

YIWARRA KUJU
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Education
at the
NATIONAL
MUSEUM OF
AUSTRALIA
CANBERRA

Ngurra kuju walyja:
Country one family People of the desert

It's my grandparents' Country,
then my mother's and father's
Country, then it's my Country.
We have to think about the
behind-people first.

Ngarralja Tommy May, 1994





Kids at the Ngumpan workshop,
near Fitzroy Crossing, photo by
Tim Acker, 2008

Who were the earliest inhabitants of the Western Desert?

Archaeologists working in the Western Desert have come to understand that habitation was not uniform over space or time. Using a variety of evidence to track and date human occupation, archaeologists now believe that the Western Desert has been occupied for around 30,000 years. In the region transected by the Canning Stock Route, which has distinctly seasonal rainfall patterns, it is hypothesised that there has been a strong seasonal pattern of land use over a long period of time although there is growing evidence of change in both desert environments and human land use.

Around 14,000 years ago the climate became warmer and moister, possibly leading to a less mobile society. Then about 6000 years ago the climate became drier and more variable, and from about 2000 years ago slightly wetter and more stable. Archaeological evidence is scarce and not conclusive. However, it appears that people lived in the Western Desert during all climatic changes since the Last Glacial Maximum and there is also evidence of changes in the way people exploited those areas. Occupation of the arid areas may have decreased at certain times and then increased again later.

Seasonal land use would have meant that after summer rains people would disperse into small, highly mobile groups taking advantage of ephemeral water and food sources. During winter, longer term camps may have been set up at more reliable water supplies. Typically, Western Desert dwellers had low population density and were very mobile. Evidence, however, has also been found of significant population growth in the region within the past 1500 years as well as decreased mobility and the development of more rigid boundaries between groups.

As with many other parts of Australia, archaeology of the Western Desert indicates that change is a long term characteristic of human occupation in Australia. As archaeologist Peter Hiscock states:

The existence of different settlement strategies within the Western Desert during the late-Holocene demonstrates that there was not a homogeneous desert adaptation. There is also growing evidence of change over time in desert environments and human economies.

P Hiscock, *Archaeology of Ancient Australia*, Oxon Routledge, 2008, p. 205

On the contrary, Aboriginal people have always been highly adaptable, able to accommodate, shape and mediate change. Archaeology reveals a dynamic and changing human history in the Western Desert of Australia.

How are people related in the Western Desert?

Aboriginal societies of the central and northern parts of the Western Desert were, and are, to a large degree fairly homogenous. While many languages were spoken in this region they were mutually intelligible and came from a similar linguistic base. Language differences marked each group associated with a particular Country. However most people spoke more than one language and people from different groups often interacted collaboratively for a variety of purposes, such as hunting and food gathering. In the harsh environment, co-operation was necessary for the common good. Subsequently the people of this area shared many features of their culture.

The two major motivators in people's lives were religion and making a living; that is, successful hunting and food collection. The first assured that the second could be achieved. Ceremonies, which included ritual songs and dances, were performed to celebrate ancestors and to increase the abundance of vegetable or animal food associated with that ancestor. To ensure the food supply there was a clear division of labour. The women collected vegetable foods and small animals. The men hunted larger animals. Hunting activities were more irregular and the results less predictable so it is not surprising that women supplied the bulk of the food needed by each group.

People were closely linked to their land through birth and spiritual association. Each person belonged to a group that had rights to a specific Country. With these rights, also came responsibilities. Each Country contained sacred sites and it was the responsibility of the group to look after these. Members of these family groups married outside their own group and so social relations were formed with other groups. The size of the groups varied depending on the seasonal demands of hunting and collecting. At times a group might consist of a single family unit, at other times several related families would join together to exploit abundant food



1 **Kurtal and Kaningarra**, 2007,
by Ngarralja Tommy May,
Mangkaja Arts, Private Collection



2 **Pangkapini Minyipuru**,
2007, by Mulyatingki Marney,
Martumili Artists,
National Museum of Australia

sources. People moved over territories which may have been Country they owned or part of Country they were cooperatively sharing with another group. Without this cooperation, making a living would have been difficult in this harsh environment. From their early years, a child learnt that they were dependent upon and had obligations to others. This was not just in a generalised way, but dependent upon and obligated to, particular persons. This relationship was codified in a social system or kinship system. The kinship system allowed everyone to know what expectations one person could have in relation to another, for example, who were acceptable or, more importantly, unacceptable marriage partners.

Desert people cooperated with each other and also worked in harmony with nature. This was achieved through ritual and beliefs that expressed fundamental values that Aboriginal people lived by. In what is known in English as the Dreaming or Dreamtime, creation ancestors moved across the land leaving visible evidence of their travels in the form of hills, rock shelters or water sources.

- 1 ***This [is a] story about Dreamtime people before Canning. Before whitefella come with a Camel. Dreamtime people were there. These two blokes, Kurtal and Kaningarra. Before I been born, these two water holes, they been looking after, cleaning all the time. Kurtal mob used to come down to Kaningarra mob, looking after Kaningarra. Keep it clean and sometime make it rain.***

Ngarralja Tommy May, 2007

As well as creating physical features these beings passed on to the people the laws by which they should live and also the rituals needed to care for their Country. For Aboriginal people the Dreaming is not just a creation period in the distant past, but a way of life both present and future.

The spiritual stories and kinship relationships were intertwined through the social life of Western Desert people. Spirit children were the way through which life was transferred from the spiritual world to the human through birth. The child then belonged to the Country in which this took place. As children grew up they learned how to make a living and the correct way to interact with other people. Boys and girls also received formal training so that they could undertake initiation rites. Novices were introduced to secret/sacred events and after various rituals, which differ according to the group (but may have included circumcision, piercing of the nasal septum, tooth removal and body scarring), became fully initiated participants in these rituals. These rituals, including songs, dances and stories, ensure that the tracks travelled and the sites created by the ancestors are always remembered.

- 2 ***This is Pangkapini and all the rockholes and soaks that I remember on the western, northern and eastern sides of Karlamilyi. I grew up around that area with my mum and dad. The Seven Sisters sat down and rested [at many of these places]. When I was a child, we camped one night at Natawalu. The Seven Sisters also rested there.***

Mulyatingki Marney, 2007

Tools for making a living

The people of the Western Desert used tools which were multi-functional, easy to make from the surrounding environment and extremely adequate for the purpose of hunting and collecting food. Resources to make tools could be scattered and their availability unpredictable. The Western Desert tool kit therefore had a relatively small number of items but these could be used for a variety of purposes, giving great flexibility to the hunters and to the gatherers.

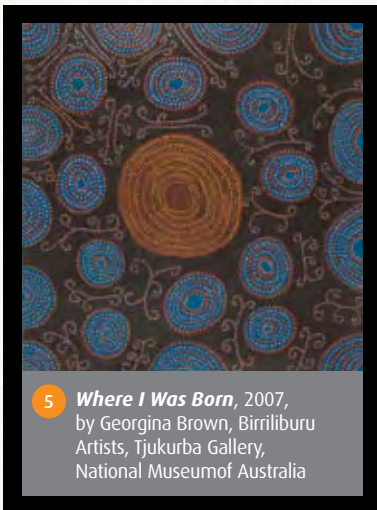
Stone tools such as stone flakes, adzes (hafted flakes) and hand-held axes were used for the manufacture of wooden tools. Grinding stones were used in the preparation of food or for grinding ochre to make paint. Large grindstones were used to grind seeds into flour, which was sometimes made into a cake and baked and sometimes mixed with water and eaten raw. These large grindstones were the exclusive property of women and were handed down from mother to daughter. They were not carried with the group but remained at a particular site in an area near a water supply and where grass seeds were common. The stones were originally obtained by men who travelled to known stone sources. Often they relied on kinship ties to effect possession of the stone. The stones were then handed over to the women and from then on became their exclusive property.



3 Wooden bowl,
National Museum of Australia



4 Georgina holding her dingo pups,
1976, photo by Harry Leaver from
Born in the Desert, Hesperian
Press, 2009



5 *Where I Was Born*, 2007,
by Georgina Brown, Birriliburu
Artists, Tjukurba Gallery,
National Museum of Australia

Hunting tools were made and used by men. These include hunting spears and spear-throwers. The hunting spear was made from a light wooden vine or tree, heated in the fire and straightened. It was usually made in two sections joined together using resin and kangaroo sinew. A barb may have been inserted into the tip and a notch cut into the end to insert the spear-thrower. The spear-thrower was made from a piece of mulga wood cut from the tree using a hand-held axe. This would then be roughly shaped and trimmed before being finally trimmed using an adze. Often a piece of flaked stone was mounted into the handle using resin, making the handle of the spear-thrower an adze in its own right. Sometimes a barb was attached to the front of the spear-thrower using resin and sinew. At other times the wood was carved to enable the spear-thrower to fit the spear.

- 3 **Collecting tools** were made and used by women. Digging sticks were made by chopping a suitable length of mulga wood from the tree using a hand-held axe. One end was fire-hardened and then rubbed or scraped using a sharp rock into a sharp chisel-like end. The digging stick was used to dig up a variety of root vegetables, obtain small animals from burrows and prise other food such as witchetty grubs from the roots and bark of trees. Wooden bowls called *piti* and *ngurti* were used for carrying food that had been collected, winnowing seeds and removing earth loosened with the digging stick. Large bowls were used for carrying infants and transporting water.

Even before the advent of the Canning Stock Route goods were often exchanged over long distances in the Western Desert. From the west came pearl shells and baler shells used as carrying vessels. From the east finely fluted hunting boomerangs and the wirliki or 'number 7' — the hooked boomerang, and from the north ground-edged axes and pressure-flaked spear points. Consequently the people who lived in this Country had access to a wider variety of goods than those that were locally manufactured. With these goods came ideas, stories and relationships that meant the people of this area possessed a vibrant and rich culture that informed every part of their life.

The construction of the Canning Stock Route and the interactions that resulted from it meant that changes in the way people made a living were inevitable for those whose Country was transected by the route. However, despite this disruption, the spiritual links and kinship systems continue to sustain and nurture the people today. The acrylic paintings featured in this exhibition are just the latest expressions of long-held traditions that are displayed within an innovative material culture.

- 4 Dadina Georgina Brown was just 6 years old when she came in from the desert. When she was found, she was clutching an armful of dingo pups. Georgina was among the last people leading a nomadic life in the Western Desert. She was born in the bush and travelled around with her family in the Country east of the stock route. In 1976 concerned families in Wiluna sent out a patrol to find them and bring them into the settlement. Georgina's parents always longed to return to their desert Country, but worried relatives prevented it. They both passed away in Wiluna. In 2009 Georgina returned to the Country where she had grown up.

Questions and activities to share with your students

1. Why do you think it would be important for desert people to be highly adaptable to changes in climate and environment?
2. Desert society was a co-operative society. People needed to cooperate to ensure an adequate food supply for all. Do you think we live in a cooperative society? Why or why not? How does this affect our society? Explain your answer.
3. Think about the tools needed by men and women in the desert to make a living. Choose either a man's tool kit or a woman's tool kit. List the tools contained in the kit. For each tool list all of the tools a person might have to do a similar job today. (e.g. digging stick — spade, fork, trowel, hoe, backhoe, pick, etc.)
4. Research an archaeologist. Find information about one of these eminent archaeologists. Find biographical information, the locations they worked, the methodology they used, the findings and contributions they made to our understanding of Aboriginal people of the Western Desert: Alan Thorne, Tim Flannery, Josephine Flood, Mike Smith, Peter Hiscock and 'John Mulvaney'.