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# Gumbula and Knowledge Generation in Collections in the USA: Where is Joe's Right Shoe?

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the methodology and aspirations of an Indigenous researcher and his work with others working within the Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums and Records (GLAMR) sector. In 2010, Joseph Neparrŋa Gumbula visited four cultural institutions in the USA to examine their Milingimbi collections and, in particular, those from his own Gupapuyŋu clan. Gumbula's methodology brought new discoveries, and questions the approach of established research in museums.

**Keywords:** J. N. Gumbula; United States; Milingimbi; Museums; Indigenous collections.

## 1 Introduction

In Australia, Aboriginal people and communities are working towards a more inclusive and equitable relationship with the Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums and Records (GLAMR) sector to resolve issues surrounding the collections management of cultural heritage media (Andrews; Thomas and Bijon; Edmonds). This article explores the methodology and aspirations of Joseph Neparrŋa Gumbula, a Yolŋu elder, scholar, performer and author, and his work with the GLAMR sector in Australia. Joe Gumbula achieved much in his life, from being a notable musician to a competent policeman, but it is his work in museums and archives that I wish to address and applaud.

This article draws extensively on work undertaken with Gumbula in 2010 and his work in four museums in the US. All of the museums we visited held collections from Milingimbi, a town on an island in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia. Local and international researchers and heritage professionals have been documenting the people and places of eastern Arnhem Land since 1924. This work continues on today. Gumbula's focus was on finding cultural material from his

own Gupapuyŋu clan, but also, more broadly, collections sourced from eastern Arnhem Land.

Museums acquire their collections through a variety of means: donations, purchases and commissions. The individuals who have made the collections that Gumbula examined in the United States of America (USA), Australia and Europe were a diverse professional group. They included explorers like Sir Hubert Wilkins, missionaries like T. T. Webb, journalists like Charles Barrett, artists and critics like Edward Ruhe, and anthropologists like William Lloyd Warner. In some cases, a museum may hold archival material such as fieldnotes, personal diaries and photographs that are of great benefit in the assessment of such items. Often, this material is not found in the museum itself, but in archives and libraries. This additional information is most likely to accompany collections that were made by anthropologists.

## 2 Gumbula's USA Trip

The methodology of Joe Neparrŋa Gumbula as an Aboriginal researcher of institutional collections was different from a typical Western based in categorising objects. Born on the island of Milingimbi, he resided for much of his married life on Elcho Island, 500 kilometres east of Darwin in the Northern Territory. He had a broad knowledge of eastern Arnhem Land cultural heritage, but was most passionate about his own Gupapuyŋu clan material representing traditional estates and residents of contemporary Yolŋu towns in northeast Arnhem Land. An Aboriginal person in Arnhem Land become a member of a clan group by descent through the father. Within the dual – patrimoiety system of Arnhem Land, there are many clan groups. The Gupapuyŋu are of the Yirritja patrimoiety, and are divided into different family groups. The other patrimoiety, to which the clan groups of his mother and sisters' children, are Dhuwa.

Gumbula's career in the museum world started in 2001, when he came to Museum Victoria and met Lindy Allen, the Senior Curator for Northern Australia Aboriginal Collections. In 2002, he worked to establish the Galiwin'ku Indigenous Knowledge Centre on Elcho Island. From 2007, he led 3 Australian Research

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Council (ARC) projects, the last one at the Australian National University. By the time he went to the USA, he was experienced in the ways of working in museums, from wearing gloves and white coats, to knowing about what information might be included in collection databases.

In November 2010, he undertook a trip to the USA working with myself and Pip Deveson, a filmmaker from the Australian National University (Figure 1). The following museums were visited: the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology at University of California Berkeley, the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University, the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, and Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. It is important to note that the majority of these museums have large numbers of items in their collections from diverse parts of the world. Of Aboriginal Australian provenance alone, Phoebe Hearst has 3.8 million, the Peabody has 1.2 million, the National Museum of Natural History has 127.3 million, and the Kluge-Ruhe has 1900. Overall, materials from Milngimbi numbered less than 200 within these museums. Yet their staff were helpful and friendly regardless.

The research conducted with Gumbula was facilitated by my previous visits to these institutions to examine collections from Arnhem Land and, in some

cases, specifically from Milngimbi. On this trip with Gumbula, a primary objective was to ensure that he was able to see and evaluate the status of the materials in terms of its access both to his own people and others. There were other things that we both wanted to know including the materials' provenance, makers, collectors, dates and any cultural information that was held by the museum.

At the Phoebe Hearst and the Peabody, the collections made by William Lloyd Warner, an American anthropologist, contained Milngimbi materials. Warner came to Milngimbi in March 1927 and stayed until 1929 in his quest to determine the social organization of the north-east Arnhem Land's Yolngu people. He produced the first ethnography of eastern Arnhem Land, *A Black Civilization* (Warner). I have previously examined the nature of his collection and shown that his collecting activities were not his primary concern at Milngimbi even though he obtained almost four hundred objects (Hamby). Warner formed a close relationship with Harry Makarrwala, whom he probably called brother, thus establishing his relationship with other Yolngu people in the community. His collection has been dispersed in Australia and overseas. Yet 63 of the objects he collected are housed in the Phoebe Hearst Museum and another 180 in the Peabody Museum accounting for approximately two-thirds of their number.



**Figure 1:** Louise Hamby and Joe Gumbula at the Peabody Museum at Harvard, November 2010, Photographer: Pip Deveson.

### 3 Gumbula's Methodology

Gumbula's methodology was different from that of a researcher outside the Yolŋu system of law, kinship and ceremonial life in northeast Arnhem Land. In all aspects of his work, one striking feature was his unhurried approach to any analysis, whether it was a photograph, object or written document. In a world where instant responses are expected, his deliberate slowness to respond was sometimes met with confusion by those in museums. His deep thinking and desire to give an appropriate response was an essential part of his methodology that has been captured on film (Deveson) and in audio recordings (Gumbula in discussion with the author about Warner's Collection, 2005). His research with objects in museum storerooms revolved around a complex process in which the importance of kinship, naming and physical interactions with objects led to his greater exegesis not only of those objects, but the cultural world in which they came together with people. He demonstrated the importance of knowing the processes of making and using those objects. The museum storeroom became a classroom for all who worked with Gumbula.

### 4 Kinship

Gumbula worked within a framework of kinship that was evident in his relationships to people, but also with his work with objects in collections. He was careful to

introduce himself with his name and affiliation. A representative example of his introduction would be "*Yäku Joe Neparrŋa Gumbula, Gupapuyŋu bäparru, Miliŋinbi ga Galiwin'ku* [My name is Joe Neparrŋa Gumbula, Gupapuyŋu clan from Milingimbi and Elcho Island]." My own adopted kin relationship to Gumbula as *galay* (classificatory wife) made working with him relaxed.

Kin relationships determine how people associate with each other. Before we went to the USA, Gumbula knew that we were going to see a legacy of cultural material that included everything from the everyday to the ceremonial items to human remains that has been gathered by the anthropologist Lloyd Warner from 1927–1929. Gumbula's father, Tom Djäwa, was 22 when Warner arrived at Milingimbi. Warner mentions Djäwa in several places in his book, but the only photographs of Djäwa's father, Nŋarritjŋarritj, and Nŋarritjŋarritj's brother, Waltjimirri, have been identified by Gumbula among Warner's photographs. Gumbula did not know Djäwa's kin relationship to Warner, but was most interested in knowing about Warner's family. Who were they, where were they, and could he meet them?

Knowing about family relationships was part of Gumbula's methodology. As part of the trip to the USA, I made arrangements with Warner's daughters in New York city and son in Berkeley, California, whom I had met previously.

The young William T. Warner and Gumbula enjoyed getting to know each other (Figure 2). I introduced William T. Warner to the fact that part of his father's collection was



Figure 2: Joe Gumbula and William Warner, Berkeley, October 2010, Photographer: Louise Hamby.





**Figure 3:** Ann Arlen, Joe Gumbula and Caroline Hightower in Central Park, New York, November 2010, Photographer: Louise Hamby.

at the university museum in Berkeley. He later visited the collection. We met with Warner's daughters, Ann Warner Arlen and Caroline Hightower, in their respective homes in New York and walked in Central Park (Figure 3). Gumbula brought them copies of his 2009 exhibition catalogue from *Makarr-garma: Aboriginal Collections from a Yolŋu Perspective* at the Macleay Museum in Sydney. The objects and photographs in the exhibition formed a link between all of them.

A wonderful surprise came during the visit to the Phoebe Hearst on our way out of the storeroom. He casually pointed to an object on the table and said, "That is my mother." It was a *gutkut* (*Kut-kut*), a feathered head pin (Figure 4). He was introducing me and the staff to the concept that non-human entities fit into the kinship system as well as people. The objects have relationships with people and people have responsibilities to them. Gumbula's mother was Eva Maranjiny, a Djambarrpuynu woman, and the headdress he pointed to was a Dhuwa-moiety one of his mother's clan group, which provided the basis for Gumbula's relationship to it.

The implication of what Gumbula was telling us was profound. Later, we were looking at ceremonial objects in the collection. Gumbula felt that it was important for the professional staff of the museum to see the objects,



**Figure 4:** *Gutkut*, feathered headdress, collected by William Lloyd Warner, Milingimbi, 1928, Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, 11-2136, Photographer: Louise Hamby.

understand their importance, and his directions that, in the future only, certain men should see these items. He was looking at an object that belonged to the Walamanu clan and discussing it in relation to his kinship connections to Wanbuma, a Walamanu woman, and other objects in the collection. Many such of his relatives had previously been identified in photographs taken by Donald Thomson in 1930s.

If I call my mother's mother, particularly the photo you have from Donald Thomson, Wanbuma. That's my *māri* (mother's mother) over there. She has all the copyright of her own through things like this, I call *māri*, the person and the objects. And I am related to them as a *gutharra* (her daughter's child). See, this is how it works. It underlines all the family with me and all the totems with me. We are still on that same kinship, sort of bloodline. (Gumbula "Objects and Kin")

We looked at Mildjingi clan group ceremonial objects as well. In 2010, the senior Mildjingi man was Jimmy Burinyila, now deceased. Looking at the object, Gumbula said, "This would be my son, my *gāthu*." Gumbula then went on to explain that Burinyila was the rightful owner of that object and the Mildjingi land it represents. I asked what relationship Burinyila had to the objects?

He is *watānu* [holder], hereditary owner of the land. He is *ranga* [secret sacred ancestral object]. He is *maḍayin* [natural creation beauty]. He will be the leader of the show. He will be the chief. He is the object! We are only related to *gurrutu* [kinship] to that object which is *gāthu* [patrilineal child]. So, I will call Burinyila *gāthu* and the object *gāthu*. (Gumbula, *Objects and Kin*)

In this example, he was making the strong link between people, objects and their relatedness. This is different in some respects to Alfred Gell's concept of agency (*Art and Agency*). Gumbula was not saying the object had agency and could make things happen. He was equating the object to the person of authority and ownership.

## 5 Naming

For Gumbula, a key element to his research was the appropriate "names of everything, just documented in our small libraries and information centres in the community where we live" (Gumbula, Feb, 2015). For the GLAMR sector, the correct naming is essential. Gumbula highlights this in his film, *Following the Path of Our Collections*, "We have to go through the guidelines so people will know the correct information. If they see Djäwa's painting, they have to put down that it was Djäwa's work with a photograph of Djäwa" (Deveson).

The naming of people and things was a major concern. The first object that we examined in the USA was a stone-hafted axe from the Phoebe Hearst Museum. We were working with the collections manager, Leslie Freund, on all the Warner objects. Reflecting on the recordings from the museum, Gumbula established an authority for himself and his position at the beginning.

My name is Dr Joe Gumbula, born and raised at Milingimbi. The items have been collected at Milingimbi and regarding the name, it should be mentioned that whatever name was given in the last 80 years, that is my language. I can speak the language today and I will name the materials with the language that I was born and raised with. (Gumbula, October 27, *Objects and Kin*)

He continued and gave us his preferred name for the axe, *gapamada*. His conversation included how the axe was used and the materials in its construction. The same approach he extended to the photographs and objects found in the Kluge-Ruhe collection (Figure 5). Their archived items included a photograph of Djäwa.



**Figure 5:** Joe Gumbula examining photographs and naming individuals, Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, Charlottesville, Virginia, October 2010, Photographer: Louise Hamby.



The difference there was that the staff knew much more about their collection, because it is small and is all from Australia.

## 6 Physical Approach to the Objects

Collection management practices often dictate the way researchers are permitted to view objects. Generally, there is no opportunity for casual looking at the contents of shelves or seeing groups of objects. They tend to be brought to the researcher one object at a time. An exception to this process was the time spent at the Kluge-Ruhe, a smaller institution. This opportunity meant that the Director and other staff could work with Gumbula and allowed him to see whatever he wished.

Gumbula totally disrupted the approach of examining one object at a time and in isolation from others. Weapons, such as spear throwers and spears, provided a greater number of objects to work with as they were collected in larger numbers than other objects. One division or classification made by Gumbula that would never be noticed by museum staff relates back to the kinship of objects. In some cases, he grouped objects by their moiety, Dhuwa or Yirritja. When possible, he would group items by clan groups. Spears, *gara*, are a

good example of his methods of analysis (Figure 6). All of the spears at the Peabody were placed on one long table that was only partially visible due to a lack of adequate space for researchers. Gumbula went about making his own selections to work with from the entire group. He used a similar method at the Smithsonian. He grouped the spears by the categories that he defined such as *bati* (barbed spears), and *ɲambi* (stone-bladed spears) and *djimindi* (spears with three or four prongs). Before examining the smaller groups he explained his methodology to be one of looking at the *bäpurru* (groups) of spears, or the families of spears.

I am now going to be looking at spears, *bäpurru* of spears. What it's going to tell me through my knowledge, if I understand these, is *gara* or spears. I am not going through the numbers. I am going through the families of the spears and try to name them. What were they? What were their names? Their names are important to the community. They will have specific names. What the tree was. What the *ɲurru* (tip) was, or spear point was. You got to name that... This is very important. At the moment, I am not going through the numbers that the collector has put there, but I am going through the *bäpurru* of those particular changes of the *gara*.

At the Smithsonian, the collection manager, with me assisting, wanted to arrange Gumbula's selection by numbers even within his own arrangement of spears, but



**Figure 6:** Joe Gumbula ordering spears in the store room, Smithsonian Museum Support Center, Suitland, Maryland, November 2010, Photographer: Louise Hamby.

this Western approach to organisation was not acceptable and was discarded.

Gumbula also had a rather unorthodox approach to analysing the materials used in the spears. This method was somewhat difficult for collection managers as well. To determine the type of wood, he would sharply tap the spears. A different sound coming from the wood, for him, determined the type of tree the spear shaft was made from, like *wadawada* (*Macaranga tanarius*).

## 7 Processes of Making and Use

Gumbula's work firmly established his role as a mentor and teacher for me and for the staff who were also present. In some of his discussions, the making of an object and how it was used was a focus not just the name of the object for a database. These conversations revealed highly relevant information about the object's relational links to land and people.

The *gutkut* mentioned earlier is a good example of this approach. He discussed the relationship of this headdress again to his mother's people, the Djambarrpuyŋu Shark people, but with emphasis on ceremonial performances in which the headdress would be worn. He emphasised the use of the object and how it should have been made with a spine from a stingray.

They would not have time to get.... This would have been a stingray spine usually. But this is only a wooden one. They mainly, if they seriously wanted to organise themselves, they would have gone and got a stingray and put it on like this.... They would have to put it here on the hair tightening up, but using of the spine. It, the spine, can grab something. And when they dance a Shark dance, it won't fall while they dance. So, they stick it on to the spine to make it harder. So, when the ceremony is finished, they take it off.

At the Phoebe Hearst Museum, we also examined two boomerangs collected by Warner (11-2095 and 11-2096). He explained how *galigali* (paired boomerangs) were used as clapsticks for singing, not for throwing. This quirky and unexpected turn of the conversation had to do with the nature of the two boomerangs and the methodology of collecting.

Gumbula explained that there is a smooth side for hitting with a flat surface. For the clapping of the *galigali*, the size does not matter, but you need two different boomerangs. He said, "According to my understanding, you need to have to have a left and a right, like a shoe." There was no left at the Phoebe Hearst. He astutely pointed out, "If Warner collected these two, there is a missing



**Figure 7:** *Galigali*, boomerang, collected by William Lloyd Warner, Milingimbi, 1928, Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, 11-2096, Photographer: Louise Hamby.

one from the set. There is one somewhere, perhaps at Peabody (Figure 7)." Indeed, he was right. There were missing ones. The Peabody's one boomerang, D3454, is heavily ochred and is not a match. However, the National Museum of Australia (NMA) has 6 boomerangs from Warner (*Galigali*). I believe that 1985.72.0003 is likely a match (Figure 8). The missing right one to make the pair. The NMA's collection from Warner originally came from the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney, where Warner was based during his time in Australia. Have I found Gumbula's metaphorical right shoe in a boomerang from the NMA?

Gumbula's exploration of the *galigali* is symptomatic of the nature of collecting, museum practices, and what could happen in the future. Collections are dispersed, sometimes with good intentions of sharing objects and perhaps making a representative collection in more than one place. In Warner's lifetime, he made the decisions about which objects went to the Phoebe Hearst, the Peabody and, at that time, the University of Sydney Anthropology Department. In this process, there has been a lack of in-depth knowledge about some of the objects which could have made a difference in the way items were placed together, or in this case, distributed.

Gumbula's knowledge of the objects led him to the conclusion that the set was broken. His aspiration to find the "right shoe" is a quest not just for this boomerang, but expresses a desire for museums and collectors to be more inclusive. Indigenous people need to be permitted to use all of their senses—visual, haptic and aural—in some cases to understand the objects in collections. Gumbula wanted to play the two *galigali* at the Phoebe Hearst, but the shock



**Figure 8:** *Galigali*, boomerang, collected by William Lloyd Warner, Milingimbi, 1928, National Museum of Australia, 1985.0072.0003, Photographer: Denis French.

on the face of the collection manager was enough to stop him from doing so. Could the two *galigali* come together in the future?

## 8 Objects and Concepts

Joe's examination of a *ranga* (secret sacred ancestral object) at the Phoebe Hearst Museum brought on a discussion about access, but the way in which had Warner collected it, informed his thinking about how it this might have happened. He did not see the *ranga* as being stolen, but taken with the authority of the elders at the time.

The collection of this was with authority from the elders as given not [like the situation where] there was another shop, where the tourists comes in and buy things from the shop. This was given inside the ceremony, only to Warner. Only Warner knows about that. He accepted the invitation from the elders. This is why he mentioned that he knows this is *ranga*.

Gumbula saw the museum as a place where information was actively captured, securely stored, and objects were protected and maintained for future generations. He thought that time to do this was running out, because people with this knowledge were dying.

This museum business, it is a capture of information. You have to store it. Capture it, store it and look after it. This is what he said because, in our society, we waste our time because our road map is different to things like this. When we have a ceremony, we take these [strings] off for the next one and we bury this. We bury this on the ground and that protects this. He was probably seeing these things, but measuring the whole aspect of seeing through the art world. And he said they put it to the ground, but I take it to the museum and keep it, museum protection. The museum look after it. What I am saying here is maybe this will be kept in a place like this. And this is what I have been saying too in Sydney [and] Canberra. This must be kept here until someone elder, or some other group will come, and if they want to explore something, they want to learn something too. Because the time is running out.

## 9 Makarrata

Gumbula taught Yolŋu concepts through objects from his own desire to impart information. Sometimes the object itself took a back seat; only mentioned at the beginning of the conversation. One instance that resonates today started with the examination of a stone spear, a *ŋambi* (*Ngambi*). Knowing the time frame of collecting between Warner and Thomson, his comments were focused on the materials of the spear.

Surely, there is no metal head here. Metal head; it was collected by Thomson very latest in the '30s. This one is the first spear, a real spear; real, true, no mixture of anything.

On the table in front of him was a group of stone-headed spears from Warner. He continued the conversation with his interpretation of the real story of the spears.

The main story for those spears, all of these spears were happening during the *makarrata* peace-keeping ceremony. Only people call it a peace-keeping ceremony; it is not that, not actually the peace-keeping ceremony. There was a penalty to be sorted out and witnessed by each clan member, each clan group, from different areas in northeast Arnhem Land. Every clan had to witness the problems being dealt [with] in a good sort of, and peace and harmony. That is what this is all about. So, peace-keeping ceremony, that's where this word comes from. Like when people go to jail well for stealing or what crimes do people make. This was a performance that they done in *makarrata*. [It] was a sort of a court case; a court case, but has been done with a spear. So. someone who been breaking the law in the community will have to have his; you know, have that is the penalty like a spear going through someone's leg. It is a normal sort of thing what was happening, what is *makarrata*. *Makarrata* is a peace-keeping ceremony. And the *makarrata* wasn't happening sort of ever [so often]. It is not a festival! *Makarrata* did happen on a special occasion; special treatment that was *makarrata*.

On reflection, Gumbula's *makarrata* explanation in 2010 was a precursor to the major event held in August 2016 at Milingimbi, *Makarrata: Bringing the Past into the Future*. Institutional representatives from the GLAMR sector, who held collections from Milingimbi, came together with Yolŋu to come to an understanding about the management and care of those collections and to form relationships. Unfortunately, Gumbula did not live long enough to see this event or to place his signature on the *Milingimbi Makarrata Resolution*. His work in the USA and other places helped to form the corpus of information necessary for this new *Makarrata*.

A film produced from Gumbula's work in museums in the USA, *Following the Path of Our Collections: Neparrŋa Gumbula's Visit to America in 2010*, was edited and filmed by Pip Deveson with additional sound and research by myself. This film, particularly its last 10 minutes, takes the technological tools of filming and other information to construct his own representation of museums for his own community. He gave instructions to Pip Deveson and myself that he was doing this film to take to his community to present his Yolŋu views. Most of his oratory is in Gupapuyŋu, interpreted by Gumbula.

The first portion is about what happened on the trip and his introduction. It highlights various interests at play, but is focused mainly on the way in which Gumbula works within collections and with other researchers. We



see, on the fringes, the activity of the collection manager, who perhaps loses interest in the level of detailed engagement in which Gumbula and myself are involved. In another segment, we interrogate each other about the details of the colours and origin of a particular spear, each holding firm to our respective positions. On this trip, one of his goals was to inform museum staff about access conditions for the collection and to provide additional information to them. He wanted information from the museum for his community. This included knowing exactly what was written about the objects and by whom.

## 10 Gumbula and Museology

New thinking in museology, in which museums move away from focussing on collected objects and focus more of their efforts on their socio-political relations, is something that relates to Gumbula's work. He was very interested in objects and collections, but was also intent on taking this information back to his community, where it might bring about some socio-political change. One recent example of this type of change was the *Makarrata* event of August 2016.

Despite advances made by museums in their relationships with Indigenous people, some critics have expressed the need for additional change (N. Thomas). Robin Boast argues that "The museum, as a site of accumulation, as a gatekeeper of authority and expert accounts, as the ultimate caretaker of the object, as the ultimate arbiter of the identity of the object, as its documenter and even as the educator, has to be completely redrafted." (Boast 67) However, there is still an effort by some museums and other cultural institutions in Australia, Europe and the USA to be more inclusive in their decision making about the care and management of collections, particularly their Indigenous ones (Thorpe). The desire to include Australian Indigenous people in decision making was apparent in the USA museums visited in their responses to requests made by Gumbula.

For example, Gumbula asked for photographs of some objects to be removed from online collections because of their restricted nature. This type of documentation about their collections, as informed by an authoritative Indigenous cultural leader, was precisely what the museums we visited wanted to improve for the future. Gumbula's data, for example, has been now linked to specific objects in the Peabody Museum's database. Gumbula went beyond identifying and naming the objects to advise on their access conditions. His discussions with museum staff provided insight into his culture with information concerning

the use, appropriate language, and the relationships of objects to people. While some museums that we visited in the USA felt it was important for their collections to be public so that any researcher could view the material, it was only after Gumbula's visit that some objects were boxed with warnings about their sensitive nature.

Relationships between museum staff and Indigenous individuals who come to such research collections are often complicated for both parties. This is more dramatic when an Indigenous party comes from the other side of the world, and requests to view objects and obtain information. The complications for both parties span access from across a great distance, selection, resources and differing research agendas. Included with these are issues concerning Indigenous authority and rights of ownership, and safe uses of museum material. By going to the USA, Gumbula eliminated the complication of access from across a great distance for himself. At all of the museums he visited, he was able to exert his authority and knowledge about collected materials, which was accepted without question by curators, who implemented the changes that he put forward.

Mary Louise Pratt is credited with being the person to coin the phrase "contact zones" (34). These zones are "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (34). The space where the different ideas and beliefs of Indigenous people and museum professionals typically come together could be described as a contact zone. For Gumbula, museums were contact zones in which he sought to exert his own authority, but not in a manner that was confrontational. His discussions and advice to museum staff were presented from a position of his own experience in Aboriginal culture.

Gumbula spent an equal, if not greater, amount of time outside museums engaging with photographic and object collections. This occurred when he visited me at home and in the office, where we had access to notes, books and photographs to assist with his questions. He also worked at home on country with other Yolŋu people in the communities of northeast Arnhem Land, where he shared with them his own notes and photographs of his discoveries in museums (Figure 9). So respected was Gumbula across the GLAMR sector, that sometimes museum curators who visited him at home in Arnhem Land would even bring collection objects with them.

Gumbula was also very aware of the methods of display and uses of historical materials in museums, and used them to great effect in his *Makarr-garma* exhibition at the University of Sydney (Gumbula *Makarr-garma*).



**Figure 9:** Joe Gumbula and Joe Dhamandyji studying photographs at Milingimbi, July 2014, Photographer: Louise Hamby.

This highly-innovate exhibition repurposed the typical methods and devices of Western museum exhibitions about other people and cultures to convey a new interpretation of Yolŋu life and culture that was informed by Gumbula's lifetime of accumulated expertise in Yolŋu law and knowledge. While at the core of a typical museum's existence is a pivotal interest in its objects, Gumbula was instead more interested in understanding and communicating the relatedness within and across the collections they hold within a Yolŋu for their existence.

## 11 Conclusion

After 10 years of doing this type of work, Gumbula was had formulated his own opinions about the way museums and collectors operate. One concern of his was that proper procedures should be followed when doing research. According to him, these procedures were not always followed in

the past, especially the recording of appropriate names of objects and people. He was concerned how Aboriginal people would have access to archival information and the objects themselves in the museums in the future, particularly his grandchildren. Museums may not always be the only place for the information to be held in the future. There are many problems associated with the reality that most major museums are far from Arnhem Land. As a result:

[many] Indigenous museums and cultural centers are creating their own centers of collecting, performance, and presentation. They are increasingly giving up on the academy as the accumulator of voices and appropriating the technology of museums to their own ends. (Boast 67)

In the last section of our film, in a message to Yolŋu people, Gumbula explains how the elders did not give much information to past collectors and that what was given was not always recorded correctly. He saw past anthropologists

and other researchers as being separate from the government, even though governments now control museums, and not Yolŋu people. His advice was for young Yolŋu researchers to continue documenting museum collections according to their own law and in the right way.

In conclusion, all people involved researching museum collections need to assess their positions in relation to each other. I would agree with Boast (67) that, in the past, museums were seen as the expert authority on all items held in their collections. The new museology has brought about many changes to museum practices including a desire to work more collaboratively with stakeholders. For museums of the future to take a more enriching role, all parties need to combine their energies and work together towards knowledge generation.

For this to happen, Boast (67) suggests that the museum will have to “learn to let go of their resources, even at times, of the objects, for the benefit and use of communities and agendas far beyond its knowledge and control.” This process can work more efficiently if all researchers are willing to participate. Gumbula’s research trip to the USA was an example of how Aboriginal people can work effectively with museum staff to mutually benefit each other. His own multi-sensory approach combined with his expertise in Yolŋu knowledge presented a unique understanding of museum collections in the USA. I can only aspire to continue searching for the “right foot” in all its variations for my *dhuway*, Joe Gumbula.

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