

## **FASHIONING IDENTITY**

### **Author/s**

Dr Anne Farren, Curtin University, Perth, Australia

Corresponding Author: a.farren@curtin.edu.au

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### **Abstract**

Throughout history, humans have expressed their identity through body adornment and dress. As the western concept of fashion emerged, it also became a significant vehicle for communication and expression of both individual and cultural identity. Australian Indigenous individuals and communities are injecting a new perspective on the expression of culture through fashion.

This paper contextualises local Indigenous Australians' engagement in fashion through the examination of national and global practice, while maintaining a particular focus on representation and communication of indigenous culture through fashion in Western Australia (WA). The paper examines both indigenous art group and individual designer engagement in fashion. Indigenous representation and engagement in fashion commenced in the 1980s in WA with the launch of the Desert Design label, which honours the work of Aboriginal artist Jimmy Pike, and the emergence of work by Aboriginal fashion designer Ron Gidgup. This legacy is now carried on by contemporary labels Deadly Denim, Kirrikin and Juluwarlu Art Group. All have paved the way for fashion to act as a vehicle for activism and a voice for Australian Indigenous peoples.

This paper also examines the role of the fashion event as a celebration of culture through the traditions of body adornment and performance. The representation of Western Australian Indigenous fashion culture has in recent years been promoted through significant events such as: the Junction Co Pilbara Fashion Festival, which included 'Karajini Runway' held at the remote location of Kalamina Gorge; the 'Pilbara Fashion Show Runway Gala' Port Hedland and the presentation of the Indian Ocean Craft Triennial (IOTA21) Fashion Showcase, 'Curiosity and the Cloth', presented at Boolabardup (WA Museum, Perth). As co-curator of 'Curiosity and the Cloth', specific focus is placed on this event as a case study and vehicle for reflection on fashion as a voice for Australian Indigenous culture.

### **Introduction**

Throughout history humans have express identity through body adornment and dress. What we wear is often described as our second skin, and functions as a vehicle for the expression of-

both individual identity and culture. Indigenous individuals and communities are injecting a new perspective into fashion. The establishment of Indigenous led fashion organisations globally including the Australian First Nations Fashion + Design (FNFD), is having a significant impact not only on the profile of Aboriginal designer work but also their expression of cultural values. This paper aims to provide an overview of Australian western desert and coastal based Indigenous artists and designer engagement in the creation of fashion-based work. It will establish the foundation for further research and acknowledge the role fashion is playing in the expression of identity and the enrichment of fashion practice more broadly.

In writing this development paper, I acknowledge that my perspective is of an outsider. I respectfully speak about local Indigenous fashion and textile practices of the western regions of Australia including the western desert areas of the Northern Territory, and the Kimberley, Pilbara and the southwest regions of Western Australia. Discussion includes artists, designers and groups who identify with the lands of the Ballardong, Banjima, Bardi, Bibbulmun, Bunuba, Gooniyandi, Kariyarra, Kurntikujarra, Luritja, Menang, Ngarluma, Nnga Nyikina, Nyul Nyul, Wadandi Walmajarri, Wangkatjungka, Whadjuk Nyungar<sup>1</sup>, Yawuru, Yindjibarndi Yinjaa-Barni peoples and their languages.<sup>2</sup> I bring to this investigation reference to published information and tacit knowledge<sup>3</sup> of the fashion industry gained over the past forty-five years of engagement in the creative industries, with a specific focus on fashion and textiles in the past thirty years. I am also fortunate to have lived and worked on several different traditional lands during my life;<sup>4</sup> experiences that reinforce my desire to support Indigenous practice in the Western regions of Australia and the dissemination of knowledge to the broader community. As a non-indigenous researcher, I seek to decolonise my position and language, signalling the need for the inclusion of the voices of Indigenous designers to further this research (Bedford, 2020).

My long-standing experience within the fashion and textile design industry, including a role on the Perth Fashion Festival Advisory Board, has allowed me the privilege of seeing the emergence and growth in vitality of local Indigenous practice in recent years. This development paper represents the foundations for further research. It aims to recognise and share more broadly through publication, the work of Indigenous designers from the western regions of Australia and recognise their contribution to the development of a circular, ethical and inclusive fashion practices.

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<sup>1</sup> The word for this First Nation language can be found in English language literature spelt, Nyungar, Noongar, Nyoongar, Nyoongah, Nyungah, Nyugah, Yungar and Noonga.

<sup>2</sup> Reference is made to public record of artist/group identification as belonging to a specific tribal/language or land. Reference was also made to Horton (1996) map 'Aboriginal Australia' to assist in the identification of traditional lands.

<sup>3</sup> I refer to the description "tacit knowledge consists of a set of ingredients in an individual's head which are a range of experiences, education, technical know-how and cultural values" (Venkitachalam & Busch 2012: p.316)

<sup>4</sup> I have lived in Marble Bar, on Nyamal land, Yandanooka on Amangu land and Perth, Wajuk Country and worked in Karratha on Jaburra land.

## **Out West - Indigenous Design**

The early presentation of Australian Indigenous artists work in fashion was facilitated through collaboration. This involved the application of artwork onto cloth that was then used to create garments. Since the establishment of Ernabella Arts in 1949, and significant other Indigenous arts groups that followed including Tiwi Designs and Utopia, “[d]ecoration and enhancement of processed textile surfaces has become widespread as a means of creative and cultural expression for Australian Indigenous people...” (Mellor, 1999, p. 26). More than twenty years ago Mellor (1999, p. 29) described contemporary Australian Indigenous textile arts as becoming “a crucible where values from each culture are incorporated in the other.” This is a prediction that I suggest has more recently been realised within the paradigm of fashion.

The approach taken by Ernabella Arts, Tiwi Design and Utopia have had a significant impact on the development of Indigenous fashion design in Australia. In Western Australia, the first contemporary mainstream fashion label to emerge profiling Indigenous design was Desert Designs. Desert Designs was established in the early 1980s in collaboration with Jimmy Pike of the Walmajarri people in the Kimberley Great Sandy Desert region, (Japingka, n.d. a) The label was set up as a commercial operation, translating Pike’s artworks onto textiles that were applied to a range of lifestyle products including fashion. Desert Designs went on to achieve local, national and global recognition. (Japingka, n.d. b) Following a ten-year hiatus, the fashion label was re-launched in 2014 and continues the collaboration through considered consultation by current directors Jedda-Daisy Culley<sup>5</sup> and Caroline Sundt-Wels’, with Pike’s wife Pat Lowe (Chandra, 2013). The significance of Jimmy Pike’s work in the expression of land, culture and its symbols were recognised by the Art Gallery of Western Australia through a major retrospective and catalogue curated by Mike O’Ferrall in 1998 (O’Ferrall and Pike, 1998).

Nyungar man Ron Gidgup laid the foundations for the emergence of Indigenous fashion in Western Australia. He established the fashion label Gidge Designs in 1987. Following the receipt of the Seamstress Award at the ‘1990 Aboriginal Gown of the Year’, he became a trailblazer for Indigenous fashion. I first became aware of the significance of Gidgup’s work and his involvement in fashion and textile design in the 1990s. His work was featured in the fashion show ‘Kwobinyarn Bokka’<sup>6</sup> held in 1993 at the Museum of Western Australia, to celebrate the Year for Indigenous People. He was the costume designer for the Barron film ‘Day of the Dog (Blackfellas)’, filmed in Perth Western Australia and released in 1993. Gidgup’s work was represented in the Western Australian Museum 1999 exhibition ‘Katta Djinoong: First Peoples of Western Australia’ (Choo, 2000, cited in Scott et al., 2000, p. 348). His work “Wolang Gabbi (Dress to Water) 2002-2003” (Figure 1), featuring fabric with a waterhole motif, is also represented in the WA State Art Collection. Today there is a generation of designers who recognise Gidgup’s place in the establishment of Indigenous fashion practice

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<sup>5</sup> Steve Culley, father of current co-director Jedda-Daisy Culley, was an art teacher to Jimmy Pike in the 1970s, encouraging the development of his art practice and was instrumental in the establishment of Desert Design label in the 1980s. The brand is now based in Melbourne, on the East coast of Australia. (Halliwell, 2014)

<sup>6</sup> Kwobinyarn Bokka’ also included a Sunseeker Swimwear range created by Aboriginal artists, including Jimmy Pike, with designs available from Desert Designs in Fremantle.

(Pascoe and Taylor, 2020). His place and influence is recognised by Indigenous designers: Gidgup is described by Teagan Cowlshaw as the “Godfather” of Aboriginal fashion (Cipriano, 2017) and as “the first Aboriginal fashion designer in WA” (Mia, 2020).



Figure 1. Ron Gidgup, *Wolang Gabbi (Dress to water)* 2002-2003, taffeta, satin, gutta pearl drops, diamante studs and net petticoat. 175 cm height. The State Art Collection, The Art Gallery of Western Australia. Purchased 2003. © Ron Gidgup, 2002-2003.

There is a depth to the history of Indigenous fashion practice that has not until recently been recognised. In 2018, Bardi fashion designer Teagan Cowlshaw undertook a studio residency in the State Library’s Co Creative Studio space. Working with Gidgup and designer Francine Kickett,<sup>7</sup> a Wiilman Nyoongah Yorga woman, Cowlshaw curated the exhibition ‘Bibullmun Bardi’, which centred on the evolution of WA Indigenous fashion and textiles (Capriano, 2017). This exhibition presented the work of Ron Gidgup, Lilla Gagliano (Banjima and Yindjibarndi woman), TJ Cowlshaw (family connections to the Bardi and Nyul Nyul people), Bruce Wiggan (senior man of the Bardi tribe), Sally Bin Demin, Leticia Shaw (Gooniyandi and Ngaanyatjarra Aboriginal woman), Peter John Farmer (a descendent from a number of Noongar groups, including the Whadjuk, Minang, Wilman and Wardandi peoples), Mangkaja Arts

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<sup>7</sup> Francine Kickett ran Bushwa Designs from 2000-2010 working as a freelance textile designer and collaborating with fashion designers on the development of collections. (Kickett, 2021)

(geographically located at the junction of Nyikina, Punuba, Gooniyandi lands) and Marnin Studio who work with Bunuba, Gooniyandi, Nyikina, Walmajarri and Wangkatjungka people. Cowlshaw described the exhibition as presenting a “...historical timeline after the 1967 referendum.” Since this exhibition, there have been significant developments for the participants including, Lilla Gagliano relaunch of her label Kaninda in 2022, following a seven-year break (Ruben, November 22, 2022), and Sally Bin Denim’s fabric painting being featured on the SBS television series ‘Characters of Broome’ (Grant, 2020).

### **Performance, Empowerment and the expression of identity**

Engagement in the creation of fashion and textile-based artifacts and their presentation through exhibition and fashion events, provide an opportunity for the expression of cultural identity and empowerment. The runway show is a performance with the opportunity to enhance the expression of a narrative. Anna Haebich’s (2018) book *Dancing in the Shadows: Histories of Nyungar Performance* provides a comprehensive overview of performance of the Nyungar people and the significance corroboree. While the book only speaks of the Nyungar people, the term ‘corroboree’ is used to describe the Australian Indigenous peoples’ practice of meeting and provides a direction for further investigation.

In recent years, there have been a number of major local runway shows that have focussed on ensuring the representation and promotion of Western Australian Indigenous fashion:

1. The ‘Chirriger’ (Totem<sup>8</sup>) collection, a solely Indigenous designer runway show was presented in 2017 as part of Perth Fashion Festival. Work was created via collaboration between Indigenous artists Peter Farmer (Snr.) and Kylie Graham who joined forces with Red Opium fashion designer Sandra Rives (Studio Startup, 2017);
2. The Junction Co, 2021 Pilbara Fashion Festival (The Junction Co., 2021a) which included the ‘Karajini Experience’ runway, held at the remote location of Kalamina Gorge and the ‘Pilbara Fashion Show Runway Gala’. The festival and fashion events profiled Indigenous designers from the Kimberley, Pilbara, Perth and the Mid West. The Karajina fashion show, ‘The Art of Everyday’, took fashion on country. The performance was enriched by the backdrop of ancient rocks, waters and the rich cultural history of the Karijini, with the soundscape of the West Australian Symphony Orchestra string quartet (The Junction Co., 2021b). Equally dramatic was the presentation of the Runway Gala event, held on the Port Hedland lookout overlooking the ocean and surrounding landscape;
3. The Indian Ocean Craft Triennial Australia (IOTA21) fashion showcase, ‘Curiosity and the Cloth’, was held at Boola Bardup (Western Australian Museum - Perth). ‘Curiosity and the Cloth’ featured capsule collections by First Nations designers from countries around the Indian Ocean rim. Work from Western Australia and the Northern Territory designers was contextualised globally through presentation alongside work from Kenya, India, Malaysia and Thailand. (IOTA, n.d.)

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<sup>8</sup> Chirriger, meaning ‘Splendid Blue Fairy Wren,’ is a Nyunga totem

4. Deadly Denim x Funk n Soul 97 – Runway Event, was coordinated by Rebecca Rickard (Barlow) and held at The Navel Store as part of the City of Fremantle, ‘Fremantle Festival 10 Nights in Port 2022’. The show was a First Nations Fashion event that celebrated local designers Tia Semi – Funk N Soul 97 and Rebecca Rickard – Deadly Denim. Aboriginal, Māori and Pacific Islander culture were also showcased through fashion and dance. The event also presented collections from other established and local emerging designers including Kirrikin. (Fremantle Festival, 2022)

As a co-curator of ‘Curiosity and the Cloth’ I am able to provide firsthand knowledge of this event. A significant aspect of IOTA21 was the focus placed on showcasing fashion as a voice for Indigenous culture and practice. The expression of culture was explored through a variety of works that embodied traditional craft, featured surface decoration, profiled collaboration, environmental sustainability and more. The event featured a selection of capsule collections created by Australian First Nation groups and individuals, curated to represent the range and nature of practice based in the west of Australia and featured the work of Creative Culture, Deadly Denim, Ikuntji Artists, Kirrikin, Neil Sherrif X Shane Pickett and The Junction Co\_Art of the Everyday ‘Jina Jina’ collection (including work from Yinjaa-Barni Art | John Prince Siddon x Emma Buswell | Juluwarlu Art Centre).

Ikuntji Artists was established in 1992 and is located west of Alice Springs on Luritjia lands. It was the first art centre established by women in the Western Desert Art Movement and influenced by the Utopia community (Hamby and Kirk, 2022, pp. 12-15). Deadly Denim is a label owned and run by Creative Director Rebecca Barlow/Rickard. Barlow/Rickard is a Ballardong, Whadjuk woman, who brings together recycled denim garments and indigenous artists painting and surface design work. The digitally printed designs are patched onto recycled denim garments. Founded in 2018, Deadly Denim was also profiled at New York Fashion Week in 2021. Barlow/Rickard speaks of how important collaboration is for the growth and recognition of Indigenous practice (Miolin, 2021). Kirrikin is a label established and run by Amanda Healy who curates the selection of Indigenous artists’ work, which is digitally printed onto sustainable fabrics which are applied to the creation of a collection. Neil Sherrif X Shane Pickett was a collaboration between Neil Sherrif, the creative director and owner of Perth based fashion house Hoodedwept, and the work of Nyungar artist Shane Pickett, which is managed by Mossenson Gallery. The collaboration functioned in a similar manner to Desert Design, with the application of respectful translation of the artists’ work into garment. A selection of work from The Junction Co\_Art of the Everyday was made to compose the Jina Jina collection with representation from Yinjaa-Barni Art, John Prince Siddon x Emma Buswell and Juluwarlu Art Centre. The work celebrates collaboration and representation of the diversity of Indigenous practice from the Pilbara regions. Creative Culture is run by Bibbulmun Artist Lea Taylor from the Wadandi Menang and Koreng nations. Lea’s work reflects the integration of traditional craft practices including string and coil weaving, native plant dying and poker work that are applied to the creation of wearable forms within the collection. Figures 2 and 3 provide images of a look from each of the Australian Indigenous collections presented at ‘Curiosity and the Cloth’.



Figure 2. L-R: Creative Culture, Lea Taylor; Deadly Denim, Rebecca Barlow; The Junction Co\_Art of the Everyday. *IOTA21: Curiosity and the Cloth*. WA Museum Boola Bardip, 19 September 2021. Photo: John Koh. Courtesy Indian Ocean Craft Triennial Inc.



Figure 3. L-R Kirrikin; Ikuntji Artists; Neil Sherrif X Shane Pickett. *IOTA21: Curiosity and the Cloth*. WA Museum Boola Bardip, 19 September 2021. Photo: John Koh. Courtesy Indian Ocean Craft Triennial Inc.

Increasingly exhibitions and fashion shows are being initiated, curated and project managed by Indigenous practitioners, creating opportunities for full control of the messaging. In her curatorial overview for the exhibition ‘Piinpi: Contemporary Indigenous Fashion’ held at the National Museum of Australia in 2021, Shonae Hobson (2021) attributes Bardi artist Teagan Cawlishaw with using fashion as a vehicle for black empowerment. In the curatorial video for the exhibition, Hobson (2021, 11:21) describes the work of many of the designers in the

exhibition as functioning to “...reinforce powerful messages of indigenous presence and visibility within the colonial landscape.”

Globally first nation fashion events such as Vancouver Indigenous Fashion Week, the Indigenous Fashion Week in Australia and the establishment of the Australian First Nations Fashion + Design (FNFD) are presenting new ways of working with fashion. These events are led by Indigenous peoples and are inspiring local initiatives like the Fitzroy Valley District High School fashion project that is fostering a new generation of Indigenous designers (Ruben, December 8, 2022). Hobson and Lee (2020) state that “Indigenous Fashion is the future.”

My engagement in the practice of making emerged in the 1960s, when youth culture emerged as a driving force behind the democratisation of fashion. In the 1960s Victor Papanek stated that “designers need to be morally and socially responsible for the consequences their ideas have on society, including environmental impact” (Edelkoort 2020 p. 9). Papanek’s statement has become increasingly relevant today with First Nations designers leading the movement toward the re-establishment of meaning and value in fashion. I am privileged to have had the opportunity to work on projects with some of the designers discussed in this paper. I plan to continue this research in collaboration with individual designers and groups to capture a more comprehensive record and recognition of local Indigenous fashion. The aim here being to reinforce fashion’s role as a ‘crucible’ for the sharing of cultural values and the expression of identity.

## Figures

Figure 1. Ron Gidgup, *Wolang Gabbi (Dress to water)* 2002-2003, taffeta, satin, gutta pearl drops, diamante studs and net petticoat. 175 cm height. The State Art Collection, The Art Gallery of Western Australia. Purchased 2003. © Ron Gidgup, 2002-2003.

Figure 2. IOTA21 Curiosity and the Cloth. L-R: Creative Culture Collection, Lea Taylor; Deadly Denim, Rebecca Barlow; Juluwarlu Art Group. Photographer, John Koh.

Figure 3. IOTA21 Curiosity and the Cloth. L-R Kirrikin; Ikuntji Artists; Sherrif X Pickett. Photographer, John Koh.

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