

The Bush Economy Goes International

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It has been very difficult limiting this talk to the topic of the “Bush Economy Goes International”. There are many issues facing art centres today and not enough time to talk about them all. What does need to be noted is that the indigenous arts and crafts industry in the Territory is strong and deserving of support.

Aboriginal art and craft centres in the Top End of Australia are poorly resourced and chronically understaffed. The costs of operating small cultural enterprises out of a remote community are exorbitant and the art centres are often at the mercy of freight companies and other service providers. Faced with the day to day challenges of trying to raise the national and international profiles of artists and generate a reasonable income for the community, art centre staff are rarely permitted the luxury of developing overseas marketing plans or strategies. In the majority of cases art centres forays overseas are reactive rather than proactive. Initiated by an invitation or by other contacts such as commercial dealers, curators, collectors or wholesalers, most attempts to break into the international market are one off experiences that generate a lot of excitement and interest but are rarely immediately followed through with repeat visits because of the costs. There are of course exceptions to this rule and today I would like to look at two very different ways in which art centres have taken the bush economy international.

Some art centres like Maruku at Uluru and Warlukurlangu at Yuendumu have managed to travel to the United States with the help of export assistance grants. These grants match dollar for dollar the costs incurred by the art centre. Unfortunately only a handful of art centres have been able to take advantage of these programmes for a number of reasons. Not all art centres are export ready. Many of the smaller organisations still need to develop product and grow their business locally. Secondly, because of the high turn over in staff many coordinators do not know about the programmes. For this reason we are working with Austrade and DBIRD on ways to raise awareness of export programmes and organise collaborative projects in targeted overseas markets.

The first case study is *Kiripuranji (Clever with our hands)* which is the first touring exhibition of Indigenous Australian art from the Tiwi Islands to travel the world under the auspicing umbrella of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Australian embassies around the world will host the exhibition over the next 3 years, which presents a fantastic opportunity to market Tiwi art to the many countries on the itinerary. It was 8 months in the planning and is now part of Artbank’s permanent collection.

The compact exhibition showcased works chosen from the three Tiwi Art Centres (MunupiArts and Crafts, Jilamara Arts and Crafts and Tiwi Design) including works on paper and canvas, spears, tungas and a range of fabrics. The touring program for 2002-2005 includes the South Pacific, North & South America, the Middle East, Asia and Europe. In 2002 *Kiripuranji* travelled to Pohnpei, Fiji, New Caledonia, PNG and has began 2003 in New Zealand. *Kiripuranji* is opening in Singapore this month and is then, travelling on to East Timor in April and India mid year.

In November 2002, Tiwi artists Gordon Pupangamiri and Robert Puruntatameri were invited by the Australian High Commission, Port Moresby, PNG for the opening of *Kiripuranji* at the National Museum and Art Gallery in Port Moresby. The Tiwi artists also met with Museum staff and enjoyed cultural exchanges with artists in Residence at the Museum. Cultural events included a tour of a Mota Koitabu village on the way to lunch and performances at Pari Village.

The exhibition was made possible because of the strong relationship between the three Tiwi art centres which has been strengthened by a strategic alliance established in 1998 and trading under the name Tiwi Art Network. The aims of the Network are:

- joint marketing and promotion of Tiwi art
- promote understanding of Tiwi art
- increase financial returns to the artists
- expand market presence
- Marketing Officer as a shared resource.

The Marketing Officer's position which is funded by ATSIC is based in Darwin, with regular travel to Bathurst and Melville Islands. The benefit of the Darwin location is that the Marketing Officer is close to commercial art galleries, free seminars, graphic designers, printers, etc. In this way the Tiwi art centres have partially overcome the disadvantages of trading remotely.

Touring exhibitions like this one are rare and require substantial amounts of government subsidy. It is universally acknowledged that when building a market for fine arts overseas audiences need to be educated about what is available and where it comes from. This exhibition will pave the way for future commercial exhibitions and hopefully raise awareness about the Tiwi Islands. By making the art of the Tiwi an Australian flagship in embassies around the world the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade have broken down two major barriers to art exporters, the first is the need to prove the authenticity of the work and the second is to establish in the minds of audiences that the work is of the highest quality. Not all overseas exhibitions have to be commercial to be successful and without these types of tours cracking the market is all that much harder.

The second case study is the Yidaki website designed and run by Buku- Larrnggay Mulka. I would like to thank Jeremy Cloake for providing the information and a lot of the text for this part of the talk.

Buku-Larrnggay is the Yirrkala based art centre for the Yolgnu people of the Miwatj region, northeast Arnhem Land. Established in 1975 Buku-Larrnggay is famous for its bark paintings, ochred hollow logs, wooden carvings, limited edition works on paper and yidaki. (more commonly known as didjeridus)

I'd like to focus today on the yidaki export initiatives of Buku-Larrnggay though the art centre exports artworks in all of the other categories.

The Yidaki or didjeridu is an important symbol of Australia both here and overseas and yet the bulk of sales to overseas tourists have been of low cost, poor quality

instruments lacking any authenticity and most of which are impossible to play properly.

It is actually common to see Indonesian made didjs with appropriated Aboriginal designs in tourist shops in Darwin, Cairns and Sydney. Despite this there has been a snowballing interest in the instrument overseas with an increasing number of people reaching a level of competence with the instrument that requires them to source better quality Yidaki.

For Yolgnu the Yidaki is more than just an instrument. There are spiritual aspects to its nature not the least of which is that it is one of the instruments accompanying all sacred song from which the law derives.

Yidaki fans in places like Japan, Germany, USA and UK are aware of the importance of the instrument to Yolgnu people and are keen to purchase authentic work from organisations who guarantee a substantial return to the artists, A change in the approach the art centre has taken to marketing and making yidaki has meant that the previously ad hoc sales of Yidaki overseas have developed into a niche market.

The alterations in production and marketing have been subtle and the improvements in exports significant rather than spectacular.

The following innovations have been adopted by the Centre

1. Yidaki are no longer seen as solely an art work. They are valued as an instrument. This has changed the way Buku- Larrnggay buy from the artist and has had an effect on the way the artists have produced and also which artists have increased production. Whereas before emphasis was placed on the artwork regardless of the playability or instrument quality now a Yidaki is judged primarily on if and how it plays.
2. Once Buku-Larrnggay committed to providing good quality reliable Yidaki service overseas they liaised with the senior Yidaki makers and demonstrated their recommended treatment of Yidaki at the point of production.
3. Buku-Larrnggay negotiated with their freight provider TNT a fixed and competitive set of rates that allowed them to quote with confidence the freight charges applicable to Yidaki sales.
4. They created a website that took innovative steps in giving remote purchasers a real feel for the Yidaki displayed on the site - www.octa4.net.au/yirrkala-arts/buku/yidaki/intro.html .
5. Buyers are provided with an artists' CV and a certificate incorporating a picture of the actual Yidaki purchased. This means that yidaki makers who are already renowned for their instruments can have their work clearly identified and up and coming producers can begin to be recognised as individuals.
6. Like any handmade musical instrument each Yidaki is different. This is particularly true where they are partly created by the natural growth of the tree and the pattern of termite activity. For this reason it is obviously crucial to find ways to accurately describe each instrument in as much detail as possible to any remote

customer. In the case of the website this includes an image which shows the view looking down the mouthpiece. This has not been done on any other website that we know of and is of great benefit to musicians trying to select a suitable Yidaki.

7. Jeremy Cloake and the yidaki artists have developed a new set of terms to describe the sound and different qualities of the instrument. This new language is recognised around the world.

8. The website was designed and constructed in house following a training program. It has been maintained entirely by Buku-Larrnggay staff since its inception.

9. One of the major originators of the overseas enthusiasm is Yothu Yindi's success in Europe in the nineties. The Yothu Yindi Foundation organises the Garma Festival annually. At each of the last three of these invitation only events the Centre has contracted to provide a Yidaki Master class where elder and internationally famous Yidaki maker and player, Djalu Gurruwiwi spends a week in advanced instruction of between 12-30 international yidaki musicians who each pay over \$1000 for the experience. This group has included many of the major non-Aboriginal Yidaki musicians, retailers and collectors from Europe, America and Japan.

The income figures over the past few years show there is steady sustainable growth in the value of the Yidaki exported. The nature of the product is that it is handmade, naturally harvested in a culturally appropriate way. This means that it will never be possible or desirable to mass-produce such quality instruments.

To ensure that the natural resources are not overly depleted Buku-Larrnggay Mulka have collaborated with the landowners, yidaki makers and Northern Territory Parks and Wildlife Service to conduct a study into the ecological sustainability of increased Yidaki production in one of our more heavily harvested areas.

A lot of the sales are generated after phone and email contact has been established with buyers. People rarely buy straight from the Website but require numerous further email descriptions and often ring up to hear their potential Yidaki over the phone.

This fits with our experience of the internet market. Customers are reluctant to buy art work directly off web sites and sales are made after personal contact has been made.

The improvement in quality of yidaki has not just happen. It is the result of a tangible commitment to supporting the artists. This includes assisting the Yidaki makers (often on weekends) in cutting the Yidaki in the bush (often hundreds of kilometres away from Yirrkala).

Going the extra mile and ensuring that artists and their needs are given priority does not always bring in the big dollars. What it does bring is high quality work and a reputation for excellence. To measure projects like this one on solely monetary terms is to miss the point. Art centres are not just commercial enterprises. They are cultural centres owned by the community.

The real employment growth is in the number of Yidaki makers who are able to have a reliable supplement to their other income as a result of the Centre's encouragement of their work. By purchasing more yidaki at better prices the benefit to Yidaki makers has been tangible. We expect these trends to continue and thereby provide work and income for local people.

Currently the major markets for yidaki and indeed other art forms are US, Japan, UK, Germany but the South American and Russian markets are also potential sales points and assistance is needed to help break into these countries.

Last year Buku-Larrnggay Mulka won first prize in the art and entertainment category of the NT Export Award. The prize was in recognition of the fivefold increase of yidaki export sales over the past 2 years and the efforts of the art centre.

Finally to address some of the questions listed in the conference issues paper.

1. How do we build greater employment management and involvement opportunities for Aboriginal people in the arts industry?

Support art centres. Recognise them as important resource agencies for producers and places where indigenous people can state the terms of agreements and benefit most from the market.

2. What role should government play?
 - Increase support for art centres. Recognise that they are under funded and that to act as agent, trainer and marketer for 100's of artists requires adequate staffing and support.
 - Recognise that the art and craft centres provide a good model for working in communities and develop government policies that are responsive to the needs of these organisations and indigenous artists.
 - Acknowledge that art practice is not a recreational activity for indigenous artists and that the indigenous arts and crafts industry brings millions of dollars into the Territory every year. (this point was clearly made by Lenore Dempksi in the discussion period)
 - Take a cross-government approach to working with art and craft centres. (Commonwealth and Territory and Local and across agencies as well). Art has a role to play in health and education programmes and the delivery of services to remote communities.
 - Formally recognise and support resource agencies like ANKAAA and DESART. Don't leave the funding to Commonwealth agencies. Put Territory funds into the industry.
 - Make art and craft centres the first point of call when organising government sponsored overseas art exhibitions. The Tiwi exhibition should not be a one off but rather the model for many more.

3. How can education help?

Training is everything. Workshops have contributed to the success and establishment of the Yidaki website and market. More training is needed and flexible funding is not redundant. The existing courses provided by educational bodies do not meet all the training needs of artists and art workers and are not always directly applicable to the workplace.

4. Should government be supporting art centres as enterprises or community centres?

If you ask people who have worked in art centres the answer remains the same. Support both the commercial and the community activities of art centres. They are not art factories and they are not just money makers. Most art and craft centres when compared to the broader commercial sector, are still small businesses who have not yet reached their full potential. To grow, these organisations require secure ongoing funding.

Just as a final note I would like to make clear the fact that aboriginal people are the largest investors in art centres. In a survey last year of our members 10 out of 19 respondents showed figures where artists contributed more money to the everyday running of the centres than government funding. In some cases artists through commissions contribute 2 – 4 times the level of government subsidy. These are indigenous organisations that should be taken seriously and permitted to focus on community needs as well as the broader market.