that offering the option of feedback is of utmost ethical importance, and I tried to consult continuously with artists and craft co-ordinators during my field experience. However, time, money and distance prevented me from obtaining their opinions on the finalized form of this thesis. My views may not conform to those held by some members of these communities; I welcome comment and criticism.

## Historical Sketch

### Introduction

I wish to begin this section with a quote by Hollinshead (1988, p. 184) who states that,

In terms of its geographic location vis-a-vis existing mainstream tourism thoroughfares and in terms of cultural appeal that is “the Outback”, Aboriginal Australia can conceivably be regarded as still very much a “developing country”, albeit by some “a third world nation within a nation.” It is important therefore, that before the individual features of that society are explored, the general issues facing developing regions are examined.

While Hollinshead is directing this statement to issues more specifically facing the tourism industry in Central Australia, it is a fitting statement which can also more broadly be interpreted to include the influence of Western culture on Aboriginal groups since European contact in the region: recalling that ‘art’ is a key facet of ‘culture’ amongst Aboriginal groups, my concern is to determine what kinds of themes emerge in the Central Australian context which might bear significant consideration as they relate to the arts and crafts industry.

Following European contact in 1788, it was believed that Aboriginal cultures would eventually ‘die out’, be ‘bred out’ or become assimilated according to the existing social Darwinist and eugenicist assumptions of the time (see Brock, 1995; Cunneen and Libesman, 1995), yet this did not happen. The introduction of European laws and lifestyles served only to disrupt the traditional structure and economy of Aboriginal cultures, and they are now regarded as the poorest, sickest, worst housed and most incarcerated segment of the Australian population today (Johnston, 1991).

This chapter provides an overview of the historical experiences of Aboriginal populations in Central Australia since contact with European settlers. Such an historical knowledge is crucial to the understanding of their current social, economic, and residential situations. The changes which have occurred to Aboriginal people in the last



200 years are profound and have affected the very essence of their well-being. I have chosen to explore this history at this point because without an understanding of the drastic nature of the changes to Aboriginal culture since contact, I cannot begin to explain the importance art and craft production can hold for Aboriginal people in the 1990s.

## **Aboriginal world view**

### **Culture and spirituality**

Australian Aboriginal people have a history which dates back more than 50,000 years, possibly as far back as 100,000 years (see Behrendt, 1995; Cunneen and Libesman, 1995). These people were directly dependent on the natural environment and, because Australia has proportionately more desert land than any other continent, the coastal and river areas were among the most highly populated regions, while the arid interior was home to small and scattered groups.

The social and economic organisation of these groups varied according to the immediate environmental conditions. Over time, this gave rise to different family and language groupings which were estimated to be numbered at 500 and 200 respectively, prior to the arrival of European settlers (see Broome, 1982; Charlesworth et al., 1990). Each social group consisted of between 100 and 500 people who shared the same social, political, economic and linguistic patterns.

The people to whom I will be referring in this thesis inhabit the region generally referred to as the Western Desert. It is an area which includes parts of the Great Victoria and Gibson Deserts; and the Musgrave, Petermann, Mann, Rawlinson, Warburton, and Blackstone Ranges (Berndt, 1989). This area has a highly varying annual precipitation and is, therefore, regarded as a difficult environment in which to live (Brokensha, 1976).

Wallace (1990) indicates that the need to travel great distances for sustenance in



Figure 2: Spinifex vegetation dots much of the landscape in Central Australia (Photo by J. Morton, 1996).

the Central Desert region required the ability to communicate with at least four or five other neighbouring groups, and this eventuated the rise of various distinctive socio-religious groupings which set Central Australia apart from other regions.

To understand the importance of these Central Desert socio-religious groupings requires an explanation of the concept of 'spirituality.' Aboriginal spirituality directly links an individual to the land. Indeed, an individual's relationship to the land is an integral part of daily life. Historically, for those living in the desert regions of Central Australia, a desert lifestyle required an extensive knowledge of the country, climate, flora and fauna, and entire lives were spent learning how one should interact with the environment (Toyne and Vachon, 1984). The land was central to an individual's identity, and it assumed strong religious as well as economic significance to Aboriginal people.

The land is still regarded as the 'backbone' or foundation upon which Aboriginal history is built. Aboriginal groups believe 'creation ancestors' gave form to the landscape and created Aboriginal law, language, and patterns of life. While Aboriginal people never owned land in the European sense, all were responsible for 'growing up the country' just as they would 'grow up the kids' (Toyne and Vachon, 1984). The law and customs of the desert populations required an individual to serve as custodian of the land from which they obtained their sustenance, ensuring that its well-being would be maintained (Butt and Eagleson, 1993; Cunneen and Libesman, 1995; Toyne and Vachon, 1984).

Desert mythology comprises the teachings of these 'creation ancestors', and is commonly referred to as the 'Law', the 'Dreaming', the 'Dreamtime' or *tjukurrpa* (Berndt, 1989; Butt and Eagleson, 1993; Folds, 1987; Isaacs, 1984; Layton, 1986; Toyne and Vachon, 1984; Wallace, 1990). *Tjukurrpa* is a belief system, a religious philosophy encompassing the entire spiritual world of the Australian Aboriginal people. It explains all that is in the Aboriginal world.

According to Toyne and Vachon (1984, p. 5), *tjukurrpa* is knowledge that is used as a set of conceptual tools, expertly and efficiently, by a people who need to find guarantees for survival without expending all their energies. Aboriginal people . . . symbolize people and places by

*tjukurrpa*, although they may call it 'the dreaming' or some other name. *Anangu* say it is 'the law', the rational and moral order to their existence (Toyne and Vachon, 1984, p. 5).

Layton (1986, p. 3) also describes the *tjukurrpa* as a system which, in addition to explaining how the landscape came to be, established the rules governing social life.

*Tjukurrpa* is an explanatory framework used by Aboriginal people to understand what is happening in their world.

Traditionally, and still among older generations of Aboriginal people, it is considered an essential part of adult life that *tjukurrpa* be learned and passed on to future generations (Folds, 1987). Children begin to learn this knowledge at a very young age, and education of the young is usually carried out by women (Ludwig, 1983). However, as the children grow up,

... young men learn 'men's business' from older males, young women learn different knowledge from older women. Children learn by observing and imitating the skills which will fit them for life in the community. This learning is rarely formal and routinized, conducted to the constraints of a timetable or removed from everyday activities. The approach to education, with its particular teaching/leading styles, implicit world view and powerful socialization effects, is integral to the culture. Gender and age are critical; males and females become *ninti* (knowledgeable) in different areas and only the older people can acquire the highest forms of knowledge. Sacred knowledge is learned, not from anyone who has it but from the person who has custody of it and stands in the correct relationship with the person who receives it (Folds, 1987, pp. 20-21).

The places where individuals and their parents were born are of particular importance to the understanding of Aboriginal spirituality. The place where an individual is born is called *ngura*, which means 'their place' (Toyne and Vachon, 1984).

Long family trees are not found in Aboriginal society. By giving each individual a personal dreaming, the community consistently recreates the ancestral world. Past re-embodiments of a single ancestor fade into the collective image of that being; it is a tenet of the religion that on death a person becomes his dreaming. To die and be buried in one's own

‘country’ ensures this will occur (Layton, 1986, p. 15).

Each adult is expected to thoroughly understand the knowledge and responsibilities associated with his or her *tjukurrpa*. Recognition of this knowledge gives an individual prestige in Aboriginal society; it is believed that only through an understanding of the *tjukurrpa* can one be considered a socially responsible individual (Folds, 1987). The entire community is responsible for teaching and maintaining the transmission of the knowledge, and this is done through song, story, art, dance and painting.

## **Aborigines and the Land**

### **Impact of colonisation**

Until the coming of Europeans, Aboriginal populations lived according to the law of their creation ancestors and the *tjukurrpa*, and understood their individual responsibilities associated with the Dreaming. However, the relationship of many Aboriginal populations to their traditional lands was radically altered by the creation of missions, stations, and settlements.

In the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, Commissioner Johnston (1991) stated that the British takeover of Aboriginal land jeopardized the personal liberties of Aboriginal people. Government laws and policies led to “intrusions into most aspects of their everyday lives and limitations upon their mode of living, work, financial and leisure activities... Institutionalisation was to be a dominant theme” (Johnston, 1991, p. 3-4).

According to Folds (1987), the growth of missions and settlements meant that the Aborigines no longer had the free use of, and access to, their ancestral lands. In addition, traditional lifestyles were strained; not only were there fewer people to participate in important ceremonies, there were difficulties in arranging acceptable Aboriginal marriages.

Folds explains that the fairly independent kinship group, an important social unit determined by descent and marriage, was destroyed by the 'artificial' communities created in missions and settlements. Individuals from many different clans and cultural groups were brought into these areas and began intermarrying, but not according to the traditionally accepted guidelines. He further states that the children born into these communities had less claim to, and affinity, with the 'country' of their parents because they had been physically displaced from their ancestral tracts.

Bonner (1988) also supports such claims. In his review of the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunyatjajara communities of Central Australia, he states that the Aborigines' capacity to dictate change within their indigenous cultural system was removed because Europeans felt it was their 'duty' to look after them. Initially, this occurred through food provisions and then continued to be reflected by a dependence on government welfare support. Bonner (1988, p. ii) further claims that the ability of Aboriginal groups to cope with the changes brought about by contact were hindered because

... the social trauma associated with the transition from nomadic to settled life has absorbed their attention and exhausted their energies. The stress that accompanied large groups of people living together was beyond traditional means of resolution. Traditional social constructions were not designed to stabilize a permanent settlement. . . Claims on relatedness grossly exceeded those which could be comfortably integrated into the family economy and society . . .

Many studies (eg. Bell, 1983; Bell and Ditton, 1980; Gale, 1983; Bonner, 1988; Young, 1995) indicate that most Aboriginal communities throughout Central Australia are now strongly dependent on government benefits and employment assistance. After the movement of European settlers into the interior of Australia, Aboriginal groups were forced from their lands, often causing an upheaval to their traditional economic system. After being forced onto reserves or into towns and cities, a dependence on welfare incomes started. Individuals in remote communities receive Department of Social Security Allowances in the form of age, disability, and widowers' pension, supporting mothers' benefits, child endowment, and unemployment benefits (Young, 1989). The loss of land

for Aborigines and the dependence on social security payments are the two reasons which are frequently mentioned in connection with the breakdown of families and traditional rituals and laws (see Bell and Ditton, 1980).

According to Ludwig (1983), the manipulation, repression, and alienation of Aboriginal groups developed on numerous levels, depending on the relationships which developed between the Aboriginal people and the Europeans. Some she considers to be simply economic, as in the case of the mining companies and their rush to have Australia become known as a nation with 'resources for sale'. However, her greatest concern lies with the treatment of Aboriginal children after contact. In many regions, they were forcibly removed from their homes and placed in state-run schools, which has, in turn, led to the creation of an entire population of Aborigines who have little or no knowledge of where they come from traditionally or who they are as a people.

During the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science Conference held in 1980, elders throughout the nation remarked that the young do not know about living on their 'country' because they do not have ready access to it. They explain that the land is a source of personal identity, and to be driven from the land is for the Aborigine to be deprived of both livelihood and personality. Thus, the children are not growing up strong in their Aboriginal ways, respectful of their culture, or with a strong sense of identity.

Deuschle (1983) uses the phrase 'culture of poverty' to describe the effects of European contact. Through legislation, the Australian government systematically disempowered Aboriginal groups, socially, economically, and legally. Deuschle uses legislative documents such as the Wastelands Act of 1842, the Crown Lands Act of 1888, and the Aboriginal Act of 1911 to illustrate how the government allowed settlers to expropriate land from Aboriginal groups; prevented Aborigines from owning large areas of land; prohibited Aborigines from entering designated areas, towns or municipalities; and restricted their movement off Reserves. She believes such legislation became the foundation upon which modern-day problems such as unemployment, poor housing, and poor health care arose.

Brock (1995) also explores legislation which allowed the Australian government to facilitate policies of racial segregation, exploitation, and assimilation between 1890 and 1950. She focuses her analysis on laws relating to Aboriginal women, who were perceived as 'breeders' and therefore the perpetrators of racial castes, and how they were especially targeted by twentieth century legislation. The removal of children from families, institutionalisation of youth, control of marriage patterns and limited access to welfare benefits are all cited as having impacts on Aboriginal people and their families today. "The era when Aboriginal families were controlled, supervised and split apart is only a generation away and many people are still working hard to recover from the traumas of that era" (Brock, 1995, p. 149). It is important to understand that these restrictive and repressive laws were applied only to Aboriginal people and were only overturned in the 1960's.

### **Land rights movements**

In 1788, the British declared the Australian continent *terra nullius*, meaning the "land of no one" or a "country without a sovereign, a land not owned".

What happened on 7 February 1788 when the officials of the First Fleet raised the British flag over the motley collection of convicts and gaolers at Sydney Cove and took possession of the colony ... ? The official view is clear. The British claimed not only the sovereignty over New South Wales- then comprising the whole eastern half of Australia- but also the ownership of all the million and a half square miles contained therein....

As many as half a million people, living in several hundred tribal groupings, in occupation of even the most inhospitable corners of the continent, had in a single instant been dispossessed. From that apocalyptic moment forward they were technically trespassers on Crown land. This denied the fact that the Aboriginal people had a legal system of their own and links to the land they inhabited (Reynolds, 1987, p. 8).

Since this time, Aboriginal people have been fighting for the right to regain



ownership (in the Western sense) and access to their traditional lands. Government policies moved from a focus on assimilation to self-determination following the 1967 referendum, which marked the year that Aboriginal people were given the right to vote (and the right to drink, which has often resulted in freedom, power and liberty being regarded as synonymous with alcohol).

During the 1970s and 1980s major strides were made by various Aboriginal groups throughout Central Australia. The Northern Land Rights Act of 1976 and the Pitjantjatjara Lands Act of 1981 witnessed the return of large land holdings back to their traditional owners, although it was not until the High Court made a ruling on the Mabo trial in 1992 that this idea of “terra nullius” was actually overturned.

This was the first opportunity which the High Court had to consider the question of recognition of native title. The High Court was faced with the task of reassessing the basis on which the country was colonised, at least in relation to ownership of land (Cunneen and Libesman, 1995, p. 101).

In 1993, the Native Title Act arose in response to the Mabo decision and serves to recognize and protect the native title rights and interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commissioner (Lavarch, 1995, p. 4) stated that

Already we have seen evidence of the impact of international law in the High Court’s decision on Native Title and the drafting of the Northern Territory Act, 1993. The decision itself, and the unprecedented negotiation which followed, occurred because the Australian legal system and the Commonwealth Government recognized that they could no longer fly in the face of every other common law jurisdiction in the world by retaining the myth of *terra nullius* and perpetuating unlawful racial discrimination. Since the passage of that Act, some Indigenous people will have the foothold of native title itself to bring other parties, including mining companies, pastoralists and governments to the negotiating table, where they previously may have felt no compulsion to do so.

These moves by the Australian government are helping overturn some of the consequences of colonisation. The turning over of land serves to recognize the rights and status of Aboriginal people, to which their history and culture entitle them.

Aboriginal people have been returning to their traditional lands since the 1960s as a result of various policies and legal decisions. This return to the land is of fundamental importance to the well-being of Aboriginal people; it is thought to ease social tension and domestic violence, and enhance family and community structures (ATSIC, 1996b). Community renewal and a sense of purpose are often generated by communities caring for the land to which they belong (ATSICc, 1996).

One of the key features of this movement is the growth of 'outstations' or 'homelands'. The concept behind homelands is to allow family groups to move back to their traditional lands, leaving behind the towns and larger, more crowded communities. According to Coombs (1994, p. 24), the homelands movement is "a response to the problems of contact and an attempt to evolve a lifestyle which preserves the essence of the Aboriginal way along with access to chosen elements from white society."

At present, more than 10,000 Aboriginal people live on over 1,000 homelands in the Northern Territory, South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland, and while this movement is applauded for allowing families to re-establish ties to their ancestral tracts, it does raise financial and policy concerns because of the high cost of providing housing and essential services (see ATSICd, 1996).

Such concerns warrant the study of the arts and crafts industry in remote regions because, as Altman (1989, p. 145) states,

Analysis undertaken elsewhere suggests that in the homelands the production of artefact for market exchange is the most significant optional cash-generating activity. While social security payments or government funded schemes such as CDEP generate more cash, artefact production remains one of the few ways homelands residents can influence their cash income.

I will explore this reality when discussing the Ernabella arts and crafts experience because it serves as a centre for a large number of homelands in the surrounding

community.

## **Health**

The disruption to the traditional lifestyles of Aboriginal people has had serious consequences to the overall health of the Aboriginal populations in Australia since they first came in contact with Europeans. The poor health status of Aboriginal people is well documented (see Beck, 1985; Brady, 1992; Coombs, 1994; Honari, 1990; and O'Donoghue, 1995). The Aboriginal population once estimated to be around 750,000 in 1788 is now closer to 284,000 in number (Brady, 1992).

The initial problems arose with the introduction of European diseases; smallpox, chicken pox, measles, syphilis, gonorrhoea, leprosy and flu decimated entire language groups (see Beck, 1985; Brady, 1992; Coombs, 1994; Honari, 1990; and O'Donoghue, 1995). In addition, as Aboriginal people moved onto reserves, missions, government settlements and cattle stations, changes occurred to their traditional diet and activity levels. Rations of tea, flour, sugar, beef and mutton replaced healthier traditional bush foods, and the increasing availability of store bought food decreased the need for daily hunting and gathering activities. Natural vegetation was also destroyed through the introduction of new crops, insects, rodents and grazing animals (Coombs, 1994).

A more sedentary lifestyle often brought large numbers of Aboriginal people of differing language groups together, putting new stresses on the Aboriginal people, who were not used to continuous interaction with so many individuals on a daily basis. According to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner (Lavarch, 1995), these newly formed communities brought people from different groups together- by force, incentive, or persuasion- to a single physical location, and in these situations, people were no longer on 'their country' and were required to live in close quarters with other groups who had been alienated from their country, fundamentally disrupting the existing social equilibrium.

The hand of non-Indigenous intervention has punched through the web, tearing and breaking the strands that tie people to each other and to country. This has hurt us so deeply that as we struggle to repair the damage, to spin new strands to mend the holes in our web, we can misdirect our attention from the causes of our malaise to the 'gammon' security of alcohol and violence (Lavarch, 1995, p. 130).

These changes have had serious consequences for the health of Aboriginal populations throughout the country. Studies show that the present rates of Aboriginal death are three to six times the national average, infant and perinatal mortality rates three times the general population, and life expectancy 18 to 20 years less than the national average, a figure which places them in a worse situation than that of comparable indigenous populations in other regions of the world (see Lavarch, 1995).

Honari (1990) states that the leading causes of death for both sexes of Aboriginal populations are diseases of the circulatory system, respiratory system, and external causes of injury (eg. motor vehicle accidents, drowning, poisoning, and violence). Significant problems are associated with heart disease, pneumonia, asthma, cancer, gastroenteritis, malnutrition, sexually transmitted diseases and diabetes.

The ATSI national survey of 1994 (see O'Donoghue, 1995) indicates that asthma, diabetes, ear and hearing problems are reported to be of great concern to Aboriginal populations. Obesity and fat and sugar consumption levels are regarded as being very high. Thirty percent of the Aboriginal people surveyed also said that they are worried about going without food at least some of the time. Fifty percent of the Aboriginal population smokes cigarettes, a rate twice the national average. Fifty percent of Aboriginal men and one-third of women consume alcohol, a situation which sixty percent of Aboriginal people regard as being one of the main health problems in their area.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Michael Lavarch, (1995) states that "we die silently under these statistics." The reasons behind the failure of the health care system in addressing these problems lies with a common misunderstanding of what 'health' is.

In 1994, of a panel of Aboriginal individuals and non-indigenous health care workers had a meeting to discuss the definition of 'health' and what the goals and priorities of health care should be, and the results were strikingly different. The National Aboriginal Commission Controlled Health Organization urged that broad human and social conditions be the priority. These conditions included issues such as land, stress, grief/trauma, dispossession, lifestyle, alcohol and nutrition. The non-indigenous health officers stressed a need to focus on 'disease', cardiovascular problems, cancers, mental health, and injury (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 1995, p. 105).

For Aboriginal people health is not simply 'disease' or the 'treatment of disease'; in addition to the "physical well-being of the individual", it is also the "social, emotional and cultural well-being of the whole community" (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 1995, p. 105). For Aboriginal people, then, health is a factor of lifestyle, an idea very much supported in the human ecological approach. Human ecology recognises that 'health' refers to much broader social and spiritual concepts than the 'individual', and is highly dependent on environmental and community-sustaining activities (see Hazlehurst, 1994; Niessen, 1996).

A House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs (1991) found that

the low standards of health apparent in the majority of Aboriginal communities can be largely attributed to the unsatisfactory environmental conditions in which Aboriginals live, to their low socio-economic status in the Australian community, and to the failure of health authorities to give sufficient attention to the special health needs of Aboriginals and to take proper account of their social and cultural beliefs and practices.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner (Lavarch, 1995, p. 107) is a little more harsh in his judgement of the situation and states that any actual illness is

largely a by-product of the process which over the past century or more has done its best to destroy all that Aboriginal people of the area held

dear... if we can recognize that dispossession is a central source of current alienation and the prevalence of 'lifestyle' diseases, then equally we can recognize that re-establishment of connection to the land as a source of cultural and economic strength holds great promise.

A lack of employment opportunities and associated poverty, feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness are cited because people have been removed from their traditional lands. A return to the land should help alleviate the present lifestyle problems which, at present include the excessive and damaging uses of alcohol and petrol sniffing (Lavarch, 1995).

Substance abuse is a problem, especially amongst the youth population, and the cost for Aboriginal communities is the alienation of the youth from their own culture. "It helps perpetuate dependency on one hand and the disintegration of traditional societal norms on the other" (Folds, 1987, p. xiv). The deterioration of traditional values and dependence on alcohol and petrol, combined with the differential worsening of the social economy, are also recognized as contributing to an increasing number of suicides in the 1980s and 1990s (Perkins, 1994).

Unless the approaches to Aboriginal health are broadened to include greater attention to the health problems of adults, and are matched by broad-ranging strategies aimed at redressing Aboriginal social and economic disadvantage, it is likely that overall mortality will remain high (Perkins, 1994, p. 43).

If people want to truly understand why Aboriginal people are the way they are, it is crucial to understand that the disruption, dispossession and dispersal of traditional culture is still being felt, and that the crisis in Aboriginal health will not go away until their social and cultural well-being is addressed.

We are still paying the heavy price of colonisation: whether we live in discrete communities in the bush, on matchbox-sized excisions from pastoral properties, in camps in country towns or in the big cities, history has determined that our health problems today should be of the legacies of the disruption of our lives caused by the depredations by non-Indigenous society of our domain over the past two hundred and ten years (Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 1995, p. 130).

Hazlehurst (1994, p. 157) believes it will be through the promotion of the ideas of 'well health' and 'positive growth', which are generated through "concentrating on changing the underlying emotional and spiritual environments in which unhealthy lifestyle, negative attitudes and violent behaviours are cultivated" that community recovery can be achieved.

Art production becomes an important avenue through which Aboriginal groups can express the 'positives' of their communities, while generating income and teaching skills to the young. The creation of an identity through art production must certainly contribute to a community's sense of well-being, helping the *individual* and the *community*, because it encourages both cultural and spiritual awareness, and increases pride in their history and their 'Aboriginality'.

## **Employment**

The 1991 census indicated that Aboriginal unemployment rates were much higher than the national average. Non-indigenous Australians had an unemployment rate of 11.7%, compared to 31% for the Aboriginal labour force. By 1994, Aboriginal unemployment rose to 38%, while it decreased to 9% for the non-Aboriginal population (Taylor and Altman, 1997).

These statistics are of great concern, especially with a growing indigenous labour force. The working age population (15- 64 years) is growing at a rate 2.4 times the national average, and it is predicted that an increase of 9000 workers/year will be added to the labour force between 1991 and the year 2000. Taylor and Altman (1997) state that in the best-case scenario, the unemployment rate is likely to increase to 40% and perhaps as high as 47% by the year 2006 as a direct result of this continued rise in population.

The reasons for high Aboriginal unemployment at present are cited by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (Johnston, 1991) as being the result of the following: Aboriginal people live in remote and rural areas where work is scarce; many Aboriginal people do not have access to land and capital, both important to material advancement; their levels of education are lower; poorer health makes it difficult to secure employment; discrimination is prevalent and Aboriginal people are marginalized. And for those Aboriginal individuals who manage to find employment, their average income falls about 30% lower than the Australian average. According to Taylor and Altman (1997), these income gaps should not be overlooked

given that dependency ratios and associated economic burden is far greater among Indigenous people. It is a consequence of many explanatory factors including high welfare and CDEP scheme dependence, low occupational status and a high engagement in part-time work... In terms of target groups within the Indigenous population, approximately 65 percent of adults can be said to currently depend on some form of government assistance to support their presence in the labour force or to sustain them outside of it.

The reasons for a dependence on government assistance are listed as being related to poor health, family responsibilities, lack of local job opportunities, and lack of qualifications and skills (ABS, 1996). As well, with the increasing advances in industry and technology, Aboriginal groups in remote communities are fast losing the ability to secure the skills required to function in the labour force.

The above quote by Taylor and Altman (1997) refers to the CDEP scheme. This is necessary to explain because it is with this support program that many remote and rural artists (including Ernabella) receive their wages. CDEP is the Community Development and Employment Project run by ATSIC, which enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations to provide employment for people in their communities. Started in 1977, CDEP schemes are found in over 270 communities and involve over 28,000 individuals. The CDEP system operates with the communities receiving direct funding from ATSIC, and this funding is then re-distributed in the form



of pay wages to Aboriginal participants (ATSIC, 1996f).

As Taylor and Altman note (1997), CDEP may provide economic income, but it is still a form of dependence on the government, and has often been regarded as a form of 'working for the dole'. However, the real benefit of CDEP is to move Aboriginal people from solely receiving unemployment benefits to wage earning activities, and this is thought to encourage community development and skills acquisition, as well as "social cohesion and the building of personal and community confidence and self-esteem" (ATSIC, 1997f).

Further, as indicated by Young (1995, p. 117),

the economic prospects of many projects which otherwise would have folded because the precarious state of their profit margins would not enable them to pay their workforce. In remote areas, where these problems are common, [CDEP] has been particularly valuable.

Bonner's (1988) study of CDEP schemes on the Anangu-Pitjantjatjara Freehold Lands shows that the communities are in total control of CDEP resources, and the arts and crafts industry is now highly dependent on the CDEP subsidy. When I talk about Ernabella Arts, I will address the importance of the CDEP scheme in the daily functioning of the craft room, because it is with this support that all fulltime workers are paid. Without CDEP, employment with Ernabella Arts is highly limited, as would be employment with other community organisations.

## **Education**

Because of the geographic location of many rural and remote communities in Central Australia, and as a result of their poor socio-economic status, many Aboriginal groups lack educational opportunities beyond primary school levels. Education statistics indicate that less than 25% of indigenous Australians stay in school until Year 12, and those who do finish schooling often do not have the adequate level of education

necessary to enter university (Behrendt, 1995). As noted in Folds (1987), and through personal field experience, those individuals who actually do attend post-secondary institutions (eg. Bachelor's College in Alice Springs) find themselves in situations which require them to leave family and friends for what they regard to be a less pleasing social environment.

A direct result of limited educational and employment opportunities is a dependence upon government support, and despite greater access to various types of support in recent years, the 1986 census showed that Aboriginal people were in a poorer economic situation than they were in 1971, and that 50% of Aboriginal children live below the poverty line (Behrendt, 1995; Hazlehurst, 1994).

For a people without a written history, the importance of art in education cannot be overlooked then. The function of art serves both to communicate and educate. Song, dance and art all embody various aspects of Aboriginal knowledge and history, and as Burton (1994) indicates, some very fundamental learning by children and adolescents is acquired through 'acts of artistry'.

If in the fashioning of visual images children transform human experience into artistic content, and if this also calls on how they make sense of and learn from the artistry of others, then this is a critical argument for supporting the importance of artistry to human growth and development (Burton, 1994, p. 451).

Central to development is the need to shape and communicate meaning, thus an emphasis needs to be placed on the potential uses of art as a means to reverse the present educational trends.

## **Summary**

European contact with Aboriginal groups in Central Australia happened at a much later date than other areas of the Australian continent. However, it was not long after the establishment of the pastoral industry in the 1930s that native flora and fauna

became scarce. This forced a change to Aboriginal hunting-and-gathering patterns, and with government subsidized rations being handed out on missions, settlements and stations, traditional subsistence lifestyles changed forever. High unemployment, low levels of education, poor health and a dependence on the state have frequently been the result.

According to Myer (1986), the inter-relatedness of the land, family and Dreaming, as organising concepts of social life prior to European contact, are paramount to the understanding of contemporary social life and well-being. While it cannot be ignored that traditional lifestyles have irreversibly changed, the strength of Aboriginal culture in this region must not be forgotten. Indeed, as further indicated by Altman (1989, p. 145), a vital factor which is often overlooked is that an Aboriginal person is not “poor, primitive or backward within his own culture.” Even though they exhibit all the signs of a disadvantaged people, with their poorer socio-economic conditions, high incarceration rates, and signs of social strain (i.e. alcohol and petrol sniffing), I want to stress that these are not the only indicators of ‘wealth’ in a culture, even though they are issues of great concern to indigenous populations. It is within this context that I wish to situate the arts and crafts industry. The next chapter will outline the development of this industry since colonisation and explain its importance to the daily social lives of Aboriginal people.

## **Australian Aboriginal Art**

### **Aboriginal Art in a Global Market**

Studies have shown that Western interest in Australian Aboriginal art only started to grow in the years following the Second World War (see Altman, 1983, 1991; C. Anderson, 1991; V. Anderson, 1991; Benjamin, 1989; Berndt, 1975; Charlesworth, 1991; Isaacs, 1984; Morphy, 1983, 1991; Scott-Mundane, 1991; Taylor, 1991; Fry and Willis, 1989). Although Australian Aboriginal art is one of the oldest art traditions in the world, prior to the 1950s it was often relegated to the category of 'primitive art' or 'tribal art' by western-Europeans and was thus largely ignored by art collectors. According to Morphy, the reason lay not "with the intrinsic properties of the objects themselves but in the evolutionary scheme into which the cultures producing them were slotted" (1983, p. 38). Essentially, the Western world was accustomed to regarding any non-European as a lesser being and the aesthetic qualities of any Aboriginal art object were therefore unrecognized. However, Aboriginal art is achieving unprecedented prominence in the world today, and it is within this favourable setting that the batik of the Pitjantjatjara women has developed.

Enough studies have focused on the origins of Aboriginal art, and the highly spiritual nature of art production is well understood and well-documented. All Australian Aboriginal art forms find their origins in antiquity, and the basis of Aboriginal art is the strong relationship Aboriginal groups believe exists between the land and the creation ancestors of the Dreamtime.

Dance, song, ceremony and material arts all combine to form a unified whole, a complete artistic network that articulates the landscape and the Dreaming. Traditional Aboriginal culture connects the arts with every feature of religious and secular life. At the core of the arts is Aboriginal ceremonial life. Music, dance, song and painting were each part of the same process of constantly connecting the life of the people with the Dreaming (Isaacs, 1984, p. 10-11).

According to Berndt (1982), the Aboriginal art which was not directly connected

to religious topics expressed relationships with ordinary subject material, including food collecting, hunting, or domestic living. However, he maintains that the main role of the artist was to be

... a re-creator, responsible for re-activating the spiritual powers of the Dreaming spirits, bringing them into direct relationship with man so that he can draw upon their powers... It was not simply a matter of an artist painting or carving *any* object of mythical significance. He had to be linked spiritually in a special way, through the Dreaming, with what he produced... Aboriginal art, then, was acknowledgement as having a purpose: it was intended to fulfil a special function- to re-create a specific condition, usually a mythic one, in order to achieve a state of affairs that was defined at the very beginning, in the creation era of the Dreaming, for the 'real' world of human beings now (Berndt, 1982, pp. 24-25).

Traditionally, Aboriginal art was a merging of nature and culture; it represented the holistic aspect of Aboriginal life. There were no separate role descriptions of 'artist' within Aboriginal communities (see Berndt, 1982; Brennan, 1991; Isaacs, 1984; Stanbury, 1977). Rather, all individuals were encouraged to create, although there were a few limitations. Each individual was restricted to using designs and symbols 'owned' by her or his kinship group. These designs and symbols served to communicate ideas and knowledge to specific individuals within a social or family group, although both sex and age served to restrict one's understanding of the mythological and ritual knowledge being communicated.

Allen (1975) has devoted a large body of literature to the description of creation myths and how they govern artistic production. He stresses that since men were the owners of important rituals, historically most of the sacred artwork was produced by men.

While the existence of these rigid taboos surrounding Aboriginal art production are also echoed in Anderson (1991), the literature relating to traditional women's art, when available, is often quite biased. The lack of information about women occurs because most field work in the past was done by men, and the opinions of men were thus collected and recorded. As Bell (1980) argues, the idea that women and their art have

been rendered invisible ideologically is far from the truth; the availability of such information has been limited only because men are not often allowed access to it. It has only been in very recent years that women scholars (Bell, 1993; Bell and Ditton, 1980; Isaacs, 1984; Hilliard, 1968, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c) have taken it upon themselves to obtain this information and record the Aboriginal women's voice.

The transition from 'traditional' to Europeanised forms of living which occurred in many Central Aboriginal communities within the last three to four decades has created many changes within Aboriginal society, and the artwork of the Aborigine is no exception. In the areas which first encountered contact with Europeans, many of the 'traditional' art forms were destroyed (Berndt, 1982). Traditional hunting-and-gathering lifestyles survived for longer periods of time in areas such as Central Australia, which were relatively isolated from European contact until later dates ( although by the 1940s there were few communities which were not regularly influenced by European contact). Traditional art forms, like traditional life, were modified as a result of this contact, of which the first well-documented examples in Central Australia were the Pintupi and Papunya painting movements of the 1970s.

Many scholars have attempted to answer the question of whether contemporary Aboriginal art is a white creation or if it is a viable adaptation to the changing circumstances of Aboriginal life. The introduction of European media and modes of expression (eg. acrylic-on-canvas painting) have been regarded by some as an adulteration of Aboriginal art, while others have looked upon it as a new means of maintaining old traditions. To this, Morphy (1983, p. 40) states,

a great effort must be made to ensure that the historical context of contemporary Aboriginal art production is clearly understood. In order to eradicate the myths about Aboriginal art, an art history must be written which emphasises its rightful place in pre-contact society. At the same time this art must not be identified as the true Aboriginal art to the detriment of contemporary production.

Meyers (1992) believes responses to Aboriginal art are often simplistic, uninformed and ethnocentric, and he agrees with Langton (1992, p. 6), who states that

there is a

need to develop a body of knowledge and critical perspective [having] to do with aesthetics and politics... on representations of Aboriginal people and concerns in art, film, television or other media.

He suggests that criticism of Aboriginal art, generated through responses to exhibitions, reviews, performances and symposia, is an important step in “culture making”, the generating of a greater understanding of the history and context of Aboriginal art. He suggests we should pay heed to the words of art critics, who have often not been given the attention they deserve, because they are helping to develop a critical discourse for interpreting and finding meaning in modern Aboriginal art. He believes art criticism is a form of ‘interpretive practice’ that is “involved in producing a sensibility for appreciating or grasping forms of material culture” (1993, p. 4).

Historically, the interest in the collection of Aboriginal art is a relatively new phenomenon (Morphy, 1983). Catalano (1988) indicates that the original motivation behind the collection of Aboriginal art by Europeans was much different than it is today. At the turn of the century, it was generally believed that the Aboriginal populations in Australia were a vanishing race which was soon to die out, and the collection of their artefacts was the only way to document their culture. Since this time, however, Aboriginal art has become very popular in the Western art scene, and is now considered worthy enough to be placed beside European/Western art.

Stanbury (1977) stated that the beginning of artistic changes in Australian Aboriginal art started as Aborigines began to develop a strong desire to obtain the material benefits and comforts of European culture. His studies have shown that many Aboriginal communities lacked the money necessary to acquire the material goods brought by Europeans, and so began to sell artefacts. Over time this led to the creation of families becoming involved in the full time production of new and modified forms of art products, leaving behind the production of more sacred art objects.

Berndt (1964, 1982) has also followed the evolution of new Aboriginal art forms. He claims there are now two types of Aboriginal art; traditional works which are

inextricably linked with the social and religious life of the artists, and art for sale in the Western art market. Berndt (1982, p. 143) states that it is “external demands which dictate what is to be considered Aboriginal art, and because of economic necessity on the part of the Aborigines they cannot easily be evaded.” Berndt uses examples of his own field research in Arnhem Land to explain how western-European demands have forced these changes in the art and have led him to comment that:

Traditional artists were certainly confined by the prevailing range of styles, by the topics which demanded their attention, and by the need for other persons to identify what they produced... With the introduction of new materials, changes took place in the way subject matter was presented.... However much Aborigines attempt to insulate themselves from external influences, to regulate their interaction with non-Aborigines, or simply ‘shut-off’ or ‘shut-out’ when faced with comments, advice, demands or suggestions from non-Aborigines, these pressures are becoming so intrusive and permeating that they cannot easily be avoided-whether or not that might be desirable (Berndt, 1983, p. 33-35).

Fry and Willis (1989) wrote their article “Aboriginal Art: Symptom or Success” following a major Aboriginal art exhibition held in the United States at the end of the 1980s. According to Fry and Willis, many exhibitions held in the 1980s gave the appearance that the Aboriginal art world had finally ‘arrived’ on the world scene, giving a voice to Aboriginal concerns, traditions and beliefs. Their claim, however, is that Aboriginal art is being manipulated by those who benefit most (i.e. the entrepreneurs/collectors, not the artists) and is wrongly being interpreted by an ethnocentric Western world. Aboriginal art is being stuffed into a Western aesthetic understanding and the Aboriginal people are spoken about and spoken for, without the ability to present their cultures on their own terms. Fry and Willis argue that the new art being produced by Aborigines is generating the “erasure” of Aboriginal culture through processes of accelerated cultural assimilation.

Benjamin (1989) gives a direct response to opinions such as Fry’s and Willis’, by claiming that the view that Aboriginal art is suffering at the profit of the Western world is a very negative contention and need not be so; Aboriginal art is far from being a



victim. Instead, Aboriginal artists are “savvy marketers moving toward greater self-determination” (pg. 75). Indeed, his belief is that even within the present system, where the market has a structural capacity for exploitation, Aboriginal art serves to empower the producers. However, Benjamin seems to contradict himself when he says the art empowers when he admits that Aboriginal artists remain extremely poor by the standards of their white counterparts and are still dependent on government benefits for their livelihood. He does make the point, though, that dollar values are not the only index of cultural power. This becomes a central argument which I will explore within my study of the Ernabella experience.

The idea that the emergence of new forms of Aboriginal art should not always be looked upon in a negative light has been echoed by Charlesworth (1991, p. 111), who states that there has been an

... extraordinary renaissance of Aboriginal art in the last twenty-five years. At a time when Aboriginal communities are numerically at a low ebb and when tragic dislocation of Aboriginal life brought about by white occupation continues, we have an amazing flowering of contemporary Aboriginal art, ironically under the sponsorship of the white culture which has been responsible for the oppression of Australian Aborigines for the last 200 years... Many aboriginal artists live in communities where traditional life has been disrupted, and in circumstances of great material deprivation and neglect. And yet they are able to call upon their own Dreaming to bring forth works of great formal and ionic potency... though some contemporary forms of Australian Aboriginal art are made for the white European art market, they still draw upon traditional motivations, symbols and images in a deeply creative way... in a very real sense these new forms of Aboriginal art are animated by the very same spiritual forces as traditional art.

In his review of the Aboriginal arts industry today, Altman (1989, p. 115) states that the industry is the “cultural and economic success story of Aboriginal affairs in the 1980s” and he believes the arts industry in the 1990s will provide the only viable alternative for meaningful employment and income generation in remote communities.

Luke Taylor (1990), like Benjamin (1989), indicates that the whole issue surrounding contemporary Aboriginal art production too often focuses only on the

financial returns for the producers or marketers. What is lacking is information about the artist's relationship to what s/he is producing. He says,

In Australia, it is clear that Aboriginal artists want more out of the operation of the industry than just money. A large facet of the work of major artists is pride in the recognition of their cultural achievement, a gratification that the power of their culture is being acknowledged. Artists have been quoted as saying that they want to educate non-Aborigines, not just make money from them (Taylor, 1990, p. 32).

While so few studies look to the Aboriginal artists themselves for information, any study which brings the artists to the forefront is important. Too many focus merely on the financial impact of contemporary art production without looking deeper at the cultural importance associated with it. It is my belief, after having conducted field research, that money only partially influences modern Aboriginal art production; art production remains a social event, one which adapts and changes with time. While the media of production may change, the reasons behind the creation of art is still recognized as a means for strengthening cultural ties. These are points I will explore shortly through a discussion of my field experiences at Mt. Ebenezer, Alice Springs and Ernabella.

### **The Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Industry in the 1990s**

Now that a general overview of Aboriginal art has been presented, I want to look at the very state of the Australian arts and crafts market as it exists today. Young (1995, p. ), claims that

Economic development cannot stand alone but is firmly embedded within social and political contexts and is a product of its history. Cultural attributes and behavioural norms influence how people perceive the changes which they are being encouraged to adopt... Solutions lie not merely in recognising the importance of social and cultural elements in development, but also in finding alternative approaches which incorporate them.

The nature of my thesis deals with this issue as it relates specifically to the arts and crafts industry in Australia. Aboriginal populations worldwide share many of the same concerns relating to the effects of colonisation, and are now seeking to re-establish ties to their cultural pasts, whether it be through land rights and self-determination movements or the development of their cultural industry. With so many aspects of Aboriginal culture being linked, the study of art and craft can be one way in which one can approach the study of Aboriginal culture. Indeed, one cannot look at art without being introduced, at various levels, to the existing socio-economic, political, legal, and residential issues as they affect Aboriginal artists and their communities today. Thus, a study of art and craft gives us an introduction to these greater cultural issues.

But what do we know about Aboriginal art and craft production in its modern forms? As ATSIC (1996) indicates, very few studies have actually focused on the overall state of the Aboriginal arts and crafts industry in Australia, and this has been a continuous problem in identifying the impact the industry has had on its Aboriginal producers. Further, as Altman (1989) points out, of those studies which have been completed, most have an economic focus, with little analysis of the social or cultural benefits of production, and

this is quite inappropriate because Aboriginal people are not working in a cultural vacuum, cut off from all the processes of socio-economic and cultural transformations which affect their daily lives. Like all of us they are constantly bombarded with changes, and accordingly they incorporate these into art (Young, 1995, p. 213).

Within this section I want to explore the arts and crafts industry as it exists in Australia, and while I want to emphasise the importance of giving notice to the socio-cultural context of production, I also want to stress that economic development is still important for Aboriginal groups within Central Australia because it is thought to encourage greater community independence and self-reliance, and now that there is recognition of title and inherent rights to land (as reflected in the passage of the Northern Land Rights Act in 1976 and the Pitjantjatjara Lands Act in 1981, and the turnover of national park areas such as Uluru and Kakadu back to their traditional

owners), there has been a greater emphasis on Aboriginal involvement in both the cultural and tourism industries.

Before looking at this in greater depth, there are common definitions for the various components of the Aboriginal arts and crafts market, which I will now briefly describe. These terms tend to fall within a few commonly accepted categories, following guidelines set out by May (1975) and Graburn (1976). In the Aboriginal arts and crafts industry, there is a very distinct division between the 'fine or traditional' arts, and the 'tourist or souvenir' arts. Individual artists are usually identified in the 'fine art' sphere, and their works are usually sold through exhibition. Fine art costs much more than souvenir art, which is usually characterised as being small, cheap and highly portable. Graburn (1976) also includes a category called 'reintegrated art' which sees the incorporation of new materials and techniques in production. Batik, silk screening, and pottery would fall into this category.

There is also a tendency to distinguish between 'contemporary' and 'traditional' art in the Aboriginal arts market, yet ATSIC (1996c) indicates that this is highly inappropriate. The use of these terms in the past has served to exclude or include individuals and organisations in terms of access to resources. The problem lay with the fact that these terms are not being used to adequately reflect the manner in which Aboriginal artists are using new ideas and techniques. As Young (1995, p. 213) indicates,

Characteristics shared by Canadian and Australian producers include the amalgamation of traditional and contemporary materials and knowledge, and the adaptation of traditional art to fit into a modern milieu which makes it marketable... Failure to recognise that Aboriginal culture, like any other, is dynamic rather than static has led to unjust criticisms that today's products are not authentic.

Ames (1992) also discusses this problem as it relates to North West Coast Indian art. As in the case of Australia, many contemporary Native artists are criticized for their use of new media; it is assumed by art galleries that such deviations render a piece 'non-traditional'. He remarks that Western white society still believes it alone should be able

to lay claim to the evolution of artistic form and style.

Steiner (1994) notes, too, that the West is more likely to idealize the 'static', 'primitive' culture, and this then raises the concern of what should be deemed 'authentic'. He states that neither anthropology nor art history focuses on the subject of 'authenticity', and that which has been written has been done by those who have an economic 'stake' in the sale of art (i.e. art dealers and collectors). The resulting definition of 'authenticity' is thus transformed into something which "combines elements concerning an object's condition and history of use, intended audience, aesthetic merit, rarity and estimated age" with ideas of the 'primitive' and the 'traditional' (Steiner, 1994, p. 100). In essence, items are manipulated to 'fit' the need of the moment.

Within Steiner's (1994) study of African middlemen operating in the Ivory Coast, we are introduced to a 'global dialectic' that explores how the local and international markets influence art production. It is a complex system which sees a continuous re-shaping of 'authentic' and 'traditional' objects according to individual need and motive. The importance is his recognition that it is a *system* of interplay and exchange amongst market participants, and is very far from static. So too, is the Australian experience.

At present, Australian art galleries and stores promote the ideas of 'authentic' and 'traditional' to mean very specific things. Acrylic-on-canvas dot-and-circle painting, boomerangs, didgeridoos, and bark paintings are the most commonly promoted 'traditional' art items. This is to the detriment of textile, bead, and other such 'craft' related objects. Women's work is commonly categorised as 'craft' or 'tourist art' as opposed to 'fine art' (Graburn, 1976; Altman, 1989).

This poses a serious question as to how to bring to the forefront the dynamic nature of contemporary art production. Indeed, the mould of the 'authentic' and the 'traditional' is seen everywhere a tourist is apt to venture in Australia. This can be seen clearly both in the types of art being promoted and the information accompanying these items. Objects such as didgeridoos and returning boomerangs were never used in the

Centre but they are promoted as though they have always been a focal point of Central Australian culture, and are thus amongst the most highly sought after souvenirs.

It was a constant question in my mind as to how this could be overcome. My interaction with tourists at Mt. Ebenezer made me well aware of tourist knowledge because I was continuously asked if we sold didgeridoos, if the boomerangs for sale would come back, and if the brightly coloured canvas paintings were made from ground ochres. Such questions reflect the type of information reaching the public, so I hope my writing this thesis, which looks at 'alternative' media, will help bring down some of these stereotypes.

Perhaps one of the first major reviews of the industry was completed by Mackay in July 1972, under appointment by the Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Pty. Ltd. He surveyed the production, distribution and marketing of Aboriginal art from various rural and urban centres in Australia, and reported his findings to the Commonwealth Government's Department of Aboriginal Affairs, which was looking for information on how to better assist the industry existing at that time. Mackay (1973) indicated that all producers (of unknown number) reportedly earned a mere \$450,000 per year combined. He states, however, that because this figure was quite small, it did little to emphasize how important the industry actually was. The importance of his findings was to recognize that there are two reasons behind the importance of the industry; the first being that the production of art and craft provides the only other form of income generation in many communities and the second is that, in comparison with many other economic projects, art and craft production helps to preserve traditional skills and culture (also see Niessen, 1996).

Altman (1989) states that the Miller Report (1985), also known as the "Report of the Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs, and the Blanchard Homelands Report (1987), also known as the "Return to Country: The Aboriginal Homelands Movement in Australia Report" were the next to indicate the importance of the sale of arts and crafts as viable forms of economic income in Aboriginal communities. Miller noted that the arts and crafts industry was not relied upon enough

as an income-generating source for Aboriginal communities, while Blanchard's report indicated that artefact sales might be a very viable cash supplement for up to 5,000 individuals living on homelands and outstations.

Altman's review (1989) of the arts and crafts industry is one of the most thorough. His findings indicate that the 1980s finally saw Aboriginal art being regarded as fine art, and this saw the industry grow by thirty-three percent. Returns to approximately 4800 producers at that time were estimated to be \$7 million, although most of the artists were still regarded as poor in comparison to most other Australians. The majority of producers were women (56%), yet they only earned 31% of the overall arts income. While this is slowly changing as more women enter the 'fine arts' market, it is still a characteristic of the industry today. Eighty percent of producers were also noted to live in remote regions (such as Ernabella), which requires a greater dependence on government support because additional money is required to allow the products to reach the market from the original communities.

While some modern literature suggests that tourism is a new guise behind which the exploitation and colonisation of Aboriginal people can continue (Nash, 1995; Rajotte, 1987), most current studies emphasise the importance of the tourism industry in the development of the arts and crafts industry within Australia (Altman, 1989; Altman and Finlayson, 1989; Hollinshead, 1988; Spring, 1990; Young, 1995). This is especially true in Central Australia because it is a region where conditions such as poor rainfall, distance from markets, and inadequate supply centres make alternative industries difficult, if not impossible (Young, 1984). Further,

Indigenous people are involved in a struggle for cultural survival... In the search for solutions to the many challenges facing indigenous people, tourism has been raised as a potentially useful mechanism, albeit one that is viewed with considerable trepidation in many quarters (Butler and Hinch, 1996, p. 4).

According to Jules-Rosette (1984), the benefits which arise through the development of tourism are important for artefact producers. Here, she refers to the idea that as the tourism industry develops, so too does interest in indigenous culture,

and subsequently indigenous art. As art sales rise, greater economic returns can be seen in the producing communities, thus generating greater self-reliance and independence.

Spring's study (1990) measured the level of international interest in Aboriginal art and culture and determined how much visitors were willing to spend on this industry. His survey found that 49% of tourists were interested in learning about Aboriginal culture and at least 30% purchased Aboriginal art, which was usually of the souvenir variety. The most interest was focused on the Northern Territory, which is home to 22% of Australia's Aboriginal population.

In his study of the economic impact of tourism on Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, Altman (1988a, 1989) indicates that the majority of Aborigines receive most of their income in the tourist industry through the manufacture of arts and crafts, although this income serves only as a cash supplement to welfare support. Altman also notes that direct cultural tourism is very limited due to the remote locations of many Aboriginal communities, and is often not desired, which makes the production of arts and crafts a viable economic alternative to direct involvement in the tourism industry. While money is being generated for these communities, they do not have to deal with the pressures of regular contact with tourists.

In 1993 and 1995, Arts Training Northern Territory and Stanton Partners were commissioned by ATSIC to conduct studies into the present state of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Industry. The results of each report identified key issues which are facing the arts and crafts industry in the 1990s, and these are summarized in ATSIC's "Refined Draft National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Industry Strategy Vision and Goals, 1996."

The term "Cultural Industry" is defined by ATSIC (1996c, p.1) as

The inseparable nature of art and culture in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies. The term also refers to a growing acknowledgement, in the Commonwealth Government's processes to develop a national cultural policy, that 'culture' viewed as intellectual and artistic activity and 'culture' viewed as a whole way of life including both material and spiritual dimension, are closely entwined if not inseparable.



The report further defines the 'cultural industry' as "the creation of products and services for cultural purposes which can also be distributed and exchanged for economic purposes. The creation of products for cultural and/or economic exchange" (p. 1).

Interest in the Aboriginal cultural industry is only now coming to the forefront, due in large part to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (Johnston, 1993). This reports set out, in clauses 300, 304, 308, 311, and 312, the need to strengthen the participation of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders in the cultural arena. The Cultural Industry Strategy (ATSIC, 1996c) was developed in part as a response to such recommendations. Suggestions of ways in which to promote the cultural industry were put forth to address the issues of poverty, unemployment, and lack of economic development in many Aboriginal communities.

The development of the cultural industry, and more specifically with the visual arts and crafts segment of this industry, is well suited to remote communities which are trying to maintain more traditional lifestyles. In producing art and craft, they are generating additional income within their communities without having to directly interact with the market.

May (1983) indicates that the situation facing the Aboriginal art market in Australia differs from that found amongst other Third World artists. He states that one of the reasons for this is that Aboriginal artists receive higher incomes, often through government supports, so art is not actually looked at as a primary form of income. More important to my own study is his belief that the ability of Aboriginal communities to restrict entrance to outsiders gives artists greater control over the making and marketing of their products. However, Altman (1989) states that the increasing interest and contact with the tourist market creates an arts and crafts industry that is much more complex and vulnerable to fluctuations in tourist demand.

At present, there are still very few statistics indicating the actual number of individuals involved in the arts and crafts industry. In 1994, ATSIC reported that some

6000 individuals listed art production as their primary 'job', although this number did not take into account those who produce seasonally or part time. The annual retail value is estimated to be in the neighbourhood of \$84 million (from formal retail outlets; there is no indication of how much art is directly marketed overseas), and is expected to grow with the increasing population of Aboriginal people and "continued exploration of the arts as a means of cultural maintenance" (ATSIC, 1996c p. 3).

There are certain limitations to development in the arts and crafts arena. For Aboriginal people, development is viewed as

a set of beliefs which carries the authority of religion and ancestral law [which emphasises] the continuity of their present experience with that of the past and seeks meaning for the present in terms of the past (Coombs et al, 1989, p.26).

This parallels the human ecological understanding of development, which recognises the intertwined existence of both person *and* community; it is broad, inclusive of whole person and whole community.

With culture being so important to Aboriginal groups, economic development needs to incorporate the attitudes and values of the community if it is to survive. Yet too often, community approaches do not conform to government or business ideals. In addition, there is often limited access to finances, skilled labour and services.

However, government and granting agencies need to realize that economics alone may not be the motivating factor behind production. The failure to recognize the importance of these factors usually results in market-driven production that often does not survive over the long term. There is a tendency to see lower quality, quickly produced items being produced when the market dictates production (see Altman and Taylor, 1990), eventually resulting in waning interest. Short term economic gain should not be promoted as the only goal; indeed, there are many projects which promote the well-being of the community but operate at an economic loss (see Young, 1995). The importance of art to educate, re-affirm ties to an Aboriginal past, generate community identity and cohesion may be better for the community than economic profit alone.

In their report to ATSIC, Stanton Partners (ATSIC, 1996c) state that one cannot

look at art production without a contextual framework in which to place it. They note the following to be of utmost importance: the link between culture and the spirituality of the people; their ownership of their heritage; the capacity of cultural maintenance and rejuvenation to help address the damaging effects of colonisation and contribute to the reconciliation process; the need for employment; the need for a new partnership which recognises the indigenous contribution to Australia's identity; and the importance of enterprise development fitting with indigenous social, family, and community systems.

Payne (1992) further states that strong communities are made up of individuals who are trained to balance the physical, emotional, social and spiritual aspects of their lives.

The revitalisation of Aboriginal culture and identity has come through the emergence of Aboriginal community organisations such as the various legal, medical or health services, arts and crafts co-operatives, housing companies or sporting bodies. It is through such organisations that the avenue for change will continue to emerge (Payne, 1992, p. 38).

## **On the Tourist Track**

In this section, I would like to make a few observations about the tourism industry as it relates to art and craft production through a brief description of my experiences with two Aboriginal groups living in Imanpa, NT, and Alice Springs, NT. I believe this is important to do before explaining the Ernabella experience because each of these locales was crucial to my understanding of the tourism industry and its link to the arts and crafts industry within the Central Australian region. Proximity to daily tourist traffic is what differentiates these communities from Ernabella, and this directly correlates with the reasons behind the manufacture of art and craft, and the manner in which it is promoted for sale.

### **Imanpa/Mt. Ebenezer Roadhouse**

According to Gillespie (1983), the most frequented tourist destinations in the Northern Territory are Aboriginal sites, of which Uluru, Katherine Gorge and Kakadu are the most popular. Mt. Ebenezer Roadhouse is located along the Lasseter Highway leading to Uluru, so is often a frequently visited stop-off point for passing tourists (see map 2). It is owned and operated by the Aboriginal community of Imanpa, which lies 16 kilometres away. Mt. Ebenezer is approximately 200 kilometres to the east of Uluru and 56 kilometres to the west of the Stuart Highway junction (at Eralunda), respectively. The roadhouse is a frequently visited stop-off point for individual travellers and tour operators on their way to and from Ayers Rock, the Olgas and King's Canyon.

The roadhouse is operated by a staff of eight or nine individuals. The managers or proprietors of the roadhouse are directly hired by the Imanpa community, and they in turn hire seasonal staff as tourist traffic dictates. The roadhouse sells food, beverage, and 'souvenir' art, in addition to the items for sale in the art gallery.

There are around 150 individuals living within the Imanpa Community, some of whom find daily employment at Mt. Ebenezer Roadhouse as grounds keepers, cleaners,

or maintenance workers. Those not directly working at the roadhouse have the opportunity to sell their artwork to passing tourists on the roadhouse grounds or to the roadhouse which, in turn, sells them through the recently created art gallery.

It is the art gallery which is the most impressive feature at Mt. Ebenezer. Established in 1993 as an addition to the existing building, the art gallery features solely the work of local artists. Paintings, animal carvings, bead necklaces, clap sticks, spears, fighting sticks and boomerangs are featured. The policy of the roadhouse is to purchase these items from the local artists on a weekly basis. The proprietor of the roadhouse pays the artists cash (for prices I was never able to learn), then re-prices the items to be sold in the gallery. The money from the sale of gallery artefacts is grouped with the entire roadhouse profits, which are then forwarded to the community for the maintenance of community infrastructure (i.e. the money is filtered to the community school, store, administration, housing).

Artists are also able to sell their work individually at Mt. Ebenezer. Artists usually sit on the small patch of lawn in front of the roadhouse at times corresponding to the tourist bus schedules, in hopes of attracting the attention of the passing groups. Paintings, clap sticks, small animals and boomerangs are the common items for sale and this is usually done by women or old men. Few young men express interest in participating in the sale of these artefacts on a daily basis.

I noticed that the importance of artefact sales on the outside grounds increased as the 'evening beer run' approached. This 'beer run' refers to a ruling made by the Imanpa community which allows the residents to purchase four cans of Victoria Bitter beer, at a cost of \$3.00 per can, on a daily basis between the hours of 5:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. only. Alcohol dependencies tend to be quite high in this region, so the approach of the 'beer run' marks an urgency for some artists to sell enough art and craft to cover the cost of the beer. It was not unusual to be approached to purchase a painting, which would normally sell for \$25 or more during the day, for 'beer price' as the evening run approached. This occurs even though the Aboriginal people of Imanpa receive their weekly government assistance benefits.



Figure 3: This acrylic-on-canvas painting was purchased at Mt. Ebenezer Roadhouse. The combination of dots and circles with stylistic figures is very common amongst Imanpa artists (Photo by J. Morton, 1997).

In addition to alcohol dependency, petrol sniffing is a noted problem for some community members. Again, the Imanpa Community Council created rules which limit the purchase of leaded gasoline to \$10.00 per day; it is sold only to those residents known to have vehicles. An absolute ban was placed on the filling of jerry cans without express consent of the roadhouse proprietor.

The sale of art for community members became very important over the duration of my stay because the 'whitefella' staff working in Imanpa left as a result of the increasing problems associated with alcohol and petrol sniffing. This meant the school, community store and administration office were closed to the Aboriginal residents. Because the nearest location to purchase food stuffs was Mt. Ebenezer, which is geared only to the sale of 'fast food' items which cost more, the sale of art works became crucial to enable the purchase of these food items (however, by the end of my stay at Mt. Ebenezer, the roadhouse began bringing in basic food stuffs, such as flour, canned beef, salt, sugar, tea, vegemite and canned milk).

My interaction with the tourists stopping at Mt. Ebenezer offered me my first glimpse at tourist reactions to Aboriginal art. Usually, a tour bus arrived, and I would give a speech about the history of the roadhouse and the local Aboriginal community as the tourists sat down to morning or afternoon Devonshire tea. After finishing with refreshments, the group was led into the art gallery, where 'authentic' art could be purchased at prices far less than what could be expected in Alice Springs.

As Gillespie (1983, p. 81) notes, most tourists have a "hunger for good quality information about the art and generally about Aboriginal culture." He indicates that this must be done in a dignified and informative setting to a motivated public. Mt. Ebenezer Roadhouse accomplishes just this. The tourist and souvenir art is available for sale at the one end of the roadhouse, while the locally produced pieces are sold through the gallery located at the opposite end. The gallery itself is quite impressive, consisting of a single room with walls covered in burlap. The acrylic-on-canvas paintings are held to the burlap with wire burned clothes pins. Boomerangs, beads and necklaces hang from notches cut in the two trees found at either end of the room, and carved animals line wooden racks

lying on the red sand covered floor. This gallery has used very simple methods to achieve a very unique look, and it appears to appeal to the passing tourist crowd.

## **Alice Springs**

Alice Springs is a town of 26, 000 people located along the Stuart Highway, 1535 kilometres south of Darwin and 1645 kilometres north of Adelaide. Being the only town of significant size in the centre of the Australian continent, Alice Springs is considered to be the most important town in Central Australia. It serves as the gateway to Uluru and Kata Juta (two of the most frequented tourist destinations in the Northern Territory) and is the major supply and distribution centre for outlying cattle stations and communities.

Alice Springs began as a telegraph station in 1872. Significant growth accompanied the opening of both the Ghan Railway in 1929 and the Allied Military Forces Base/Pine Gap Space Research Facility during World War II. However, the greatest growth in population came after the opening of the Stuart and Lasseter Highways in the 1960s, making Alice Springs an accessible and desired tourist destination (Heppell and Wigley, 1981).

Although Alice Springs is the traditional home of the Arrente Aborigines, a large number of Aboriginal people from throughout the Centre now settle in this region. The group of Warlpiri with whom I worked lived in a variety of fringe camp and government housing establishments within the Alice Springs town limits. They regard their traditional home to be Yuendumu, 295 kilometres to the northwest, but spend most of their time in Alice Springs.

Alice Springs is a major town centre for Aboriginal artists. There are over twenty art galleries and stores which sell art from Aboriginal areas such as Pintupi, Warlpiri, Luritja, Anmatyerre, Arrente, and Pitjantjatjara tribal lands.

The Warlpiri people historically inhabited the northern central areas of Australia. The tribal lands stretch from Stuart Bluff Range to Hooker's creek to Central Mt. Stuart

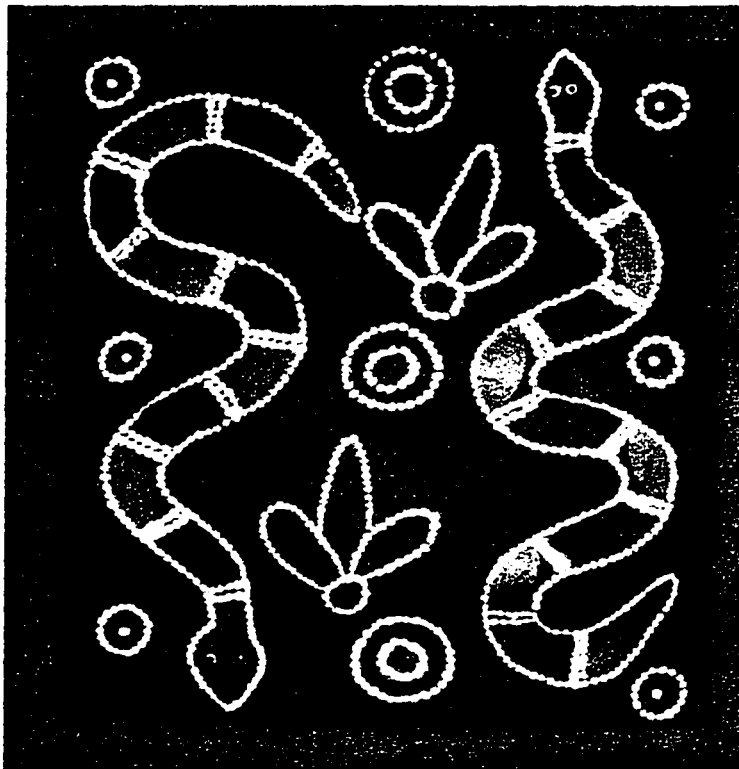


(Meggitt, 1962). In the present time, Warlpiri primarily live in the communities of Lajamanu, Willowra, Nyirripi, Alekarenga, and Yuendumu (considered the largest community with approximately 1000 individuals). Warlpiri can also be found living in other larger Aboriginal communities in Balgo, Yaruman, Areyonga, Papunya, Mount Allen and Turkey Creek (Rockman, 1994). The larger Northern Territory Centres of Tennant Creek, Katherine, Hall's Creek, Darwin and Alice Springs are also now home to many Warlpiri families.

According to Rockman (1994), the encroachment of Europeans into Warlpiri areas was a slow, drawn out process, and the gold rush era of 1910 - 1932 and the pastoral settlements of the 1920s initially did little to influence the Warlpiri lifestyles. However, as with the Pitjantjatjara, the establishment of missions and settlements soon brought about irreversible changes to Warlpiri life.

My interaction with the Warlpiri began with an invitation to watch their presentation of 'traditional' life to tourist groups. The Aboriginal participants are hired by a local tour operator to present examples of spear and boomerang throwing, bushtucker cooking, art production and dancing to tourists over a three hour period. A European-Australian acts as the main tour guide, leading the tourist group from one demonstration site to another, explaining what each activity meant to the Warlpiri in earlier times. Although the participants begin the day at 5:30 or 6:00 every morning, and continue till 1:00 in the afternoon, each is paid only by the number of demonstrations completed (usually \$20.00 per demonstration). The sale of art returns directly to the artist.

The style of art being presented to the tourist crowd is of the dot-and-circle style. It can be found on clap sticks, rocks or coolamons, but is most often associated with acrylic-on-canvas paintings. This art style is what is most regarded as 'authentic' and 'traditional' in Central Australia, despite the fact that the acrylic-on-canvas painting tradition, like batik, began in the early 1970s. What draws the tourists to these paintings, though, is the link to a Dreamtime past, for the dot-and-circle style is directly adapted from ceremonial and ritual decoration. Tourists also buy because it is relatively



**Figure 4:** An acrylic-on-canvas painting depicting the “Snake and Emu Dreaming” of Kitty Kilgariff (Photo by J. Morton, 1997).

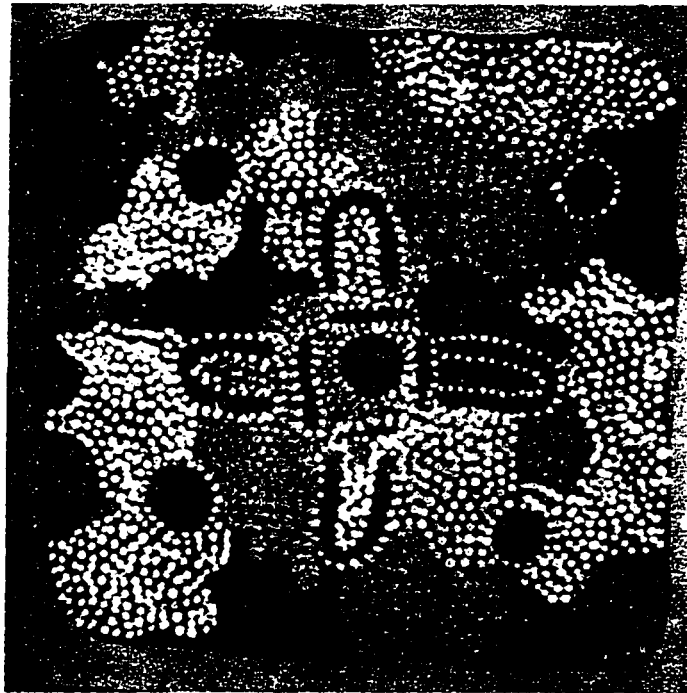


Figure 5: A dot-and-circle painting such as this is highly desired on the tourist market because of its link to spiritual symbols. This painting by A. Nugarra depicts women dancing in a ceremony (Photo by J. Morton, 1997).

inexpensive in comparison to art sold through galleries found directly in Alice Springs (15cm x 30 cm paintings sell for about \$40). Better still for the avid tourist is the fact that he or she can accompany the painting with a picture of the artist, providing them with a more permanent link to the 'ancient primitive', who at the time is likely adorned with body paint and the associated ceremonial attire from recently completing a demonstration of a corroboree.

While it is encouraged that the tourists sit and talk with the Aboriginal people participating on the daily tour, I rarely observed this. It appeared important to the tourist that a Dreamtime story be associated with any painting purchased, but actual contact with the artist was not desired. Essentially, the primary exchange is that of object for money and not for any other forms of interaction, this despite their apparent 'hunger' for knowledge of indigenous culture as indicated by Hollinshead (1988) and Spring (1990).

Some Warlpiri expressed sorrow at the lack of interest shown by the tourists into their lives but stressed that any form of education of the 'white fella', which they indicate can occur through the sale of their art, is a step in the right direction to sharing their culture.

As G. Jabajimba, a well-educated Warlpiri artist who has published and lectured on his people, told me, such a tour provides people with a closer glimpse into their Aboriginal culture, their history, their beliefs. He is one of the active participants on the 'tour' who explains to the passing groups that his people *have* changed since meeting the 'whitefella', and these demonstrations are a means to explain what is still central to their 'Aboriginality'.

Hauling out a painting, he says,

"This is my Dreaming. Snake and Emu. This is my land, my people. I cannot share with these whitefellas who come here so quickly what this means but I try to make them look a little differently. A seven day corroboree become a seven minute corroboree so they cannot learn what we learn our whole lives. But if they go away from here knowing what Warlpiri is... that is good."

He then said few actually take the time to stop and talk and ask questions. He

thinks it is perhaps because they are shy or maybe scared of “knowing how we really live. It’s not this camp. This is for show. It looks pretty.”

G. Jabajimba is referring to the ‘site’ of the demonstrations, which is located on the outskirts of Alice Springs. *Wiltjas*, Aboriginal windbreaks, are erected and campfires are set up. For a tourist seeking the ‘romantic’ Aborigine, this certainly adds to the flavour. It is a far cry from the conditions seen in town, where most live. Many choose to live in the dry creek beds over government housing because it better accommodates their lifestyles. And for those who live in government housing, the interior is rarely used; families sleep and cook outside. Also unseen at the tourist site is the litter of the town camps; at this site, all rubbish has to be picked up on a daily basis.

## **Summary**

Mt. Ebenezer and Alice Springs introduced me to the volatility of a direct market. The artists in Alice Springs noted the problems associated with fluctuating sales- one day they may sell \$200 worth of art and the next day nothing- and this could create tension if their weekly government benefits had run out. Government support is paid in cash, so is often very quickly distributed or spent on alcohol, and very few have bank accounts on which to depend for saving money. While the artists at Mt. Ebenezer have the benefit of being able to sell artwork to the roadhouse, which is a more stable system than that seen in Alice Springs, some artists still rely quite heavily on the sale of pieces to passing tourists, which again fluctuates greatly.

I witnessed money filtering through the entire kinship system, as is expected according to traditional rules, in both Alice Springs and at Mt. Ebenezer. This appeared to be an issue of contention with some of the women, who told me they reap fewer benefits because those who are capable of working, yet choose not to work, still have access to their money. When asked if they would consider keeping the money for themselves, I was told that it is not a consideration; distribution is expected and is

therefore practised.

The decision to make certain forms of art complies directly with the tastes of the passing tourists amongst these two groups. Carvings that are small, cheap and portable are highly desired, and thus tend to be produced in large quantities. As well, smaller acrylic-on-canvas paintings which have 'Dreamtime' significance are quickly produced. I should note that many of the acrylic-on-canvas paintings sold through Mt. Ebenezer show variations on the dot-and-circle styles so highly desired by the tourist market; the paintings show figurative animals and vegetative matter scattered amongst the dots and circles. They usually have hunting-and-gathering stories attached to them and do not often hold specific reference to ancestor stories; however, should a tourist ask what the 'Dreamtime' story is, then the hunting-and-gathering story often takes on an altered meaning (initiated by the artist) so a sale can be made.

My experiences at Mt. Ebenezer and Alice Springs gave me great insights into the desires of the tourism industry. The image of an unchanged past is both promoted and desired, yet tourists did not want to look too closely or too long at the Aboriginal people they were there to see, for they might very well see something far removed from their idea of the 'romantic Aborigine'.

As Dominguez (1986) brings to light, the West has a fascination with capturing the image of more primitive times.

Objects are no longer collected because of their intrinsic value but as metonyms for the people who produce them. And the people who produce them are the objects of examination not because of their intrinsic value but because of their perceived contribution to our understanding of our own historical trajectory (Dominguez, 1986, p. 548).

She continues by saying that the collection of artifacts "rests on a strong historical consciousness but concentrates its work on peoples perceived to be without a history." This parallels Catalano (1988), who states that the early interest in Aboriginal art rose from the belief that it was a dying race, and artefacts would remind us of a long dead culture.

The terms 'ancient' and 'primitive' abound in the Centre where Aboriginal art or

Aboriginal tours are promoted. This very much implies that Aboriginal culture is an already dead culture, and is therefore static and unchanging. Perhaps this is the reason tourists look no further than the piece of the *past* they manage to purchase, roll up and pack away in their suitcase. They do not wish to see a *modern* Aborigine in western dress who is capable both of conversation and interaction. This would destroy the very image of the 'romantic past' so well preserved in Western constructs.

## **Ernabella Arts Incorporated**

It cannot be ignored that the marketing of Aboriginal arts and crafts has been very important in helping communities transform from traditional subsistence economies to cash-based economies (Bonner, 1988). Since European contact, Pitjantjatjara communities such as Ernabella find themselves increasingly dependent on the outside world. Within the past sixty years, their economies have been moved from a hunting-and-gathering subsistence to a point where they are now highly dependent on a government-supported welfare system (Bonner, 1988). In this chapter, I will discuss how the arts and crafts movement grew in the community of Ernabella, South Australia following the creation of the Presbyterian mission in 1937 to its present state, and what this development has meant to such a rural and remote community.

### **Geographic location**

The community of Ernabella lies within the Musgrave Ranges of the Anangu-Pitjantjatjara Freehold Lands, which have traditionally belonged to the Pitjantjatjara people of Central Australia. It is located 30 kilometres south of the Northern Territory-South Australia border, approximately 90 kilometres southeast of Uluru and 520 kilometres south-southwest of Alice Springs (see map 2).

Approximately 400 individuals reside in Ernabella and immediate surroundings. It was first established as a cattle station in 1933, but was transferred to the hands of the Presbyterian mission in 1937. It remained a mission until 1971 when it acquired incorporated status.

Because of its location within the Anangu-Pitjantjatjara Freehold Lands, access to this area is highly restricted. All visitors are required to obtain the appropriate permits from the Pitjantjatjara Council in Alice Springs. The need for these permits prevents ease of access to this area, thus creating an indirect relationship to the tourist market.

By Aboriginal standards, Ernabella is a larger 'centre', comprised of a number of buildings- a church, store, school, teacher's resource centre, health clinic, mechanics



workshop, child care centre, petrol station, generator station, administration office, craft room, seniors home and TV/Radio station. Despite its size, though, Ernabella is still a very isolated community. During flooding seasons, Ernabella is not accessible by air or by four wheel drive, as the dirt roads and airstrip become washed out.

The relative isolation of Ernabella creates economic problems reflected by a high level of unemployment and dependence on government support. However, it was this very troubled economic situation which led to the creation of Ernabella Arts Incorporated, and the isolation is cited as being a key feature in the development of the art styles seen in the region.

The introduction of the CDEP (Community Development Employment Program), which is administered by ATSIC, plays a significant role in the Ernabella Community. CDEP is used to generate wage-paying jobs in the community store, administration office, EVTV, health clinic, school and arts centre.

## **The people**

The inhabitants of Ernabella belong to the Pitjantjatjara Aboriginal group. The Pitjantjatjara refer to themselves as *Anangu*, the “human beings who belong to the earth” (Toyne and Vachon, 1984). Mountford (1971) states that while the tribal boundaries of the Pitjantjatjara have varied greatly, it is commonly assumed that they extend from the Musgrave Ranges north to Lake Amadeus, east to the Basebow Ranges and west to the Warburton Ranges (see Map 2).

The Pitjantjatjara are distinguished from other Western Desert groups by language; the Pitjantjatjara use the verb stem ‘Pitja’ or ‘Pitjantja’, which means ‘to come’, to distinguish themselves from other neighbouring groups such as the Yankuntjatjara, the Matutjara, and the Ngatjatjara (Edwards, 1983; Wallace, 1990).

Every Aboriginal person is born into a ‘totemic jurisdiction’ which, according to Layton (1983) is often assumed to be of a patrilineal nature. He claims that this is not the

case amongst the Pitjantjatjara, however. Rather, the harsh conditions of the environment led to the emergence of a distinctive system that actually differentiates the Pitjantjatjara from other Aboriginal groups, so while patrilineal land-owning groups are usually the norm amongst Aborigines in areas such as Arnhem Land and the Kimberleys, a flexible system of ambilineal descent appears to be standard amongst the Pitjantjatjara.

The argument that the connection to the land, and the rights and responsibilities of a land-owning group are determined by ambilineal descent lines is also supported by Wallace (1990), Yengoyan (1970) and Lang (1987). They state that a child's relationship to the land is determined not specifically by mother or father, but by 'place of birth.'

At birth, each individual has rights in the land-owning groups of both parents, but during his or her lifetime they come to exercise these rights predominantly in one or the other group, and it will be membership of the selected group which the individual transmits to his or her children... Generally Pitjantjatjara or Yangkuntjatjara children join the group that owns the estate in which they grow up (Layton, 1983, p. 24).

It is believed this flexibility is the direct result of the necessity to maintain a balance between demographic and ecological factors; flexibility in residence groups and their relationship to the land is probably the only thing which allowed the population to survive (Yengoyan, 1970). Limited access to food and water supplies during times of hardship and drought resulted in the formation of this flexible system of land and resource use (Toyne and Vachon, 1983).

With regards to marriage, traditional marriage is

a recognised social reality and a lot of the rules pertaining to traditional marriage are in fact connected with land ownership and the ways in which different clans occupy lands. The rules that govern who might be married to whom are very intimately connected with land ownership (Cunneen and Libesman, 1995, p. 135).

In most cases amongst the Pitjantjatjara, an ideal marriage was one which matched distant cross-cousins on the matrilineal side, although marriages of these relations were also accepted on the patrilineal side (Yengoyan, 1970). The movement of individuals amongst various residence groups was also not deterred because the survival of the

population required the sharing of resources and knowledge in the desert environment.

At present, there still exist strong kinship networks and reciprocal relationships amongst the Pitjantjatjara of the Ernabella region. The operation of these relationships, and the requirement to re-distribute goods was well observed in the operation of the craft cooperative, which I will discuss below.

### **History of the Ernabella Mission**

Prior to the 1930s, outside interest in Central Australia was very minimal, thus the Pitjantjatjara had little interaction with Europeans. Hilliard (1968) states that while early explorers passed through the territory, the land was not thought to hold any significant monetary value, and was thus largely ignored; the industrialization and development of the country occurred in the more 'hospitable' regions of the country along the coastal and river areas.

Layton (1986) and Hilliard (1968) note that contact between Europeans and Aborigines was quite minimal in this region of Australia prior to the Depression era of the 1930s. During this decade, contact intensified as cattle stations began to stretch their boundaries into this region.

For bounty hunters, the early appeal of the region centred around the dogging industry, which saw the government paying Aboriginal individuals for the scalps of dingos. Hilliard (1968) has compiled useful material on the dogging industry during the 1930s, an industry which was important because it relied heavily on the Pitjantjatjara population. She claims that it was through this interaction that the Aboriginal people of this area first became accustomed to European food, clothing and money.

Often, this economic relationship was exploitive (Toyne and Vachon, 1986). The Pitjantjatjara would exchange the dingo scalps for food stuffs (such as tea, flour, and sugar) at less than their full value, and this was common until the newly created Presbyterian mission agreed to pay higher prices for the scalps.

The beginning of the mission was due in large part to the work of Dr. Charles Duguid, a surgeon from Adelaide, and Rev. R. R. B. Love, to both of whom are attributed policies quite different than those of previous missions set up in other regions of the country (Hilliard, 1968, 1993a; Layton, 1986; Toyne and Vachon, 1986). Dr. Duguid believed that the Pitjantjatjara needed time to prepare, both socially and spiritually, for the changes which were bound to come with European contact. Having travelled through the region, Duguid (1972, p. 115) stated “there was to be no compulsion nor imposition of our way of life on the Aborigines nor deliberate interference with tribal custom.”

In his report on the Ernabella Mission, Rev. Love (1937, p. 10-11) wrote,

In this enormous area of mostly semi-desert, Australia has a great opportunity to save a splendid and interesting people. I believe the Reserves can, without much difficulty, be kept from unauthorized intrusion... I would not advocate that either scientists or missionaries be allowed unrestricted access to the Aborigines.

Such beliefs in the need to preserve traditional lifestyles, authority structures, customs and values, set the development of Ernabella apart from other missions, which were known to have given the value and complexity of Aboriginal culture little thought. In many missionary areas, Aboriginal groups had been moved onto reserves or settlements, alienating them from their traditional lands, children were forcibly removed from their parents and indigenous languages were banned. Isaacs (1982) comments that such tactics by missionary groups quickly led to the erosion of power and traditional decision-making abilities of Aboriginal groups.

Understanding the effects of early missions and their impact upon Aboriginal groups becomes important if placed in the context of art and craft production because art is used by Aboriginal people to demonstrate their knowledge of, and respect for, their country. According to Brody (1990, p. 31), contemporary Aboriginal art has enabled “some bridges to be built across the moral, social, and political chasm that opened up in this continent as a result of colonisation.” Thus, in communities such as Ernabella, the continued control of art and craft production by the Aboriginal population was one avenue through which the Pitjantjatjara could empower themselves.

Hilliard (1968) states that the mission did not want to force the people to convert to Christianity. It was accepted that the encroachment of European lifestyles into the region was inevitable, but the aim was to allow the people to prepare for this transition. Although Toyne and Vachon (1986, p. 24) also acknowledge this respectful relationship, they are more critical of the mission's goals, stating that although "Ernabella would not be strictly evangelical, it was not to become a ration depot either, and if the Aboriginal people wished to enjoy the foods and services provided they would be expected to listen to Christian instruction."

The Pitjantjatjara who began settling around Ernabella were trained in various aspects of the cattle industry, sheep raising and shearing, office work, health care, and crafts. The Pitjantjatjara children were encouraged to attend school, after the establishment of the school in 1940. Children were taught in Pitjantjatjara, with English being taught as a second language.

### **Ernabella Arts Incorporated**

Winifred Hilliard (1968, 1983, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c) has provided the most thorough and accurate records of the development of the Ernabella arts and crafts industry. As craft advisor for the mission for many decades, Hilliard was influential in bringing non-traditional art forms to the mission. The development of the craft industry began in the late 1940s, and was considered most timely. Concern was being raised as to what forms of employment could be found for the girls leaving school. The males, following initiation training, were readily employed in the pastoral industry, but women had fewer opportunities. According to Love (1944), this has always been one of the concerns of the mission; it was thought that Ernabella would never be able to employ more than a comparatively small number of women on a more permanent basis.

Mrs. Bennett, a craft worker from Western Australia visited Ernabella in late 1948 and early 1949, and in working with the women, taught them how to adapt traditional

spinning techniques into the spinning of wool. This wool was then dyed and woven, and it was upon these skills that Ernabella Arts began. Although weaving sustained the crafts industry for a number of years, Ernabella Arts did not remain static. Rug hooking and wood carving were also encouraged.

As techniques and skills grew, and access to new colours was made possible, the 'Ernabella Design' came to be common. Hilliard (1968, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c), Isaacs (1994) and Kean (1990) all describe these designs as being very clear, fluid and delicate, with their origins found in *milpatjunanyi*, traditional women's sand stories which involved the drawing of figures and symbols on the ground as a way of telling their history, and an understanding of the surrounding environment and its beauty. Ernabella designs are mostly abstract, consisting of lines and patterns which hint of leaves, flowers, and birds.

Ernabella Arts Incorporated came to the attention of art galleries and museums in the 1970s when it adopted the textile tradition of batik. Batik is an ancient process of wax-resist dyeing which has been found in Japan, China, India, West Africa and Indonesia. While its origins are obscure, batik has achieved the zenith of its elaboration on the island of Java.

Houston (1975) describes batik as the combination of fabric, wax and dye. Patterns and shapes are drawn out on fabric with molten wax, and these waxed areas then resist the dye colour "thus preserving the fabric's original colour as a negative image" (1975, p. 9). After the material is dyed, the wax is removed. This process is repeated through several more waxings and dyeings.

Batik is distinguished from all other methods of hand-designing fabric by the fact that it is the only process using wax to create the designs on the cloth (Conoway, 1975; Houston, 1975). There is a wide variety of tools which may be used to wax a fabric piece; brushes, pens, blocks and other imprinting tools. In Java, the stamped or printed batiks are called *tjap* and the freehand designs are called *tulis*. The latter are more highly valued.

The *tjanting* (Javanese wax pen) has been used in South East Asia for the production of batik for many centuries. It is a tool which consists of a metal tube and spout which is attached to a wooden handle. The metal portion is filled with molten wax

which runs through a spout when the *tjanting* is tipped forward. According to Grey (1976), the heavy copper *tjantings* are best because they retain heat longer than other materials.

Grey (1976) states that the most striking and unique characteristic of batik is the 'crackle' which is created when dye seeps into the fabric along lines where the wax cracks, thus creating fine, irregular lines. In some countries, this is a desired effect, while other countries, such as Indonesia, consider this to be an imperfection and try to avoid its creation. Brody (1990) questioned whether this 'crackle' was a desired effect amongst Aboriginal artists. My own observations indicated that it was accepted as part of the process, but not intentionally produced.

The artists in Ernabella use both *tjantings* and brushes to transfer wax to the silk pieces. *Tjaps* were also introduced but were not a preferred method because they only allowed for the creation of repetitive motifs, something considered quite dull amongst the artists.

Batik is not indigenous to Australia. It was first introduced to the Pitjantjatjara women of Ernabella in 1972, by Leo Brereton, an American student of Indonesian batik. On the advice of Winifred Hilliard, batik was introduced because it was a medium which could allow endless expression of design. What was the original lure of batik? Many of the artists I spoke with indicated that many of the other art and craft ventures introduced over the years (such as the weaving looms) were not well liked simply because they involved much repetition and separated the women from one another. As well, batik did not require 'technology' to fit into such a remote community; it could be done inside or outside, with the wax being melted by fire or electric fry pan. Batik production thus allowed women to remain in a very social setting. It is still very much a social experience for the women. As they sit around the wax pots, they share stories amid much gossip and laughter.

Hilliard states that the Pitjantjatjara women were left to explore the art of batik themselves and in this way made it their own. Her refusal to learn the technique meant the women could develop after their own fashion, and it is for their batik tradition that



**Figure 6:** A detailed section of a 2.9 metre cotton batik by outstation artist, Dora Haggie. This textile was purchased through Ernabella Arts Incorporated (Photo by J. Morton, 1997).



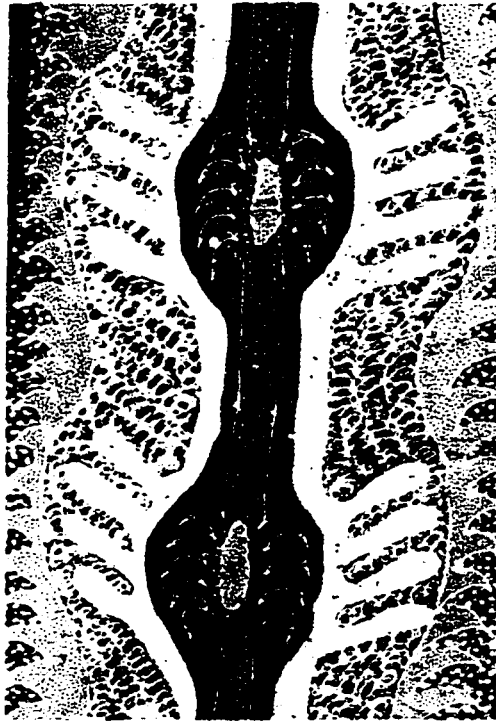


Figure 7: Detailing from a batik scarf produced by Atipalku Intjalki of Ernabella Arts. The inspiration for such designs comes from *Milpatpunanyi* (sand stories) and the environment which these artists live (Photo by J. Morton, 1997).

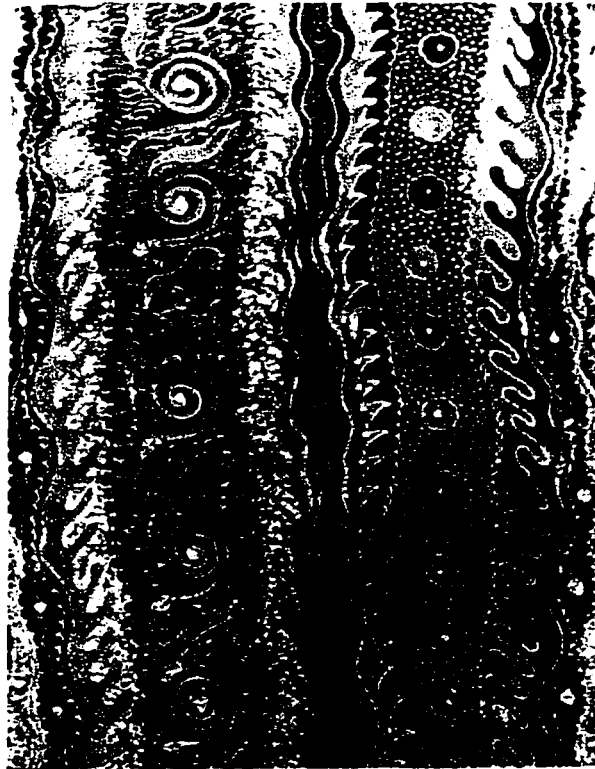


Figure 8: This is a portion of a batik scarf that reflects the distinctive style for which Ernabella artists are known. The fluid lines and vibrant colours have long since been a feature of Ernabella art (Photo by J. Morton, 1997).

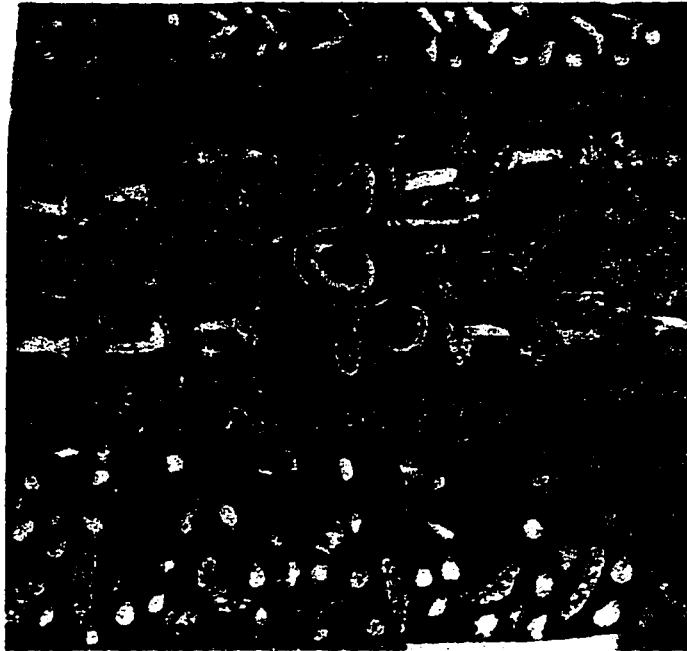


Figure 9: Silk scarf batiked by Tjulkiwa Atira and Angkalya Purampi. This piece was purchased because it is very unusual to see an Ernabella artist depict Dreamtime stories through batik (Photo by J. Morton, 1997).

Ernabella artists are known.

Since the emergence of batik in Ernabella, there have been introductions of other media which provided a different means of exploring Ernabella designs. These, according to Kean (1990, p. 14), are also wonderful new “cross-over forms that are just now emerging, and demand recognition and representation in the major art collections of contemporary Australia.” These include silkscreening, woodcarving, acrylic-on-canvas painting, printing and silk painting.

### **Items produced through Ernabella Arts Incorporated**

I originally went to Ernabella to look at batik production, but marvelled at the incredible variety of other art and craft pieces being produced through the cooperative. While batik is very much an important focus for many of the artists, it is by no means the most desired medium in which to work. Indeed, I was pleasantly surprised to see artists exploring woodcarving, acrylic-on-canvas painting, solar relief printing and silk painting. Those artists employed directly through Ernabella Arts receive CDEP wages (amounting to \$8-10 per hour), plus bonus money for each piece completed. The lure of bonus money is a highly motivational factor in attracting many of the younger artists.

### **Wood carving**

According to Sculthorpe (1990b), carving has generally been regarded as a men's activity throughout much of Australia, despite the fact that women have been actively working in this medium for the past twenty years. Within the Ernabella region, wood carving is very popular amongst women. It is an activity which allows them to 'go bush' in search of materials (usually the roots of the red river gum or the mulga tree), and this often leads to other socialising activities. While I was in Ernabella, one such wood

gathering trip resulted in a trip to a womens' sacred/secret site where a love magic ceremony was held.

The expert knowledge of the Pitjantjatjara women for their surrounding environment allows wood to be found and gathered without causing the destruction of the tree from which it is gathered. During my first trip to collect wood, I was taught to choose one or two root systems from each tree, leaving the rest and thus ensuring the tree would not die. This was not always the case amongst the group with whom I worked at Mt. Ebenezer. When out gathering wood for some of their projects, I saw that some of the artists would fell an entire tree or take so much of it that the tree would surely die. Knowing that the over-grazing of cattle and high rabbit population is fast killing what does remain of the vegetation around Mt. Ebenezer, any destruction of wood sources in the region is noticeable. The Mt. Ebenezer region is now very much a flat, dry dusty area which is unlikely to see any real re-generation of native flora take hold in the next fifty years. I only realised the likely results of the wood gathering methods around Mt. Ebenezer after being educated by the women in Ernabella, so did not have the opportunity to ask whether those in the Mt. Ebenezer region felt any responsibility to maintain the viability of the surrounding environment.

I learned about the quality of the wood (both for its carvability and its aesthetic qualities- i.e. the redder the wood the better) through their way of teaching which was primarily composed of trial-and error. For example, I remember the Pitjantjatjara women in Ernabella informing me after frequent half hour struggles of trying to haul fifteen foot root systems from under three or four feet of loose sand that the root was dead and would never be appropriate for use. I can assure the reader that I was well aware of what was desirable after a few such exhausting trials.

Carving is popular in Central Australia because it is saleable. Many tourists believed the carved animals for sale were very 'traditional' and 'authentic' replications of what the Aborigines had always carved, despite the fact that the carving of animals was introduced in the 1960s. Historically, if carving were done, it was to make functional artefacts such as bowls and digging sticks for food-gathering, music sticks and wooden

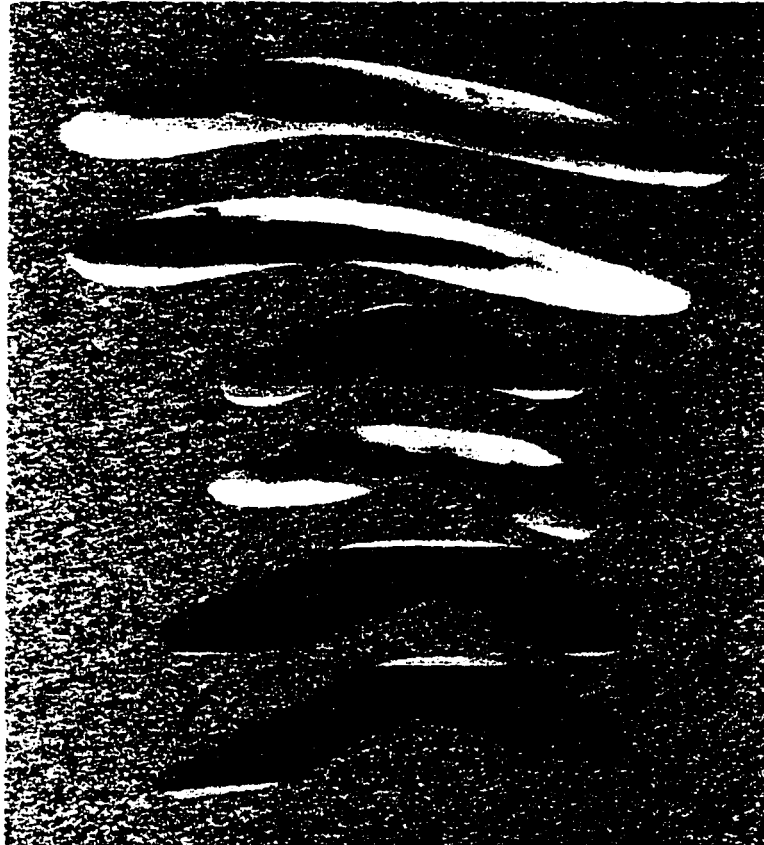


Figure 10: Notice the variation in boomerang shapes. The top two boomerangs were made in Ernabella, while the bottom four were made at Mt. Ebenezer Roadhouse. Less attention to detail is apparent when objects are made for quick sale to passing tourists (Photo by J. Morton, 1997).

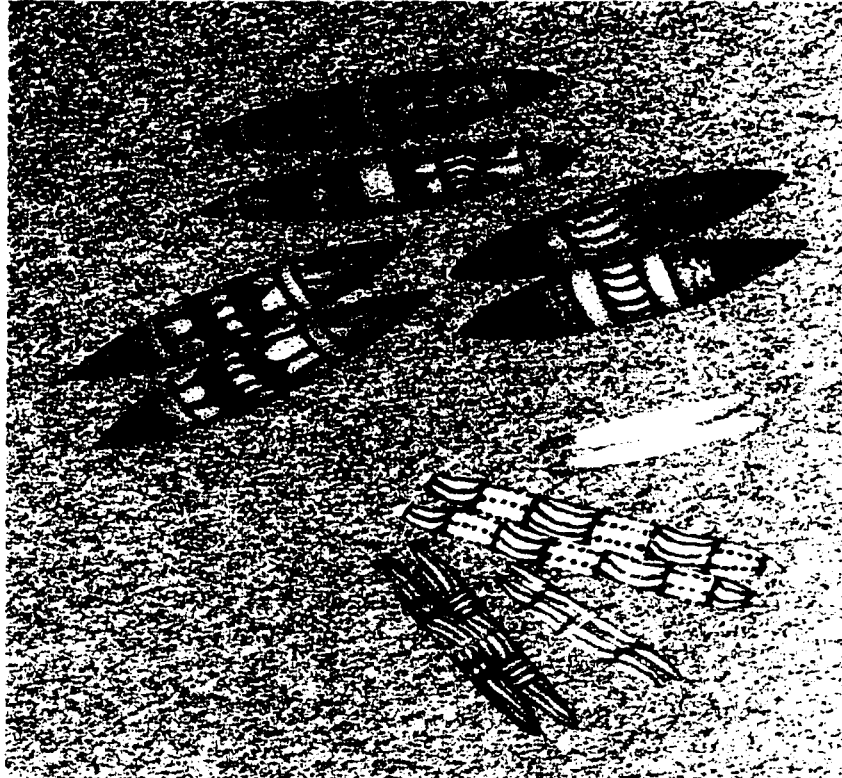


Figure 11: Clap sticks or *timpilypa* are played by firmly holding one stick in one hand and striking it with the other in rhythmic fashion. The three *timpilypa* on the right were made at Mt. Ebenezer Roadhouse and are too light and small to produce effective sounds. However, they are popular with tourists because they are both portable and inexpensive. Those on the left were made in Ernabella and are crafted from mulga wood. The design effects on all these clap sticks are created using a wire burning technique which was introduced in the 1960s (Photo by J. Morton, 1997).

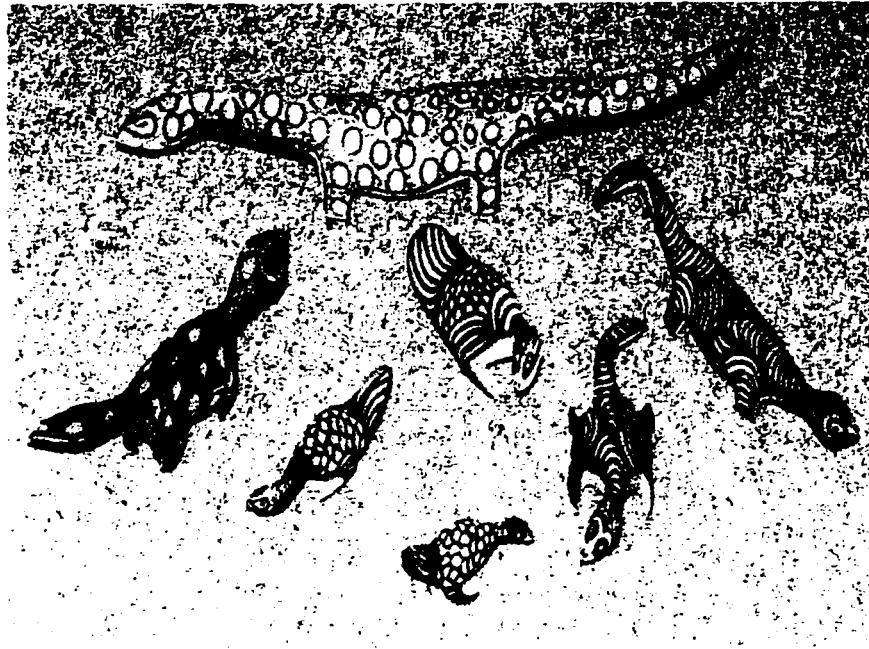


Figure 12: The animals created from the roots of the red river gum often take the shape of snakes, lizards, native cats, bush turkeys, frogs and fish. The carving of these items began in the 1960s, for sale on the tourist market. The majority of animal carvers in the Pitjantjatjara-Anangu Lands are women (Photo by J. Morton, 1997).





**Figure 13:** These wooden bowls are usually made by women in Central Australia, and the use of wire burning is very common in their decoration. The size and shape of the bowls varies according to the desired use of the vessel (Photo by J. Morton, 1997).

weapons for ceremonial purposes.

### **Screenprinting**

A screen print workshop was established in 1988 so Ernabella Arts could become more financially viable. A building addition was added through funds supplied by the Aboriginal Development Commission and the then Department of Aboriginal Affairs. There are two methods which the women use to transfer their initial designs to the screen. The first is with a pen to produce a wax stencil and the second is through the use of photo stencilling. Rolls of fabric length can be printed because the print shop is equipped with a long fabric printing table. The shop is also equipped with the supplies necessary for T-shirt printing, although most artists would rather have T-shirt printing done in Alice Springs because the production process is thought to be 'dull' once the technique has been mastered. In addition to regular wages, screen printers receive the bonuses ranging from \$1.00 per metre (which equals \$12.00 per table) to \$24.00 per table.

### **Painting**

Acrylic-on-canvas painting is not a frequent past time with the artists in Ernabella Arts proper. Rather, it tends to be done by women living on the homelands or outstations. These artists must purchase their supplies from Ernabella Arts at the following costs: brushes range from \$2.20 to \$10.00 and canvas from \$35.00 to \$64.00 per metre (depending on whether it has been primed and stretched). Ernabella Arts will pay for a canvas in part when it is brought to the office, and the remaining money will be forwarded to the artist once the painting is sold. Some artists work on small cotton duck canvas boards which they purchase themselves, and when sold, the artist receives 75% of profits and Ernabella Arts the remaining 25% upon sale of the item. Depending on the



**Figure 14:** The “Good Food Story” created by artist, Nyuwara Tapaya, for the Nganampa Health Unit. This logo is screenprinted on T-shirts to help promote the importance of the healthier ‘traditional’ food sources. It is well acknowledged that the elevating levels of poor dietary habits are causing serious health effects amongst Anangu (Photo by J. Morton, 1997).



**Figure 15:** Screenprint textile length designed by Nywara Tapaya and Nykana Baker. The *Puti* or *Bush* design is often used for home furnishings (Photo by J. Morton, 1997).



Figure 16: This is a *Maku* or *Witchetty Grub* screenprint textile design created by Vera Williams (Photo by J. Morton, 1997).

size of board, the artist can receive a bonus from \$18-\$50.

Painted gift tags and cards will provide bonuses for the artists, ranging from \$2.50 (for a gift tag) to \$15.00 (for large cards or book marks). This is not a common past time for the artists since the recent craft advisor was hired. She encouraged the younger girls, who appeared to be concentrating on painting these tags, to develop their skills with other media, so they tend to paint these items only when supplies for silk painting run out.

### **Printing**

The recent introduction of solar relief printing, stone lithography and etching to Ernabella has resulted in a new profit distribution structure. Because these items are often sent to exhibitions and galleries, they are rarely purchased quickly. Upon their sale, however, the artists receive three-fifths of the proceeds and Ernabella Arts the remaining two-thirds (1/5 for costs and 1/5 for profit from sale). Since 1993, prints have been exhibited in major printmaking exhibitions throughout Australia and many have received awards.

The move into printing has generated much excitement on the part of young artists. This medium also opens up a new door for the women to enter the fine art market due to the nature of the medium and, because the prints usually have a greater 'spiritual' meaning attached (albeit one the women admit is *ngunti*, a falsehood), it is regarded by purchasers as being more 'authentic'.

### **Seed work**

Bonus money is also paid for the collecting and cleaning of seeds, and the making of seed necklaces. There are five different types of local seeds (Wintalyka, Kuna kanti, Wanguna, Wakati, and Kaltu kaltu) which are packaged and sold to tourist groups. For



Figure 17: An etching by Yilpi Michael of Ernabella Arts. Ernabella artists learned this technique during a workshop held in Darwin, NT in 1995 (Photo by J. Morton, 1997).



Figure 18: Solar relief print entitled "*Tjanpi munu Liru/Spinifex and Snakes*" by Lexie Michael (collection of J. Morton).





Figure 19: Solar relief print by Rita Davey. It is entitled "*Minyma Kutjara/Two Women*" (collection of J. Morton).

every 125 grams collected and cleaned, \$8 will be paid, although uncleaned seeds will only earn \$6 per 125 grams.

### **Silk painting**

Silk painting is preferred to batik by young girls. It was introduced a short year and a half ago as a course offered through a Bachelor's College course in Alice Springs. Silk painting involves the drawing of designs using 'super gutta' (which resembles a white school glue) on silk or organza squares. This glue hardens when it sets and the regions with the gutta then become resist areas. The other regions of the silk are then painted with water soluble dyes. Once the dyes dry, the gutta is washed out and the dye colours are 'set' into the silk through the use of steam. Steaming involves rolling fabric up in paper and placing the entire roll in an electric floor steamer for 1.5 hours, after which the gutta is washed out.

Because silk painting is so new to Ernabella, I witnessed a high degree of experimentation with this medium. Rock salts were added to wet dye areas to create a marble/crackle effect on the fabric. This was often done along the borders or on large surfaces either to create an effect or to hide mistakes (there were often problems with water staining). Also problematic was the breaking of the gutta resist, which often caused dyes to run into each other.

Silk painting is very much like batik in its reception by the artists. Very little technology is required and working with fabric allows for fluidity of design. The girls commented that they prefer it to batik because they can experiment with very bright and vibrant colours that are not possible to create with batik dyes. Their love of colour is also reflected in the multi-coloured tie dye T-shirts worn.

## **Ernabella Arts in the community**

Ernabella Arts Incorporated is a women's craft cooperative, owned and operated by Pitjantjatjara women in the community. Producers are all over the age of 14 years. At present, there are approximately 20 artists employed full time with Ernabella Arts with another 70 employed casually. Full time employees work in the craftroom 30 hours per week at a set hourly wage, while casual employees work from home, bringing in art on a 'pay per piece' basis. Casual employees are often outstation artists who do not live directly in Ernabella.

It is immediately apparent that the significance of artefact production in the regional economy is very important. In economic terms, the community of Ernabella is highly dependent on government support. Due to its relative isolation, there are few opportunities for employment. While many of the local Pitjantjatjara people work for wages in the community store, school, health clinic, EVTV video/radio station, administration office, or garage, there are not many possibilities for change. The craftroom, the largest employer of women in the community, is funded by various government support agencies (ATSIC, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Unit of the Australia Council, and the South Australian Department of the Arts and Cultural Development).

The reliance on CDEP is of utmost importance to the maintenance of employment stability at Ernabella Arts Incorporated. Ernabella Arts is like many other remote centres which sees much of the income generated immediately being re-invested in new supplies and overhead costs. CDEP allows the artists to remain continuously employed without being subject to the fluctuation of the art market. It is the cooperative and not the artists, which bears the burden of the stress of the fluctuating market, then. As well, wages are paid regardless of quality or quantity of work produced (Bonner, 1988), which is important in the maintenance of the overall social atmosphere of the cooperative. There is no need for competition amongst the artists.

CDEP is also important because it allows Aboriginal groups to undertake work, defined as whatever the communities regard as purposeful to productive activity associated with the overall social and economic development and cultural well-being of the community. Therefore, whilst a work program should retain an overall worthwhile employment emphasis, the nature of the work and project activity is at the discretion of the community (Bonner, 1988, p. 81).

CDEP is arranged in such a way because its allocation is governed by ATSIC, whose regional councillors stress the need for individual communities to promote what is right for their community (i.e. what is appropriate in Sydney would not reflect what is needed in an outback settlement). These regional councils respond to community input and requests, thus recognizing the importance of maintaining local cultural values as being core to the particular economic activity. The arts and crafts industry does this, and its benefits are furthered by the fact that there are no restrictions on mobility; artists are free to attend to ceremonial or religious matters, visit relatives or go hunting. There is also an immediate reward for the efforts being put in by the artists. Such characteristics indicate that the industry recognises the importance of maintaining a quality of life for the producers.

Ernabella is very important to the numerous outstations, or homelands, in the region. These are smaller communities which are scattered around the outlying region and are home to specific family groupings which usually lead a traditional-oriented lifestyle. Ernabella is the centre which can supply these outstations with the necessities not obtained from their hunting-and-gathering oriented lifestyle. As Altman (1983) notes, outstations tend to have two forms of economic activity, the first of which is their subsistence production for their daily lifestyles, and the second is the manufacture of artefacts for market exchange.

Ernabella Arts Incorporated is engaged in the outstation artefact market in a variety of ways. It sells the outstation artists the supplies necessary for batik production and acrylic-on-campus painting, then purchases the finished products once completed.

These outstation artists are paid directly in cash for batik pieces. The prices are set at the following: small and long silk scarves are purchased from the artists for \$30.00, medium scarves for \$55.00-\$60.00, and large scarves for \$60.00-\$80.00. Batik lengths are worth \$40.00-\$60.00 per metre, with price variations varying according to quality. Silk lengths can earn the outland artist up to \$100.00 per metre. The making of batik is well-enjoyed amongst outland artists, and their work is usually purchased by Ernabella Arts without hesitation. There is a tendency for outland artists to work with cotton fabrics which are much cheaper than the silks and are not as delicate so require less care.

The decision to purchase acrylic-on-canvas paintings and wood carvings from outland artists varies according to need and aesthetic appeal. This is entirely subjective on the part of the art advisor at Ernabella Arts, who will look at the quality of the items being brought in, as well as the number of such items already in stock, before making a decision to buy. Depending on painting size, it might be purchased outright by Ernabella Arts, and then re-priced for further sale, with the artist receiving no more money for the piece. The other option is to pay the artist in part for the piece, with the remaining amount being forwarded to the artist once the painting has been re-sold.

Wood carvings are purchased according to size and need. If the demand for such items from art galleries in major centres (such as Alice Springs, Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney or Darwin) wanes, so too does the willingness of Ernabella Arts to purchase them from outstation artists. The problems lies with the fact that Ernabella Arts does not have enough capital available to allow it to purchase stock it cannot move. This is cited by Morris (1990) and Altman (1989) as being a common problem associated with an external market force. The result of this reliance has been the introduction of numerous art and craft ideas over the years to help maintain the viability of Ernabella Arts in the changing market. It also furthers Ernabella Arts reliance on government funding to help cover operating costs and the expenses associated with getting the goods to market.

Access to funding is highly dependent on State support, which in turn means that the development of various art/craft ventures is affected by relationships developed between these communities and the State (ATSIC Cultural Report, 1996). This was an

issue raised by Ernabella Arts as an influencing factor in its development over the past few decades. The artists working through this cooperative regard themselves as Central Australians and have a strong affinity with neighbouring groups, some of which lie in Western Australia or the Northern Territory. Due to Ernabella's geographic location within Central Australia, Alice Springs in the Northern Territory is the nearest centre from which most necessary/essential services operate (eg. The Flying Doctors, the Pitjantjatjara Council, mail and food services). Alice Springs is also a primary location in which Ernabella art is sold. However, because Ernabella is found geographically within the State of South Australia, it does not benefit from the Northern Territory states funds which support local artists in the Northern Territory.

The artists, as a collective, hire the art advisor to manage the daily administrative workings of the cooperative. The present coordinator is a batik artist herself, which fits in well with maintaining an air of creativity. New art ideas are continuously generated and introduced by the coordinator (eg. silk painting and printing) because she sees directions in which Pitjantjatjara talents can be applied.

The choice of art coordinators is important both for maintaining levels of creativity and juggling financial responsibility. During the history of Ernabella Arts, the craft advisory role has always been filled by a 'white' woman. The need for an individual of European descent became clear when I observed the administrative tasks required to keep the centre operating. The demands of paperwork, filing, phoning and grant writing are not beyond the means of Aboriginal cooperative members, but it is beyond their interest. They do not see time and organisation in the same way as the external market which purchases their goods, thus being without an individual who understands these needs would highly limit the success of such an operation in so remote a region.

At present, attempts are being made to obtain funding for the training of an Aboriginal administrative assistant for Ernabella Arts. The current craft advisor would like to spend more time seeking markets for goods produced by Ernabella Arts but requires an individual to fulfill the administrative tasks necessary to keep Ernabella Arts operating on a day-to-day basis whenever she is away. The securing of such funding,

which would be an amount higher than an artist's wages, will help generate greater interest in the position on the part of the Pitjantjatjara.

The art advisor must also do much travelling both to promote items for sale and deliver items to market. When I asked some of the senior artists if they would enjoy this aspect of the job, they said '*wiya*, no this is our home'. This distaste for leaving the community was expressed by most older women and many of the younger girls. Those who had travelled to foreign countries already indicated that they would rather stay where they 'belong' where they can have better food and climate. Young artists had greater interest in travelling overseas, and were requesting they be able to partake in an upcoming trip to Western Samoa. Yet despite this, they rarely enjoyed leaving Ernabella for an extended period of time. Opportunities to learn new art and craft techniques in Adelaide, Alice Springs and Darwin are met with great enthusiasm, but only if there are a number of women going; individual 'studies' are highly disliked.

The art advisor's control of administrative affairs does not mean she has a high degree of power and control within the cooperative. Because she is hired by the Pitjantjatjara, she is answerable to them. Ernabella Arts has board members that make important decisions concerning the running of the centre. The art advisor is one of three individuals who has cheque signing authority, thus cannot make any unilateral decisions.

Hilliard (personal communication) informed me that it is the women who decide as a group which artists are worthy of the higher hourly earnings, and upon asking them about it, they said they regarded this as a fair system. Those who work more should be rewarded. The 'bonus money' earnings are standardized according to the item being produced, thus allowing each artist to calculate what she is to earn at the end of the week.

Within the past five years, the current and former craft advisors of Ernabella Arts Incorporated, both non-Aboriginal, have responded to the fluctuating nature of the arts market by suggesting the need for the establishment of a company, Ernabella Arts Trading Pty Ltd. Such a company is currently in the creation stages, and its function will be to develop and market the commercial aspects of screenprint textiles. Such an

undertaking can increase profits for Ernabella Arts so that it can become a more independent and self-sufficient centre.

Due to its remote location, Ernabella Arts relies heavily on government support to 'get their products out'. The use of screenprint textiles as household furnishings, fashions and accessories will be marketed in the larger Australian centres not readily accessible by Ernabella Arts as it exists at present. The profits from such a company will be distributed amongst shareholders and the community. Decision making would rest in the hands of the Ernabella Arts Trading Board, which consists of elected artists from the co-op. This company will enable the women artists to tap into the growing demand for Aboriginal art and design in a manner which will give greater recognition to their iconographic traditions.

The estimated sales from Ernabella Arts in 1971/72 was \$24,000, which amounted to approximately \$300 per artist (Mackay, 1973). Batik sales amounted to roughly \$300 in the year of its introduction. By 1975, sales had risen to \$9,600, amounting to 25% of Ernabella Arts total earning.

According to Hilliard (personal communication), in Ernabella Arts' early years, women were paid both in cash and 'rations' of food and clothing. By the 1960s, the ration system was replaced by a system of cash remuneration, and this resulted in artists earnings almost doubling. However, it was not until the introduction of CDEP wages in 1978, that artists began to express content at the return for their efforts. When I asked about this, they said teacher's aides and health workers earned more than artists before CDEP. CDEP helped equalize earnings throughout the community for jobs many artists felt were of similar standard.

Due to the nature of income generation through hourly earnings over individual or commission sales, artists' wages do not appear to have increased greatly in the past decade. In 1983, the top artist earned \$6.50/hour, while \$4.20 marked the minimum rate. At present, top earners receive \$10.00/hour, with the minimum rate sitting at \$8.00/hour (where one Canadian dollar equals one Australian dollar in 1996).

When arriving in Ernabella, I had questions of the benefits of a craft cooperative



system. In Ernabella I found that the outstation artists were the ones to be paid for each art piece, while the full-time artists were paid weekly wages. Usually, the full-time artists work an average of 30 hours per week, in addition to bonus money received for the work they complete. This system grants the artists stability not seen in other communities. Rather than relying on a fluctuating market, they can count on weekly incomes, and many are therefore able to open and maintain savings accounts. Without having cash directly on their persons, the demands of kin expecting money is greatly alleviated.

This echoed Bonner (1988), who states that

rules of distribution fan out from the family centre and are strictly adhered to. The system is enshrined in law- hence eliminating the capacity for dispute... It has been suggested that the continuing strength of the indigenous rules of distribution act as a disincentive of production activity in the contemporary economy because the satisfaction of obligations to the multitude of relatives living in close proximity in community centres limits the benefits accruing to the gatherer of resources. It also produces tension between disgruntled family members who feel they have not benefited sufficiently.

The control of Ernabella Arts members over resource distribution is much higher than I saw elsewhere because they could rely on the art advisor to help coordinate bank transactions on their behalf. Women recognise the importance saving for 'bigger ticket' items such as washing machines or vehicles, so when weekly pay time comes, they can request a portion be set aside to put into savings. With many individuals living on the homelands surrounding Ernabella, the immediate pressure of money distribution is alleviated, as well.

The fact that the artists do not have to market and sell their own artwork from Ernabella also alleviates tensions. They are left to create what they want, at their own pace, and this freedom allows for a great deal of experimentation. The very fact that such experimentation is encouraged makes Ernabella Arts a remarkable setting in which to work. It was within this realm that I began to understand more fully the importance of 'creating' for these women. The process and not the end result was what was so important. This is when the economic reality of what I had witnessed earlier faded to the

background and the cultural emphasis sprang forward. For these artists, money was not such a key issue. I am not implying that cultural reasons for producing in Alice Springs and at Mt. Ebenezer were non-existent, for I was continuously told the ‘meaning’ of the art and the importance of teaching children in the ways of their elders through art; it simply appeared that the need for money and the lure of money more readily touched upon daily life in those communities that had more direct interactions with urban lifestyles.

Ernabella Arts garners a great deal of respect within the Pitjantjatjara Lands; its lengthy existence is unparalleled in other communities. Within Ernabella itself, it is a meeting place for many community members. However, there is a noticeable tension between Ernabella Arts and the local Women’s Council because Ernabella Arts refuses to promote the issues of the Women’s Council. The craft advisor states that this is due to the artists’ insistence that they are artists first, and thus their concerns surround artistry. The craft room, therefore, does not have women’s issues at the top of its political agenda.

Within my next chapter, I will bring to light the meaning of art production by women in this community. While this outright political agenda is not at the forefront, the very fact that it is the women who have taken it upon themselves to use art to benefit their community is of importance.

## The Meaning of Production

As the years have passed, the work of the Pitjantjatjara women of Ernabella has become more well-known, with workshops and exhibitions being held throughout Australia and overseas. Artists have travelled to New Zealand, Indonesia, Japan, Kenya, and USA. Hilliard (1993c) suggests that the uniqueness of their Ernabella Designs and their mastery of production have been key factors in bringing their work, especially their textile art, to the attention of national and international collectors.

While this interest generates some recognition of Pitjantjatjara women as artists, it does not go far enough. The prejudices of the art world which distinguish between 'fine art' and 'craft' serve to relegate batik production to the realm of 'craft' even though the pieces sold fetch high prices. According to Fourmile (1991, p. 4),

It was the Aboriginal men who emerged as the painters (of barks, and acrylic transpositions of totemic symbols prepared on the ground), and the women as the craftworkers (concerned with basketry and fabric design). Many of the exhibitions, books and catalogues of the late 1970s and early 1980s concerning Aboriginal art focused on the works of men.

Fourmile further indicates that women suffered from the division of Aboriginal art into 'non-traditional' and 'traditional' or 'authentic'. These views tend to be well entrenched in the art buying market, and it is against this that Ernabella struggles. While Ernabella artists are using their textile arts to reflect their cultural resilience and vitality, these items are thought to be mere 'craft', and thus garner less interest than the art 'traditions' to the north (eg. the Papunya, Hermannsburg and Pintupi painting traditions).

Ernabella Arts probably suffered from the stigma of non-traditionalism in times when such a status meant being neither 'art' nor truly 'Aboriginal'. The move into batik and textile production provided a context less afflicted with these prejudices than the world of high art, thus ensuring the survival of Ernabella Arts Incorporated. But it also increased the art world's prejudice against them for working in a female dominated (and thus 'uncreative', 'craft oriented') medium (Johnson, 1994, p. 40).

Batik, as an item of 'craft' and a product of women, suffered from its 'two

dimensionality'. As Hardy (1995) notes in her study of Indian embroidery, art history and anthropology have failed to regard textiles as items with function, context and meaning. Thus, batik never achieved the 'desired artefact' status that is attributed with the rise in popularity of paintings and carvings from other regions (see Altman, 1989; Dominguez, 1986; Young, 1995).

At the outset of my research, I did not want to begin explicitly with an emphasis on gender, but it was unavoidable and thus became a central issue. Not only were most of the artists with whom I interacted women, the arts and crafts market is highly gender conscious in its treatment of items produced. Further, most of the information I obtained came from women, and while the issues were not solely about women, they did reflect the concerns women had for their communities and families.

According to Lacik (1990, p.2),

Aboriginal women throughout Australia have had to contend with many traumatic and demoralising situations over the past 200 years. Their continued strength, devotion and commitment to family and domestic responsibilities are still evident with their prominent participation in the establishment of health services, child care services, substance abuse programmes and women's action service groups.

The development of art and crafts programs become very important vehicles through which Aboriginal women address these concerns. Not only is the income generated from art sales filtered through entire communities, the art is being used to send out very clear messages. In Utopia, batik was used as a means by which their knowledge of and attachment to land was expressed to the Central Land Council during the Alywarre Kaititja Land claims and Utopia Pastoral Lease hearings of 1977-78 (Boulter, 1993). In Ernabella, women artists were commissioned by the Anangu Health Unit to create T-shirt designs, promoting a healthier lifestyle through the consumption of traditional bushfoods. The "Mai Wiru/Good Story" design arose out of local concern with the poor dietary health of people in the community. A logo depicting traditional bush tucker of kangaroo, witchetty grub, emu, honey ants and grains is applied to T-shirts and sold through the craft room and health centre. It is thought that by getting the

message out, it will help alleviate some of the problems associated with poor diet (e.g. diabetes, heart conditions and obesity). Messages about the harmful effects of substance abuse are also heard.

I was often told that, as women, they are concerned about many things in their communities. They have the Women's Council to voice some concerns but they also enjoy doing art. Art brings people together at a central meeting place so these issues can be discussed in a supportive social setting. Artists rarely work alone; there is always a group during the production process, which makes the craft room a very important central meeting place for women in the community.

Children are also taught their relationship to other community members in such settings. It is commonplace to hear artists say, "This is your auntie," "This is your brother" and so on, thus preserving family relationships and knowledge of kinship.

While the social setting is highly agreeable, I was made very aware that the craft room was not a vehicle *for* women's issues; that is what the Women's Council is for. As the craft advisor explained, the artists have concerns as artists and as women artists who wished to speak as artists first.

### **Women's art**

Even though Aboriginal women take the initiative to foster greater community well-being through the creation and sale of art works, the rising interest in women as artists has not gone far enough, and it still remains difficult for women to be given credit or support for their art (Allen, 1990).

My study looks at gender as it relates to women's roles in the social, economic and environmental spheres through a focus on art and craft production. Aboriginal women's knowledge of culture and history *is* different from that of Aboriginal men. Perhaps this is most evident in the more recent land dispute cases seen in Australia, where women have become important (and independent) contributors to proving their

people have links to certain tracts of land. Their songs, stories and dance, long ignored in the academic literature, reflect this knowledge and understanding of their world and it has only been since the 1980s that this information has been collected.

While Aboriginal women in Central Australia tended to occupy more egalitarian positions historically, European contact served to decrease their status and power (see Bell, 1993b; Bell and Ditton, 1980; Gale, 1983; Isaacs, 1984). Women became marginalized as their knowledge and skills were overlooked by the Europeans in government positions, who were solely seeking the views of Aboriginal men. As Young (1995) indicates, though, many of the changes which have affected Aboriginal communities have had a particularly drastic, and often negative, effect on the women.

In choosing to align myself with women as opposed to artists in general, I was afforded a more in-depth insight into the everyday views of women. Daily interactions 'beyond the walls of the craft room' were the times when I was most often told stories. These stories were often sparked by the sight of a geographic landmark or Dream site the individual thought I should know about. Moreover, these stories usually brought 'history' to present times, and the women would often express concern and dismay about the changes which have occurred in past years. Mention of increased sickness, substance abuse, reliance on government 'hand-outs' and lack of respect of the elders by youth was common.

However, the negative was not the focus of what I was told. Instead, these situations were explained in a way which expressed great hope for the re-generation of a strong culture. I was always given the impression that the ramifications of contact could or were being overcome. The women stressed that the education of youth in their indigenous culture was of extreme importance to re-establishing their communities. The women believe they have a strong role in this and do so with confidence and authority.

They believe they can educate in the craft room. School groups regularly come through and children frequently told me that when they grow up they will work in the craft room. Senior school students often participate in work experience programs within Ernabella Arts during the school terms, as well.

I did not attempt to record the songs or stories I heard, except to note that the women in the Ernabella region have a very strong affinity to their culture and to their land, something not so readily expressed in the other communities in which I worked. I cannot comment on the degree to which their knowledge of culture has changed since contact, because

on the topic of Aboriginal women's cultural knowledge as compared to men's, not nearly enough has been done in regard to documenting and recording and assembling more than a fraction of the relevant information. (Berndt, 1989, p. 15)

It is within daily life that cultural knowledge can be observed. However, as Jacobs (1989) indicates, the importance of women as custodians of cultural knowledge has only recently become more central to Aboriginal studies. Within this thesis I promote the strength of Aboriginal women in their quest to re-affirm and re-construct their culture through art and craft production. Aboriginal women see the plight of their communities and are trying to reverse the trend for their children. Arts and craft centres thus become places for mutual support and personal fulfilment.

As Hazlehurst (1994, p. 102) states,

Upholding and strengthening the family and undertaking activities which lead to the rebuilding of Aboriginal society and Aboriginal culture are critical in turning the tide of ill health and addiction.

The space in which they choose to work and live provides incredible insights into their contemporary worlds.

Altman (1989, p. 50) states

The objectives and policies of Aboriginal art centres vary, but all seek to meet some mix of commercial, cultural and social objectives. The commercial objective is to act as a marketing agent for Aboriginal products; the cultural is to support the maintenance of what is frequently termed Aboriginal traditions, with special emphasis on art and material culture. Social objectives vary, but may include using the arts to provide activities and pride to younger age grades, and providing welfare support via the arts to the old and needy.

The Constitution of Ernabella Arts Incorporated includes the following: to encourage and promote the development of Aboriginal culture including arts and crafts; to work towards the arts and crafts and other expressions of Aboriginal culture becoming a viable economic project and enterprise; to provide facilities for education, technical training, employment, care for the aged, housing for the Association, and art and craft work; to encourage the members of the Association and through them the Community at Ernabella to preserve its traditional culture. These appear to be objectives that have been successfully achieved over Ernabella Art's fifty year history. While the degree of economic success has varied over the years, Ernabella Arts is still a central strength in the community, not only as a major employer but also as a meeting place where concerns and issues are discussed amongst community members.

As a strong community centre, Ernabella Arts helps women meet the financial needs of their families within a supportive atmosphere. As the least educated, most impoverished, least employed and most powerless segment of the Australian population (Hazlehurst, 1994), Aboriginal women who find a voice through this cooperative are definitely making strides in reversing this type of 'invisibility'.

I have described some of the workings of Ernabella Arts Incorporated but have not yet linked what I saw and experienced while in Central Australia to my main reasons for choosing this location as a focus of study. I will now turn to these issues because they are not immediately apparent. Indeed, without spending an extended period of time in this community, and without having experiences to compare to Ernabella, I would surely have missed part of the bigger picture.

My initial interests in studying batik production in Australia remained rather constant when I arrived in the country. I wanted to determine if the motives for the production of this textile tradition were geared by notions of 'commerce' or 'culture'. This very much intrigued me since batik is a non-indigenous art form of very recent introduction. As well, given the emphasis of the art buyers in Central Australia on the 'traditional' and 'authentic', I desired to see how such a 'non-traditional' form was being received beyond the boundaries of the community, and whether this was a concern for the



producers.

As Sculthorpe (1990a, p. v) states,

Even with the growing appreciation of Aboriginal art since the late 1970s, little specific attention has been directed to works by Aboriginal women. The first exhibitions of specifically women's works did not occur until 1984. The Aboriginal Women's Art Festival in Adelaide in 1985 and subsequent exhibitions have begun to redress this imbalance... Those female artists who have received most attention have generally been those working in media or styles pioneered by men, such as watercolours and acrylic paintings on canvas. Women working with other materials and stylistic forms such as batik and fibre craft have not received the same recognition and artefacts related to the economic and domestic spheres are often overlooked.

While I sought to see what this meant for the producers and community, my experiences amongst other art producing communities made me realise that the very forces of art and craft production went far beyond what I originally believed. It is not a black-and-white situation which sees 'economics' overshadowing 'culture' or vice versa. The two are directly dependent on one another for the survival of the particular art form in question; there must be a market for the items being produced or it will simply fade out of production (such failures occurred in Ernabella itself. Kangaroo moccassins, rug hooking and weaving are examples of production that is no longer). No art producing individual or community is so self-supporting and self-sustaining that it can afford to simply produce for the sheer pleasure of producing, yet few, if any, Aboriginal groups will produce items which have no cultural value or meaning.

Had I only visited Ernabella, I would not have fully understood this relationship because it is so far removed from the market that I would have been unable to ask the questions needed to be asked about the market's influence on production. These questions grew out of my experiences at Mt. Ebenezer and Alice Springs, where the economics of production were much more obvious. Initially, in these communities, I only 'saw' art being created for the money that was required to purchase food or alcohol, but after lengthened contact, I came to realise that production was always associated with

story and song. Never did I see artists working alone and never did I hear silence. Children were also usually near, and were often encouraged to participate in production. I was told this is because the art tells them who they are and where they come from, so it is important they learn so that they, in turn, can teach their children.

As Sculthorpe (1990a, p. v) states,

The contemporary production of artistic forms is an important means by which cultural traditions are continued or renewed... As well as its economic usefulness, much production involves social opportunities to go out and gather raw materials. These occasions are often used to gather food at the same time and are an opportunity for older women to pass on skills and knowledge to younger women and [children].

The importance of women as art producers cannot be overlooked. Witnessing art and craft production amongst women proves that it is used to help maintain the well-being of their communities. While the monetary gain from production benefits the women and their families, it is important that they have control of income. It is not uncommon for government monies to be allocated to a specific individual, and this money may not actually go beyond that individual. Money gained from art and craft production ensures women that they will be able to provide for their children. This form of income is also necessary because not all women are eligible for government assistance and benefits because they may not meet the recipient criteria (eg. due to age or marital status). Moreover, the government fails to recognise the importance of social parenthood amongst Aboriginal groups. Very often, women care for and 'grow up' a child which is not their own, yet because they are not biological mothers, they are not entitled to additional benefits.

Ernabella Arts is unique in its approach to art production. The artists are not required to come to work on a daily basis but most do so because it is such a creative and enjoyable atmosphere. Stories are told, and jokes shared- it is a very social setting. As Wallace (1979) notes, the creation of Western style housing and town layouts sees much of the traditionally important community structure destroyed. The social gatherings at Ernabella Arts serves to re-connect family groups to one another, re-affirming ties to

culture.

Beyond the welcoming atmosphere is the overall importance of allowing the artists to experiment in their creativity. Batik was well-accepted when it was first introduced because it allowed the women to develop their designs and skills in a manner they found entirely pleasing. However, batik is not well received on the tourist market because it is regarded as 'non-Aboriginal' and 'non-traditional', and thus regarded as highly overpriced material. This is compounded with the fact that the women do not attach any 'Dreamtime' significance to the works, something considered to be of great importance to the tourist market.

Batik does have a constant (albeit limited) following in the art gallery and museum world, but its production alone cannot maintain the functioning of Ernabella Arts. This is one of the main reasons why Ernabella Arts has such a diversified selection of items for sale, many of which are geared for quick sale in the tourist market. Despite this, however, the maintenance of batik as an art form is encouraged by the art coordinator because it 'belongs' to the women; it is an expression of their world, their voice. They have adopted it and guided its development through nearly twenty-five years, a time frame which has been associated with many changes in administration staff and craft advisors. This is something of significance because many projects die after the art coordinator who introduced them leaves. So, despite its poor foothold in the tourist market, which drives so much of what is produced elsewhere, no attempt is made to have batik thrown by the wayside (by the art coordinators). Batik is recognised for the importance of its production and the meaning to its makers.

There is no one single thing which can be identified as the reason behind the popularity of batik. It is in part a generational issue, for the main batik artists are among those who learned when it was first introduced, and enjoyed its ease of production (i.e. it does not require much equipment) and its ability to capture the fluidity of designs not possible with other forms media previously introduced.

Perhaps batik will fade out in its importance as other media are introduced, and the taboos and restrictions governing what is put into permanent form are lifted, or as the

original batik artists themselves pass away. This would never impact on the tourist market, for it never took to batik art. It would, however, have repercussions on the collectors who see this a truly unique Aboriginal art form, practised almost solely by women in the remote regions of the desert. It gives an identity to a group, rather than to individuals.

Twenty years ago most established Aboriginal artists were men. Today major exhibitions contain many works by women. As some of these works show, Aboriginal women artists have brought some interesting innovations into this field. In particular the production of large works of art as group projects, in which the actual [art] is carried out by a number of women related to each other as classificatory mothers, sisters and daughters who are responsible for the preservation of the stories and tradition which they are depicting, has been particularly interesting. Here the [art] is produced in a way that accords closely with traditional practice, with artists sharing the work. Not surprisingly many art critics and dealers, accustomed to works attributed to single artists, have had some difficulty in accepting this approach (Young, 1995, p. 268-269).

The very nature of art creation is at the centre of the women's cultural core. They do not see art as something which should be cut off, separated and individualised; it is a social event which serves to re-affirm cultural values through daily social interaction, so while they are criticised for not creating 'authentic' and 'traditional' art, they are doing the very thing art production has done historically. They are making a connection to their land and their people. Perhaps this does not take the shape the art market has come to expect, however. In attempting to preserve their culture and prevent its adulteration, they have refrained from depicting their ritual knowledge in any permanent form. Such information is regarded to be of utmost importance for those who live in remote regions, and considered to have 'traditional' lifestyles. Ritual knowledge amongst Pitjantjatjara women is still believed to be sacred enough that its dissemination to 'others' through permanent artwork is still evaded. This sets the Pitjantjatjara apart from many other Aboriginal groups who feel that the sharing of their ritual designs through art is a way to educate others.

## **Situating Women's Art**

In a special edition of the Journal of Australian Studies, essays concerned with Western (non-indigenous) ways of 'knowing' Aborigines were brought together (see Attwood and Arnold, 1992). This volume is an important contribution to modern Aboriginal studies because it is concerned with 'Aboriginalism' as a mode of discourse, which is said to presently be found in three forms. Firstly, 'Aboriginalism' is seen as 'Aboriginal Studies', whereby European scholars believe they are better equipped to speak on behalf of Aboriginal groups rather than Aboriginal people speaking for themselves. Secondly, it is a style of thought that is based on an epistemological and ontological distinction between indigenous and Western views. Finally, 'Aboriginalism' is recognised as being a corporate institution which exercises authority over Aborigines. Of these present views of 'Aboriginality', none appear to take the Aboriginal voice into account.

Some of the reasons behind the creation of these views requires a look at the history of anthropological studies. Socio-cultural and physical anthropology have had a profound influence on the development of the early ideas of 'Aboriginality'. The armchair anthropologists of the late 1880s and early 1900s promoted the idea of evolutionism and the 'noble savage', which placed the Aboriginal Australians on a lowly rung of the 'evolutionary ladder'. As Attwood and Arnold (1992) indicate, a more sympathetic understanding of Aboriginal cultures developed during the 1920s, yet most studies became characterized by the study of 'traditional' culture (i.e. full-blood as opposed to mixed-blood communities). Moreover, these studies were phallogentric and did little to identify non-male activities or circumstances. Attwood and Arnold further state that many studies also failed to recognize the importance of the historical changes occurring to Aborigines since contact. Essentially, Aborigines were changelessly frozen into a time and space which no longer existed, which has been noted by Pardoe (1992, p. 139) as "one of the greatest crimes committed by anthropologists and archaeologists" because it denies contemporary Aborigines of a "valid present or a cultural frame."

Jones (1992, p. 62) further indicates

Europeans have projected Aboriginal culture according to their own criteria... these projections have their own particular histories, but one factor nonetheless remains constant: official versions of Aboriginal society (whether found in museums, anthropological textbooks or television documentaries) rely on their method of construction (dioramas, evolutionary series of artefacts and anthropological sensibilities) as much as on the objects of enquiry. Accepting this, the differences between official versions of Aboriginality and those lying closer to popular consciousness... do not seem so marked. What unites these versions on the same continuum is an underlying assumption that Aboriginal culture is not coeval with the West, but represents the 'other', marginal in space and more importantly, in time. The influence of cultural relativism has done little to shift the basis of this assumption.

Against this reality, it becomes important to generate a framework in which Aboriginal voices are better heard.

In terms of how, for whom and for what purpose knowledge is produced, the various scholarly discourses have been responding to Aborigines' demands for accountability. Anthropologists, archaeologists and linguists (but not yet historians) have adopted professional codes of ethics to guide their research. In practice new relationships between Aborigines and European scholars are being forged. There is now collaborative studies, and much of this work is applied research (Attwood and Arnold, 1992, p. xiv).

The study of art and craft production is important because 'art' is an integral part of 'culture' amongst Aboriginal groups. Regardless of how much money is brought in from sales, the process of the making is still regarded to be a very important aspect of their lives. In studying art production, then, I am attempting to overcome some of these barriers to the understanding of 'Aboriginality'. I desired to create a dialogue *with* the artists and uncover what the reasoning behind their art production is, yet did not want to speak *for* them.

It is important, however, to break down the barriers of the 'authentic' and 'traditional' by showing that nothing, whether it be artform or culture, is static and unchanging. The promotion of all art forms as culturally important is therefore necessary. Moreover, in situating contemporary art production in the present socio-

economic situations facing Aboriginal Australians today, it helps break down the romantic image of the 'ancient primitive'. These people are living in a world which is characterised by high rates of infant and adult mortality, poverty, unemployment, homelessness, substance abuse and incarceration. It is not an ideal past these people are presently living; it is not the 'pretty' picture presented in tourism brochures and coffee table books. This reality deserves to be understood because it gives recognition to their 'Aboriginality'.

However, according to Nicoll (1993, p. 709), when trying to situate Aboriginal art in relation to the politics of Aboriginality "we are brought face to face with the state.... Whether we are looking at 'Aboriginal art' or 'Aboriginal Deaths in Custody', our readings are invariably inflected by a government constructure of Aboriginality." This holds true for academic constructs, as well.

The study of such a topic falls well within the boundaries of the human ecological approach. According to Westney, Brabble and Edwards (1988, p. 129), human ecology is

the scientific and holistic study of human beings, their environment, and human-environmental interactions. As a discipline, human ecology is both a science and an art. As an applied discipline, it seeks to identify the forces which enhance human development, actualize human potential, optimize human functioning, and improve the human condition and the quality of lives of people.

In conducting my study of Pitjantjatjara art production, I am addressing many of the objectives set forth by this framework. Human ecology supports an interdisciplinary approach, and its flexibility both enhances and reflects the very nature of art production amongst Aboriginal groups, yet human ecology has not yet addressed art production and its implications for indigenous populations. Art is integral to culture amongst Aboriginal societies, so its study provides insight into how the producers are interpreting and re-creating their cultural reality as it exists in the contemporary world. I suggest the importance of looking at this through the human ecological approach is because it is not limited to one level or manner of understanding and knowing. The study of art and craft

is a complex holistic process. As a product of Aboriginal culture- in historical and modern terms- art is situated in culture, and one cannot hope to understand it if only studying a part of the greater whole.

In looking at Young's development work, he makes a statement which is directly applicable to the study of art and craft.

When the aboriginal groups concerned are part of an industrialised nation state, as in Australia or Canada... any analysis aimed at providing detailed reasons for development's failures or successes involve some deconstruction of the whole into its separate parts. The resultant fragmentation detracts from the totality of the real life situation (Young, 1995, p. 13).

If looking at specifics, I believe this statement is very true of the arts and crafts industry in Australia. Altman (1989) points out that there are few studies of the arts and crafts industry which focus on more than the economic sphere. However, it is only in situating production in the entirety of the socio-economic, residential, and political situations of daily life that one can understand the present Aboriginal condition. This is well accomplished within the human ecological model because the very essence of this model reflects many of the characteristics found within Australian Aboriginal society. In allowing many aspects of daily life to be studied in their integration, human ecology seeks to prevent the destruction of the very context which builds and creates meaning for these people.

I have used the human ecological framework as a guide for my research. As an approach which allows for flexibility, it was very useful in allowing me to develop my own approach throughout the research process. I was able to adapt and develop my ideas as events in the field unfolded, and was then able to choose those things I felt were most relevant to my study. I did not go to the field with specific questions in mind; rather, they were at a more general level which could accommodate and promote flexibility. I did not expect to study 'everything' but did not want to limit myself before arriving in the field. The human ecological framework allowed me to organize my observations and ideas during the process of data collection, thus allowing me to choose



those things I deemed most relevant. Another researcher will undoubtedly see other things as being more or less relevant, but this is a means by which more information will be uncovered.

## **Conclusion**

My research is distinguished from other studies in the Central Australian desert region for a number of reasons. First, it is a recent study in an area which has not seen a focus on textile art and craft done in many years. Further, it links art and craft production to aspects of daily life other than mere economic ones. I do not believe it is appropriate to view art and craft production without a comprehensive context in which to place it, and many studies within Central Australia have not looked beyond the dollar and number sign; indeed, art and craft production has not often been rationalized in terms other than straight economic ones. Thus, my study ties together the importance of the integratedness of Pitjantjatjara life to art and craft. In drawing together many aspects of Aboriginal life, I am situating art within a context, without an understanding of which I believe there can be little meaning attached to art production. This is perhaps the most significant thing I learned during the course of my research.

If art and craft are studied within the context of their production, we are given a greater understanding of Aboriginal life and people. Production does not operate within a vacuum, so when approached from a perspective which recognizes there are many avenues that influence, and are influenced by, this activity, we cannot help but benefit from this knowledge.

While art and craft production is not the only way to educate about Aboriginal life, it is perhaps one of the more effective ways. It generates interest on the part of many, and is often a point of contact between cultures. It is a medium through which information can be disseminated to a wider audience; about both the art and the artist(s). An interest in Aboriginal art is undoubtedly there. This is reflected in the growth of industry over the past few decades.

Art production alone will not educate everyone about the Aboriginal experience, but it is an introduction; it is what the general and tourist populations have access to. If the public learns that Aboriginal art takes many forms and encompasses many aspects of current lives and past histories, art production can be a means to promote their cultures.

As the constitution of Ernabella Arts states, art production is used to encourage and promote the development of Aboriginal culture; to promote art and craft production as a viable economic enterprise; and to encourage the preservation of traditional culture. With so many studies looking at mere economics, many such goals of art and craft production are not recognized or acknowledged. The generation of economic return is but one of many reasons Ernabella Arts, like other art producing communities, exists. It is a cooperative which recognizes the importance of long-term goals and community well-being over short-term economic gain. Government and granting agencies can learn from this.

Learning and disseminating information about such a centre, owned and operated by women, will help educate others about the variety found in Aboriginal art production. The fact that women have the freedom to use art to generate income and transmit culture, to their children and to their community, has not been fully realized in the literature, and my study only begins to look at the implications of this. While I have suggested that art and craft need to be studied in the context of their production, there are still many avenues left unturned. The very fact that control is in the hands of the women needs to be explored more thoroughly and will be well suited to future research projects.

The importance of Ernabella Arts is unmistakable; it functions to benefit not only the women who work there, but their families and community beyond. While it has continuously sought new and viable economic avenues in which to promote and market art through the years, it has remained a central point in the community, and one that has survived over an extended length of time. As the longest continuously functioning Aboriginal craft cooperative in Australia, Ernabella Arts is indeed a success story.

## Appendix 1

How does art and craft production fit into communities that are known to depend on government assistance and have drug and alcohol problems?

Does it provide encouragement and hope in the community?

Do the women see craft production as a means of maintaining culture or is it very much an economic force that drives it?

Are there specific things they make for money and specific things they make to reflect their culture?

What do the producers have to say about what they are doing?

Who decides what is made? A craft advisor? A committee of artists? The individual?

Why is batik preferred over other media? Is this related to availability of supplies? Technical considerations? Cultural considerations? Design considerations?

Do the artists produce products other than batik?

How many members of the community are involved in the batik process? How long have they been involved?

What are the production methods/tools like? How do they affect production?

Who decides who may participate in batik production? Is a limit set to the amount being produced?

How much control do the women have over training/supervision? How is it manifested? How do they cope if they have less control? Is control shared with others?

Do all artists work within a cooperative or individually? How are profits shared? Who buys the supplies? Are there problems with the existing system?

What is the role of Ernabella Arts in the community? Do the artists have a voice in the running of this organisation? What is the locus of power?

What are the methods of purchase/distribution/marketing of the batik products? How involved are the artists?

Do the women for selling/exhibition/own use/cultural factors?

What is the role of the producer and the outsider?

The women have become income generators. How is the money dealt with in the family situation? Is it given to men? Has it changed the status of women in the community? Do the men want to become involved? Has it altered lifestyle? What percentage of sales do they earn?

What are the effects of an outside (Western) market on production? Does the notion of market affect the type of work produced? Are the batiks being produced for the tourist/souvenir market or the art market? Has commercialisation affected the quality of work? How?

How does batik production mesh with other social activities within the family and community?

Is batik being used as a means of transmitting information across cultural boundaries or to others within the Pitjantjatjara community?

Does batik production affect any other Pitjantjatjara institutions?

To what extent has batik production allowed the women to assert their cultural identity?

## Glossary of Terms

Aboriginal	An Aboriginal person is someone who self-identifies as an Aboriginal and is accepted as such by his/her immediate social milieu. This is a social rather than racial or genetic definition of Aboriginality (Altman, 1988, p. 5).
Aboriginal art centres	Community-based arts organisations located primarily in remote and rural communities. They are also called community craft centres and community arts and crafts organisations.
Anangu	A Pitjantjatjara term for “one of our people” or “Aboriginal person”.
Art	Art is culture. It can refer to the creative process, the production process and the end product.
Art coordinators	Senior staff of Aboriginal art centres. Also commonly called art advisors and craft advisors.
ATSIC	Refers to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. It was established in 1989, replacing the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Aboriginal Development Commission as the policy-making body for indigenous issues. It is a decentralised organisation which consists of 35 regional councils around the country, with decision making reflecting local community interests.
Ayers Rock	Also called Uluru or Mount Uluru. It is the largest stone monolith in the world, covering an area of 3.33 square kilometres with a circumference of 9.4 kilometres. Found in the Uluru (Mount Olga) National Park, Northern Territory, Australia, Uluru has been a popular tourist destination since the 1960s.
CDEP	Community Development and Economic Project run by ATSIC. It allows regional councils and organisations to provide employment for people in their communities in ways considered culturally sensitive.
The Centre	Refers to region known as Central Australia. Also called the Red Centre.
Community	People who identify themselves as part of a group because of cultural heritage, spirituality, geographic location, language or gender.

Cultural Industry	The creation of products and services for cultural purposes which can also be distributed and exchanged for economic purposes. Also refers to the inseparable nature of art and craft in Aboriginal societies.
Homelands	Also referred to as 'outstations'. They are inhabited by family groups which have shown they possess spiritual ties to the land, as well as the rights to forage across it. Usually, these family groups lead more basic, subsistence-based lifestyles.
Inma	A Pitjantjatjara term for 'corroboree'.
Kungka	A Pitjantjatjara term for 'woman'.
Mabo	Eddie Mabo was a Torres Strait Islander living on the Murray Islands who took the State of Queensland to court in 1982. In 1992, the High Court decided that Mabo and the Meriam people adequately proved they had traditional rights to the land, and thus had property rights in this area. This landmark case overturned the idea of <i>terra nullius</i> , recognizing for the first time since colonisation that Aboriginal Australians held native title rights.
Mipattjunanyi	A Pitjantjatjara term referring to women's 'sand stories', which are used to link themselves to the land through drawing images in the sand.
The Olgas	Also known as Kata Tjuta. This term refers to the famous outcropping of rocks in the vicinity of Uluru.
Ownership	Aboriginal groups do not 'own' the land in a European sense. Rather, they are responsible for the care and maintenance of significant sites and stories which run over a piece of land. In the legal system, Aboriginal groups can show 'ownership' of traditional lands by proving they have common spiritual affiliations to a site on the land, and are entitled by Aboriginal traditions to forage over that land.
Pitjantjatjara	A linguistic group of Aboriginal people associated with the Pitjantjatjara Lands and adjacent areas in the States of Western Australia, the Northern Territory and South Australia. Also referred to as Pitjandjara in the literature.
Pituri	A narcotic obtained from burning down leaves of the pulyantu tree.

Terra nullius	When European settlers arrived in Australia in 1788, they brought with them the British legal system. It was assumed that the Aboriginal population did not possess rules or laws governing property rights, and it was therefore believed that the land was 'uninhabited' and thereby claimable by the Crown.
Timpilypa	Claps sticks made of mulga wood. These instruments are played by striking one stick against another in rhythmic fashion. They are usually decorated with a wire burning technique.
Tjap and tjanting	Special tools used for applying wax in the batik process. A <i>tjap</i> is a stamping block and a <i>tjanting</i> is a tool consisting of a wooden handle and a metal end container used to hold melted wax. A narrow spout allows wax to be applied to fabric in a very fine line.
Tjukurrpa	Refers to Aboriginal Law, the Dreaming, Dreamtime, or Creation Time. Also spelled <i>tjukurpa</i> , <i>jukurrpa</i> , or <i>jukurpa</i> .
Walpiri	A specific linguistic group of Aboriginal people now associated with the area north of Papunya in the Northern Territory. Also called the Walbiri, Walpiri, Warbiri.
Uluru	Aboriginal name for Ayers Rock
Wiltja	A traditional form of shelter.



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