

JASON GIBSON AND JOHN KEAN

'New Possum Found!' Photographic Influences on Anmatyerr Art

ABSTRACT

Despite extensive and at times contested retellings of the origins of Papunya Tula painting, few authors have identified the extent to which intercultural influences affected the work of the founding artists, preferring instead to interpret the emergence of contemporary Aboriginal art, at a remote settlement in Central Australia, as a marker of Indigenous cultural autonomy and resistance. A recently unearthed painting by the Anmatyerr artist Clifford Possum challenges this interpretation and suggests that the desert art movement arose from a more complex social milieu than has previously been acknowledged.¹ As one of the earliest and most unusual paintings by a major Australian artist, the 'new Possum' is of undeniable significance. Our analysis of this work reveals that it is, in large part, derived from photographs published in a well-known anthropological classic. An examination of the painting and its sources will begin to build a picture of early influences on Anmatyerr art and the intriguing intercultural context in which the 'new Possum' and related works were created.

Introduction

'Possum' is an emotive noun in Australian vernacular. Dame Edna Everage refers to her fans as 'Possums', while gardeners in leafy suburbs curse 'bloody possums' nightly as the insufferable marsupials thump on garage roofs, growl, fight and fornicate, before systematically stripping new shoots from exotic shrubs. Next to kangaroos and koalas, possums are probably the most widely known of our native animals. They are a paradoxical component of Australia's endangered wildlife, thriving in the midst of urban expansion in the eastern states, and yet now almost completely absent from the continent's arid heart. Accordingly, the prospect of a new species of possum being discovered would be sure to capture the attention of any nature lover, while raising the hackles of devoted gardeners, or so thought the adroit sub-editor of *The Australian*.

A headline 'New Possum Found!' displayed prominently outside newsstands on the 25th of September 2011 advertised an article in *The Weekend Australian*, relating to a recently discovered work of art by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri (circa 1932–2002). Possum was a superstar of Aboriginal art and holder of the record for the highest price paid for a work by an Aboriginal Australian artist.² He was in every sense a 'possum man'. His 'bush name' was *Rrpwamper* (Brushtail Possum) and he was born at *Alherramp* (Laramba) a place closely associated with his ancestors, the Possum people. As a child, Clifford grew up in a creek-bed that was overlooked by *Rrpwamper* living in the hollows of grand

¹ Anmatyerr has historically been spelt in a variety of ways — Unmatjera, Anmatjira, Anmatjera, Yanmadjeri, Anmatjere, etc. Anmatyerr artists are often recorded in the early documentation of their paintings as Anmatjira Aranda, in recognition of the Anmatyerr as an Arandic language, very similar to Arrernte.

² Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's painting *Warlugulong* (1977) was purchased from the Sotheby's *Important Aboriginal Art* auction by the National Gallery of Australia for \$2.4 million in July 2007.

River Red Gums and later in life he would learn to track them as they made their way to Ironwood trees to graze on their sweet flowers.³ The antics of the *Rrpwamper* ancestors are depicted on some of Clifford's most admired canvases, but the painting referred to in this newspaper article featured not possums, but a group of decorated and dancing men.



Fig. 1. Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, *Untitled (Kwaty anganenty rntwem — Rain Dreaming Dance)*, 1972. Synthetic polymer paint on composition board, 51 x 35cm, Sydney, private collection.

³ Kean, 2011, p. 43.

Beneath the headline was an arresting black and white reproduction of a painting depicting three Aboriginal men kitted out for ceremony; an image bound to attract the eyes of those curious about the secretive world of Aboriginal ritual. Inside, the newspaper reported the discovery of a previously unknown painting, created in 1972 just one year after the emergence of the contemporary Aboriginal art at Papunya. The painting, so the story goes, had been kept in a family home in New York for over thirty-five years, until identified by a representative of Sotheby's Australia. Serendipitously, the discovery was announced days before the launch of *Tjukurrjtjanu: Origins of Western Desert Art* at the National Gallery of Victoria, where the 200 'early boards' painted at Papunya had been assembled for display.

The 'forgotten' painting sparked considerable interest and as the date for the auction neared, speculation about the authenticity of the painting's attribution became the subject of some contention. An unnamed 'source' in *The Weekend Australian* suggested that the image bore an uncanny resemblance to a photograph from Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen's classic anthropological text *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*.⁴ The author, Michaela Boland, opined that Possum may have copied the image to 'fast-track his output and earnings' in the tourist market. In contrast, Sotheby's Head of Aboriginal Art, D'lan Davidson preferred to think of the painting as 'beautiful and magical' and 'from his own mind'.⁵ However, a more nuanced examination of the socio-historical context into which Clifford Possum and other Anmatyerr painters grew into manhood points to a far more complex story of intercultural communication and exchange.

Popular Ethnography and Painting

A close comparison of both the newly discovered Clifford Possum, which was ascribed the title *Untitled (Emu Corroboree Man)* by Sotheby's, and photographic plates in *Native Tribes* leaves us in no doubt that the three decorated dancers are derived from the pages of this anthropological classic.⁶ As such, Possum's incorporation of photographic stimulus contributes to a growing body of evidence that several of the founding Papunya artists were inspired by non-Aboriginal imagery, notably maps, cartoons and photographs. Tim Leura, Clifford's brother, for example, described the large map-like works that he and Clifford produced between 1974 and 1979 as 'topographical', and it has been argued that Possum's Warlugulong epics of 1976–1977 were, in part, inspired by cartoon imagery.⁷ The new Possum painting lends further weight to these

⁴ Spencer and Gillen, 1899, p. 621.

⁵ Boland, 2011.

⁶ The historic images reproduced here (and that were used earlier in *Native Tribes*) have recently been cleared for circulation by contemporary Arrernte and Anmatyerr men as a part of the detailed consultation process integral to the development of *Spencer & Gillen: A Journey through Aboriginal Australia* website <http://spencerandgillen.net>.

⁷ Johnson and Possum, 2003, p. 80. Kean demonstrated how narrative elements of Clifford Possum, *Warlugulong*, (1977, National Gallery of Australia) were derived from cartoon imagery, in *Follow the fire: tracking time in the work of Clifford Possum and Tim Leura at Tjukurrjtjanu: Origins of Western Desert Art*, symposium at National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 12 November 2011.

interpretations, but how, and why, would Possum have referred to late nineteenth-century ethnographic text?

Native Tribes provided a compelling account of 'traditional culture' for those interested in Aboriginal art and spirituality. It informed the emerging disciplines of sociology and anthropology in Europe and continues to be recognised as a seminal text in Australian Aboriginal studies. It has been reprinted many times and remains in constant circulation, especially in Central Australia where history buffs, anthropologists and the descendants of the Arrernte informants continue to find riches within its pages. The photograph from *Native Tribes* referred to in *The Weekend Australian* article was originally captioned by Spencer and Gillen as 'Decorations used during a rain dance or corroboree, Arunta Tribe'. This photograph was most likely taken by Francis (Frank) Gillen, in either 1894 or 1895, and depicts a group of Aboriginal men performing a rain dance over 500kms south from the Anmatyerr region, where Clifford Possum grew up.⁸

Gillen had arrived in Central Australian in 1875 to work on the Charlotte Waters Telegraph Station before being transferred to the Alice Springs Telegraph Station in 1892. He established a bond of trust with the local Arrernte people, and on the basis of his privileged intimacy, became one of the region's most important ethnographers.⁹ Gillen first met Spencer when the Melbourne-based professor travelled to Central Australia on the Horn Expedition in 1894. The two intellectuals soon committed to a partnership, and friendship, based on a shared passion for photography and ethnographic investigations. Their collaboration over the subsequent decade resulted in an encyclopedic record of Aboriginal people of Central and Northern Australia.¹⁰ Beautifully executed glass plate photographs worked to complement their detailed descriptions of Arrernte social and cultural life, which were further augmented by meticulously drawn maps and diagrams, published in a series of coauthored volumes.

Gillen's photograph of the 'rain dance' shows five men with body paint across their shoulders and on their waist and thighs. Each of the figures is wearing a headdress made of vertical wooden boards, decorated with diagonal lines and concentric circles. At the top of each board is a tuft of dark emu feathers. Possum's painting, however, has three, not five, decorated men, but each is embellished with an elaborate vertical headdress and their faces are camouflaged with white daubs; as are those of the rain men from Charlotte Waters photographed by Gillen (Fig. 2). It is revealing that the decorations applied to the bodies of the men in Possum's painting also bear a strong resemblance to the three 'Arunta (Arrernte) natives, decorated for the Erkita Corroboree' on the adjacent page of Spencer and Gillen's tome.

⁸ It is also possible that Spencer took the 'rain dance' photograph during the Horn Expedition of 1894. Although the photograph itself does not feature in the Horn Anthropology Volume, an illustration of one of the headdresses from this performance does.

⁹ Gibson, 2013, pp. 57–72.

¹⁰ Morphy, 1997; Batty, Allen, and Morton, 2007.



Fig. 2. Francis (Frank) Gillen, *Rain dance at Charlotte Waters*, c.1895. Glass plate photograph, Melbourne, Spencer Collection Museum Victoria.

While the headdresses, masklike disguises and painted armbands appear to have been derived from the 'rain dance', the shoulder to knee body paint and hair-string belts (replete with tufts of Bilby's tail) are similar to those worn by the *Erkita* men. We are not suggesting that Possum has slavishly copied the images from Spencer and Gillen's text, rather that he consciously used elements derived from both photographs to construct an

illustration of a ceremony that he possibly knew well as a participant. While Spencer and Gillen's photographs show the men posed for the long exposure of an old glass plate camera, Clifford Possum, who would have been thinking of an actual performance, has the right leg of the principal performer lifted, mid step as he stamps out the beat sung by (unseen) accompanists. Furthermore, two of his performers reveal the totemic design on their softwood shields, a detail that does not appear in either of the original photographs. The fact that the 1972 painting shares elements from both photographic images, suggests that the artist is most likely to have been working with *Native Tribes* open to pages 620–3 in front of him.

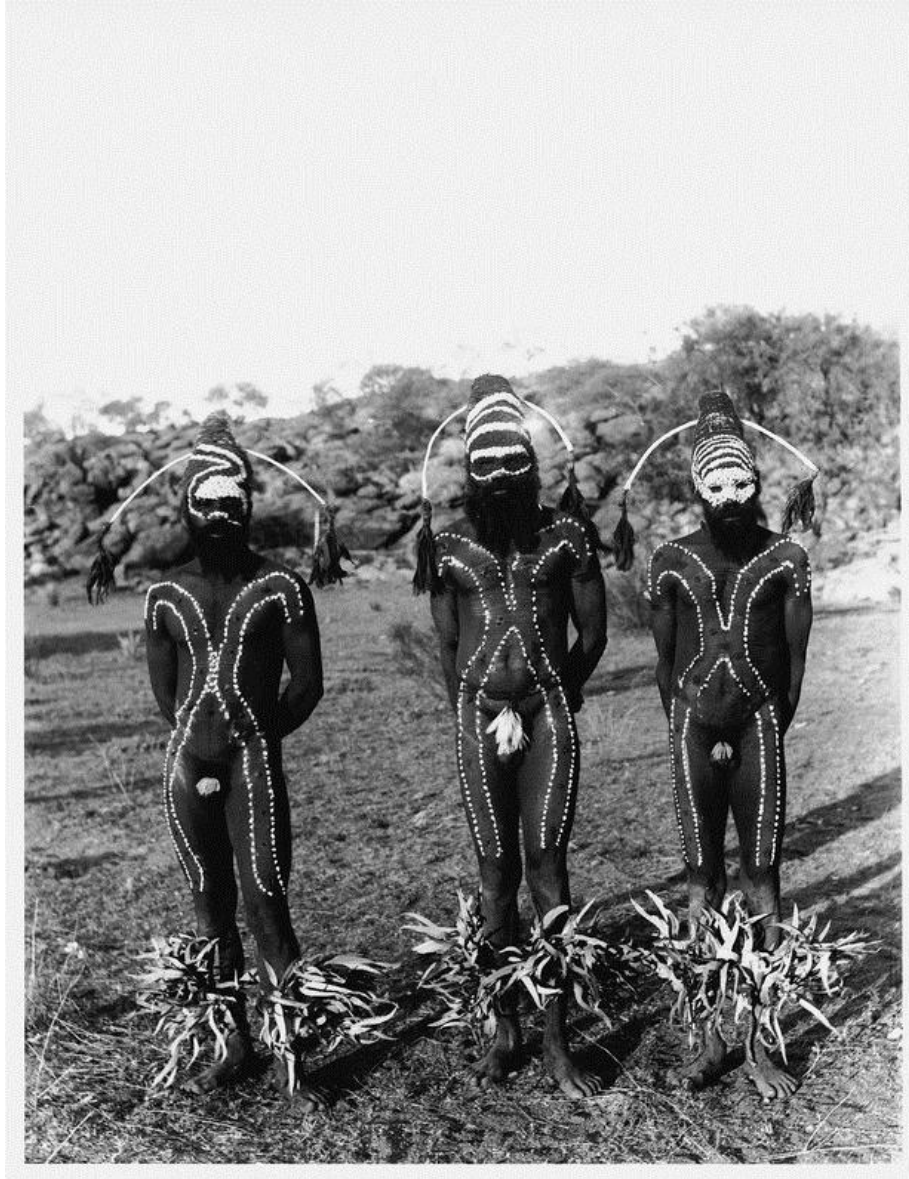


Fig. 3. Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen, *Erkita Corroboree, Alice Springs*, c.1896. Glass plate photograph, Melbourne, Spencer Collection, Museum Victoria.

The idea of one of the founding painters of the Papunya movement using a photograph as stimulus should cause a radical rewriting of the prevailing narrative of Central Australian art. One journalist, commenting on the new Possum painting, repeated the often heard story that 'the most prominent of exponents [were] only superficially touched by Western influence. They also grew up when traditional Aboriginal social structures had not been undermined'.¹¹ Clifford's painting, however, urges us to carefully rethink this rendering of the tale, as well as what anthropologist Patrick Sullivan has described the 'hermetic view' of Aboriginal culture as something pure, timeless and self-referential.¹² The current essay complements recent literature by acknowledging the varied sources of contemporary desert art, including crayon drawings created for anthropologists, idiosyncratic works painted by Hermannsburg based watercolorists and early explorations in carving and illustration.¹³

Country, Cattle and Kaapa's Idea

Before we go into further iconographic analysis of the 'new Possum' it is worth pausing to place the current work in an historical context. From the late 1950s Aboriginal people from a vast swathe of country had been bought together at the government settlement of Papunya, west of Alice Springs, under the auspices of the assimilation policy. Each of these groups had their own unique experiences of contact with non-Aboriginal people; moreover, they spoke in a number of extremely different languages, Warlpiri, Anmatyerr and Arrernte, Luritja and Pintupi. Papunya of the 1960s and '70s was therefore a tinderbox, primed for conflict but also a creative explosion.¹⁴

It was forty-five years ago when Aboriginal men from these various desert cultures began to paint their 'Dreamings' on portable/saleable boards. Unsurprisingly, the cosmopolitan Anmatyerr, being more familiar with Europeans after generations of working on cattle stations, were leaders of the painting movement, while the Pintupi, many of whom had made their first contact with 'whitefellas' in the early 1960s, were initially more reticent. It is unfortunate that Anmatyerr and Pintupi artists, whose artistic intentions may have been quite different, have been lumped together, to the extent that their individual identities have been subsumed under the generalised rubric of the 'Western Desert' movement of which they were a part.

Just as is the case with other great movements, the genesis of the contemporary Aboriginal art movement is veiled in myth and conflicting accounts. One fact is certain, however: Kaapa Tjampitjinpa was the first to paint and promote detailed paintings of ceremony on scraps of recycled board.¹⁵ When his *Men's Ceremony for the Kangaroo, Gulgardj* (Fig. 4) was announced co-winner of the Caltex Art Award in the early spring

¹¹ Allen, 2011.

¹² Sullivan, 2005, pp. 183–94.

¹³ Sutton, 1998; Jones, 2007, pp. 305–35; Gibson, 2015; Hinkson, 2014, pp. 137–52; Johnson, 2015, pp. 40–51.

¹⁴ Davis and Hunter, 1977.

¹⁵ For the most detailed account of Kaapa's early agency see Johnson, 2010, p. 11–79.

of 1971, the resulting prize money became a catalyst for Kaapa's countrymen to take up the brush.¹⁶



Fig. 4. Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, *Men's Ceremony for the Kangaroo, Gulgardi*, 1971. Watercolour on plywood, 61 x 137cm, Alice Springs, Araluen Arts Centre.

Kaapa's *Gulgardi* is unlike the abstracted 'dot paintings' that have come to characterise the contemporary desert art phenomena, rather it is a representational tableau in which a decorated performer presides over the ceremonial ground painting and its associated poles and windbreaks. Vivien Johnson has suggested that a limited group of paintings painted in 1971–2 should be characterised as belonging to the 'School of Kaapa', most of which were produced by his relatives, Anmatyerr speakers. These rare paintings share key elements with Kaapa's *Gulgardi*, notably ceremonial figures realistically portrayed in association with equally detailed ritual paraphernalia. The performers are presented in semi-perspectival pictorial space, representing the ceremonial ground.¹⁷ Later paintings by the same artist employed a now familiar 'plan view', in which ceremonial performers and objects were abstracted in stylised, symbolic compositions and required some basic information to 'unlock' key visual references.

Two of Kaapa's cousins, Clifford Possum and Tim Leura, were already renowned as craftsmen for their realistic carvings snakes and goannas for the local tourist market. They were proud of their Aboriginal culture and when the opportunity arose, they produced vivid painted accounts of ceremony for interested Europeans. But the explicit

¹⁶ Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, *Men's Ceremony for the Kangaroo, Gulgardi*, 1971. Alice Springs, Araluen Arts Centre.

¹⁷ Johnson, 2010, pp. 33–43.

nature of the works produced at Papunya during 1971–2 did not go unnoticed by others. When they became aware of the paintings, ritually related men from connected communities sought to sanction the explicit representation of sacred stories for which they too had custodial responsibilities. As a result of the disapprobation (as well as the natural process of stylistic evolution) the explicit depiction of realistic ceremonial performers and attendant ceremonial objects were suppressed, encrypted or transformed.¹⁸ By the summer of 1972–3 the extravagantly experimental phase of Papunya painting had come to an end. Paintings had become increasingly stylised and codified, their secret/sacred elements camouflaged by generalised forms or disguised beneath a shifting veil of dots.

The 'new Possum', however, clearly belongs to the earlier, quasi-instructional, pedagogical style of the 'School of Kaapa'. What makes this painting so compelling is the direct gaze and scale of the figures as they assert themselves across the picture plane, top to bottom. The revelation of the 'new Possum' has caused us to analyse other paintings produced by 'School of Kaapa' artists, in the period 1971–2, to determine if Clifford was alone in referring to photographs while developing compositions. We have found strong evidence that ethnographic photographs informed at least one painting by Tim Leura. Tim was not as accomplished a draftsman as his younger brother Clifford (in the western sense of representational figuration), however, his *Young Men's Initiation Ceremony*, 1972,¹⁹ reveals that he too derived figures from a photographic source. The painting discloses a sequence of events from restricted men's ritual, including two men realistically represented in full ceremonial regalia. The figures are much more detailed than any other known by the artist and as such they stand out as unique among his oeuvre.

It is axiomatic that Papunya Tula paintings are created with a loaded brush directly and with great confidence onto an undercoated substrate; a close examination of *Young Men's Initiation Ceremony*, however, reveals that Leura used a pencil to outline the figure before applying paint to the figures. Moreover, the seated figure to the left of the painting is holding a ceremonial wand in his left hand, drawn with knowledge of foreshortening not seen in any other works by the artist. While we have not as yet identified the photographic source of Leura's imagery, we are confident that he too copied a photograph in his attempt to reveal the details of this ceremony precision.

Other paintings produced by Kaapa and his followers deploy representational figures on a ceremonial ground that conforms to the scale and focal length framed by Spencer and

¹⁸ Kimber, 1995.

¹⁹ Tim Leura's painting, *Young Men's Initiation Story* (Stuart Art Centre code: 5018) 1972, Araluen Arts Centre, depicts restricted men's ritual in graphic detail and it can therefore not be reproduced here for public distribution. A sketch of the painting is, however, reproduced in Bardon and Bardon, 2004, p. 386, including a margin note, 'Story about after young men are initiated', so rather than being a *Young Men's Initiation Story* the painting depicts post-initiation (a more typical subject for Papunya Tula paintings) rather than initiation/manhood ceremonies as the later title suggests. The sensitive nature of painting is well recognised by the Araluen Arts Centre in Alice Springs and despite its significance it has been omitted from recent exhibitions of Papunya Tula painting.

Gillen in their widely circulated 'corroboree' photos. As the figures in paintings by Kaapa, Long Jack Phillipus and Johnny Warangula were painted in a naïve manner, it is more problematic to determine if these artists were influenced by the cropping [of pictorial space] of ethnographic photographs. While it difficult to connect their works to a particular photographic source, the scale of figure/ground relationships employed by the artists in the period 1971–2 conforms with the documentary photographs taken and published by Central Australian ethnographers.

The recent *Tjukurrjtjanu* exhibition jointly presented by Museum Victoria and the National Gallery of Victoria made absolutely explicit the connections between Spencer and Gillen's Arrernte-centric ethnography and the 'Western Desert' art movement (without asserting that the artists were influenced by the photographs).²⁰ Some of the objects collected and photographs taken by Spencer and Gillen between 1894 and 1902 were included in the exhibition to draw the audience's attention to the source of the iconography that was later employed in acrylic painting. The connection to this Arrernte material is particularly significant given that painters like Kaapa, Possum and Leura all spoke Anmatyerr, a language very similar to Arrernte, and they have all been at times described as Anmatyerr/Arrernte artists. It is worth emphasising that these 'Arandic' languages, spoken in communities around Alice Springs, are distinctively different from the Western Desert languages spoken by the Luritja and Pintupi, whose traditional lands lie to the west of the Papunya settlement.²¹ Possum's choice to reference a photograph of an Arrernte ceremony (and not an Anmatyerr one) is therefore not unusual, given the cultural, linguistic and mythological connections to a range of dreaming that link these geographically disparate groups. Anthropologist T.G.H. Strehlow, for example, has recorded Dreaming connections between Possum and Leura's home of Napperby (in the Anmatyerr area) and the general Charlotte Waters Telegraph Station region (in the Lower Arrernte area).²²

Possum was an independent thinker who made conscious decisions regarding his artistic output, but he also operated from within a particular complex set of social, economic and cultural relationships that influenced his practice.²³ Exploring the context for Possum's work — linguistic or otherwise — is therefore critical when considering his decision to reference a classic nineteenth-century ethnographic text.

Remote, desert communities are often caricatured as isolated and disconnected places where cross-cultural contact is largely confined to government settlements and ration

²⁰ Western Desert Art is something of a misnomer when applied to the work of the Arrernte and Anmatyerr artists of Central Australia. The Western Desert applies to the land to the west of the MacDonnell Ranges, where dialects of a very different language are spoken. The Pintupi, who are now most powerfully associated with Papunya Tula art, migrated to Haasts Bluff settlements and, after it was established in 1959, Papunya in the decades preceding the genesis of art movement.

²¹ Shell-shocked art advisors — including one of the authors — who parachuted into Papunya in the 1970s often missed the significance of this cultural/linguistic difference. As many Anmatyerr paintings were documented in Luritja, the *lingua franca* of the Papunya Settlement, the task of differentiating an artist's references is now made especially challenging for anthropologists and art historians alike.

²² Strehlow, 1932, p. 93.

²³ Johnson and Possum, 2003.

depots. Whilst this may apply to most Western Desert communities like Kintore and Kiwirrkurra, on the other hand, the Anmatyerr, Alyawarr and Arrernte people to the east have experienced a far more varied intercultural history. Cattle stations had been operating on Anmatyerr land since the late 1800s and since the 1890s generations of men have grown up working as stockmen or occasional labourers. These people, working for rations and the ability to stay on their traditional lands, had been raised in a turbulent zone of cultural exchange and interaction.²⁴ In contrast to the Pintupi artists of the Gibson Desert, the founding Anmatyerr painters had grown up in the stock camps of the cattle stations immediately to the north and west of Alice Springs.²⁵ The construction of the Overland Telegraph Line, the north-south stock route and much later the construction of the Stuart Highway impacted the Anmatyerr and their land. Such interventions had been marked by conflict and violence between the 1860s and 1928, but there was also a degree of co-existence and camaraderie between settler and Aboriginal people.



Fig. 5. Unknown (Anmatyerr stockman), *Mustering on Beetaloo and O.T. Stations, Northern Australia*, 1929. Pencil on paper, Adelaide, South Australian Museum, A1038 Acc 268.

Clifford Possum grew up on Napperby Station, in the shadow of the Coniston Massacre of 1928, and its exonerating jury. Like many Anmatyerr people, his father One Pound Jimmy who later found fame as the iconic Aborigine and whose picture was used on postage stamps, magazines and posters, fled the violent frontier during what is still referred to by Warlpiri and Anmatyerr people as the 'killing times'.²⁶ However, Possum grew up in a time when non-Indigenous station managers paid Aboriginal stockmen for their labour and provided basic provisions to resident families. By the 1930s some of the

²⁴ McGrath, 1987.

²⁵ Kean, 2011, pp. 43–47.

²⁶ Johnson, 1994, pp. 26–9; Young, 1987, pp. 156–70; Cribbin, 1984.

local European pastoralists could communicate using a very limited Anmatyerr vocabulary and had families with Anmatyerr women. By this time a new life, based on the requirements of the pastoral industry, and under the growing influence of the missions and government 'welfare' policies, emerged. While some Anmatyerr people were brought in to live at government settlements like Yuendumu (*Ywerntem*) in the late 1940s, the majority continued to live on cattle stations. In the early 1960s, Possum and Leura, as well as their 'pensioner' father One Pound Jimmy Ngwarray were living and working at Narwietooma Station to the northwest of Alice Springs.²⁷

By 1972, generations of Anmatyerr people had negotiated a unique identity on the pastoral frontier that was 'neither traditional in the pre-contact sense nor assimilated'.²⁸ In the same year, ethnographic filmmaker Roger Sandall produced *Coniston Muster*,²⁹ a documentary detailing the complex, cross-cultural relationships on desert cattle stations and the everyday lives of Anmatyerr families. Station life meant that men often travelled far afield with their work, droving and mustering cattle across the arid interior. Clifford for example, worked on Napperby, Glen Helen, Mt Allan, Central Mount Wedge and Hamilton Downs Station. He also worked far at Idracowra, far to the south and much closer to the Charlotte Waters Telegraph Station, where the Gillen photographs had been taken over seventy-five years earlier.³⁰

Possum, Leura and Kaapa spent months at a time in isolated stock camps and shared campfire conversations with European cattlemen when the muster was on. While not able to read much English, these Anmatyerr stockmen were curious and confident characters who would have taken great interest in any available visual literature, from comics to well-illustrated scholarly text such as *Native Tribes*. Tim Leura described the large paintings that he and Clifford Possum had painted in the second half of the 1970s as 'topographical', no doubt recalling the maps used by station owners to mark out fence-lines, bores and roads.³¹ How likely was it that books, as well as maps, were in circulation in these camps?

The popularity of *Native Tribes* in the metropolitan centres of Australia and overseas is well documented, however, it is difficult to assess how the publication was received amongst the descendents of its subjects in Central Australia. There is, however, evidence to suggest that the text had been doing the rounds of Central Australian Aboriginal communities for decades. Anthropologist Olive Muriel Pink, for example, examined Spencer and Gillen work with a group of Arrernte men in the 1930s. The men proceeded to identify many of the people photographed (including themselves) by name and provided Pink with further commentary on the ceremonies depicted in the photographs.³² The most vivid account of the book's reception in Central Australia is provided by the Hungarian psychoanalyst-anthropologist Géza Róheim, who when visiting Alice Springs

²⁷ See <http://www.cifhs.com/ntrecords/ntcensus/narwietooma.html>

²⁸ Rolls, 2010, pp. 179–200.

²⁹ Sandall, 1972.

³⁰ See Fig. 5, Johnson, 1994, p. 22.

³¹ Johnson and Possum, 1993, pp. 79–120.

³² Marcus, 2001, p. 117.

in 1929 spoke with an elderly Arrernte man named Jiramba/Yerrampe [Honey Ant]. Yerrampe maintained that Spencer and Gillen had documented his own initiation during the 'Engwura [Angkwere] festival' of 1896 and he appeared to have working knowledge of the resulting publication.

One day after he [Yerrampe] had dictated a myth about the moon, I asked him if he knew any myths about the sun. He replied that he did, but that it would not be worth my while to copy them because they could all be found in Spencer's [and Gillen's] book.³³

Native Tribes remained a standard text for interested newcomers to Central Australia into the 1970s. The men of Papunya would not have to have gone any further than the Papunya Special School to come across a copy of the volume, for according to a former teacher at Papunya in the late 1970s, a 1968 reprint copy of the book was readily available on the library shelves.³⁴ Kaapa was among several men who were employed as gardeners at the school in the early 1970s, and the book would have been of as much interest to him as the clean-skin teachers who drove the long dusty track from the city to Papunya in late January in preparation for the start of school year. Patrol officers, missionaries, anthropologists, schoolteachers and some of the pastoralists themselves carried Spencer and Gillen's books with them whilst working in the Anmatyerr, Luritja, Warlpiri region.³⁵ Lutheran Pastors and Lay Missionaries who often visited cattle Stations to the north of Alice Springs — and have been credited with giving Possum his name 'Clifford' — were also certainly not strangers to ethnographic literature. Ted Strehlow (1908–1978), the son of a Lutheran missionary, spent four decades working in the Arrernte, Luritja and Anmatyerr region and he often discussed the Spencer and Gillen photographs with them. On one occasion, his informant, Bob Rubuntja, commented that many of the ceremonies filmed by Strehlow in 1960 had already been photographed 'in Mr. Gillen time' and were featured in Spencer and Gillen's book *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*.³⁶ Clifford and Tim's father, One Pound Jimmy, and over sixty other Anmatyerr men too had worked with Strehlow between 1932 and 1971, and had also spent time with two other important Australian ethnographers interested in art and literature, C.P. Mountford and Bill Harney.³⁷ It is also important to note that Strehlow filmed and photographed both the possum and fish ceremonies of Napperby/Laramba with some of Clifford and Tim's relatives in 1953, and in 1968 travelled throughout this region collecting information.

³³ Róheim, 1974, p. 62.

³⁴ Personal communication with Museum Victoria curator Philip Batty, 2012

³⁵ Marcus, 2001, p. 111.

³⁶ Strehlow, 1960, p. 19.

³⁷ Gibson 'Revisiting T.G.H. Strehlow's Anmatyerr Ethnography' presented at the *German Anthropological Tradition in Australia* Conference, ANU, Canberra, 18 June 2015. Harney, 1957, pp. 208–219; Mountford, 1967, p. 1.

It seems feasible therefore that Clifford Possum would have come across the Spencer and Gillen book, and other anthropological texts, at some point either via the stock-camp, the mission, the settlement or via an inquisitive ethnographer.

What's in a name?

In reconsidering this new painting and contextual influences that played on its creation, it is worth reviewing the title, *Untitled (Emu Corroboree Man)*, ascribed to it by Sotheby's in the heat of the moment just days before the *Important Aboriginal & Oceanic Art* catalogue went to print.³⁸ The painting was certainly produced during the same period as Possum's first-known painting *Emu Corroboree Man* 1972. While sharing the same palette and having strong stylistic similarities, the iconographic elements of the pair of paintings are distinct; consequently, we assert that these contemporaneous works are thematically unrelated.

The iconography associated with *Emu Corroboree* is diagnostic. The foot of the Emu leaves a powerful three-pointed print that can be seen on the shield that is held between the arms and the back of the dancer. Moreover the prints of the emu ancestor can be traced as reverse-arrows around the perimeter of the painting. The extended 'wrists' of the emu can be seen as the strait lines adjoined to the reverse-arrows adjacent to the sets of concentric circles in each corner of the work. These are unmistakable marks of an Emu 'sitting down'.

The 'new Possum' has none of these distinguishing symbols, instead the sacred boards and shields held by the performers have both sinuous lines and zig-zags recurrently associated with lightening and running water of a rain dreaming. These marks in and of themselves are not diagnostic, however, for in a different context they can refer the tracks of snakes and possums. Clifford Possum was *kwertengerl* (manager) of the rain/water dreaming story that ran through his country, depicting it on several occasions.³⁹

We have already documented the iconographic similarities between the 'new Possum' and the photograph of the rain ceremony held at Charlotte Waters in 1895. However it is risky to assign works to a particular story without strong evidence, and there is another work that complicates any definitive attribution.

In 1973 Possum's classificatory brother, and sometimes collaborator, Tim Leura painted a work that shares many iconographic elements with the 'new Possum'. Although *Pulapo (Ngkata) Possum*, 1973 (Fig. 6) was painted a year after the work in question, it does not have the representation attributes associated with the 'School of Kaapa'.⁴⁰ There are key iconographic elements that can be identified in both paintings to reveal perplexing similarities.

³⁸ Sotheby's, 2011, pp. 68–69.

³⁹ See for instance *Water Dreaming at Napperby*, 1983. Flinders University Art Museum.

⁴⁰ Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, *Pulapo (Ngkata) Possum*, 1973. Unknown location.

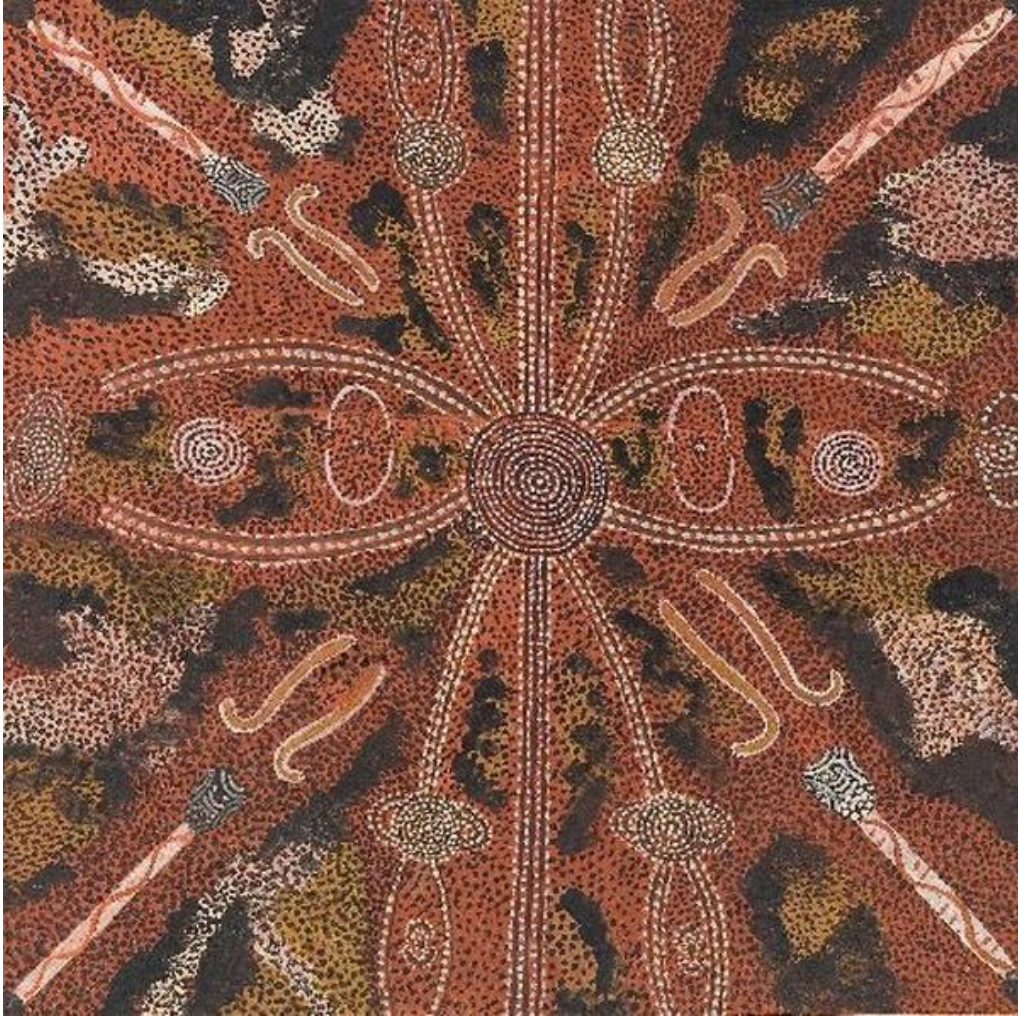


Fig. 6. Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, *Pulapo (Ngkata) Possum*, 1973. Synthetic powder paint on composition board, 43 x 43cm, (unknown location), private collection.

First of all it is important to recognise that similar iconographic elements have been deployed within contrasting spatial configurations in these two works. Leura's *Pulapo (Ngkata) Possum* is made radially symmetrical about its central roundel. Within each of its quadrants the body paint and headdress of a ceremonial performer is depicted, without the outline of the performers body. Imagine the performer's feet planted next to the central circle. The mirrored and elongated 'hook' shapes are the body paint leading from the thighs, up the abdomen of the performer and across each shoulder. Details of the face are omitted but the headdress is shown in considerable detail leading to the corner of the work. The sinuous lines inscribed thereon are similar but not identical to those adorning the performers depicted in the 'new Possum'.⁴¹

⁴¹ Tim Leura, *Pulapo (Ngkata) Possum*, 1973. This title probably refers to a 'Purlapa', a Warlpiri word referring to a public song and dance. T.G.H. Strehlow recorded a similar — possibly the same — performance as the *ltata antana* [*althart antenh*, a public performance pertaining to possum ancestors].

Most evidence, however, supports the hypothesis that the new painting makes reference to a rain/water dance. Acknowledgment of Possum's identification as an Anmatyerr speaker (we suggest) should be rendered in the orthography of that language. Furthermore, as the painting bares great resemblance to the Gillen photograph, perhaps the title should also include reference to Spencer and Gillen's original caption. With all of this taken into consideration, a longer title in Anmatyerr and English could be written as *Kwaty Anganenty Rntwem (Rain Dreaming Dance) 1972*.

Clifford Possum was a man of his time who drew from a variety of sources, both European and Aboriginal. The fact that he sourced a photograph on which to base his composition does not make this in any way a lesser work, for photography has informed the visual arts from Édouard Manet through to Possum's contemporary, Andy Warhol. On the contrary, Possum's use of available visual references brings the work closer to us as global natives of the photographic age. *Kwaty Anganenty Rntwem (Rain Dreaming Dance)* also sheds light upon a period in post-colonial Australian history where Central Australian Indigenous people were simultaneously — and contradictorily — regarded as remnant 'traditional' populations living segregated reserves and yet successfully participating in the dominant economy via the cattle industry and later in an innovative art practice.

While Geoffrey Bardon's involvement is often explained as the primary stimulus towards this new style of painting at Papunya, this paper proposes that the influence of ethnography, and in particular ethnographic modes of photography, may have been more substantial than previously thought. Being exposed to these texts, witnessing ethnographers at work around them and seeing the popularity of these texts may have made Kaapa, Possum and the other artists realise that such images were marketable, and served an (ultimately profitable) role in visualising and communicating their lifeworlds to non-Aboriginal people.

Comparisons with Gillen's original photos reveal Possum's extraordinary plastic imagination, forever searching out new ways to communicate to aspects of Anmatyerr country and culture in pictorial space. Moreover, the fact that a definitive title remains elusive should not sideline the work from consideration as one of the major milestone paintings in the development of contemporary art from Central Australia. Master craftsman, virtuosic painter and enigmatic presence at the auction of his own work, Clifford was never one to be shoehorned as a stereotypical 'Aboriginal artist'.

Jason Gibson

Jason Gibson is a curator in the Humanities Department of Museum Victoria and a consultant anthropologist with sixteen years of experience in Central Australia. He is currently writing his PhD at the Monash Indigenous Centre on T.G.H. Strehlow's Anmatyerr ethnography.

John Kean

John Kean is an independent producer, curator and writer, and was an Art Advisor for Papunya Tula Artist Pty Ltd (1977–1979). He is a PhD candidate at the University of

Melbourne, and an Honorary Associate of Museum Victoria, where he worked as a producer for fifteen years.

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Illustrations

Fig. 1. Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, *Untitled (Kwaty anganenty rntwem — Rain Dreaming Dance)*, 1972. Synthetic polymer paint on composition board, 51 x 35cm, Sydney, private collection.

Fig. 2. Francis (Frank) Gillen, *Rain dance at Charlotte Waters*, c.1895. Glass plate photograph, Melbourne, Spencer Collection Museum Victoria.

Fig. 3. Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen, *Erkita Corroboree, Alice Springs*, c.1896. Glass plate photograph, Melbourne, Spencer Collection, Museum Victoria.

Fig. 4. Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, *Men's Ceremony for the Kangaroo, Gulgardi*, 1971. Watercolour on plywood, 61 x 137cm, Alice Springs, Araluen Arts Centre.

Fig. 5. Unknown (Anmatyerr stockman), *Mustering on Beetaloo and O.T. Stations, Northern Australia*, 1929. Pencil on paper, Adelaide, South Australian Museum, A1038 Acc 268.

Fig. 6. Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, *Pulapo (Ngkata) Possum*, 1973. Synthetic powder paint on composition board, 43 x 43cm, (unknown location), private collection.