

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WIK SCULPTURE ¹

INTRODUCTION

The Wik peoples of western Cape York Peninsula became widely known in Australia in the 1990s through their historic native title claim, but they have also become renowned for their distinctive sculptural tradition.²

The people who practise this tradition come from the area between the Embley and Edward Rivers on the Gulf of Carpentaria.³ When Aurukun Mission was set up on the Archer River in 1904, it very slowly began to draw in people from both north and south, although it was not until after World War II that the majority of the land's inhabitants had settled more or less permanently at Aurukun or at the nearby missions of Weipa and Edward River.⁴

Those who lived in the Aurukun Reserve became significantly isolated from their neighbours as a matter of conscious mission policy, from the 1920s until the 1960s.⁵ This may have contributed to a localised development of the sculptural tradition discussed here, centred on Aurukun.

Certain forms of traditional Wik life were encouraged by the Aurukun Mission in this period, including those ceremonial forms deemed acceptable to William MacKenzie, the all-powerful Presbyterian Superintendent (1923–65).⁶ He himself was initiated at Archer River and spoke at least basic Wik-Mungkan, the regional lingua franca.⁷ Western-style changes were also imposed or encouraged, and among these were the engagement of Wik men as workers in the mission sawmill and in learning carpentry for building and repairs. The woodworking skills they already had were augmented not merely by the use of better steel tools, but also by the use of carpentry techniques including sawing, morticing and nailing. The men applied these skills in the development of their pre-existing sculptural tradition, and at least since the 1940s have produced some of the most visually arresting ceremonial sculptures of Aboriginal Australia, with their attached or inlaid limbs, teeth, breasts, fins and eyeballs, their highly figurative approach to representation, and their strong use of bush colours.

The major general collections of Wik material culture come from Ursula McConnell, whose 1927 collection is mainly held by the South Australian Museum, and from Donald Thomson whose 1932–33 collection is held by Museum Victoria.⁸ The first substantial collections of Wik ceremonial sculptures, however, were made by missionaries J.B. McCarthy in 1949 and William MacKenzie in 1954, 1955 and 1958.⁹ These are held by the Anthropology Museum, University of Queensland. The largest single collection of Wik sculptures was made by Frederick McCarthy of the then Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, at Aurukun in 1962, and is held by the National Museum of Australia.

Steel tools, especially the short-handled axe, had thus probably made their way into the region long before the people settled at missions, perhaps as early as the late nineteenth century.¹² Given the relative isolation of the coastal Wik people at that time, however, the use of steel tools by Wik people was probably not common until after World War I.¹³ A practice of religious sculpture in a variety of forms, in media other than clay, and ranging from the abstract to the highly figurative, was certainly in place in the region by 1927.¹⁴

The production of sculptures under mission supervision at Aurukun was undertaken from as early as about 1960. MacKenzie wrote:

Some wood carving has been done by the older boys and young men under Mr. [Jock] Henderson's supervision. Crocodiles, turtles, sharks, and snakes have been carved out of the suitable local timbers. Some of the older men have been making woomeras, firesticks and spears for sale. We are grateful to the Director of Native Affairs for his assistance in the sale of these. All the proceeds from the sales except a small percentage to cover costs are paid to the people.¹⁵

FOREIGN INFLUENCES

The east coast and northern tip of Cape York Peninsula down to about the Pennefather River, which is not very far north of the Wik region, were classically characterised by a ceremonial tradition in which wooden drums, ritual grass skirts worn by men, and elaborate masks, including full-body masks, reflected an ancient Melanesian influence from Torres Strait.¹⁶ Dugout canoes of the same areas attest to an entrenched practice of large-scale wood carving. The making of dugout canoes had moved south along the west coast from Pennefather River to the central Wik coast by 1933, but had only done so 'since the recruiting of native labour for the bêche-de-mer and trochus fisheries'.¹⁷

This era, or slightly later, seems also to have been the period in which Torres Strait 'Island Style' singing and dancing were incorporated into Wik culture, with the songs being composed in local Wik languages but the outward forms being

THE GOVERNOR'S DANCE

MacKenzie's Aurukun Diary entries for 1958, like those of most years, were dominated by notes on mechanical repairs and other humdrum matters, mingled with the odd prayer and records of misdemeanours and punishments for everything from 'rudeness' to adultery to assault.¹⁸ MacKenzie ruled Aurukun with a rod of iron. But on 2 September he recorded that 'Barry and men' were working on a 'dancing ground', as if this were official mission business. The next day: 'Had practice for Governor's arrival. The Governor of Queensland, Colonel Sir Henry Abel Smith, was paying an official visit to Aurukun to invest MacKenzie as a Member of the British Empire.¹⁹

On the 4th:

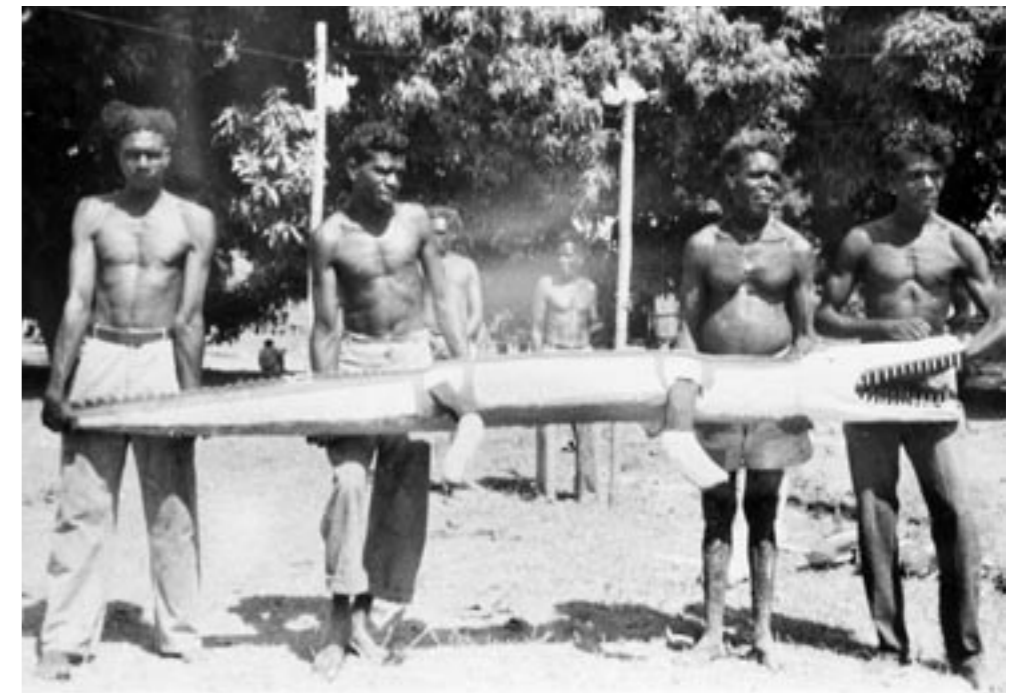
5.20 plane heard. Children lined up on strip & men in paint & spears. Plane landed. Governor stepped out. All sang National Anthem, introductions, Dr O'Leary, Dr Tuffley, Colonel Anderson (Aide), Capt. Keith Galloway. Inspection of Guard. Sgt Thornton, Councillor, Police & ex-Soldiers. Inspection of Children in Houses, Drover, Helicopter & Cessna (Boys), Hibiscus, Alamander Orchid (Girls). Governor showed great interest. After dinner to dance. Arplitch & Winchinum very fine performance & showing of sacred totemic birds & reptiles & fish.²⁰

According to MacKenzie '[t]he men came to me and asked if it would be alright if they came to welcome the Governor in paint and feathers and carrying spears', suggesting that the primary initiative for the ceremonial performances came from Aurukun residents rather than himself.²¹ He also wrote:

These models and dances had never been shown in public before, but the older men said they would show them in public in honour of the Governor. The models were most realistic—crocodiles, sharks, dingoes, stingrays, humans, crows, eagles and other birds—and the dances were very fine, depicting incidents from the lives of the different totemic creatures.²²

The Governor of Queensland left next morning after a spear-throwing demonstration, his own attempt with a spear and woomera apparently being 'quite a good effort'.²³ On 24 November the Diary records 'Jock H. & men busy packing & crating things from Governor's Dance to forward to Dr Winterbotham'.²⁴

In 1962 the political connection went federal. On November 16, MacKenzie noted in the Mission Diary that the 'Party to film dances' had arrived, including F.D. McCarthy (of Canberra's Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies), Peter Hinton (anthropologist then working at Weipa) and Ian Dunlop (film director, Commonwealth Film Unit), as well as camera operators and a sound recordist. McCarthy was the Institute Principal, Hinton an Institute grantee, and Dunlop and his crew were making the film for the Institute.²⁵



Ron Yunkaporta
Apelech Law Poles Set 2005
 synthetic polymer paint
 on milkwood
 86.0 x 16.0 x 16.0 cm;
 97.0 x 20.0 x 20.0 cm
 Courtesy of the artist,
 Wik and Kugu Arts and Crafts
 Centre, Aurukun and Gallery
 Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne
 Photographer: John Brash



AN 'ADAPTATION TO SPECIAL CONDITIONS AND CIRCUMSTANCES'

There is also, however, no doubt that in the 1962 case the event was carefully organised and promoted by the Reverend William MacKenzie:

*There appears to have been a planned approach to the dances by Aborigines to enable them to accede to McKenzie's [sic] wishes and to eliminate (a) secret-sacred matter, and (b) anything unpleasant in McKenzie's views. The whole of the 38 dances appear to me to form an intensely interesting example of adaptation to special conditions and circumstances, of the extent to which rituals can be modified for public demonstration, and of the influence a mission and a long-reigning missionary can have on the Aborigines.*³⁴

*The ceremonies were organised by the Rev. Mackenzie [sic] because he was about to retire and was anxious to have a film record made of them. He had most of the sculptures made before our party arrived at Aurukun but the Aborigines were still adding touches to some of them. He also had rehearsals of the dances, apparently, to see if there were any parts of them that he would not allow us to film.*³⁵ ... So far as I can remember he approached the Institute about this project...³⁶

The departure of MacKenzie from Aurukun in 1965 did not mean that the Wik sculptural tradition ceased to flower. Indeed it has continued to the early 21st century, mainly in the context of mortuary performances held at Aurukun township and principally for local and internal religious purposes, but also for artefact sales.

Since the 1980s some carvings have been sold on the fine art market, and a number of unpainted sculptures were for a time sold through the Aurukun Handcrafts outlet.³⁷ By the early 2000s the Wik and Kugu Arts and Crafts Centre had become established as the primary marketer of art and handcrafts from the Wik region. The making of ochre-painted sculptures for the purpose of sale has, however, been controversial among Wik people.³⁸

In the 1962 performance, at least, the revelation of the sacred had been part of an exchange between Wik people and the outside world, a world of which they knew little at that time. But the terms of the exchange were very much those engineered by powerful non-Aboriginal figures. Whether the sacred can survive under

FOOTNOTES

1. An earlier version of this essay was published on the *World of Dreamings* website (National Gallery of Australia, 2001) for the exhibition *Contemporary Australian Art in Modern Worlds* organised by the National Gallery of Australia at the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg. Reproduced by kind permission. This text was originally published in *Story Place: Indigenous Art of Cape York and the Rainforest*, Queensland Art Gallery, 2003 and is revised and republished on the occasion of the exhibition *Imagine... the creativity shaping our culture*. I wish to thank the following colleagues for helpful comments and/or archival assistance with the preparation of this paper: Ian Dunlop, Jacqui Lambert, Colin Sheehan, Vern Gibson, and especially Geoff Wharton. I also thank Cecil Walmbeng, Julie Chevathun and Jane Karyuka for assistance in identifying the people in the image, Leslie Walmbeng with mission carpenter Jock Henderson, Aurukun sawmill, c. 1960'.

2. In 1992 the High Court of Australia acknowledged the existence of native title in Australia, in its decision in the Murray Island (Torres Strait) case of *Mabo v. Queensland*. In 1996 the High Court, in *Wik Peoples v. State of Queensland & Ors*, found that the issuance of a pastoral lease did not necessarily extinguish native title rights and interests in the leasehold land. The Wik Peoples' native title claim, while in large part settled in their favour, was still under negotiation at the time of writing. Note that 'Wik' in this paper covers those now known locally as the 'Wik and Kugu peoples'. 'Kugu' is the southern term for 'language' within what linguists and anthropologists call 'the Wik group'.

3. In classical terms the Wik languages and cultural region extend from south of Archer River to the Edward, while the area north of the Archer to the Embley is part of what Wik people call the Wik Way ('Difficult Languages') area. The native title claim has been by a combined Wik (including Kugu) and Wik Way group of people resident at Aurukun, Pormpuraaw, Napranum and several other centres. It has also been a combined Wik and Wik Way population, originating in both cultural areas but mainly resident at Aurukun, which has developed the sculptural tradition discussed here.

4. See J.P.M. Long, *Aboriginal Settlements: a Survey of Institutional Communities in Eastern Australia*, Australian National University, Canberra, 1970. The Weipa Mission, founded on the middle Embley in 1898, was relocated to the Weipa Peninsula in 1932 and its now secularised descendant is the community of Napranum at Jessica Point, Weipa. Edward River Mission was founded near the mouth of the Edward River in 1938 and its likewise secularised community descendant is Pormpuraaw. Since the early 1970s out-stations have gradually enabled the resettlement of a number of outlying areas in the region, mostly on a part-time basis.

5. Letter from Peter Hinton to Frederick McCarthy, 8 April 1963, Weipa. McCarthy papers, AIATSIS Library, Canberra. Contact between the two communities did continue through this period, as is evident from, for example, marriages contracted between individuals resident at the two centres.

6. MacKenzie was first appointed in December 1923, served for a year, then returned to Melbourne to complete his studies at Ormond College. See Geoff Wharton, 'MacKenzie, William Frederick (1897–1972)', in John Ritchie (ed.), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 15: 1940–1980 Kem–Pie, Melbourne University Press, 2000, pp. 245–6. In all MacKenzie served at Aurukun for almost forty-two years. See Geraldine MacKenzie, *Aurukun Diary: Forty Years with the Aborigines*, Aldersgate Press, Melbourne, 1981.

7. From author's field data, beginning in 1976.

8. See U.H. McConnel, 'Native arts and industries on the Archer, Kendall and Holroyd Rivers, Cape York Peninsula, North Queensland', *Records of the South Australian Museum*, vol. 11, 1953, pp. 1–42; and E.G. Ramsay, 'Aboriginal artefacts in the Donald Thomson Collection 1928–1965', Microfiche, Museum of Victoria, Melbourne, 1986.

9. J.B. McCarthy was Acting Superintendent in 1949 while MacKenzie was serving as Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Queensland. He should not be confused with Frederick D. McCarthy (see below). MacKenzie left Aurukun on furlough in December 1948 then took up his role as Moderator in May 1949. From December 1948 to August 1949 the acting superintendent was C.D. (Doug) Sydney. J.B. McCarthy had been on furlough from Mornington Island and was then sent to Aurukun from September 1949 to July 1950. MacKenzie returned to Aurukun on 7 August 1950 (Geoff Wharton pers. comm.).

10. See F.D. McCarthy, 'The Dancers of Aurukun', *Australian Natural History*, vol. 14, 1964. McCarthy did not identify the observers concerned.

11. See p. 2 of F.D. McCarthy, *Aurukun Filming and Collecting of Sculptures*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), Canberra, 1962, Doc. 62/10/7.

12. See R.L. Sharp, 'Steel axes for stone-age Australians', *Human Organization*, 2, 1952, pp. 17–22. Sharp asserts this for the Yir-Yoront of the Mitchell-Coleman Rivers area to the south, although he says their sources were the Mitchell River Mission

14. Ursula McConnel's collection of 1927 included an ironwood mallet 'probably made with stone implements'. One even larger painted wood carving (a phallus), a painted ceremonial boomerang, twelve painted pandanus phallic symbols, decorated bullroarers, two 'symbolic fish' made of bark, and a highly naturalistic wax figurine of a male figure complete with genitalia and attached pubic hair. See McConnel, 1953, pp. 24, 35 + plates V, VII, XVII; and see Anne O'Gorman, 'Ursula McConnel: the Archaeology of an Anthropologist', BA Hons thesis, Australian National University, n.d.

15. See William Frederick MacKenzie, 'Aurukun Mission, Annual Report of Director of Native Affairs for the year ended 30th June, 1960', *Queensland Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 1960–61, p. 210.

16. See plates XXVII, XXVIII of D.F. Thomson, 'Notes on a Hero Cult from the Gulf of Carpentaria, North Queensland', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 64, 1934, pp. 217–35.

17. *ibid.*, p. 229.

18. Aurukun Mission Diary for 1958, MacKenzie Papers, AIATSIS, Canberra.

19. MacKenzie's published accounts of the visit almost fail to mention the purpose of the visit. See William Frederick MacKenzie's 'The Governor visits Aurukun', *Presbyterian Outlook*, vol. 42, no. 4, 1958, pp. 1, 3; and 'The Governor visits Aurukun', *Encounter*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1958, pp. 4, 5.

20. Apelech and Winchanam are two of the five regional ceremonial forms practised in the Wik region. The others are Shivirri (Saarra), Puch and Wanam.

21. See William Frederick MacKenzie, op. cit., p. 1.

22. See MacKenzie, *ibid.*, p. 1, 3.

23. *ibid.*, p. 3.

24. Jock Henderson was the mission carpenter at Aurukun from about late 1956 to September 1960 (Geoff Wharton pers. comm.). Dr Lindsey Page Winterbotham was a keen amateur anthropologist, a lecturer in medical ethics at the University of Queensland, and a founder of the Anthropology Museum of that University. See Barbara Langevad and Gerry Langevad, Editorial Notes, in L.P. Winterbotham, 'The Gaiarbau Story', *Queensland Ethnohistory Transcripts*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1982, Archaeology Branch, Queensland, 1982. Winterbotham was the channel whereby the 1949, and probably the later Aurukun collections, came to be deposited there. In 1950, when the 1949 sculptures arrived at the University, Winterbotham was Honorary Curator of the University Ethnological Collection as it then was. See letter from Registrar, University of Queensland to J.B. McCarthy, 13 April 1950, Anthropology Museum files, University of Queensland.

25. Aurukun Mission Diary for 1962, MacKenzie Papers, AIATSIS, Canberra.

26. Ie. Shivirri, with its ritual boss the late Angus Kerindun in charge.

27. See *Dances at Aurukun* [film: director Ian Dunlop], Commonwealth Film Unit Production for Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS), Sydney, 1964.

28. Ie. wuut, 'old men' in Wik-Mungkan. McCarthy's documentation, valuable as it is, bears all the signs of hasty work with people not well known to the ethnographer, in a language other than their own, these being limitations which McCarthy himself realised with regret.

29. Years later McCarthy wrote: '... we had to leave suddenly when a plane arrived to take us back. I had intended to spend another week questioning the Aborigines about the dances and sculptures but most unfortunately this was not possible'. Letter from F.D. McCarthy to Geoff Sutton 15 January 1987, the author's files. MacKenzie had a long history of not tolerating unwanted anthropologists at Aurukun, beginning with Ursula McConnel in 1927—see p. 101 of O'Gorman, 1993—and this may have been another case. Perhaps McCarthy had already accomplished what MacKenzie had wanted.

30. McCarthy, 1962, op. cit., p. 3.

31. *ibid.*

32. Aurukun Mission Diary 29 November 1962. The carpenter at that time was Henry Kanofski (Geoff Wharton pers. comm.).

33. The River Whaler Shark, *Carcharhinus leucas*. See C. Kilham,



such conditions, even when ‘self-managed’ rather than stage-managed by a Superintendent MacKenzie, remains to be seen. The gift of the 1962 Wik sculptures to the Australian nation can, however, be understood as having achieved one of its main objectives very thoroughly: that of recognition and respect for a remarkably energetic and aesthetically powerful religious tradition, and for its custodians as a people.

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Thanks to Mary Filsell, Research Assistant, Anthropology Division, The Science Centre, South Australian Museum for providing details for ‘The place of images in the ceremonies’.

and cattle station Aborigines to their south. Even into the 1930s he says they had no contact with the Aurukun Mission people. Stone axes were used before steel ones, but even so they do not appear to have been very common.

13. A number of Aurukun artefacts were given by Elizabeth Allen to the Queensland Museum in the years 1914, 1915 and 1916. She had visited Aurukun on 22–23 May 1914 with husband James Allen, then a Queensland state politician and member of the Presbyterian Church of Queensland Committee on Missions to the Heathen. See Walter Owen, ‘Report of Aurukun Mission Station, 1913–14’, *Minutes of Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australia*, Session 10 (September 1914); and see D.B. Waterson, *A Biographical Register of the Queensland Parliament 1860–1929*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1972. As in the case of other parts of Cape York Peninsula, this 1914–16 collection included mallets and painted bullroarers fashioned from hardwood, and there is no doubt that these forms of carving predated steel tools in the region. The language of the registered names of the artefacts is most probably a variety of Wik-Elkenh (= Wik-Alkan, Wik-Ngatharr), a dominant language of the area between the Love and Kendall Rivers. One of the 1914 items is described as a ‘native chisel’ (‘ma-chal’). These appear to be the earliest known Wik collections still in existence, apart from a single neck ornament from Archer River registered at the Australian Museum (Sydney) in 1905 and collected by W.E. Roth.

M. Pamulkan, J. Pootchemunka and T. Wolmby, *Dictionary and Source Book of the Wik-Mungkan Language*, Summer Institute of Linguistics, Darwin, 1986.

34. Letter from F.D. McCarthy to John von Sturmer, 8 November 1972. McCarthy papers, AIATSIS Library, Canberra.

35. MacKenzie would not allow the women to play their normal roles as performers on this occasion: ‘Rev Mackenzie would not allow the women’s act at the end of each dance to be performed, though in some of them, as Von Sturmer has pointed out, the men substituted for the women and performed their act. Whether Mackenzie abbreviated them in any other way I do not know’. Letter from F.D. McCarthy to Peter Sutton, 15 January 1987, the author’s files.

36. Letter from F.D. McCarthy to Peter Sutton, 26 January 1987, the author’s files. On the other hand, W.C. Wentworth advised AIAS Council that ‘while at Aurukun [at some time prior to the filming event] he obtained the consent of Mr. McKenzie [sic] to stage a corroboree for filming’ (AIAS Council minutes 15 September 1962, AIATSIS archives, Canberra).

37. In 1980 ‘wood carvings’ retailed through Aurukun Community Inc. at \$20–\$40 each, with a 20 per cent reduction for wholesale.

38. I particularly observed this at Aurukun in the 1970s and 1980s. Unpainted sculptures did not have the same powerful and dangerous spiritual properties as those that had been ochred.



Garry Namponan, *Shark* 2005
synthetic polymer paint on milkwood
54.0 x 110.0 x 54.0cm
Courtesy of the artist, Wik and Kugu Arts and Crafts Centre, Aurukun and Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne
Photographer: John Brash

Garry Namponan Selected biography

Born Aurukun Mission, Cape York 1960; lives and works in Aurukun and Cape Keerweer

Garry Namponan is a member of the Wik-Alkan and the Wik-Ngathan language groups and his ceremonial group is Apelech. His father’s country is south of Aurukun in the Cape Keerweer region, and his mother’s country is at Aayk on the Kirke River estuary. He was taught to carve and paint by his father, Angus Namponan (1930–1994), a well known artist from the region. Garry Namponan also studied art at the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education in the Northern Territory.

Selected group exhibitions

- 2006 *Carved from the Cape*, Australian Art Resources, Melbourne
- 2005 *New Directions from Aurukun*, Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne
- 2004 Hogarth Galleries, Sydney
- 2003 *Story Place: Indigenous Art of Cape York and the Rainforest*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
- 2002–05 *Native Title Business: Contemporary Indigenous Art*, national touring exhibition
- 2002 *Old way–New way*, Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), Sunshine Coast, Queensland

Selected bibliography

- Ann Curnow, Chris Kilham and Mary Tarpencha, *Wik kath*, A–C, Summer Institute of Linguistics, Australian Aborigines Branch, Darwin, 1978
- Sarah Stutchbury, ‘Garry Namponan’, *Story Place: Indigenous Art of Cape York and the Rainforest*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2003, p. 78
- Peter Sutton, ‘Sacred images and political engagements’, *Story Place: Indigenous Art of Cape York and the Rainforest*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2003, pp. 54–59

Ron Yunkaporta Selected biography

Born Aurukun Mission, Cape York 1956; lives and works in Aurukun

Ron Yunkaporta is an Elder and custodian for the Wik-Ngathan language group and is a senior member of the Apelech ceremonial group. His father’s country is south of Aurukun at Aayk on the Kirke River estuary, and his mother’s country is in the Cape Keerweer region. His family has had a long history of carving ceremonial objects. Ron Yunkaporta has also worked as a senior ranger, travelling throughout the Cape York region, and is now a full-time police officer in the Aurukun community.

Selected group exhibitions

- 2006 *Carved from the Cape*, Australian Art Resources, Melbourne
- 2005 *New Directions from Aurukun*, Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne
- 2004 Hogarth Galleries, Sydney
- 2003 *Story Place: Indigenous Art of Cape York and the Rainforest*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane

Selected bibliography

- Tony Albert, ‘Ron Yunkaporta’, *Story Place: Indigenous Art of Cape York and the Rainforest*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2003, p. 81
- Peter Sutton, ‘Sacred images and political engagements’, *Story Place: Indigenous Art of Cape York and the Rainforest*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2003, pp. 54–59
- Garry Namponan and Ron Yunkaporta exhibit their work with the assistance of the Wik and Kugu Arts and Crafts Centre, Aurukun.
- This information has been sourced and compiled with assistance from the Wik and Kugu Arts and Crafts Centre, Aurukun and Mary Filsell and Peter Sutton, Anthropology Division, South Australian Museum, Adelaide.

INNOVATION OR EFFLORESCENCE?

In 1964 Frederick McCarthy wrote:

*Just how long these carvings have been made is not known. The natives say that they have made them in wood only since steel tools became available from the white man, but careful observers of Aboriginal customs who visited these tribes over long periods between 1890 and 1934 did not mention these sculptures.*¹⁰

In an unpublished report McCarthy had provided a little more detail:

*I was informed by one of the oldest men in the village that these figures have been carved in wood only since the Aborigines were able to obtain old horseshoes from the cattle stations, and steel axes from the missions (since about 1894), and that prior to the use of metal tools the images were modelled in clay (which was painted when dry) at the auwa totem centres.*¹¹



Dancers with sculpture, Aurukun
Photographer unknown c.1958
Courtesy of the Mackenzie Collection,
Audiovisual Archives, Australian
Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander Studies (AIATSIS), Canberra

typically Torres Strait. Although Wik sculptures play no part in Island Dance performances at places such as Aurukun, this does not mean that there has been no Torres Strait influence on Wik carvings.

If the efflorescence of Wik sculpture is to be partly ascribed to outside influences, carpentry is therefore probably not the only one. On the other hand, an ‘inside influence’ in addition to the drive and energy of the Wik clan members themselves was certainly that of the mission superintendent’s own intentions.

The 1949–58 collections now in Brisbane and the major 1962 collection now in Canberra do appear to have been an elaboration of an existing tradition, but at least in the 1958 and 1962 cases William MacKenzie played a special role. This role was very much to do with the connection of the Aurukun Mission, and perhaps unintentionally the Wik peoples themselves, to centres of political power via the medium of cultural display.

MacKenzie was taking no chances.

The next day he

[w]ent to see carvings, had them shifted out to dance ground, had some men do dances with figures without dressing up, to time them.

The following day was a Sunday.

Church Service. Phil[ippians] 4:11 For I have learned in whatever state I am therewith to be content. Ex[odus] 14:15 God said to Moses ‘Go forward’. Rations. Mr McCarthy speaking with old men.

Only ‘Dance’ is relevantly recorded for the following Monday, but on the Tuesday Peter Hinton returned to Weipa and the plane brought in two powerful figures: W.C. Wentworth, a senior federal parliamentarian and the man credited with persuading the Prime Minister of the day to create the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, and D.W. McElwain, Professor of Psychology of the University of Queensland and later Chairman of the Institute’s Psychology Advisory Committee. They left after two days.

MacKenzie kept an eye on proceedings:

*Tuesday 20 November: ... Went out to dance ground. Dancing. Shivare Angus.*²⁶ *Good days photography all day till 5.*

Wednesday 21 November: ... Men dancing

Thursday 22 November: ... Men dancing.

Friday 23 November: ... Men dancing

Saturday 24 November: ... Dancing all day, final total 37 dances.

Not a man of many words, about these stunning performances of high art and religious intensity.²⁷ The stories figured in the carvings and tableaux and poetically alluded to in the song verses were not ‘just-so’ stories used for the trivial purposes of entertainment. They addressed not only the spiritual essence and origins of the performers and their relatives, and some eternal psychological concerns with sexuality, conflict and other similar themes, but also the foundations of the people’s political geography based on a complex system of social and local organisation.

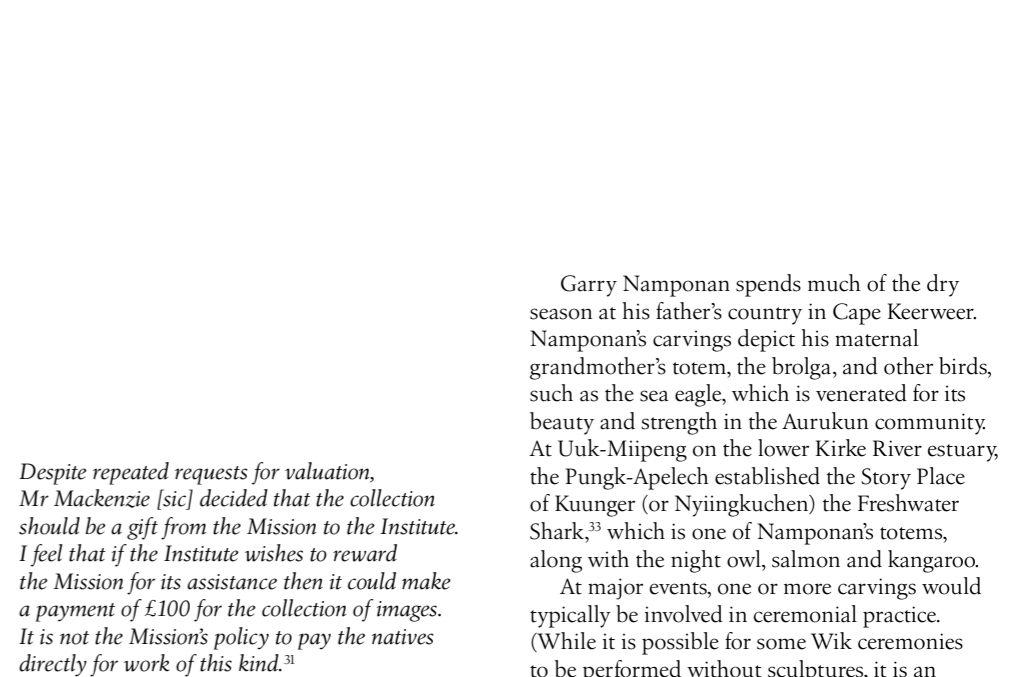
On the Sunday there was rest, and on Monday:

2 Bullocks. 1 1/2 for people who danced... Men half lay off for feast, bullock, flour and rice. After word on [air]strip. Mr McCarthy sorting figures from dance.

The film crew left the next day, while ‘Mr McCarthy [was] sorting and packing figures gear from Dance, getting information from Woorta’.²⁸ The timber for Mr McCarthy’s crates was milled on the spot at the Aurukun sawmill, as he packed the many sculptures for their journey to Canberra. He managed to fit in a little insect collecting among the mangroves just before going. Then, on Thursday: ‘Peter McLeod arrived after rain stopped & took Mr McCarthy out’. MacKenzie’s underlining of ‘took Mr McCarthy out’ suggests more than a little acidity.²⁹

On his return McCarthy reported that he and others in his party were the guests of bauxite mining company Comalco at Weipa one night each way. The Peter McLeod who had arrived to fly McCarthy out of Aurukun was in fact the manager of Comalco’s Weipa operation. ‘No charge was made for these services’.³⁰

MacKenzie had pulled off a coup, one that would put Aurukun on the federal map, and one that engaged the good will of the only significant industry muscle in the region. He had also made a great gift to the nation, without spoiling his tough regime at the Mission:



*Despite repeated requests for valuation, Mr Mackenzie [sic] decided that the collection should be a gift from the Mission to the Institute. I feel that if the Institute wishes to reward the Mission for its assistance then it could make a payment of £100 for the collection of images. It is not the Mission’s policy to pay the natives directly for work of this kind.*³¹

THE PLACE OF THE IMAGES IN THE CEREMONIES

Ron Yunkaporta is a song man for ceremonies and dancers, a senior member for the Apelech ceremonial group, and is responsible for Thuuth thaa’ munth (Law poles). The making and the designs of the Apelech poles have ceremonial and symbolic levels of significance. The law poles had an important place in traditional funeral ceremonies until the early 1960s but are now more commonly used in house opening ceremonies. The ochres are dried and cooked in paperbark to enrich their colour before being applied to the carved cotton tree poles. The white dotting represents the light reflecting from salt water against the red colouration of the setting sun on the west Cape. Apelech can be translated to mean *clear water*.

Garry Namponan spends much of the dry season at his father’s country in Cape Keerweer. Namponan’s carvings depict his maternal grandmother’s totem, the broлга, and other birds, such as the sea eagle, which is venerated for its beauty and strength in the Aurukun community. At Uuk-Miipeng on the lower Kirke River estuary, the Pungk-Apelech established the Story Place of Kuunger (or Nyiingkuchen) the Freshwater Shark,³³ which is one of Namponan’s totems, along with the night owl, salmon and kangaroo.

At major events, one or more carvings would typically be involved in ceremonial practice. (While it is possible for some Wik ceremonies to be performed without sculptures, it is an unusual occurrence). These sculptures are commonly used in performances where dancers re-enact dramatic events that follow the movements of their mythic heroes as well as the allocation and maintenance of land and law. The sorts of stories enacted would include the consequences of breaking clan laws. Some ceremonies focused upon increasing the number of game and resources for future generations and very importantly, many of the stories would centre around the bequest of country, rights and obligations by ancestral beings.

During a performance, the dancers often pick up the sculptures, causing them to be momentarily alive through dance and becoming actors in the ceremony. The sculptures could be said to become a physical icon of sets of rights and obligations to Ron Yunkaporta’s and Garry Namponan’s ancestral countries, as they are often the subject and the centre of the ceremonial action. Sculpture, song, dance, geopolitics, religion, obligation, and responsibilities to land are inseparable elements of this ancient tradition in practice.