WARAKURNA ARTISTS

The Missionaries Came to Warburton

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Emilia Galatis with David Brooks, Anthropologist.

The story of missionaries in the remote Ngaanyatjarra lands is one of mutual respect and relative harmony. The mission being in the heart of the country, at Warburton, meant *yarnangu* (people) did not have to leave their homelands or abandon cultural obligations. At Warakurna, many artists including Eunice Porter, Judith Chambers, Nancy Jackson and Polly Jackson have childhood memories of the early mission days. The affection many *yarnangu* had towards the mission is reflected in their work. Tales of specific people and treasured memories indicate the important role many missionaries played in people's lives.

Warburton was established by the United Aboriginal Missionaries (UAM) in 1933 and formally closed in 1973. Throughout those forty years the mission survived "on a shoestring", with almost no government support. In these circumstances mission and *yarnangu* helped one another to survive. A mutually beneficial arrangement arose whereby *yarnangu* brought in dingo scalps that the mission could cash in for the bounty that existed at the time. While the mission was thus enabled to gain valuable finances, the people received in return some of the "whitefella" food that they had come to like. The existence of the mission was also valued for a variety of reasons. It provided them with a place of occasional respite from the harsh conditions of the desert, especially in drought years. It was the place at which they learned about God, something that they value enormously. Another boon involved them often willingly leaving their children with the trusted mission folk while they returned to live for spells in their own particular bush areas, also searching for the dingos whose scalps they would bring in at the time of their next mission visit. When the mission finally ended its administrative role in 1973, several missionary linguists like Amee Glass, Dorothy Hackett and Herbert Howell stayed on for many years, doing translations as well as Ngaanyatjarra literacy work with individual *yarnangu*. Artists tell specific stories that involve key figures from the mission, like the founding missionaries Mr Wade and Mr Jackson, and the later figures like "Miss Glass" and "Miss Hackett". These dedicated people undertook the monumental task of translating the New Testament and portions of the Old Testament, working together with approximately 40 Ngaanyatjarra

speakers from Warburton, Jameson, Blackstone, Wanarn, Warakurna and Tjukurla. Out of the Bible project, the world-class "Ngaanyatjarra and Ngaatjatjarra Dictionary" was published in 1972. This work was also achieved in conjunction with many Ngaanyatjarra people. It is a resource that is heavily used today and is a source of immense pride.

Judith Chambers grew up hearing about the missionaries arriving with camels at Warburton, and later saw *yarnangu* using camels themselves to travel great distances. During Judith's childhood, people still lived bush way, travelling around, but would come long distances into the mission where among other things they would attend church. As the years went by and *yarnangu* started to become more concentrated in the regions around the mission, but as Judith explains, they would still go out bush for holidays and for extended periods of time. People would walk, take camels or be dropped out in trucks from the mission for a few months. Judith relates how windmills and wells were built to supplement the water available from the age-old sources of creeks and rockholes, which could not sustain people on their own, now that people were using particular parts of the country more extensively. Every week the truck would head out to the main camps of people at the water-points, dropping off stores, like flour, sugar, tea, jam. When people got sick they would be taken back to the mission to be treated. Judith remembers being very sick once out bush and being taken back on the truck with her family. She was rushed to the mission hospital to be treated, while her parents waited anxiously in a wiltja (bough-shade) close by.

Today, the "mission time" represents an image of a relatively secure past in which people were able to adapt slowly, and at their own pace, to what in objective terms was a huge challenge – how to negotiate an engagement with the massively different wider world that was inexorably coming their way. The relationship they had with the mission allowed *yarnangu* to retain a crucial measure of autonomy. They were not just "on the receiving end", but had something of value, in the form of the dingo scalps that the mission could not have survived without. Nor did they come quickly and passively into the mission world – they retained their independent way of life over a forty year period, only gradually accepting the terms of a new sort of way of life, once they had fully assimilated the intermediate steps. Perhaps the autonomy and dignity implicit in these circumstances is part of what underlies the special regard they have for that era. On top of this was the intimacy that they shared with the missionaries – a feature that largely disappeared when more impersonal forces and players came on to the scene after "mission time" ended. Some of the flavour of these intimacies can be detected in the paintings.

(David Brooks has worked as an anthropologist on the Ngaanyatjarra Lands for over 25 years)