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**Article Title:** Re-Positioning Traditional Craft: Knowledge Affect and Social Identity

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Craft-making and craft objects play different roles in western and traditional cultures and hence craft cannot be understood outside of the cultural conditions in which it is made. In the West, industrial manufacturing and mass production that took hold in the nineteenth century overshadowed traditional artisans and the value given to the objects they produced. However, a resurgence of craft soon emerged as an attempt to re-structure creative labour and regain a romanticised pre-industrial past.

In traditional cultures quite a different picture emerges. In such societies geography, climatic and other environmental conditions as well as customs and belief systems determine the kinds of materials available for manufacture and the kinds of objects that are needed or desired. The making of objects is both utilitarian and ritualized; the designs, symbols and usage of objects often operate as an expression of shared identity.

In this sense we may speak of “relational craft” since craft in such contexts operates not only in terms of its use function but as a mode of preserving, extending and transmitting social relations and knowledge that would otherwise be lost. This includes, environmental, ecological, technical, traditional and cultural knowledge and also, a more profound knowledge: tacit knowledge which includes the skill derived from making and using craft objects that cannot be fully conveyed through language and therefore escapes documentation. This unspoken knowledge constitutes inter-

subjective “knowing” and affective relations that are deeply connected to places of dwelling and the material realities from which they emerge. Hence simply documenting, appropriating, copying or exporting traditional creations for commodity consumption and other purposes is not a guarantee of preservation of the integrity of cultural practices predicated on *experiential* connection to place and people. Maintaining practices in situ, but which are also emergent and responsive to change thus becomes a crucial aspect of conserving cultural heritage.

In this paper I will attempt to outline how the cohering of different domains of knowledge constitute a mode of doing and being that does not homogenies but rather constitutes both collective and individual identities that at a certain level may be understood through the notion of “life style”. Such a term allows us to go beyond articulating only those tangible, externalized and material aspects of culture, but also the attendant affects, values and belief systems that inform the practices of everyday life from generation to generation. Jess berry suggest for example that visible craft has played a significant role in articulating Australian national culture (Berry

Crucial to the emergence of identities are geographical location and the environment that are subject to change over periods of time. The imperative to respond to both permanent and shifting conditions of social and physical space involves ongoing processes of cultural production that preserve and perpetuate tradition whilst *at the same time* involve dynamic and constantly evolving practices. Contemporary influences can be grafted onto traditional forms of knowledge in ways that do not erase or replace traditional forms, but allow innovations to emerge that are nevertheless particular and situated. In some isolated Filipino cultural communities from the

Highlands for example, weavers and carvers are barely influenced by the outside world (Baradas, 2014). Their craft productions are grounded in the pristine patterns influenced by a close connection with nature. The materials dyes and motifs that are features of such productions are reflections of the natural environment and social practices that are rooted within it. These traditional craft makers share an intimate knowledge of the resources and techniques of making and specific ritual uses of their craft all of which have remained largely unchanged. However, with colonization and globalization, the notion of “untouched” and unadulterated cultures has become an anachronism, as I will illustrate in more detail later in this paper with reference to examples of Australian art and craft practices. Before this I would like to discuss the connection between relational craft and relational knowledge.

### **Relational Craft and Relational Knowledge**

In his book *Relational Aesthetics* (2002) Nicholas Bourriaud suggests that art (and by extension craft) can be understood as “participatory” in that it involves interactions with objects that also engender and affect social encounters. This is so, because the audiences of art are integral to the way in which art objects articulate the meanings, values and uses that the art object embodies. The maker’s practice and approach to making also determines the kinds of relationships that may be formed with the work. Hence, according to Bourriaud, the object may be viewed as separate from capitalist exchange. What the artist produces is “first and foremost “relations between people and the world by way of aesthetic objects (Bourriaud, 2002:42). Bourriaud’s work suggests that the west is just beginning to catch up with many non- western societies’ conceptions of the role of aesthetic objects. In such societies the notion of relationality is imbricated in all

aspects of daily life. How can we articulate more clearly the way relationality through craft, operates as a central mechanism in the forging of individual and collective identity? Drawing on Bourriaud's thinking, and then going beyond his primarily *social* focus, I suggest that key to this is a deeper understanding of the dimension knowledge that I posit as, "relational knowledge," knowledge as action and interaction.

In his influential work *Knowing and Being* (1969) Michael Polanyi asserts that there is an implicit dimension of knowing that he theorizes through notions of tacit and personal knowledge. Polanyi argues that all knowledge is fundamentally tacit since it includes more than what we can tell. A wholly explicit knowledge is unthinkable systematically misleading and culturally destructive (1969:166) Colonizers who either deny or try to capture and commodify such knowledge, put cultural diversity and specificity at risk. Preserving the integrity of traditional craft practices is therefore central to resisting the erasure of culture and identity. An understanding of the link between relational craft and tacit or relational knowledge helps to illuminate this further.

Craft making operates not only on the basis of explicit and exact knowledge, but also on that of tacit and experiential knowledge and skill derived from interaction with objects in the world and within a specific environment. Such practices are therefore always contextual and situated. The key to understanding the relationship between experience, practice and knowledge is the notion of "sense activity". Consider learning to ride a bicycle. It is impossible to tell another person everything he or she needs to know to be able to ride a bike. Only practice and experience will result in attaining such skill. Once this skill is attained however, the learner becomes part of a specific group of people who are connected through shared knowledge that cannot be fully grasped by

others who have not yet learned to ride a bicycle. We can understand this shared knowledge as “relational knowledge” derived through interaction with objects in the world; it distinguishes a group of people on the basis of tacit knowledge that is situated in doing and also confers upon individuals in that group an aspect of their identity. “She is a weaver, he is a didgeridoo player” and so on. Destruction of traditional craft practices not only results in loss of knowledge, but also destroys the relationality upon which social identity relies - and by extension, the social cohesion upon which individual wellbeing is founded. As already noted above, this is not to suggest that traditional art craft practices are frozen in time, but rather that they emerge according to changes in local and environmental conditions and through shared practices handed down from generation to generation. Also this does not result in denial of individuality. We may turn again to Polyani who provides an explanation through his account of personal knowledge. For each of us, learning to ride a bike or make a craft object is a unique experience that relies on the length of our legs or fingers and other physical and cognitive capacities as well as the nature of the materials or bicycle itself. Then, there is place of making or the terrain in which the riding occurs, which may vary from person to person. Hence, each of us develops an additional layer of tacit knowledge that can be understood as “personal knowledge”. This determines our particular style of making or way of riding a bike and in the case of craft makers it is what may distinguish a master craftsman from others. Variability and heterogeneity sustains social dynamism and a responsiveness to change that leads to innovation.

## **Relational Knowledge and Contemporary Practice**

Sylvia Kleinhart (2010) explores how cross-cultural practices offer a broader, more inclusive framework for contemporary art and craft in southeastern Australia, a framework that helps to recuperate and reinvigorate Indigenous identity. Such practices grounded in dynamic Aboriginal cosmologies demonstrate both continuity and innovation.

### **The Possum Skin Cloak: Intercultural Relationality**

In February 2008 *Ngambri/Ngunnawal* elder, Matilda House, dressed in a possum skin cloak and performed the first Indigenous “Welcome to Country” for the opening of the Australian Parliament in Canberra and then, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologised to the Stolen Generations. This event marks the way in which the use of ritual artifacts changes in response to changing social and political landscapes. The possum skin cloak, a ceremonial item of clothing is also a crucial means of ensuring that the stories, practices and knowledge of the past is preserved. The cloaks are made through a technique of tanning the skins with ochre and other local materials and then burning into the hide the song lines of the group to whom the cloaks belong.

Today, Indigenous artists demonstrate how both traditional and contemporary forms operate to revitalize and restore culture and Indigenous identity. In the South East of Australia, Aboriginal Australians were subjected to relentless colonisation, resulting in disease, violence and dispossession of traditional lands. People were removed to remote missions and reserves and hence separated from the material foundation of their cultural practices. Dress was part of the civilizing process used by the colonizers and colonial officials imposed government-issue clothing on Aboriginal people. Within decades of settlement, traditional clothing including the possum skin cloak had almost

completely disappeared endangering a crucial object through which cultural knowledge was transmitted. Kleinhart suggests that as somatic objects, the items of dress are transformative, they as an expression of identity and difference and a means of mediating with a settler society. Viewed from within Aboriginal cosmologies grounded in continuity and innovation, through the possum skin cloak, the past becomes a referent for the present (Kleinhart, 2010:12).

In other words, contemporary art and craft making and uses of ritual craft objects that incorporate traditional motifs, can become a means of addressing the unresolved histories of colonial history and a means “self-performatively taking control of representations (Kleinhart, 2010). Hence, it can be argued that they operate as a form of political action that contributes to social and cultural cohesion. Seen in relational and processual terms, art and craft making become a means of intervening in discourses of Aboriginality, an engagement that involves imagining a future and finding new ways of articulating affective connections both between people and people and people and place. We have already seen how relational craft and knowledge forge such connections through interactive and collective “knowing”. This knowing is also implicated the affective relations to which I will now turn.

Another key to understanding how art and craft produce social cohesion is the notion of “affect”. Creative productions exert a strong influence on emotional states. A sense of belonging and connection is often sustained through representations of the familiar that engender processes of recognition and identification. Through this recognition, craft and art objects open up a space for the transmission of shared memories and emotions. Because craft emerges through local knowledge and is rooted in specific

localities, it also engenders self-identification. Jeff Malpas (2004) observes that there is no possibility of understanding human existence and especially human thought and experience other than through an understanding of place and locality (2004:16). Through his account, place can not only be understood as an extension of human desire for nurture and security, but as the very foundation of human thought. Place is more than where we are, it is also how we are and how we know and connect to self and other. Hence a sense of place is essential to creating meaning, understanding ourselves and creating community. The transmission of affects through craft is made possible because of its connection to place. By engendering processes of reciprocal and mutual exchange and identification with others through relational knowledge and the transmission of affect, craft making in its various forms can be understood as a crucial means of sustaining individual and collective identity.

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