

Our Future's Past: Indigenous Archival Discovery as a Catalyst for New Recording Initiatives in Remote Northeast Arnhem Land

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There is immense interest among Australia's remote Indigenous communities in discovering their recorded history. The introduction of new digital media to these isolated regions this century has enabled copies of rare materials held in cultural heritage collections worldwide to be returned home with unprecedented ease and rapidity. The rediscovery of these materials after many decades of radical socio-economic change in remote Australia has stimulated new awareness of history among these Indigenous communities, and has prompted many local elders to consider the recorded legacy that they themselves will leave for future generations.

This article traces current endeavours among the Yolŋu communities of remote Arnhem Land in Australia's Northern Territory (see Figure 1) to locate the earliest ethnographic records of local community life. It focusses on my research with the Yolŋu elder and academic, Joseph Neparrŋa Gumbula, whose own family history is vividly documented in the films of Cecil Holmes (dir. 1963, 1964), Alice Moyle's sound recordings circa 1962, and various photographs, artifacts and notes dating from 1924 that were collected by AP Elkin, AM McArthur, Donald Thomson, WL Warner, TT Webb and GH Wilkins. I will also explain how this historical research has stimulated new community efforts to comprehensively record endangered Yolŋu performance traditions in alignment with the National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia (NRP) (Marett et al. 2006; NRP 2007).

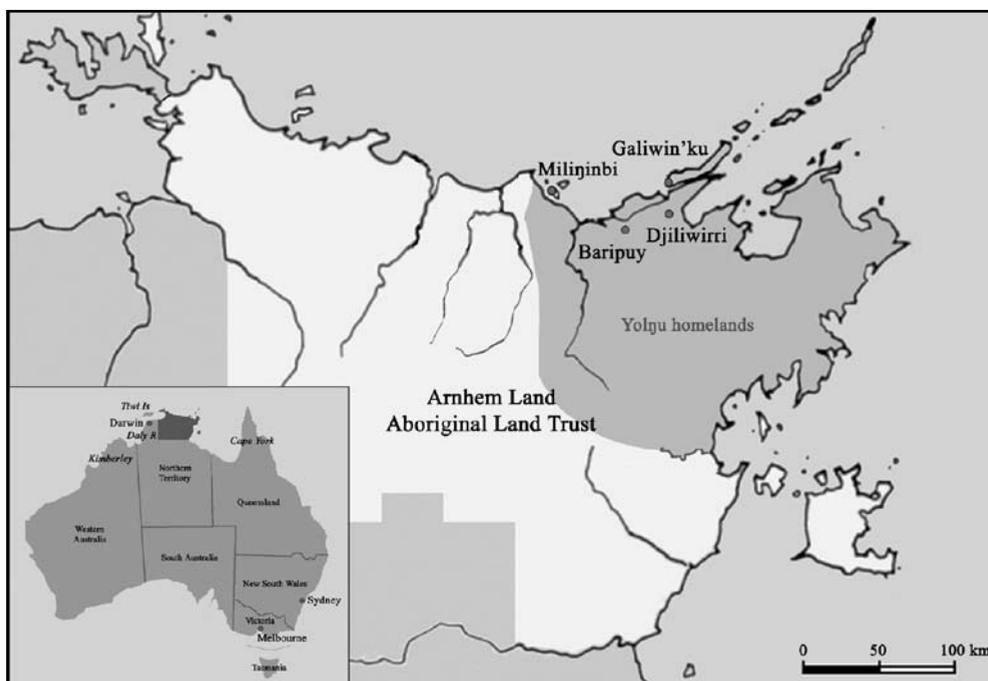
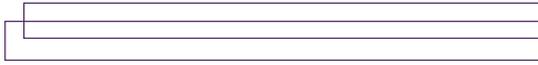


Figure 1. Locations within the Yolŋu homelands and elsewhere in Australia.



Remote corners of regional Australia are home to numerous continuous yet endangered Indigenous performance traditions including yawulyu in central Australia (Barwick, ed. 2000), junba in the Kimberley (Barwick, ed. 2003), wangga in the Daly River district (Lane 2001; Marett 2005), kuwuwala on the Tiwi Islands (Campbell, ed. 2008), kun-borrk in western Arnhem Land (Cooper et al. 2005; Djimarr 2007), emeba and wungubal in southeast Arnhem Land (Moyle & Stokes 1979; Harvey, prod. 1995), and marrga on Cape York (Dixon & Koch, eds 1998). These are nonetheless a small fraction of the Indigenous performance traditions that once existed Australia-wide prior to 1900, and many have yet to be fully recorded. The NRP was founded in 2004 with the aim of addressing this oversight in response to contemporary needs among Indigenous community for better access to their own recorded history (Yunupijū, Langton & Marett 2002). The tradition I work with the most is the manikay 'song' tradition of northeast Arnhem Land.

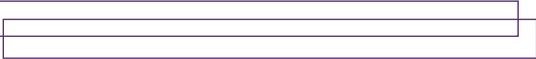
Yolŋu Law

The Manikay tradition is owned by the Yolŋu 'People', the Indigenous people who have inhabited northeast Arnhem Land for countless millennia. Today, there are some 8000 Yolŋu whose homelands extend from the Gove Peninsula in the northeast, west to Cape Stuart, and south to Walker River. There are six contemporary Yolŋu towns in this area. Miliŋinbi, Yirrkala, Galiwin'ku, Gapuwiyak and Ramanginj were founded by the Methodist Overseas Mission between 1922 and 1973, while Gunyayara was established by the Yirrkala community in the 1980s. Gumbula was born at Miliŋinbi and has lived at Galiwin'ku since 1971.

Yolŋu society is an expansive network of some sixty patrilineal mala 'groups' and each owns at least one Manikay series (Zorc 1996; Bagshaw 1998). Membership of each mala passes from father to child in perpetuity. This is also the conduit through which ownership of all traditional hereditary property passes in Yolŋu society. This hereditary property includes tracts of land and water, or wāŋa 'homelands', and incumbent canons of sacred yäku 'names' ŋ, manikay 'songs'ŋ, bungul 'dances' and miny'tji 'designs'ŋ that record ancestral observations of their ecological features and ceremonial associations. Together, these canons of ancestral knowledge and practice are known as maḍayin which describes the 'beauty' of all creation and the 'nature' of all things in it. Names, songs, dances and designs are therefore important assets in Yolŋu society. Together, they provide a ceremonial framework for all legal, political and religious processes observed under rom 'law' (Corn & Gumbula 2006). Yolŋu are profoundly linked to their homelands and ancestors through these hereditary canons of ancestral knowledge and practice, and there is a manikay series for each Yolŋu homeland. Yolŋu communities also recognise the growing importance of documenting their traditions in new ways, and locating their recorded history in ethnographic collections worldwide.

The Search Begins

Gumbula was admitted to leadership within the Gupapuyŋu mala and began to explore his own family's recorded history in 1996. He had heard that his father, Djäwa, had appeared in an old ethnographic film held at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) in Canberra, and so he requested to see a copy. This film, Djälumbu, was directed by Cecil Holmes (1964), and features Djäwa leading a complex Djälumbu ('Hollow Log') funeral ceremony incorporating canonical songs and dances from the series for the



forest homeland of Baripuy (Corn with Gumbula 2005). Later in 2001, Gumbula found an earlier documentary recounting his father's life story, *Faces in the Sun* (Holmes, dir. 1963), at the National Film and Sound Archives in Canberra.

In 2001, Gumbula commenced his research at Museum Victoria in Melbourne where he found thousands artifacts, paintings and original photographs documenting his family's history in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Collected by Donald Thomson (2004) and others, these materials include rare photographs of Djäwa and his father, *ṛarritjṛarritj*, at Miliṛinbi dating from 1937. In 2003, Gumbula joined me and our director, Marcia Langton, as a Senior Fellow in the Australian Indigenous Studies Program at the University of Melbourne, and his research spread into related collections including those held privately by former mission and teaching staff at Miliṛinbi.

In 2007, Gumbula and I received funding from the Australian Research Council (ARC) to start new research into photographs and other records held in the University of Sydney Archives which had never before been seen in Arnhem Land (Gumbula, Corn & Mant 2008). Dating from 1927, they include materials collected by the second serving minister at Miliṛinbi, TT Webb, and the first anthropologist to study Yolṛu culture, WL Warner (1969), as well as later materials collected in the 1940s and 1950s by AP Elkin and AM McArthur. These too depict Gumbula father and father's father at Miliṛinbi and Galiwin'ku, and portray a history of Arnhem Land that now stands at the very edge living memory. This project brought Gumbula to the University of Sydney, where I held my own ARC Australian Postdoctoral Fellowship, as its first ARC Indigenous Research Fellow. It stands as the only ARC project in history to be led by a Yolṛu elder. The only earlier records of Yolṛu culture known to exist are those collected by GH Wilkins (1929) which date from 1924. I commenced research into Wilkins' materials at the British Museum and the British Museum of Natural History in London in collaboration with Louise Hamby from the Australian National University (ANU) in 2008 (Peterson, Allen & Hamby, eds 2008).

Filling the Silence

Gumbula's capacity to investigate these materials stems from his intimate knowledge of local families and their histories, his ability to consult multilingually and cross-culturally with local elders and experts elsewhere, and his consummate knowledge as a duly-appointed elder of Yolṛu law and ceremonies including song, dance, design and linguistic traditions. This is where our research into collections and our present efforts to comprehensively record of Yolṛu performance traditions intersect.

It was 2004 when Gumbula realised that the decades of photographic evidence of Yolṛu ceremonial conduct and community life was not reflected in the existing recordings of Yolṛu performance repertoires. Peter Toner (2003) of ANU had recently repatriated digital copies of sound recordings by Alice Moyle circa 1962 which included Djäwa and his brother, Boṛawuy, singing only a limited selection of subjects from the Baripuy forest repertoire (Moyle, ed. 1967: 4A, tracks 1–2). The documentation of this repertoire in Holmes' films was also incomplete. Gumbula and his siblings were greatly inspired to be able to hear their forebears perform manikay in this way, but wished their repertoire had been recorded in its entirety (Gumbula & DeLargy Healy 2004). Shortly after, they decided to enlist my help as a producer to do just this for their descendants' benefit. Therefore in 2004 and 2005, we travelled both as colleagues and adoptive family to the most sacred Gupapuyṛu homeland, Djiliwirri, to digitally record a range of materials including photographs, films and geo-data,

and of course, a full recording of the Baripuy manikay repertoire spanning all of its subjects in all possible rhythmic modes (see Tables 1–2) (Corn & Gumbula 2007). While these subjects may look like a field-spotters guide to the various natural species and phenomena found at Baripuy, they nonetheless record profound observations of this homeland’s ecology and its ceremonial associations that Yolŋu trace back to the original *waŋarr* ‘ancestors’ who named, shaped and populated it.

With such a wealth of photographic and other materials stretching back over eight decades being returned to Arnhem Land, the idea of recording this repertoire for the NRP archive was far from alien to my Yolŋu collaborators. Yolŋu have long had their own oral mechanisms from ensuring against their loss. Indeed, the very repertoire we were recording once belonged to the Wora mala who succumbed to pastoralists nearly a century ago. In what Gumbula has described as a traditional way of archiving, it passed into the care of his own mala, the Gupapuyŋu, who recognised the Wora as a *märipulu* ‘mother’s mother’s group’ (Gumbula & Corn 2007).

Table 1. The order of subjects and rhythmic modes in the Baripuy manikay series.

subject number and name	rhythmic modes performed			
1. <i>galigali</i> ‘boomerang’		ii	iii	
2. <i>yininya</i> ‘barbed spear’		ii	iii	
3. <i>bilitjpilitj</i> ‘red-winged parrot’		ii	iii	
4. <i>dhurripinda</i> ‘plum’		ii	iii	
5. <i>marmu</i> ‘possum’			iii	
6. <i>wunymbul</i> ‘possum-fur string’	i		iii	iv
7. <i>lorŋpu</i> ‘sulphur-crested cockatoo’		ii	iii	
8. <i>gana’kana</i> ‘stringybark sapling’		ii	iii	
9. <i>gakundurr</i> ‘yam’		ii	iii	
10. <i>bepi</i> ‘banded fruit dove’		ii	iii	
11. <i>wurŋpan</i> ‘emu’	i		iii	iv
12. <i>gapu-raypiny</i> ‘freshwater stream’			iii	
13. <i>djarramumu</i> ‘land snail’		ii	iii	
14. <i>laparr</i> ‘dove’		ii	iii	
15. <i>garrtjambal</i> ‘red kangaroo’		ii	iii	
16. <i>burrmalala</i> ‘cyclone’	i	ii	iii	
17. Murayana, an ancestral ghost	i	ii	iii	
18. <i>wärrarra</i> ‘red sunset’		ii	iii	
19. <i>biyay</i> ‘large goanna’	i		iii	
20. <i>wora</i> ‘fin grass’		ii	iii	
21. <i>wokara</i> ‘small frog’		ii	iii	
22. <i>nyanura</i> ‘freshwater tortoise’		ii	iii	
23. <i>djewul</i> ‘freshwater weed’	i		iii	iv
24. <i>ḍakawa</i> ‘yabby’			iii	v
25. <i>mayku</i> ‘paperbark tree’	i		iii	iv
26. <i>burala</i> ‘darter’	i		iii	iv

27. <i>djalumbu</i> 'hollow log'	i	iii	iv
28. <i>manbiri</i> 'speckled freshwater eel-tailed catfish'	i	iii	iv
29. <i>gana^hdharr</i> 'heron'		iii	v
30. <i>garraⁿun^u</i> 'hammerhead shark'	i	iii	iv
31. <i>dhangi</i> 'quince'		iii	v
32. <i>gurrutjutju</i> 'kite'		iii	v

rhythmic mode	rhythm	tempo
i. <i>rengitj</i> (body)		♩ = 110
ii. <i>dhu^ui-nhirrpan</i> (foundation)		♩ = 74
iii. <i>wana-waⁿa</i> (branch)		♩ = 78
iv. <i>dhirrpuma</i> [named for its opening didjeridu rhythm]		♩ = 88
v. <i>marrtjina-marrma</i> ' (second journey)		♩ = 130

Figure 2. Rhythmic modes performed in the Baripuy manikay series.

What We Leave Behind

Gumbula and I have now fully translated this series and our recordings from Djiliwirri are scheduled to be released as an album in the new NRP series, The Indigenous Music of Australia. Since 2005, I have also collaborated with Yolŋu elders to record different manikay series owned by the Birrkili, Djapu' and Gumatj mala, and have standing invitations to record, document and archive others yet. The transformation of recording media from wax cylinder in Warner's time to solid state hard drives in ours has improved our ability to capture and repatriate high quality sound recordings to Indigenous communities with unprecedented ease and rapidity. There are nonetheless serious budgetary and infrastructural constraints on the NRP that must be addressed before all current Indigenous community calls for digital recording and archiving initiatives in their localities can be met (Corn 2007). Allan Marett and Linda Barwick, whose work towards the NRP has involved establishing sound archives in remote communities such as Belyuen and Wadeye in collaboration with the Northern Territory Library, have commented that even these modest facilities now require additional funding for maintenance and upgrading to keep them operational (Marett with Barwick & Corn 2008).

In our various conversations and presentations together, Gumbula has often said, 'Before, there was empty space where nothing was written. What will we leave behind for the community?' The recent introduction of digital recording technologies to remote Indigenous communities in the form of devices as ubiquitous as mp3 players and digital camera has certainly stimulated local elders to consider what they themselves can do to ensure that their traditional knowledge and practices are recorded and securely-accessible to future generations. However, in our own experience, there are also immediate community benefits to be had from the process of recording performance traditions on remote homelands like Djiliwirri. In essence, all kinds of recording and archiving activity can stimulate all kinds of

interest and action in local performance traditions. Indigenous community investment in the recording, documentation and archiving process not only creates lasting records of Indigenous performance traditions, but can also stimulate lasted youth engagement with tradition as a whole. Further information about our work can be found on the NRP and University of Sydney websites (U Sydney 2007; NRP 2007).

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