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## **WARNING**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this document contains images or names of people who may have since passed away.

**Spirit, Story, Symbol:  
Indigenous Curating in the Queensland Rainforest**

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BA (Hons)

*A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the College of Arts, Society and Education  
July 2021*

James Cook University

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*Statement of the Contribution of Others*

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## *Abstract*

Indigenous curatorship is now accepted as one of the approaches to decolonising museums. This compels one to ask: what is meant by “Indigenous curating”? The current project addresses this question by first describing the curating of Jirrbal elder Ernie Grant who, over his lifetime, had collected and selectively communicated about his people’s rainforest culture and artefacts to diverse audiences. It then turns to the wider descendant community through an account of an Aboriginal artist community who make “new artefacts” at the Girringun Aboriginal Art Centre. Building on the core proposition that curating is culturally informed, the thesis argues that material rainforest artefacts are curated as spirit, story and symbol. In a North Queensland context, Indigenous curatorship is a culturally specific way of respecting the ancestral past and utilising market and state institutions to assert rainforest identity. It occurs outside of traditional exhibition spaces. Finally, it connects artefacts to place for future generations.

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## ***1. Introduction: Spirit, Story, Symbol***

### **1.1 Benefit to a Descendant Community**

Our values have been filtered through the values of others. What has been considered worthy of protection has usually been on the basis of its scientific, historic, aesthetic or sheer curiosity value. (Mick Dodson in Smallacombe, 2000, p. 157)

I see little real anthropology in most supposedly anthropological exhibitions. The main reason for this is that museum curators do not really take indigenous forms of knowledge seriously. (Taylor, 2020, p. 100)

The rainforest region in Queensland Australia may well be defined by its long history of collected material culture (Erckenbrecht et al., 2010). As a distinct “cultural area” (Peterson, 1976) in Australia, far north Queensland is known for its large painted shields, broad swords, and woven bi-cornual baskets (Kahn, 2000). For the Dyirbal language group within this area, extensive cultural and linguistic research (Dixon, 1972, 1989; Roth, 1900) has greatly enriched ethnographic descriptions of such artefacts. Archaeological documentation (Horsfall, 1987) and community explanations of the traditional use of Dyirbal “tools of the rainforest” (Pedley & Jumbun, n.d.) have also been given. Yet, discussions about Australian rainforest people as themselves curators, and relatedly, the significance of old artefacts to the new artefacts they create today, remains under-investigated.

Both the problem and the potential of anthropology for understanding Indigenous curating are expressed in the perspectives cited above. On the one hand, my fellow Yawuru countryman Mick Dodson raises the exoticising and scientising of Indigenous knowledge that led, during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, to anthropology being complicit in colonial “collecting”, a potential euphemism standing for the theft as well as the trade of things. On the other hand, in terms of cultural values and recognising them, anthropology remains committed today to a degree that not many disciplines are. This is what Anne-Christine Taylor (2020) means, I think, when she refers above to “real anthropology”. She moreover goes on to say, “the crux of the matter is that an ‘anthropological exhibition’ should be equally interesting and surprising for non-native

and native people, for insiders just as much as ‘outsiders’ (p. 100). It is believed here that taking Indigenous forms of knowledge seriously, via a critical examination of a case of Indigenous curating, is precisely what would lead to the kind of curating that is of value to Indigenous descendant communities.

I met Jirrbal elder Dr Ernie Grant in Tully, North Queensland, during a language and heritage project in 2014. He had been a keeper of artefacts and stories for decades, and together with his daughter he operated a cultural tours business called Ingan. At the Tully railway station where Ingan was based, the family wanted to open a keeping place, or museum as it was interchangeably called by Grant and his family, to showcase a small collection of rainforest artefacts as well as other historical resources that Grant had carefully collected over several decades. Initially they had engaged the services of an Indigenous freelance curator, but they could no longer pay the curator, having run out of money. After developing a good relationship with Ernie Grant in the previous heritage project, I offered to assist with his work as of part of my own doctoral research. The first small benefit of the research would therefore be some sort of resource for his family’s cultural tours business describing his people’s artefacts according to his perspective as both a collector and a Jirrbal elder (see appendix for this booklet). Further to this tangible resource, our effort could go far towards addressing the critique expressed in Mick Dodson’s opening comment (about the reduced “curiosity value” of Indigenous artefacts) since in Ernie Grant’s case, as an Indigenous person collecting and researching, a “filter” was less present. The greater benefit, in other words, would be showing people how a descendant community values its artefacts, and how “indigenous forms of knowledge”, as Taylor put it above, are integral to this.

In addition to working with Ernie Grant, I spent time with people from his Murray Upper community for this research, specifically, the group of at least 10 regular artists who attended the Girringun Aboriginal Art Centre (GAAC) and their family members. The GAAC art group was more often referred to in conversation as “Girringun” rather than by their awkward acronym. On one occasion an artist even identified himself with the art centre rather than his Girramay tribal group: “I am Girringun”. Girringun people – productive artists and non-artists – went regularly out into “the scrub” as the dense rainforest was called to hunt for certain materials, taking youth and others with them in the Girringun bus. Within their repertoire of material culture, they chose which potent

symbols to keep or reproduce as “new artefacts”. In this way they were an influential section of the broader Giringun Aboriginal Corporation, a long-standing Aboriginal organisation based about 30 kilometres south of Murray Upper, in Cardwell.

Named after a soak hole in Cardwell, the Giringun Aboriginal Corporation is an Indigenous organisation that began in the 1990s. It represents nine traditional owner groups from over 25,000 square kms of North Queensland, of mostly tropical but also savannah-type country. It is not a Prescribed Body Corporate (the government-recognised bodies across Australia that represent traditional owner groups holders after a successful Native Title determination) but it is a Public Benevolent Institution, as stated on their web page (<https://www.giringun.com/>). This is a type of charitable organisation dedicated to addressing, among other things, “poverty or distress”<sup>1</sup>. An original non-Indigenous volunteer still working there after 25 years was writing a history of Giringun at the request of the CEO. She told me, “Giringun started so that people could have a point from which to liaise with TO groups. It now advises new Native Title holders on their PBC roles. We are very much a training centre too” (pers comm, 2017). Some of this training was in art and the business of selling art at the Giringun Aboriginal Art Centre.

Participants at GAAC’s weekly art workshop identified with several different tribal groups represented by Giringun including Girramay, Jirrbal, Gulgnay, Djiru and Warrgamay. Most people lived in the region of Murray Upper where Ernie Grant grew up (located in between Tully and Cardwell), and in Jumbun (a small Aboriginal community within Murray Upper). Due to the many artefacts collected there, only some of which have been repatriated to Giringun’s keeping place in Cardwell, the whole Murray Upper/Jumbun group would be known as a “source”, “origin”, or “descendant community” in museum-industry idiom. The descriptor “source community” has been criticised for implying a purely “extractive” relationship between museums and Indigenous communities (for an example of the debate, see Peers 2014), and so it will

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<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.acnc.gov.au/tools/factsheets/public-benevolent-institutions-and-acnc> for a further explanation of what constitutes a PBI.

not be used here. I favour descendant community over origin community, to emphasise the kinship-like connection between people and artefacts through time, so will continue to use this phrase to refer to Giringun people in the thesis.

In this descendant community, artists like Emily Murray, Abe Muriata, and Theresa Beeron were all well-respected senior elders and regular attendees to the Tuesday workshop. They oversaw younger kin as they made art on Girramay country. This art was often inspired by rainforest artefacts like shields and baskets, but also by plants and animals in the local rainforest environment in painted motifs. Together with Ernie Grant and others, these senior elders provided the opportunity to address several questions. For example, what values and social practices are at work that might enable Indigenous people to preserve and make material artefacts? What obstacles and supporting structures shape this Indigenous-led curatorial experience? These questions address the foundational problem for this thesis: “What is meant by Indigenous Curating?” If we remember that curating is not just about preservation, but also selection, archival and intellectual engagement, and finally, communication to the public, then the current research makes it clear that curating rainforest artefacts is a cultural practice well-embedded within this particular North Queensland community.

## **1.2 The Thesis’ Starting Place: Between a Rock and a Hard Place**

Before outlining the methods used to answer the above questions, I want to first state a general context – a starting place – that makes answering them either difficult or exciting, depending on one’s theoretical inclination. For me it has proved mostly exciting because the Giringun artist community and others have brought such an important perspective to two consequential provocations for the current research. The first provocation is in Ingold’s (2007) statement: “*Despite the best efforts of curators and conservationists, no object lasts forever*” (p. 10). The second provocation is by way of a question that I think is usually raised at some point by critics of Heritage: “*why bother preserving heritage at all?*”. I hope this second, rather functionalist, question is addressed more latently throughout the whole thesis.

To the first provocation. In *Materials against Materiality* (2007) Ingold challenges scholarly attempts to revive things with agency – that “magical mind-dust” (p. 11), as

he puts it, which supposedly puts dead things once again in motion. Furthermore, he criticises agency-led materiality studies for obscuring the unique physical material of objects and separating them from the environment to which they are constantly relating and responding to. At the outset of his discussion, therefore, Ingold asks his reader to place a wet rock on their desk before commencing to read (the fair presumption being that a desk is where one must be to have access to such a paper) so that they might observe the rock's changes over time. The task demonstrates well his subsequent assertion that "things are in life rather than...life is in things" (Ingold, 2007, p. 12). Indigenous rainforest artefacts in a museum or a local keeping place might then be anathema to Ingold's position. There is limited movement and no unfolding environment in a climate-controlled room. There is no opportunity to touch the artefact with one's bare hands, and no "real" environment given the concerted non-environment that is affected (darkness is the ideal). To add further insult, a museum artefact might even be placed, during display, against a contrived backdrop with plastic greenery to replicate the egregiously absent "traditional setting" (indeed just such a plastic tree exists in the permanent Enchanted Rainforest exhibit of the Museum of Tropical Queensland at Townsville<sup>2</sup>, where Indigenous rainforest artefacts are displayed). The curator, then, like the agency theorists that Ingold critiques, now becomes the 'conjurer' (ibid) of life in artefacts. Such a scene, despite good explanatory intentions, would no doubt prompt musings like Anderson's (in Simpson, 1996): "the appearance of a museum is the surest sign of the death of a self-sustaining culture" (p. 78).

I appreciate Ingold's refusal to engage in further theory acrobatics on the topic of materiality. And we must agree with his excellent antagonism that all materials change and eventually perish, and human-crafted objects cannot last forever. Still, there is a problem with his wet-rock scene when it comes to Indigenous people and their own attempts to preserve heritage. When working with Ernie Grant and Girringun people, I saw that preservation was rather a valued activity. Indeed, in the humid rainforest environment of far North Queensland, a setting ostensibly adverse for the preservation of Aboriginal artefacts, preserving was a central concern. Artefacts that Murray Upper

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://mtq.qm.qld.gov.au/Events+and+Exhibitions/Exhibitions/Permanent/Enchanted+rainforest>



and other North Queensland rainforest communities were known for such as the broad sword, the painted shield, the bi-cornual basket, the anthropomorphic fire maker, and more generally, the *mija* hut or “humpy”, were being preserved as the important carriers of spirit, story and symbol that they are. This was through various community activities including visiting precious old objects in the museum, telling stories about personally held and remembered artefacts, collecting what the art centre termed “traditional materials” in country, and practising skills to ensure that a varied section of traditional artefacts could be reproduced for the future.

All of these are examples of cultural practice – *happenings* amidst the energising flow of an abundant “ocean of materials” that Ingold would likely endorse (2007, p. 7). Happenings certainly “happened” at the weekly art workshops I attended over 12 months: there was always telephone wire for *mind*i (woven baskets), and artist’s clay for *bagu* (fire maker sculptures) at hand; being outside under a large carport in a National Park we often commented on the daily conditions and their effect on our bodies and the art – “this wind is drying out the clay too quick”, “them tourists drive so fast, they get dust all over the place”. So in this respect there was no shortage of the material stuff that Ingold urges us to pay attention to. But in focusing on the changing properties of the material and surrounding environment I saw less intellectual space being made for artefacts and artefactual art – that is, old artefacts and the new artefacts inspired by them – which were clearly so important at the art workshop and in Ernie Grant’s home. Might collected, curated and newly created artefactual art pieces be too easily dismissed as “objects of disinterested contemplation” (Ingold, 2000, p. 347) under an Ingoldian lens? Moreover, is it really so helpful to say that objectifying something means to hasten its death, when death itself is culturally contingent?

Ingold’s ‘rock problem’, we could call it, advocating for our attention to materials in environment, is further compounded from the point of view of recent anthropological and sociological perspectives by another serious dilemma for Indigenous people. Put simply, few respectable options exist for making artefacts last. This is the hard place I mean. Serious culture scholars are sceptical of traditions and can denigrate any effort towards their preservation. So as not to contribute to a damaging narrative of loss, which puts Indigenous people in a position of deficiency or inadequacy (*without* language, *without* culture), it is only acceptable to study that which is not in need of

‘heritage help’. Demonstrating the sink-or-swim attitude of social scientists to heritage, it is as one sociologist quite seriously asked a lecture theatre full of linguists, at the opening of a language documentation lab that I attended at the Cairns Institute for Research in Tropical Societies: “why preserve language?” The sociologist’s seeming preference for such things to die a natural death might be called an anti-preservation position – one where there is only interest in the process not the product, the art practice not the art-or-artefact. But such an “anti” position is surprising (even taking into account the still-deep fear amongst anthropologists of being labelled a salvage anthropologist) when you consider worldwide legislative support for heritage projects, and more importantly, the desire of many Indigenous groups around the world to be at the forefront of this effort.

In some ways, the thesis proceeds so as to answer the sociologist’s question (why bother with preservation?), but what I have found is that the expression of Indigenous heritages or traditions, whether through language or rocks, is not just about pragmatic functionality (question: why preserve? answer: for ethnic pride). Rather, preservation of traditions, artefacts and artefactual art, in new and creative ways for Murray Upper people, is itself a cultural reality. It is a way of “being Indigenous” in a place where restricted access to traditional land is really the most demonstrative example of loss. For this reason, all the chapters in this thesis support an argument that essentially favours preservation.

### **1.3 Defining Indigenous Curating and The Postcolonial**

Indigenous curatorship is now accepted as one of the solutions to decolonising museums, but this compels one to ask what exactly is meant by ‘Indigenous curating’? To address this question, it is first necessary to define what I mean by ‘decolonising’, and how it is different to a close term, the ‘postcolonial’. In my view, to ‘decolonise’ means to interrogate and challenge the often taken-for-granted colonial power structures that still control and de-authorise the Indigenous inhabitants of a place. As a broad project it is especially salient in those nation-states in which non-Indigenous settlers

make up a majority of the state's population, like the so-called CANZUS<sup>3</sup> nations where Indigenous people continue to suffer higher incarceration rates, poorer health outcomes, and lower socioeconomic standards than the wider population. There is at least a suggestion of *action* in the verb 'decolonising' that differentiates it from its noun-cousin the 'postcolonial'. In short, decolonising activity can be *discerned*. Postcolonialism, on the other hand, continues to be elusive as both concept and outcome. Australian Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson similarly prefers the term 'postcolonizing' for Indigenous people in the settler state of Australia who are legally still "homeless", she argues. As she explains:

There may well be spaces in Australia that could be described as postcolonial, but these are not spaces inhabited by Indigenous people. It may be more useful, therefore, to conceptualize the current condition not as postcolonial but as postcolonizing with the associations of ongoing process, which that implies. (Moreton-Robinson, 2015, p. 10)

My own approach is to see the three interrelated terms as a spectrum in the following manner: postcolonial – postcolonising – decolonising. This is not to suggest a linear progression towards a finally decolonised place, as if some settler-states may be further along the road. Rather, I see the movement towards decolonisation as one that accounts for space. This is a space in which Indigenous people *are* "inhabitants", active in the postcolonial critique and assertive of their own epistemologies. Indigenous curating is not just the *Indigenising of curatorship*, however, that is, the promotion of Indigenous curatorship on its own terms whether in museums or otherwise. In this research, we will see that Indigenous curating has also gone hand-in-hand with *Decolonising knowledge production* in traditionally colonial spaces like the school classroom and the state museum. Walter Mignolo (2020) is instructive on this. Referring collectively to "the formation, transformation, control, and management of coloniality" as the "colonial matrix of power (CMP)" (p. 613), he writes:

decoloniality in my arguments is not a model or a conceptual frame for the interpretation of world events or texts; on the contrary, events, issues or texts

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<sup>3</sup> Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States.

are the manifestations allowing me to understand the work of CMP in the configuration of such an event.  
(Mignolo, 2020, p.615)

I agree that paying attention to decolonising events – including Indigenous curatorship outside of traditional museums settings – is an important part of the overall project of decolonising practice. In other words, the recognition of decolonising events in action is even more important than claiming a decolonising methodological framework for research.

Before explaining this methodological position further, I must first say that, in my aim to define Indigenous curating, there was a firm instinct to *expand* the notion of curatorship. I wanted to look beyond curating in terms of its lay associations with simple preservation and consumption (as in curating cold cuts of meat) and toward those other curating activities that Ernie Grant seemed to be doing such as selection, research, organisation, and communication. The thesis still orients its discussion of Indigenous curating to these further activities, particularly to the Indigenous *selection* of what is to be preserved. But simply expanding the notion of curatorship was not, after all, what I set out to do.

In the book *Curationism*, Balzer (2015) discusses the term “curate” and its apparent overuse in all forms where, as he says, “playlists, outfits, even hors d’oeuvres are now curated” (p.1). The statement echoes the flippant remarks I began to make to my academic advisor in this regard: “bloody everybody’s a curator!” Contrary to Balzer (and perhaps in response to it), in Sansi’s (2020) edited collection *The Anthropologist as Curator* the role of curator is suggested to be much more discrete. To invoke some of the repeated terms there, we learn that “assemblages” in the “curatorial space” have probably replaced the single ethnographic site for good, and that, because curatorial and ethnographic practice are so intertwined, curatorship may be the new “labour of anthropology” in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. A focus on the work of anthropologists in this way is perfectly understandable. However, since a work about the *anthropologist* as curator does not address the *participant* as curator, we miss seeing how curating might be understood anthropologically. In other words, we find ourselves in the position that Taylor above admonishes (of little “real anthropology”). Moreover, in addition to more debilitating self-consciousness in anthropology related to the crisis of representation

(Marcus & Fischer, 1986), this direction overshadows a critical examination of curating in relation to the participant, beyond the role of collaborator. Not everyone will agree with this and certainly the issue is not just about how unimportant the reflexivity of the anthropologist is in this space per se (I do agree that it is important). But the participant as curator, in this case a so-called “origin” or “descendant” community of collected artefacts, is surely a much-needed focus for research given the increased involvement of Indigenous people in the care of their own artefacts today.

Daniel Miller has a concise explanation that helps move us past the too-inclusive/too-exclusive problem above. Defending against an old criticism that researchers who are interested in material objects must be engaged in a fetishism of things (Malinowski, 2002 [1922]), or as Geismar (2011) describes it, a “vulgar materialism” (p. 212), Miller (2005) says instead that: “*we need to show how the things that people make, make people*” (p. 38). This people-focus is surely what Taylor has in mind when she indirectly asks for exhibitions to be more “anthropological”. Moreover, Miller’s words are gently suggestive of the link between creating with caring, another sense of curatorship. We see this association more explicitly in Bickel & St Georges’ (2020) notion of “curating as compassion” where they say, “an ethics of relationality engages holistically and creatively in meaning-making” (p.7). Relatedly, Kosoko (2018) observes that curating “is a practice that requires “unearthing” hidden histories” (p.122) and further (repeating Martin’s (2015) notion of “radical care”), “Curation, when practiced with radical care at its foundation, is inevitably inclusionary” (p.123). The Murray Upper community people that I spoke with would probably agree with these senses of curating that emphasise compassion, creativity, and care. Ernie Grant would certainly favour holism and unearthing hidden histories.

In this way, some senses of curatorship appear to naturally align with Indigenous aims to look after and respect the land and ancestors. We see this in discussions of Indigenous curatorship across various settler states: Rosoff (2003) outlines museums’ integration of “traditional care” and “respect” that might require, for example, objects be stored on the top floor so as to avoid them being ‘walked over’; Miller (2012) presents himself as an “insider” within the museum who selects, as a “Native curator”, what knowledge, as well as objects, will be combined and shared; Conway (2018) analyses the “curatorial rationale” in Neparnga Gumbula’s 2009-2010 exhibition,

*Makarr-garma: Aboriginal Collections from a Yolngu Perspective*. Others (Gilchrist, 2020; Withey, 2015) have gone further than care and respect, arguing that Indigenous curatorship can be linked to Indigenous assertions of sovereignty via public exhibitions.

Few studies, however, address Indigenous curatorship *outside* the context of public exhibitions or museums and within the community. The current research does investigate two traditional display spaces (the Girringun keeping place and the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair) but it is more fundamentally focused on curating in the community, and indeed, on a curating of the community and self. It sets out to be anthropological by showing how things, and curating things, makes people. It attempts to take seriously a form of Indigenous curating that may not look like what we typically associate with curating. Finally, the research shows that the things people “make” can include collections.

#### **1.4 Indigenising or Decolonising Methodology?**

Given my stated interest in curating activity ‘outside the museum’, one might assume that my preference would be for a kind of Indigenous autonomy regarding a mode of inquiry – an Indigenous methodology, in other words, ideologically separated from the hegemonic western-scientific system. In a chapter on “Decolonizing Methodologies” (Evans, Miller, Hutchinson, & Dingwall, 2014), a Jirrbal researcher succeeds in this aim by adapting his dreaming story image of the *cyclone* as Jirrbal methodology. Moreover, via the dismissive term “whatever”, he eschews “Colonial knowledge systems” altogether. He and the other authors write that, “as a system of thought and knowledge production Indigenous methodologies do not dispute European ones directly, but rather ignore them” (p. 180). I appreciate the benefits of this strategic refusal to engage. To disavow may mean to disempower. Also, to directly dispute can lead to a problematic comparison of (returning to the present topic) Western and Indigenous notions of curatorship. For example, in work with Māori people in New Zealand, Atkinson (2014) observes: “The obsession with preserving artefacts, thereby removing their purpose other than to be on display, was not a Māori way of doing things; rather it was a western one” (p.116). Here, “preserving” has been too immediately associated with a “display” purpose, and an unhelpful judgement comes in, whether deliberately or not, through the choice of term “obsession”.

Like Mick Dodson, Ernie Grant was similarly critical of attempts to translate of Indigenous worldviews. Nevertheless, I have seen in his work a strong desire to communicate with, and respond to, the “western system”, as he would put it. This research attempts to do the same. Even the structure of the thesis works to acknowledge the continued omnipresence of coloniality, and moreover, position Indigenous bodies and perspectives as a respondent to it. Thus, the thesis discussion begins with the Murray Upper descendant community inside a state museum. In this way, and in contrast to Evans et al (2014) who further state that “Indigenous methods derive from Indigenous perspectives, language, and culture and are thus exactly that—Indigenous; not simply postcolonial or decolonizing” (p.181), I together with Grant am more inclined to keep the colonial power firmly in view and in dialogue. The reason for this ‘compassionate willingness’, we might call it, to engage can be best explained by the words of Dakota scholar, Waziyatawin. She says:

An analysis of colonialism allows us to make sense of our current condition, strategically develop more effective means of resistance, recover the pre-colonial traditions that strengthen us as Indigenous Peoples, and connect with the struggles of colonized peoples throughout the world to transform the world. When colonialism is removed from the analysis, we have little alternative other than to simply blame ourselves for the current social ills. This blaming the victim strategy only increases violence against our own people. (in Lonetree, 2012)

Whether it be racism, stolen land or assimilation practices, Grant, too, consistently explained his people’s marginality in terms of the machinations of colonialism. It seemed to me that this was precisely to ensure a cessation of that damaging inward-facing, self-blaming violence that Waziyatawin suggests.

At this point it may appear that I am asserting a preference for decolonising over Indigenising methodology. But from my perspective there cannot be not one without the other, so central is “Indigenosity in Australia” to my investigation. To further explain, I can contrast Evans’ cyclone image with that of the *wangal* or boomerang. The Jirrbal cyclone story that Evans evokes is highly specific to Jirrbal people. It is certainly powerful as a distinct, Jirrbal methodology. Yet, it is arguably too singularly emic to be persuasive. The boomerang, on the other hand, is a general, and symbolically effective,

icon of Australian Aboriginality. It suggests the possibility of switching between an insider (emic) to an outsider (etic) intellectual space, in the way that anthropology claims also to do. Sometimes the boomerang has a target, sometimes not. The point is it can be cast out by its Indigenous agent into a distinctly ‘outside’ space to return once more to an Indigenous conceptual domain.

Methodologically speaking, then, I do not aim to be so inclusive and expansive as to lose all meaning (as in, arguably, a postmodern paradigm); contrarily, neither do I aim for a closing of Indigenous ranks, such that the resulting formation is impenetrable to anyone who is not Indigenous. Rather I seek to go out into a western space of knowledge and then return to an Indigenous domain, as has clearly been the case in Ernie Grant’s work over several decades in Queensland. Concrete examples of a colonial power ‘target’ and an Indigenous domain ‘return’ can be found, respectively, in Grant’s critique of *jilbay* knowledge (his colonial target), and the Holistic Framework he developed in response to it (his return to an Indigenous perspective).

### **1.5 Jilbay Knowledge and Grant’s Holistic Framework**

Referring specifically to a lack of locally grounded knowledge at universities, Ernie Grant would describe academics with a Jirrbal term by saying they were *jilbay*, meaning “experienced” and “expert (at a task)” (R.M.W. Dixon, 2017b, p. 71), yet also, according to Grant, “TOO clever” and “knowing too much for no good reason” (E Grant pers comm, 2016). *Jilbay* knowledge became Grant’s overarching critique of the academic expert (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) and university produced knowledge – first taught in the school classroom and culminating, it seems, in the academic conference. *Being jilbay* also seemed to refer to being overly analytical. In a meeting I attended at his house with museum curators, Grant once compared museums *favourably* against universities to say, at the museum “if it’s clay, you can’t argue”, and further, that museums at least were “closer to reality...closer to the old people” (E Grant pers comm, 2017). Such a statement is surprising and potentially even confusing for those who associate museums with western scientific knowledge (is Grant *for* the ultimate classifying and compartmentalising institution, a museum, after his critique of “the expert”? How is museum knowledge different to university knowledge anyway?).



The assertion by an Indigenous elder and scholar that we are engaged in “perceptions”, as he further described it, rather than “reality” needs an explanation.

In my view, Grant’s use of the term “reality” is an assertion of Indigenous ‘knowledge’ over Indigenous ‘belief’ (the latter being a term used to devalue Indigenous Knowledge). Moreover, it is an assertion of his “old people” and their authority, over and above any other “expert”. Perhaps there is a suggestion, on Grant’s part, that museums ‘recognise’ the expertise of Indigenous people as reality, while university academics merely ‘criticise’. Meer (2014) reminds us that postcolonialism is not just “a historical formation – the state and nature of social and political relations after colonialism”, but also, “a mode of inquiry (namely a critique of power and knowledge production)” (np). Grant’s own criticism then – of *jilbay* knowledge – is a postcolonial critique. What is uniquely useful about the case study of Ernie Grant’s collection is that we move beyond the critique and get an insight into Grant’s corrective for it, which he called the Holistic Framework. This is the return, as I see it, to an Indigenous-conceptualised space where Grant and his people’s reality can be apprehended via the conceptual framework he created to communicate it.

Devised in the 1990s, Ernie Grant’s Holistic Framework consists of six elements – *Land, Language and Culture*, in the context of *Time, Place and Relationships*. I will expand upon the framework in chapters to come, and most importantly, how Grant used the framework to share knowledge about several artefacts in the systematic way of a curator. For now, the Holistic Framework can be described as an Indigenous educator’s methodological tool for apprehending the “local situation”; it is in this way ‘Indigenising’. Grant said furthermore that he developed it to help “black kids not doing well in a white classroom”; in this way it is also decolonising. In other words, the Holistic Framework is not about comparing, expanding or ignoring as the previous discussion has outlined. More specifically, it is about *responding* to a system (the state education system) that he perceived to be failing his community. Indeed, I would argue that to create the framework with six *quantifiable* elements was a strategic choice ensuring the State Education system in Queensland would take his reality seriously. The framework is not just a translation then, it is a well-considered response to a culturally inappropriate state education system. This begins to explain what I mean when I frame Ernie Grant’s educating and collecting activities as a “postcolonial response”.

The current research does not adopt Grant's Holistic Framework as *method*, rather it is strongly influenced by the six factors in the framework as *methodology*. My research methodology values *Time*, *Place* and *Relationships*, for example, by describing the town of Tully and people there before going on to discuss Ernie Grant's collection artefacts in the next chapter. It values *Language* by italicising those signs of Jirrbal language that were used in the community to deliberately offset them in an otherwise English text, and it values *Land* by designating chapters to artefact making on-country, including on the banks of the Murray River behind several farms. My methodology values *Culture* ("what we do" as Grant would describe it) not just by discussing it, but by enacting it. Thus I maintain the elder-younger relationship so integral to knowledge sharing in Australian Indigenous communities. This includes story telling from elder to younger, which the framework, as I will show, endeavours to systemise for both an Indigenous and non-Indigenous audience.

I will note that, at first, I thought Grant's framework might be a potentially novel element of the study in terms of an applied method. However, it was not really a straightforward or practical method for data collection. For one it simply took too long to 'complete'. There was always more to add to the story. In short, the Holistic Framework was for Indigenous *representation* not scientific *elicitation*; it was methodology more than method. I observed some frustration at this when one of numerous researchers who came to visit Grant, with clear time and budget constraints, commented on his "roundabout" narrative answers. Once again, the Holistic Framework was a speaker's organisational tool for communicating culture to an audience through story rather than a researcher's method for data collection. Moreover, it reflected an oral tradition, or as Grant put it, a "blackfella way" of thinking and teaching.

Respecting stories in the form they came from the community, whether *jujuba* 'dreaming' stories, descriptions of "cultural information", or memories, was a good way to uphold Indigenous forms of knowledge sharing or 'a blackfella way'. Authors from various disciplines have investigated the role of story and storying in research with Indigenous people (eg Archibald, Lee-Morgan, De Santolo, & Smith, 2019; Geia, Hayes, & Usher, 2013; Kovach, 2009; Stark, 2017). I agree with Sium & Ritskes (2013) who summarise that, far from being a simple thing, "Stories in Indigenous

epistemologies are disruptive, sustaining, knowledge producing and theory-in-action. Stories are decolonization theory in its most natural form” (p. II). This approach has also been behind a manuscript that Ernie Grant and I co-authored called “Growing Up Jirrbal”. The Holistic Framework therefore serves in this thesis as a kind of corrective to *jilbay* knowledge. It facilitates the boomerang-like return, after the critique of *jilbay* or western-expert knowledge, to an Indigenous-conceptualised space. My valuing of this engagement with the non-Indigenous “colonial matrix” and a subsequent return to an Indigenous agent is why I would characterise this research as being both etic and emic, both *decolonising* and, if not *Indigenising* as previously discussed, then definitely Indigenous.

### **1.6 Method and Researcher’s Positioning**

To develop both an emic and etic understanding of Indigenous curating I used participant observation, field notes and recorded interviews. Primary fieldwork was undertaken from April 2016 to December 2017 with return visits in 2018. More specifically, I went to Ernie Grant’s home in Tully during 2016, and in 2017 from July to December, unless there was a funeral or a flood, I drove down every Tuesday for from Cairns to the Girramay National Park near Cardwell to attend the art workshop that ran from 8-3pm. In 2018 I attended both places more intermittently, around once or twice a month.

My role at the Girringun Aboriginal Art Centre in Cardwell was “volunteer and researcher”, as conferred to me by the European Australian Arts Manager. The regularity of Girringun’s art workshops once a week allowed an insight into at least some of the “inponderabilia” (sic) that Malinowski (2002 [1922], p. 18) first advocated as critical to ethnographic fieldwork. Jobs for the two to three regular Girringun volunteers ranged from assisting with the preparation of morning and afternoon teas, to folding tea towels for sale in the gift shop, to washing the bus. In this way, I could participate in or observe art making and on-country activities, most importantly, with minimal invasiveness to the community. Fieldnotes were usually written afterwards in the same day or dictated into my phone during the two-hour drive home after the weekly art workshops.

2016 is when I visited Ernie Grant and his family in Tully. I went fortnightly for approximately six months, most often staying for half a day. Occasionally I stayed overnight in Tully at Grant and his wife's home in Tully, or in Cardwell at the Giringun Aboriginal Corporation sleeping quarters upstairs. During 2017, I visited Tully less often so that I could attend the art workshop (another half hour drive south from Tully). In addition to recording several hours of Ernie Grant's commentary about artefacts, I observed his work activities, which were substantial even in his late seventies. My various experiences for this ranged from sitting in on a session he had with another researcher, to visiting farmland where he thought stones axes might still be. I was also simply present for the family, friends and strangers who called or visited him at his home. Finally, at the Tully railway station I observed the successes of his cultural business's operations, as well as difficulties, including financial insecurity, land ownership challenges, and the slow pace of the development of an on-country museum.

Like many of the senior elders, Grant was well versed in working with researchers. He had a network of people who both respected and influenced him, academic writers such as Bob Dixon (1972, 2019), Frank Woolston (1995; Woolston & Advancement, 1980), Timothy Bottoms (2013) and Åsa Ferrier (2015), to name just a few, who came from fields as various as linguistics, history and archaeology. On our first day of recording, Grant had asked me: "Do you want to ask questions, or shall I just talk?". I responded, "Maybe you can mainly talk, and I will ask questions sometimes". In this way we proceeded with interviews. A somewhat less successful method of elicitation was my attempt to fill in artefact questionnaires for each of Grant's artefacts. The questionnaire quickly changed to a less structured narrative approach inspired by his Holistic Framework.

While I concede that the authorship of the current work is mine alone, and that there are inherent restrictions to a textual format, I nevertheless value Onciul's (2015) statement that an "Indigenous voice" should be the voice of "community self-representation" in terms of their views and perspectives. With respect to this I recorded over thirty interviews with Ernie Grant, and one interview with Abe Muriata for this project. I made notes from conversations and public speeches with several other elders, and relied on turns of phrase from people, what I called "soundbites", that I remembered vividly to convey the multi-layered voice of the community. Indeed, these turns of phrase became

critical for including those voices that were less heard in cultural deference to the senior (and male) elders, and for building up a general picture of whole community. I also draw occasionally on interviews I recorded with for an Australia Research Council heritage project during 2014-2016, particularly to supplement discussion of land use and Murray Upper conceptualisations of “heritage”.

In addition to staying true to stories and voice, the elder-younger relationship that developed between myself and the five primary elders in this research – Claude, Abe, Ernie, Theresa and Emily – was certainly typical of much knowledge sharing in this community, as indeed it is for other Indigenous communities across Australia. These rainforest elders knew me as a mixed heritage “Broome girl” from Yawuru country, on the North-west coast of Australia. Thus, I should note that my experience as a woman, as an Indigenous woman – who has clung for dear life to a 4WD roof rack ducking for low branches on a bush track, who has been to too many funerals for young cousins, who has witnessed and experienced the unyielding demands of an Aboriginal kinship system – was helpful for an easy relationship with Indigenous rainforest people despite being from different Indigenous Country.

Yet, I do not rely only on my Indigeneity to claim an Indigenous standpoint in my analysis. In a discussion after Feminist Standpoint theory, Nakata (2007) describes his own position on an Indigenous standpoint that reflects my own. It is not enough, as he puts it, “for Indigenous students (or academics) to authorise themselves solely on the basis of their experience. Rather, it would encourage the drawing in of that experience to bear on a critical analysis of accepted positions and arguments” (p. 216). In terms of Ernie Grant sharing knowledge, understanding my background was a major reason behind why he was so generous with his time. However, for both of us, a robust and academically defensible argument for articulating and furthering Indigenous interests to a general audience was of the utmost concern.

Many people called Ernie Grant “Uncle” however, this took me a while to do. I erred on the side of formality for some time calling him Dr Grant for respect, then eventually called him Uncle in front of others as this was expected. The latter kinship designation felt not quite right to me, and I had laughingly said to him one time, “it’s strange for me to call you Uncle because my mother and all her brothers are much younger than you”.

Thankfully (to my knowledge) he was not offended by this. Given the long mentorship I eventually received from him, I started to call him simply “Ernie”, as I will do now, mostly, throughout the thesis. This familial feeling was cemented when I brought my Yawuru-Malay mother to visit him in Tully. We shared a meal that Mum had cooked – a big pot of stew that had sat on the floor of the car between her feet from Cairns – and after saying grace as he did on more special occasions of eating, Ernie reassured Mum that he and his wife Enid would “look after me” here, like an “adopted” family member.

For researchers looking to be accepted by the community, incorporation into the local kinship network is usually critical. For me and my mother it was mostly important to know that we were identified as Indigenous people and welcome on another’s country. I usually identify as “mixed heritage” to acknowledge my Scottish and Malay ancestry in institutional settings. Sometimes I said nothing at all and let non-Aboriginal people continue to think of me as “mongrel”, or even more exasperating, “ethnic”, so as not to inevitably become a pan-Aboriginal spokesperson in the institution. However, with other Aboriginal people it is important to tell them I am of Yawuru descent. Though my father is white, my mother would raise my husband in terms of my identity: “just because you married a white man, you mustn’t forget where you come from.” She had always instructed me to tell other Aboriginal people in particular where I was from so that they would know “who they are talking to”. Thus, with Ernie Grant and his family, as with all the Indigenous artists at Girringun, I introduced myself as “Tahnee from Broome, my grandmother’s country”.<sup>4</sup>

The Murray Upper elders who consented to be recorded and identified were four of the most senior elders living in the community: Uncle Claude Beeron, his wife Aunty Theresa Beeron, Aunty Emily Murray, and Uncle Abe Muriata all participated in interviews for my research and offered up their valuable time. Again, throughout the thesis I will refer to them by either by first name, or Uncle/Aunty (what I called them in person), as is appropriate to the context of the narrative. In the case of other participants

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<sup>4</sup> It was appropriate here to refer to my oldest living Yawuru kin at the time, my grandmother Mary Drummond.

whom I necessarily mention as part of Ernie and the other elders' social network, I have avoided or changed names to protect their anonymity for the context of a wider readership. In this way, the thesis proceeds in what it hoped to be a respectful, as well as ethical<sup>5</sup>, way for the community.

Non-Indigenous people are also part of the community in this research and in some cases have lived in Tully, Murray Upper, and Cardwell among Indigenous people for several generations. In addition to “non-Indigenous”, I use the term “European Australian” to refer to those with European ancestry, but sometimes respectfully refer to white and black people to repeat the local idiom or situation. Occasionally, to similarly reflect situational use, I use a Dyirbal term *waybala*, which derives from “whitefella”. Further, the term “Indigenous” is employed unless I want to specifically refer to Indigenous people of the mainland Australia continent, in which case I use “Aboriginal”, as many elders did to differentiate themselves from Torres Strait Islanders<sup>6</sup>.

Regarding punctuation conventions, longer quotations from participants are cited as either an interview or a personal communication, while shorter personally communicated phrases cited (soundbites) are highlighted with double quotation marks. Single quotes marks are used when drawing attention to a term. Dyirbal language words are italicised, most often only in the instance, with English translation given after in single quotes, as in *waybala* ‘whitefella’. For clan names in the thesis, I follow the spelling adopted by the Giringun Aboriginal Corporation, as in ‘Djiru’ not the alternative ‘Jirru’. Finally, I capitalise country only when referring to specific Indigenous territory, as in on-country versus Girramay Country.

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<sup>5</sup> JCU Research Ethics for research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants was sought and approved in 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Following Canada and other settler states, the term “First Nations” is also becoming more prevalent in Australia’s national discourse referring collectively to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. I use “Indigenous” and “Aboriginal” as these were the terms most used at Giringun.

## 1.7 Thesis Argument and Chapters Supporting this Argument

Building on the core proposition that curating is cultural, the thesis argues that material rainforest artefacts within the community are selected and communicated, “curated”, as spirit, story and symbol, and that this curating does not necessarily occur in a traditional exhibition space. The thesis is structured along the three concepts of spirit, story and symbol, though it should be remembered that each can be seen at different times in the thesis. To be clear, my discussion is not an argument for the importance of the “intangible” per se, which is now a widely used heritage term, adopted in global discourse such as UNESCO’s 2003 *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Rather, it is an assertion of the importance of the tangible and the intangible taken together, as a culturally specific way of respecting the ancestral past, utilising current market and state institutions, and linking artefacts to future generations. The artefact as this all-encompassing whole is precisely what Ernie Grant and the Giringun group were trying to articulate and thereby preserve, so all chapters will work to draw out this type of cultural preservation.

### 1.7.1 Spirit

My argument draws on the idea that an Indigenous rainforest artefact it is not just an object. This is not so novel. Many theorists have already paved the way for some version of this assertion to be made, almost as a matter of necessity. For example, if we were to say that, like a dead language no longer spoken, an artefact is a dead thing no longer used or cared for, we might conclude that such a topic is not suitable for anthropological research. Our only option as anthropologists in this scenario would be to argue that artefacts actually *are* alive – perhaps with ‘agency’. They are, in this logic, immersed within the world of materials and relations by virtue of their sociality within the world and with people. On the other hand, we may accept them as ‘dead things’ and simply insist on their continued significance to living people, arguably as archaeologists do. Serving as a theoretical background for the thesis, then, chapter two describes the way material things and other less than human elements of the world have been kept alive and ‘interesting’ as research subjects. It outlines how artefacts have been historically conceptualised in the social sciences, and how they have shifted from being objects, to subjects and to agents. Even outside of the cultural relativism of anthropology, alternative ontologies are now plausible with this move, so that even the



archaeologists accept a “broad ontology of connectivity between humans, objects, plants animals, and the world in which they reside” (Harrison, 2013, p. 13).

Consequently, museums around the world are recognising that artefacts can be constituted from “spirit” for Indigenous descendant communities. Artefacts must be looked after accordingly. But does this apparent concession by a slow-moving institution really reflect an improvement of museum-Indigenous community relations, or the ongoing avoidance of repatriation? I discuss this in chapter three where, for Giringun elders and artists, a visit to the Museum of Tropical Queensland in Townsville was an opportunity to recognise and empathise with ancestralised artefacts that have become “wild”. This is what I call locked away, off-country artefacts that do not receive care from community. Uncle Claude Beeron’s further story of a visit to a museum “down south”, after which an ancestor maker and spirit appears to visit him in his hotel, is also discussed. On both occasions, an artefact collection signifies an ancestor’s distance – in the sense of being far from home and family, and in the awareness that they have been selected by European, not Indigenous, collectors.

I show further in this chapter that an argument for ‘wild artefacts’, as an emic conceptualisation, is the only effective argument for repatriation of all artefacts back to country. As I define it, the ancestralised artefacts are agitated and ‘wild’ as in angry, but also, like uncared-for, unstable ‘wild country’. Therefore, the question of whether all rainforest artefacts should be repatriated back to country depends on whether this wildness can be alleviated by either community visits to the museum or Indigenous curatorship facilitating care – in the same way that some outlying country may be visited and cared for. It is possible, under this conceptualisation, that artefacts simply remain wild, like wild country that is not visited. However, if artefacts are recognised as ‘family’ – as having the spirit of one’s ancestors – then ideally, they should be cared for on country, or in other words, repatriated.

### ***1.7.2 Story***

In addition to spirit, the stories and memories that attended rainforest artefacts were so crucial for some elders in this research that they were seemingly reified as transmissible knowledge, lovingly kept, and revealed at the right time with the right people.

Artefacts’ physical materials are usually important to state in an exhibition. Date and

place acquired, material and collection source – these are usually given as the most basic information. Thus, a rainforest shield from North Queensland Australia is made from the buttress root of a fig tree. But what else is it made of after many years of being kept? Chapter four discusses Ernie Grant's use of stories as two kinds of material: as firstly, physical material kept close and the burden that comes with that in his hometown of Tully; and secondly, as material evidence brought out to help tell the story of a history of racism and massacre, and to support the anti-racism message of his cultural workshops.

Artefacts for this collector are certainly constituted by more than just physical materials, yet the way to document such attendant heritage is still to be understood. If chapter four is about the 'content' of stories – in materials, oral history, myth and anecdote – then chapter five is about the 'form' of these stories, which in this case can be seen in an example of an Indigenous teaching and learning framework. In describing eleven artefacts that Ernie kept for a family keeping place, and fifteen he sold to the Museum of Tropical Queensland, the chapter shows how Ernie Grant's stories are structured via his Holistic Framework. The Indigenous worldview arguably conveyed through Ernie's Holistic Framework is in fact a deeply methodical and skilfully considered way of telling stories, in the way, indeed, of a curator.

As previously mention, Ernie Grant's Holistic Framework consisted of six key elements – relating together *Land*, *Language* and *Culture* in the context of *Time*, *Place* and *Relationships*. It was in many ways a storyteller's tool used to communicate culture to an audience in a systematic way. For example, upon being asked about rainforest shields there was potentially so much for Ernie to say, whether to an Indigenous or non-Indigenous, researcher or non-researcher audience. Inevitably, he spoke about *Land* first, one of the elements of the Holistic Framework, to emplace the shield within a physical landscape. As a method for teaching, the framework thus facilitated *selection* in curating: what to communicate to an audience (of the many details constituting "Indigenous knowledge"), and how to do so (through a structured, organised narrative).

### ***1.7.3 Symbol***

Chapter six, seven and eight turn to the wider Girringun artist community whom we should see as an ongoing source of cultural symbols instead of a source community of

artefacts. In addition to providing an avenue for personal and community recognition, and making some money, the art centre supported a community to select and make certain powerful symbols such as the *jawun* and *mind*i baskets, the *bigin* shield, and the *bagu* fire maker. Chapter six discusses these artefacts and their makers at the weekly Girringun art workshop on Girramay country and shows how these artefacts, particularly their shapes, were important as symbols of rainforest identity. Although traditional materials were highly valued by artists at the centre, shop clay was particularly useful to facilitate the production and articulation of these iconic cultural shapes. Drawing on postcolonial theorist Stuart Hall's classic idea of cultural "articulation" (in Grossberg, 1986), the making of new artefacts as both a non-verbal expression and a strategic movement to simultaneously retain and exchange aspects of "tradition" is demonstrated.

Beneath all this creative activity lies the solid ground of Aboriginal country. Chapter seven describes Girringun's *mija* building on the banks of the Murray River in Murray Upper to show how the *mija* or "humpy", an arguably universal symbol for Australian Aboriginal place, is not just a symbol of home but also a concrete thing. The linguist who first described the Dyirbal grammar writes that, as a noun, the term *mija* "probably has a wider range of meaning than any other in the language" (R.M.W. Dixon, 2017a, p. 192). He translates *mija* from Dyirbal to English in more intangible terms as "a place where a number of people are camped together" and "any tract of country", but also, as a tangible "hut" or "house" (ibid). *Mija* in this way is the material home that Girramay, Jirrbal and Gulngay people at Girringun want naturally to access. Just as with artefacts in a state museum, people must negotiate with European 'owners' to do so. In a narrative featuring three elders we will see the deep, and somewhat hidden, frustration of this struggle. To access country that is now rented by colonisers for profit is an arrangement which "hurt a man's feelings" as senior Girramay elder Uncle Claude delicately puts it.

Taking place just a few weeks after the *mija* building day described in chapter seven, the Indigenous symbol of *mija* is moved off Country to the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair (CIAF). Chapter eight describes Girringun's 2018 exhibition at this art fair, which was a strong example of Indigenous-led representation of "new artefacts" for an audience in an off-country location. We will see that the Girringun group emplaced their new

artefacts within a culturally appropriate and highly marketable context of *Time, Place* and *Relationships* (to use terms from Ernie Grant's Holistic Framework). A further narrative from one of the key artists at Girringun shows that, while art has "a different spirit" it nevertheless "shares the story". We might assume this to mean dreaming stories, and in some cases 'the story' does refer to dreaming stories – *jujuba* stories as Dyirbal speakers would call them. Yet the story also refers to more functional explanations of artefacts as well as other remembered details at the level of clan and family. The thing (whether it is called art or artefact) cannot be separated from either spirit and story, and we can therefore agree with Ingold (2011) when he says that "stories always, and inevitably, draw together what classifications split apart" (p. 160).

It has taken decades of academic discussion to arrive at this exciting place for Indigenous material heritage, beyond etic classifications and glass-doored shelves. However, so omnipresent are the old scientising notions that one becomes unsure what is Western and what is Indigenous, especially when a Jirrbal elder puts a traditional bicornual basket inside a glass-doored shelf himself. One could argue it is perhaps also now a matter of mixed heritage. Yet, something like 'spirit' in the artefacts that I looked at throughout this research strongly identifies them as uniquely Indigenous. To begin, the following chapter will outline some of the changes in theory since anthropology and the collecting of artefacts began, which have led to the important recognition of Indigenous spirit in artefacts from a western-scientific perspective.

## SPIRIT

***2. The Interesting Nature of Artefacts*****2.1 Introduction**

This chapter identifies multidisciplinary approaches to conceptualising the “material thing” and outlines the impact that these approaches have on anthropological questions about artefacts. It examines a recently asserted idea of the artefact as “phenomenon” in light of a number of ethnographic artefact studies where artefacts are permitted their intangible associations. It then shows that, despite the potential this offers for an expanded conceptualisation of Indigenous artefacts, a scholarly preference for process over product, for becoming rather than being, still challenges a valuing of tangible heritage. I argue that something material does persist in artefacts for interlocutors in this study – a lingering material spirit of place and people that requires recognition and care. Moreover, to examine this type of cultural materiality might help others see Indigenous people in Australia as curators of artefacts.

To begin an investigation into why Indigenous people themselves are not so often seen as curators it is necessary to look into the way that artefacts have been conceptualised over time: as objects, as person-like subjects, and as agents, for example. All of these notions reflect changing theoretical paradigms and determine the way artefacts materialise as scholarly “interesting”. A basket in the bookshelf at Ernie Grant’s home in Tully, probably made between the 1930s and ‘40s, has passed through all of these changed eras. However, a closer look at the basket shows how, for the Indigenous collector, it and other community artefacts like it have the persisting feature of spirit; in the case of the basket, the spirit of Grant’s mother who made it, the spirit of the white family who returned it to him, and the spirit of place where it was made. In this way, the basket is acknowledged as a product of its time but as more than tangible materials from that time. Before expanding on this type of conceptualisation, I want to first discuss artefacts as they have been defined in the social sciences over a hundred years.

## 2.2 The Interesting Nature of an Artefact

What exactly is an artefact? Early scientific collectors of North Queensland artefacts probably would have agreed with the Oxford Dictionary's definition, which states that an artefact is: "an object made by a human being, typically one of cultural or historical interest". Anthropology emerged during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century because of an acute "interest" in living people and their cultural objects. Professional collectors of artefacts in North Queensland often emphasised an object made, as in the following description of a bi-cornual basket, the kind once used by Aboriginal people in North Queensland for leaching toxic rainforest fruits:

The basket varies in size, but the shape is usually the same, more or less oval, narrow at the top and broad at the bottom. The material consists almost exclusively of the branches of lawyer-palm, which are split with the aid of teeth into thin slender strings, and these are scraped smooth and even with clam-shells and stones. (Lumholtz, 1889/2009 pp. 193-194)

Lumholtz collected near Cardwell and Ingham in Queensland during his time in Australia from 1880-1884<sup>7</sup>. Above, it appears to be the basket's physical appearance, materials, and process of manufacture that is of interest. This reflects the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century's evolutionist concern with identifying exotic people, animals and objects, and also, with documenting traditions perceived to be primitive for museums.

Over a century later, anthropological interest in artefacts has changed dramatically. Moreover, a definition and description of artefact is not so simple. Part of the problem is that it is very difficult to generalise about human-made things (as merely objects, for example) across the many different cultural contexts that anthropology typically encounters. The challenge has been recognised in a publication from the International Council of Museums, which cautions museum curators against privileging the term 'object' since "the status of the object is considered today to be a purely western product" (Desvallées & Mairesse, 2010, p. 61). It is little wonder that, when even this slow-changing institution gives ground to such a concession, in the field of

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<sup>7</sup> See a summary of Lumholtz (and others) who collected for museums in the QLD Wet Tropics at: <https://espaces.edu.au/arcresearch-space/collectors/lumholtz/carl-s-lumholtz>

anthropology (distinguished by its attempts to describe ever-changing, locally specific understandings) it is difficult to pin down a general idea of ‘artefact’ at all. As Chua & Salmond (2012) describe it, “questions of the role, nature and definition of artefacts continue to haunt the discipline” (p. 3).

A haunting surely began when the idea of artefact as ‘object’ was more broadly undermined. Could an artefact actually be conceived of as a ‘subject’, with all the ties and relationships that subjects in the world have? Arjun Appadurai’s (1986) *The Social Lives of Things* worked to seriously advance this argument. In his introduction Appadurai states his highly consequential thesis, that “commodities, like persons, have social lives” (p. 3). By following the trajectory of objects, exchanged as commodities through time and place, his contributors investigate the idea as well as its attendant methodological assertion that, “from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context” (p. 5). Studies employing a subsequent follow-the-thing method have gone so far as to suggest that an artefact can be a “witness” to the past (Jones, 2007), even an “intellectual companion” for the collector (Mindell & Turkle, 2011). Artefacts shifted conceptually, then, from being a made *object* to a social *subject* – moving through, and even seeing the social world about them.

The work of Latour (1987) and Law (1986) probably helped clear the way for this intellectual shift given that their argument was so ambitious. They posited that the ‘thing’ was not just capable of moving and seeing, but also *doing*. The thing was, in short, an agent itself. Coming from the field of Science and Technology Studies, Latour (2005) further explained that one could see “the social” as simply “a trail of associations between heterogeneous elements” (p. 5). From this perspective, social researchers should examine both these heterogeneous elements – human and non-human – equally, since both are equally involved in any relational network. This radical “democratisation” (ibid) of human and non-human agents culminated in Actor-Network Theory, and a catchy acronym (ANT). Perhaps the most impressive example of ANT’s application comes from Callon (2015) when he persuasively attributes agency to sea scallops in a fishing village. Such an argument could only be made with a re-conceptualisation of the non-human material thing as *agent*, since as *object* the material

thing is set apart and incapable of social relations, and as *subject* it can only be a “pale imitation” (Chua & Salmond, 2012, p. 4) of a person and of human sociality.

It is important to outline these different theoretical conceptualisations of the material-thing over time – as object, subject and agent – to show how the general concept of the ethnographic artefact has been given the theoretical room it needed to expand, but also, to show how each conceptualisation has determined what questions are subsequently asked of the artefact. As *object*, researchers were interested in recording the artefact’s practical use and function, asking positivist questions such as “how is it made, what is it for?” As *subject*, writers reported on the experiences of the thing. They might have asked, “where has an artefact been, what has it seen and who with?” As *agent*, the questions to ask were, “what does an artefact do, what wider action does it enable in a network of sociality?” Arguably, a further conceptualisation of the artefact – as *thing* – either sidesteps the need for any predetermined questions, as in *Thinking through things: Theorising artefacts ethnographically* (Henare, Holbraad, & Wastell, 2007), or asks all of the above simultaneously, as in *Towards an Ecology of Materials* (Ingold, 2012). Yet if we say that it is the job of a social researcher to describe to others the *nature* of an artefact in their various cultural contexts, with more emphasis on this cultural context perhaps than plain “thingy-ness” can offer, then the appropriate question to ask about artefacts becomes, rather, *what does an artefact encompass?*

Henry, Otto and Wood’s (2013) definition of an artefact is helpful in this respect. As anthropologists, they describe an artefact as: “a complex *phenomenon*, consisting of a collected material thing, its specific documentation, and the stories and theories that give it a history” (emphasis in original, p. 35). It is a useful definition in two respects. Firstly, as “phenomenon” the artefact can be described in terms of aspects that are significant to its own cultural setting – for example its related community stories, or inherent ancestral power. Secondly, as “phenomenon” the artefact can be constituted in terms of information that comes perhaps from a completely different cultural context – such as documentation recorded by a scientific collector for Indigenous artefacts. This latter concession is a crucial component, one would think, in any anthropological discussion of a thing that has been described as ‘artefact’. More to the point, it allows for the fact that contemporary Indigenous groups themselves may take account of scientific writing when assigning meaning to their own artefacts, particularly for iconic



rainforest artefacts like the bicornual basket described above. Indeed the history of an artefact, its “biography” as Kopytoff (1986) would term it, cannot be limited to just one ‘original’ cultural context. As must be the case for so many artefacts that have been collected and removed from that first context, an artefact’s history does not necessarily stop at its collection (although, admittedly, if it languishes in the basement of a museum, decade after decade, it may appear to).

Henry, Otto and Wood (2013) further argue that the artefact can even be partially “created” through its manner of collection and documentation. An example they give is a beeswax figure collected by the Swedish zoologist Eric Mjöberg. The wax figure is made by an Australian Aboriginal man and given to Mjöberg after the two men find a beehive in the bush together. As this creation story of the wax figure is told and retold by Mjöberg in later publications it becomes an indissoluble part of the artefact’s constitution. Thus the authors conclude:

Mjöberg created an artifact...comprising the thing sculpted by a local person, his original documentation in his notebook, and a theory discussed in an academic article and popular book on the north Queensland expedition. (ibid, p. 37)

Given all that has been written and read about Aboriginal artefacts, it is somewhat liberating to embrace documentation and theory as actually constitutive of the artefact. While it will always be difficult to generalise about artefacts across varying cultural contexts, we can at least accept that the artefact has the potential to encompass so much more than just its material, and original, characteristics. If there is anything universal about an artefact it is precisely this potential to encompass multiple factors.

### **2.3 Storied Artefacts**

Regrettably the debate over objects, subjects, agents, and things, while theoretically interesting and fruitful, seems to have directed attention away from the very topic that anthropology purports to take as its specialisation: people. One way of getting focus back on to descendant communities has been to advocate preservation of their stories. Linguists and anthropologists have long been interested in documenting the orally transmitted stories and songs of Indigenous peoples across the globe, but the idea that this so-called “intangible heritage” might need protecting, in the same way that material

artefacts need protecting, has only been asserted relatively recently in the *UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Moreover, although professional collectors have sometimes made efforts to record information from the descendant community to contextualise collected artefacts, stories associated with artefacts have only lately been valued as truly explanatory of an artefact, and therefore worthy of ‘preserving’, or curating, too. Ballard (2008) for example demonstrates how “intangible cultural heritage is not confined to the role of providing background information” (p. 78). As an example, she discusses an exhibition of Lough Neagh eel fishing in Ireland at a folk festival. She argues that when curating old and contemporary hooks and other fishing paraphernalia, there is a “curatorial responsibility” to also record associated knowledge and practices to do with “the process” – such as dyeing one’s fishing line to facilitate the etiquette of cutting and tying off another’s in the case of a tangle, “counting the moon” (an increase ritual related to phases of the moon), and making one’s own grading table to ensure compliance with contemporary Lough Neagh Eel Fishery’s regulations. To argue for the importance of all these practices to the tangible artefacts on display at the folk festival, Ballard further says: “it is intangible cultural heritage, the actual process of fishing itself that makes real sense of these pieces” (p. 82).

Such intangible sense-making community stories may be cosmological or ecological, but more profane stories of individual connection to an artefact might be just as important for descendant community members. Svensson’s (2008) case study of Sámi basketry in Sweden provides a good example. Here Svensson places strong emphasis on the life-narrative of basket makers, often quoting at length participants’ recollections and sentiments about baskets and basketry. This is about more than just re-asserting the native voice previously marginalised by the omnipotent ethnographer (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Svensson’s narrative emphasis is also a critique – against the “thing-as-subject” and “thing-as-agent” constructions previously outlined. Contrary, then, to ideas that the thing-subject has a traceable life, or that the thing-agent has the power to communicate, Svensson argues: “without people’s life history, selectively recorded, there can be no biography of objects”; and further, “Objects *per se* cannot *speak* for culture; on the other hand, objects combined with adequate words can most likely convey cultural insight” (emphasis in original, p. 100). In this way he reasserts, not the “subaltern other” against the dominant ruling classes, but rather the “person” – against

the dominance of things in intellectual writing since Appadurai and the impenetrable actor-network theorists.

Svensson's approach is an adoption of the biographical depth of focus that Gell (1998) has said distinguishes Anthropology from other social science disciplines. While other lenses may criticise such a heavy focus on the individual<sup>8</sup>, for Svensson biographical narratives have a unique "informative strength" for artefacts. Furthermore, such narratives can show the artefact in its "appropriate context, its cultural setting" (p. 98). He thus concludes that, "the collecting of artifacts should always be associated with the collecting of knowledge, and the informative part of such knowledge derives from narratives told by key persons" (p.100). The argument for biographical narratives lies also, then, with its ethnographic embeddedness, or in other words, with people's lived lives. In this way Svensson seems to rebel against too much theory, and relatedly, too many 'things'.

Holbraad (2011) takes a similar position. In a conference paper called "Can the thing speak?", a title which ironically invokes Spivak (1988) to suggest the absurdity of the idea that the thing is "subaltern", Holbraad urges anthropologists not to forget, amidst all the theorising, that ethnographic data is still key:

if what a thing may be is itself an ethnographic variable, then the initial analytical task must not be to 'add' to that term's theoretical purchase by proposing new ways to think of it...Rather it must be to effectively de-theorise the thing, by emptying it out of its many analytical connotations, rendering it a purely ethnographic 'form' ready to be filled out contingently according only to its ethnographic exigencies. (Holbraad, 2011, p. 11)

Holbraad reveals here his preference for 'thing' over object, subject or agent. Yet a further invocation of an empty vessel (a bowl perhaps?), waiting to be filled by the anthropologist with "ethnographic exigencies", now brings it closer to Henry, Otto and Wood's (2013) conceptualisation of the artefact as "phenomenon". In fact, we should see the artefact as being less like Holbraad's bowl, as I am understanding it, and more

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<sup>8</sup> See Thornborrow & Coates (2005, p. 15) for an overview of such critiques.

like a planet: it has its own gravity, and it draws in surrounding elements that help to define it – both tangible and intangible, both emic and etic, both before and after collection. The latter planet metaphor lacks the tidy material connotations of a potential archaeological artefact but, given that the distinction between intangible and intangible is not always relevant in some cultural cases, it is more suitable.

Having now claimed a definition of artefact, and explained its appropriateness for my purposes, it is reasonable to assert that anthropologists of material culture do not often address the question of Indigenous people's use of an artefact *as an artefact* – that is, as a “collected material thing” with “stories and theories that give it history” (Henry et al., 2013). In the concluding section of this chapter, I suggest a reason for this gap in the literature, and it is related to the introduction's mention of preservation sceptics and the wide disparity between object and artefact.

#### **2.4 A Basket in the Bookshelf**

To explain the omission I need to expand at some length a quote first raised in the thesis introduction from an anthropologist who has also written about basketry (Ingold, 2000). From this view, a basket should be valued because it is created by human hands from within the world. Once the physical connection between human hand, material object, and environment is lost through removal to an artefact collection, so too, according to Ingold, is the analytic value of the basket. Thus he writes:

The more that objects are removed from the contexts of life-activity in which they are produced and used – the more they appear as static objects of disinterested contemplation (as in museums and galleries) – the more, too, the process disappears or is hidden behind the product, the finished object. Thus we are inclined to look for the meaning of the object in the idea it expresses rather than in the current of activity to which it properly and originally belongs. It is precisely this contemplative attitude that leads to the redesignation of the ordinary objects of the quotidian environment as items of ‘material culture’ whose significance lies not so much in their incorporation into a habitual pattern of use as in their symbolic function. (Ingold, 2000, p. 347)

Ingold's disdain for museum artefacts here echoes Krzysztof Pomian's (in Desvallées & Mairesse, 2010, p. 28) definition of the collection more generally, where collected objects, being “held temporarily or permanently outside the circuit of economic activity” are now mere “semiophores” – that is, carriers of meaning or significance

(ibid). Ingold's further argument for closer attention to "the process" and to humans who act and "dwell" in the world is not too far from this. However, for many Queensland rainforest people it is less common to dwell within the world of traditional basket making since the treasured materials used for making baskets are either locked away behind fences or cleared away altogether to make room for sugar cane and bananas. People use new materials of course – such as multi-coloured, plastic telephone cable instead of lomandra grass for the small *mind*i basket, once used by their ancestors to carry human flesh. But in terms of those iconic, traditionally crafted bi-cornual baskets of the Queensland rainforest, contemplation is sometimes all that remains.

One might describe this kind of contemplation as being part of "heritage", as the UNESCO 2003 convention does. The problematic heritage term has not escaped the critical gaze of anthropologists, but if we remember its original Latin etymology, as simply "assets" that descendants inherit (Desvallées & Mairesse, 2010, p. 39), then it is a useful term to keep in mind as I introduce another bi-cornual basket, one acquired by Ernie Grant in Tully, North Queensland. Ernie had recently sold fifteen of his rainforest artefacts to the Museum of Tropical Queensland, but he had at least ten remaining rainforest artefacts at his home in Tully. He sometimes used these kept artefacts to present cultural workshops to students and visitors to Tully at his family's Aboriginal-run cultural tours business. He also had an array of stone artefacts, collected during his time as a timber cutter for the local sawmill, where he was paid, "sadly" as he put it, to cut down the trees of his country. Most of these artefacts had been either bought, given or traded to him by family members. Some European farmers in the area had given him artefacts too, telling him something like "you should really have this".

This was the case for a small bi-cornual basket his mother made. The Butlers, a European Australian farming family, had returned the basket to Ernie and it was now sitting inside a bookshelf in his living room. The basket was one of the first artefacts Ernie and I documented using a form I had adapted from a standard museum artefact registration form. The form asked basic provenance questions, such as when and where the object was made. It also had a field for information about "traditional use". On a whim I added another box to the end of the form and labelled it simply "Other Information". Ernie looked to this part of the form and said, "That will be the most

important part – all the “other” information that I can tell you about this basket” (E Grant 2016, pers comm).

Ernie proceeded to tell me that he would never “part” with this particular basket. His mother had made it before he was born on the Butler’s farm in Tully, where his parents had lived and worked for some years. The Butlers were “a good family”, Ernie said. As an example of this, he noted that when his young sister died from a childhood illness, they helped his mother bring home her body to bury on the farm in Jirrbal country. Ernie remembered seeing half-made baskets laying about in the camp because “they took a long while to make”, but with the small lawyer-cane hook attached to the back of the basket, one was able to eventually hang them up in the camp. He also commented on the curved face and flat back of the basket that his mother had achieved. As he described:

this basket was made so it sits properly between you shoulder blades when you’re walking. And it’s got a nice sheen finish from the beeswax. Not like the new ones you see today. They’re all round with no sheen.  
(E Grant interview, 2016)

The basket prompted more general reflections about the artefact as a ‘type’, too. For example, he commented on the practice of burning the first basket you made and rubbing the ashes onto your arms (he did not have an explanation for this, except to say, “it was just done”). In addition to this ritualised practice, he acknowledged the material culture of his “old people” as simply “the stuff they used to exist”. Indeed, he emphasised functional aspects of artefacts, scientific interest in these baskets particularly, and even the place of the basket within his collection, as in the following:

The baskets were a huge and integral part of Aboriginal culture. Culture being – is how you do things. Now the bi-cornual basket is – I don’t have to talk too much about it there’s a huge amount of information been given about that. The reason it’s called bi-cornual and the ergonomics of that is being well-understood. But the Aboriginal people were a lot smarter than people think they were...what we’ve talked about today is a representation of what we’ve been trying to teach non-indigenous about our material culture. I feel very deeply that things are fast fading away from the old time. And these things are a means of trying to preserve in our human arrangement of things of just what it was like in our time from time immemorial of stuff we made to live on this land. It’s a good representation this little collection. (E Grant interview, 2016)

We begin to see from these comments that Ernie's basket was not simply a family heirloom. It was a family *asset* – of value to his immediate and extended Jirrbal family due to its strong association with culture (“how you do things”), specific crafting rituals (burning of one's first-made basket) and ingenuity (making toxic food safe to eat). When we speak of “curating” we might think immediately of “preserving” or keeping perishable things static in time. In fact, curating is *a collection of processes* that includes collecting, preserving, documenting and communicating to others. Thus while Ernie does refer to preserving knowledge about the “old times”, the act of speaking at his dinner table to me about the basket and other artefacts seems to me to be a part of curation, that is, documenting and communicating. Moreover, if the stories associated with the artefact – about the Butler family, the baskets hanging in camp, and the burning of one's first basket – are told to his family members and others in Tully, might this be a way of re-energising the artefact?

It is just as Ballard suggests: only when we pay attention to an artefact's so-called “intangible” aspects can artefacts be seen as *recreated* by people. Thus she writes:

The unique factor in intangible cultural heritage is that the focus is always on people, the holders and constant recreators of the cultural artefact and practice. The role of the curator is to identify, preserve and act as a conduit to these elements, in a context of respect for the culture itself and for the people through whom it is expressed. (Ballard, 2008, p. 93)

“Respectful” interaction with an artefact's descendant community, where the people are shown to be “constant recreators” of the artefact, is ostensibly good for the community. However, it is also good for an intellectual debate about artefacts that has so far remained fairly quiet when it comes to Indigenous collectors like Ernie Grant.

Moreover, and critically for this thesis, Ernie's basket, made by his mother, was a symbol of time and land “immemorial”. This was not a pre-contact time per se. In my view, Ernie's comment “our human arrangement of things” refers to the complex idea of both a *place* on this Earth, and a *time* when Indigenous people still owned and accessed their land, and subsequently, ‘did things’ a certain way. Ernie spoke about this on another occasion:

You go down the main street of Tully there and pull somebody up and ask them about Aboriginal culture you'd be very lucky to get them to even to know that we had such a thing as a shield for instance. It's so shallow. And it probably come down to the fact that there's been no legitimate or legal – legitimate form of the English coming and taking over the country. There's been no format and therefore there's been a dodging – let's get away from it. It's like I said with that farmer, oh they don't want to know it's on their property...like how are they going to be able to tell their grandchildren – about how they got their property? (E Grant interview, 2016)

Again, one may jump to a critique of Ernie's apparent assertion that "Aboriginal culture" can only refer to a pre-colonial way of "doing things". Yet, as will become more and more apparent throughout the thesis, the real emphasis here is not on a pre-colonial time, but rather on a pre-colonial understanding of place – when Aboriginal people owned and accessed their traditional lands.

### **2.5 A Unique Aboriginal Keeper?**

Perspectives on keeping and preservation vary greatly among Indigenous people around the globe and within groups. However, we can at least agree with one of the perspectives quoted in Clavir's (2002) useful review, stating "it is...patronizing to assume that indigenous people necessarily believe that all their works should complete a natural cycle and be allowed to degrade and eventually return to the soil" (p. 78). To assume that Aboriginal people do not collect or care for things, or consider their longevity, is problematic since such a conclusion is surely drawn from narrow stereotypes about the nomadic hunter-gather past of Aboriginal Australians. Only one Girringun person that I spoke with stated outright that artefacts should return to country to naturally perish in the trees as they might once have done. Most others wanted to keep collected artefacts 'cared for' somehow.

Still, Ernie Grant was a unique case as an Indigenous collector. For one, as I later learned, he did not entrust his collection and resources into the care of the Girringun Aboriginal Corporation located in Cardwell to the south of Tully. The Girringun office was a practically sensible destination because it already had a climate-controlled keeping place with displayed artefacts, some of which had been repatriated from the Queensland Museum. Moreover, Ernie's Jirrbal clan group was one of the nine represented by Girringun, and he maintained friendly relations with the CEO and other



people there. But in reply to my question, “where would be the ideal place for these artefacts to end up in 50 years’ time?” Ernie stated to me, “I would like to see them in the best possible public domain and the best possible keeping situation that includes preservation techniques. But also publicly available” (E Grant interview, 2016). He went on to say that if the right information was presented with artefacts, this could combat ignorance in the settler state. As he described: “Ignorance is a big factor of people attitudes in the country. If you’re ignorant of certain facts you’ll come up with assumptions that are not based on truth” (ibid). For Ernie, it appeared Girringun was not the best keeping situation, or accessible to the public in a way that could address “ignorance”.

In terms of a “best keeping situation” at Girringun, or perceived lack of one, Ernie described the example of a Jirrbal language program that he had helped to create at fair cost and effort. The tangible aspect of the program included word cards put at Girringun for people to use. Word cards gradually started to disappear, however, and this made the resource incomplete and unusable, according to Ernie. Staying overnight above the Girringun offices on one occasion, I saw the physical remnants of the language program – namely the cards – now kept indeed like artefacts inside a locked glass cabinet, probably in a subsequent effort to keep them safe and secure.

One might argue that in fact the cards were at least accessible in the first place, which is why they disappeared. Yet the issue of accessibility for some people, and inaccessibility to others was raised in a conversation I had with Ernie and his nephew (RG below), one of a number of “younger people” (in his 50s) to whom Ernie would frequently interact with to speak about “cultural matters”. On this occasion the three of us were discussing what suitable resource should be produced for a Dyirbal heritage project, which occurred directly before the current research. Sitting at the dinner table again, a metaphor of inaccessibility came up when I raised Girringun, as described in my field notes:

I asked EG, “what would you like people to know about your culture and artefacts?” EG says that he would like “information to be made available, and brought all together, like a scrub hen”. (When we gather the eggs in the nest, he said, they can hatch, like ideas.) “Scrub hen won’t tell you where the eggs are. But there are signs of where to find them, like the newer leaves that line

up and direct you to the freshest egg”. Referring to the Heritage Project, I ask: so that’s what we are doing, pulling all these resources together to make a nest? “Yes”. I further comment that there are a “few nests” around – “You have one here, with all the resources you have gathered over the years. And maybe Giringun has one too? “Yes”, EG replies, “but they have a big cassowary watching over it that won’t let you near it!” RG and I laugh at this, the metaphor now apparently exhausted. (TI Fieldnote Book, 2017)

At first I thought the cassowary was a specific person, but it was probably more correct to see it as the bureaucracy of the organisation, and maybe certain inner families, acting as a barrier to accessing knowledge once it was stored at Giringun. This predicament might seem contrary to the aim of such Aboriginal organisations, which are supposed to be a central place for “the community” to be able to regularly interact with. But consider that the Yawuru Prescribed Body Corporate office in Broome had an almost irreverent untouchability for me too, such that on my visits back home I admired the office from afar but generally avoided going in<sup>9</sup>. How many other people might feel the same way about these “community” offices? Ernie’s story of the language cards and the intimidating cassowary demonstrates how difficult the balance between security and accessibility could be to achieve. For Ernie, who chose to stay outside the organisational bureaucracy, the solution was to simply keep resources himself. Of course, claiming ownership as an individual, rather than community, would always draw the critical gaze of some of his fellow countrymen and women.

Ernie certainly had to navigate difficult encounters with his own people being the known “keeper of things” in Tully. Thus, when a document or photograph was being discussed in the community, a refrain that I heard from people was, “old man Ernie might have it”. It seemed to me that this was usually said to mean that one might go see Ernie and acquire the thing. But occasionally the sentiment was expressed as a mild resentment, probably because the collection point was not a shared community space, but rather Ernie’s own house. Photographs of people and family members, for example,

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<sup>9</sup> My avoidance was also due to the fact that, over several generations, relations between my family and the families of most of the board members had been infamously fraught. I cannot comment here on the relationship between Ernie’s family and Giringun. I note only that the Jirrbal group did not join Giringun until quite some time after its inception.

were highly sought after, and after years of collecting copies directly from museums, or through researchers, Ernie had acquired a staggering 20,000 photos or more on his computer. This was enough to begin to present a storage management problem, which we discussed. Some were probably double ups of course, but still, the fact that Ernie had such a hoard at his house was cause for some jealousy and even animosity within his community. For example, he told me that one man, whom we both knew, had angrily demanded a picture of his father sitting by a fig tree that had been partially cut to extract timber for a shield. “I would have given it to him, he just had to ask”, Ernie told me. I later spoke at length to this man, an artist and one of the few shield makers in the community. He must have acquired the photograph in the end for I came upon it in a folio he had put together with other important documents like his granddaughter’s school merit certificate.

In addition to dealing with jealousy, Ernie worried that his own people, perhaps unwilling “to ask”, would simply take the things that they wanted when he was not home. For example, a small digital recorder that I had borrowed from the Language and Culture Research Centre in Cairns, and which I had left with him to record his own narratives, was apparently stolen from his house. The theft was deeply upsetting for him and we searched the house for an afternoon, to no avail, in case it had been misplaced. I had backed up much of our recorded conversation before leaving it with him, so it was not a loss in terms of data. However, it was my understanding that, in addition to retrieving the device and his stories, he was also desperate to discount the possibility that a family member living nearby, whom he sadly suspected, had come into the house and taken it. Such was the occasional suspicion that came with ‘keeping things’.

To make recordings and “write stuff down” might concretise and thus make ‘things’ susceptible to theft in this way, but for Ernie it seemed concretisation was, surprisingly, another way of keeping things safe. If fact archives in general were perceived as a helpful tool for ensuring that such information would not be “forgot”. To take one small but demonstrative example, in a video recording Ernie Grant interviewed his Uncle Jack Muriata who animatedly told a dreaming story about fire on Riji Hill. Ernie’s Uncle Jack ended his telling emphatically with, “this is not to be forgot! Not to be forgot”. The Uncle expressed his axiom directly to the camera, as well as to Ernie, showing that he was as receptive as Ernie was to the power of the archive for achieving this “not-to-be-

forgot” purpose. Therefore, one final point to be added to the preliminary conceptualisation of an artefact that has so far been discussed is that the histories and stories that come with artefacts are similarly, for some people, “not to be forgot”.

## 2.6 Conclusion

As has now been shown, artefacts and material things have been conceived in social-science literature as objects, subjects, agents and things. But none of these conceptualisations have served to address the subsequent perceptions of Aboriginal people as only ever makers of objects, or creators of art inspired by these original forms. They are rarely acknowledged as collectors of artefacts, or curators of country as Ernie clearly is. Maybe we can appease Ingold’s distrust of anthropologists who do not to pay attention to the lived-in world by showing through further research that artefacts are an integral part of Aboriginal lives in Tully and Murray Upper. As we have seen, Ernie and his family do not use baskets to leach toxic poisons from rainforest fruits in the rivers anymore, but baskets, nevertheless, are a strong symbol of this cultural practice and an important connection to the ancestors who once did.

In the next chapter, I move from a discussion of spirit as a theoretical consideration (how spirit *could* be) towards a discussion of spirit as an ethnographic reality (what spirit *is* for Giringun people). As we will see, achieving repatriation of artefacts that are not-sacred, and therefore supposedly not-with-spirit, is still a long way off in the Australian context. Thus, to visit one’s artefacts in a museum is still the reality for most descendant communities like Murray Upper.

### *3. Into the Museum with Wild Artefacts*

#### **3.1 Introduction**

Museum storage is often thought of as the end of the road for artefacts. We could say, then, that this thesis begins at the end, as we will now go into the museum with a descendant community. In the following two stories about visiting artefacts, varied reactions and opinions evidence the problematic notion of a single community response from Murray Upper people of North Queensland. But if pain was universally felt, it was not for artefacts no longer in community circulation, or the end of artefact lives. Instead, it was for the absence of a culturally appropriate ‘end’ on country. More specifically, I will discuss ancestralised artefacts’ disconnection from country and kin, and what I will call ‘wild artefacts’. The term draws on the idea of wild Country, which I have heard several other traditional owners in Queensland use to call country that is theirs but not cared for or visited, as in one Thaypan man’s description to me: “that’s wild country. Even I don’t go there”<sup>10</sup>.

To first contextualise the two museum visits, I outline general relations between descendant communities and museums as well as the repatriation discourse in Australia. The global push for Indigenous rights, including to collections in museums, has helped clear a path for arguments to be made for repatriation of secular objects in Australia. Yet these arguments, so far, have ultimately failed leaving us with a “Philosophy of Repatriation” as Hennessy et al (2013) term it. The descendant community visit to the museum is perhaps the best example of this current philosophy, and thus I turn to the two visits made by Giringun community people: one to a museum “down south” as described to me by a senior Girramay elder, and the other to a much closer museum, the Museum of Tropical Queensland in Townsville. The latter visit, I was able to participate in. It will be seen that an artefact is ‘ancestralised’ because it is linked to the ancestor who made it, and this becomes a problem when the artefact is too far from home. The ancestralised artefact now becomes ‘wild’, meaning uncared for and somewhat unstable

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<sup>10</sup> A Thaypan traditional owner made this comment to me at a Native Title boundary meeting in Cooktown, 2021, with the Cape York Land Council. He was key ‘boss’ for this country, hence his choice of words, “even I”.

because the spirit of the artefact is always drawn back to the museum instead of its own country.

### 3.2 Repatriation and “Going There”

The word museum has a negative connotation signifying *the place where dead things lie* and *native people don't go*. (Cranmer-Webster in Clavir, 2002, p. 85)

The previous chapter raised arguments that have worked towards disrupting the notion of artefacts as merely objects, or dead things, which can then only be resuscitated as agents through the single authoritative breath of the expert. The problem with this countering movement however (apart from the fact that it remains within an elusive theoretical domain that is of no consequence to most people), is that a descendant community viewpoint here remains only one of many. Moreover, multiple viewpoints, though they may be acknowledged via an exhibit, are less fully incorporated into the western museum system of operation as Harrison (2013) summarises: “postmodern restructuring...does not necessarily reform the system...does not lead to a real sharing of authority...only to reorganisation of existing categories to accommodate differing perspectives” (p. 6). To address their negative image with Indigenous communities around the world and remain relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century state museums have had to embrace a “sharing of authority”. This has meant confronting both points of critique made in the comment above by a Canadian First Nations woman and curator. That is, not just that artefacts are “dead things”, but also, that native people do not go there. At this point, we appear to shift from the postmodern to the postcolonial.

We can say at least that as a force, if not destination, the postcolonial challenge from Indigenous people has resulted in what I consider to be a more straightforward proposition for museums, and that is decolonising practice. An example of the scathing critique from Indigenous people regarding their lack of justice in the face of the non-Indigenous, academic knowledge production comes from one Native American lawyer cited in Simpson's (1996) *Museums in the Post-colonial Era*: ‘Desecrate a white grave and you get jail. Desecrate an Indian grave and you get a Ph.D’ (p. 173). Since the passing of *The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act* (NAGPRA) in 1990 – a federal law in the U.S that made all state-funded museums report their

Indigenous inventory lists to associated Native American communities – Indigenous people “going there”, for museums, has meant being transparent about what is in the stores and then engaging with communities to begin the return of human remains and ceremonial objects to communities. It has also meant vigorously supporting the physical presence of Indigenous people in these traditionally colonial spaces, to address the ironic critique of Moreton-Robinson (2015) first described it in the thesis introduction, that so-called postcolonial spaces are not really “inhabited by Indigenous people” (p.10).

There is no federal legislation like NAGPRA in Australia, but the return of human remains and ceremonial objects (that in Aboriginal Australia may be referred to as “secret-sacred” objects) has been advocated by Museums Australia for some time. For example, point 1.5.3 from Museums Australia’s *Principles and Guidelines for Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture* document states: “Museums are to seek out the rightful custodians of secret-sacred items and ask them whether they wish the items to be repatriated to the community or held by the museum on behalf of the community” (p. 20). In a paper discussing repatriation practice in Australia, the return to communities of remains and secret-sacred objects, as decolonising practice, has thus been described by Pickering (2015) (optimistically rather than cynically I think) as a “business as usual” (p. 429) approach for Australian museums.

What is less usual is the return of secular objects. Pickering further reports, for example, that for the National Museum of Australia repatriation of secular objects is, “usually more complex and conditional than that for Indigenous remains and sacred objects” (ibid, p. 429). I suggest that the case for returning secular objects has typically been made via three general arguments. The first is that objects have been acquired through illegal means. This approach is supported by the 1970 UNESCO *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property*, which Australia is a party to. Pickering suggests that, historically, it is likely human remains and sacred objects were more often stolen than secular objects. This is because secular objects, by virtue of their ‘lack of sacredness’, were more easily acquired from Aboriginal people through “purchase, trade or gifting” (p. 429). Pickering does not explicitly state it, however, I think we can go one step further and conclude that it is not because of ‘lack of sacredness’, per se, that

repatriation of secular objects happened less frequently, but rather ‘lack of association with theft’. In this way, the same western legal framework that protects property rights also supports the museum’s right to keep what they deem to have legitimately acquired at the time.

Just as subtly impotent for the return of secular objects is a second potential argument for repatriation: that all artefacts should be returned to where they belong (like ceremonial objects and human remains) because in fact every artefact is partially sacred through embodiment of ancestral beings and power. This extension of the powerful sacred to more secular objects has been suggested at times for Indigenous cultures across the globe. For example, as it has been described in a North American context:

sacredness in the Indian world is like the early morning dew, it falls over everything. Nothing is exempt, everything is sacred. But there are degrees of sacredness, places where the dew only lightly touched, and others where the dew heavily coated. (George Horse Capture in Rosoff, 2003, p. 74)

Pickering (2015) notes this, too, for Australian Indigenous objects, stating that, “all objects are, to some extent, a manifestation of the sacred being” (p. 431). The weight given to this term “sacred” in museum practice is demonstrated in the National Museum of Australia’s Indigenous artefacts classification system, which deals with ‘degrees of sacredness’ and subsequent management of artefacts. Of the five categories<sup>11</sup>, “secret-sacred” requires the highest level of restricted access in museum storage (where elders might still elect to keep sacred artefacts). Usually only initiated men are able to access secret-sacred artefacts, and strict cultural protocols are in place around their handling and use. As Pickering (ibid) further points out, however, elders have in some cases overturned artefacts previously categorised as secret-sacred, thus allowing a number of previously secret pieces to come out for display. In my view, this demonstrates the importance of ongoing engagement with community representatives, but also points to how the term “sacred” may simply be expected to do too much in terms of a repatriation argument. Clearly not all artefacts, at all times, are sacred *enough* to make this argument

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<sup>11</sup> These are: sacred-secular, sacred-public, sacred ceremonial (public), sacred sorcery objects and secret/sacred (restricted) (Pickering 2015, p.431).



work. Of course, there are other ways for Australian Indigenous people to say that an artefact is significant without invoking the special category of “sacred”. But before elaborating on this, I raise a third and final position from which an unsuccessful argument for repatriation of secular objects has been made.

Indigenous people have now seemingly found the globally endorsed support they need to argue from a position based on “rights”. After an initial vote of no (together with other reluctant settler states such as Canada, the U.S. and New Zealand), Australia agreed to be party to the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples 2007*, which commits to the “repatriation of ceremonial objects and human remains” (article 12.2). It is easy to see how Indigenous rights advocacy in Australia echoes the language used in Australia’s *Native Title* legislation, which is often described in legal and popular discourse as “a bundle of rights” for the determined claimants (such as the right to hunt on, or exclude other Indigenous groups from, traditional lands). A few, often younger, participants in the current study expressed themselves through a discourse of rights. For example, when I spoke to one Girramay woman about artefacts that her grandfather had lately seen in a museum “down south”, her firm view as a politically engaged young person was that the museum should not have them – “they should be here”, she stated. By “here”, she meant a keeping place located on her and her grandfather’s country and run by the Girringun Aboriginal Corporation, where she also worked as an Indigenous ranger. But the legal ineffectiveness of a rights position is ultimately attested to in the fact that the southern museum’s artefacts were *not* in the Girringun keeping place and were not likely be returned either. Moreover, a lot of the artefacts at the Girringun keeping place were only on loan from the Queensland Museum, suggesting a kind of contradictory temporary repatriation. In short, although *Native Title* offers some land-use rights, and the *UN Declaration* supports rights for the return of ceremonial objects and human remains, when it comes to legally defensible rights for repatriation of secular artefacts back to country in Australia – though we may insist these rights exist – there really are none for Indigenous Australians.

A rights discourse, in terms of an anthropological perspective, may in fact be unhelpfully reductive when trying to focus on emic ways of thinking. For example, it did not adequately describe the way that the Girramay grandfather felt when I spoke with him about his museum visit. His view was more similar to a finding of

Krmpotich's (2010) study with Haida people from British Columbia in Canada and their efforts to locate and repatriate ancestor remains in museums. Krmpotich hypothesised that Haida, given their history of political agitation for land rights and repatriation, would explain repatriation in terms of rights. However, she found that the Haida in fact emphasised obligation and belonging over rights or ownership, through a specifically Haida way of expressing connection (namely, a Haida kinship principle of *yahgudang*, meaning to pay respect and be fit for respect). It was thus concluded that, "explanations positing repatriation as a statement of cultural rights, or as a post-colonial or decolonizing act were insufficient" (p. 159). This finding heeds a further gentle warning that Krmpotich invokes, suggesting a similar problem for both remains and artefacts: "contemporary trends (such as post-colonialism or cultural rights) can efface other ways of knowing artefacts" (Seremetakis in *ibid*, p. 174).

In summary, it is against this backdrop of failed theft, sacredness, and rights arguments that the following discussion attempts to understand "other ways of knowing artefacts", from the point of view of traditional owners and artists of the Murray Upper community. This emic perspective could even lead to a better position from which to advocate for repatriation than those outlined above.

### **3.3 A "Philosophy of Repatriation" and Strategies for Access**

In lieu of actual repatriation, but in a context of compromise, Hennessy et al's (2013) notion of a "philosophy of repatriation" is salient. The authors state: "Under the impetus provided by NAGPRA and what we call the "philosophy of repatriation" (predicated on reciprocity and respect), the roles of relationships between museums and descendant communities have been transformed" (p. 47). Relationships based on reciprocity and respect have been encouraged, it seems to me, by the promotion of three basic things for Indigenous people of a descendant community:

- 1) *access* to museum-stored artefacts
- 2) *consultation* regarding artefacts' care, and
- 3) *collaboration* on representation in museum exhibits.

In the first story I retell below, *consultation* is at play though the museum's wish to speak with a senior elder about the identification and care of Murray Upper artefacts. In the second story, *collaboration* is evident in the 2017 exhibition *Manggan: Gather, Gathers, Gathering* organised by the Girringun Aboriginal Corporation and the Museum of Tropical Queensland. My primary focus here, however, is on the *access* to artefacts, which occurred in both examples – or, in other words, “going there”.

In addition to physical visits to the artefacts in museums, other strategies aiming to increase descendant community access to museums-stored artefacts have been employed by museums. One example is the idea of “digital return” that Hennessy et al (ibid) discuss. From my experience with Murray Upper people, intermittent internet access (through smart phones, tablets, or the Girringun office computers) renders the idea of digital return highly dubious, particularly for processes needing data, such as downloading of pictures. For older people it would be almost inconceivable. For example, a rare collection of songs performed by Dyirbal and other singers had been recorded by Dixon and Koch (1996) and put online for the community's access via a portal code. I had the code for this site because of my position as research assistant on a Dyirbal language and heritage project and, after a lunch at the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders Centre in Tully, I set up an internet connection on my laptop through my phone's hot spot so that five Jirrbal elders could listen to their old people singing the songs stored online. Assuming that they would have heard these songs of their close family members, perhaps at the Girringun office with the help of digitally capable staff, I was amazed to learn that most of the elders had never heard them online. Although digital access with codes may be seen as the answer to controlling access<sup>12</sup>, in this case it was demonstrably restrictive, for the elders present on this occasion had neither internet access at home, nor the code for the website.

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<sup>12</sup> The linguist who recorded these songs told me that, given the songs were not classified as secret-sacred, he wanted to make CDs of these recordings, which would have been a more accessible media. However, he was advised that this would be inappropriate (by whom, I was not told) and so reverted to an online archive for them (Dixon 2016, pers comm.).

The listening event was received well enough, however. The elders began to discuss the clap sticks they could hear and the places where they might still find the wood for them. Interestingly, one of the aunties actually remembered being there herself for a recording as a young person. She asked me if I could find a certain funny song that she remembered the singers composing on the day. Overall, the response – of wonder, reverence, nostalgia and generally being moved at hearing their old people singing – was captured in Uncle Patrick’s comment: “it’s like turning back the hands of time”.

In addition to attempts at digital return, another strategy claiming re-connection is outreach work, which I have heard described colloquially as the “travelling suitcase of artefacts” method. An interesting example of this suitcase method in Australia comes from Hafner (2013) who travelled with artefacts housed at Museums Victoria to Coen on the Cape York Peninsula, Queensland. Hafner finds that, unlike old photographs of people and country, which did elicit some interest and excitement from the Lamalama people, reactions to artefacts were unexpectedly ambiguous. Some “apparent emotional discomfort” (p. 362) was even discerned by her. Hafner interprets this as being the result of a problematic change of physical context – from museum to country. She thus concludes:

When we took artefacts out of the museum and transported them to Cape York Peninsula we changed the context through which they were perceived by the Lamalama. That is, we removed them from their discursive location within the ‘whitefella’ world and temporarily placed them back into the exclusive domain of the Lamalama. (Hafner, 2013, p. 361)

She notes further: “As a kin-based society...re-introducing objects whose biographies were unknown, or only partially known in the case of the artefacts, posed challenges for the Lamalama in establishing an effective relationship with them” (p. 362).

I never heard of museums bringing artefacts to Murray Upper in this way. However, in an example that could arguably be described as another moment of digital return, I once took minutes for a meeting held in Girramay country (at the Girringun art workshop space) between a museum curator, researchers and the Girringun community. A new project was being proposed via a power point with pictures of rainforest artefacts and plant materials. As with the Lamalama in Hafner’s project, there seemed to be a similar feeling from Girringun people of wanting to ‘place’ the displayed artefacts somehow:

familiar rainforest styles and shapes were recognised, language names were identified, and locations where these artefacts were taken were enquired after. The presentation of travelling artefacts did not cause the same level of discomfort as with the Lamalama, but I could see how there would be some expectation for connection and recognition, which could cause disappointment in the community if not met.

I can briefly compare this Giringun community meeting with Giringun people's experience visiting artefacts at the Museum of Tropical Queensland (MTQ) in 2017, which will be soon described in more detail. At the MTQ, people could choose for themselves which artefacts to attend to on the museum shelves. Whereas during the powerpoint presentation, in the community, images of artefacts were selected by a museum curator due to presumed relevance and perhaps connection. At the MTQ any expectations of connection certainly seemed lower, and this caused excitement rather than disappointment if expectations were not met. From this brief comparison of situations, I would assert that when compared to digital return and outreach programs, it is the community visit into the museum stores that exemplifies the strongest commitment to decolonising practice for museums holding Indigenous collections. There is no substitute for a physical visit into the stores, for people of a descendant community actually "going there" and selecting, themselves, what artefacts to pay attention to.

Fienup-Riordon's (2003) work with Yup'ik elders from Alaska in the U.S. provides one of the first cases studies of this sort of Indigenous-led visit into the museum. With members of Yup'ik, Fienup-Riordon attended Berlin's Ethnologisches Museum (at the time called Museum für Völkerkunde) and spent three days in the collections with over 7000 plus artefacts, the largest Yup'ik collection in the world. Fienup-Riordon, like Hennessy et al (2013), came up with a term to describe what exists in lieu of full repatriation, calling it "visual repatriation". She summed up the endeavour by saying: "what we sought was not so much the collection's physical return to Alaska, but the return of the knowledge and stories, the history and pride that they embodied and that, we hoped, we would be able to bring home (p. 29). Most interestingly for the current discussion is how she describes the visit at one point as like attending a "dance festival" because Yup'ik elders were so animated in their remembrances of practices that artefacts evoked. Although anything short of full repatriation – whether virtual, digital

or visual – has been criticised (as mere "data sharing" for example, see Boast & Enoté, 2013), these types of events or experiences, like dancing through the museum's collections or listening to the old people's songs, are worth a closer look as examples of a philosophy of repatriation at work.

The two visits to different museums for Girringun people that will now be described were indeed like "events". The first event is a personal account from Girramay man, Claude Beeron, who visited a museum collection store in another state "down south" as he called it, together with his nephew (a skilled artist at Girringun). Sitting in his country, Claude told his story to me and Jirrbal woman Emily Murray, a senior elder from a different family. I regretted that I was unable to record Claude and Emily directly as I had done on other occasions so that I could give this account entirely in his own words. Still, there seemed to be a more casual conversational interaction on the porch, which may not have occurred if a recorder were involved. The second story is about the Girringun community's visit to a closer, regional museum, the Museum of Tropical Queensland (MTQ) in Townsville. I was able to attend and be a part of this visit myself, so I recount the visit much as I did in fieldnotes.

### **3.4 Claude Beeron in a Museum Down South**

A few months before Girringun's visit to the MTQ in Townsville, I was in Murray Upper, known as an origin or descendant community due to the many artefacts collected from there. I had just visited with Emily Murray, a Jirrbal elder and artist, and as I was packing up to leave I told her I was going to see a married couple of her generation – Claude and Theresa Beeron – who also lived in Murray Upper. The pair had recently moved from their old place that I used to visit, and I had only been to the new place once before. I said to Emily that I hoped I remembered where their house was. Emily said "I'll come for ride. Get out of the house", her motive probably being to show me the way, and perhaps also to visit her two friends. We hopped in the JCU car and drove the few minutes it took to get to Claude and Theresa's house. Theresa had been sick and was asleep inside, but Claude came out to greet Emily and me.

Like Emily, Claude is a senior elder in Murray Upper. In fact he is the most authoritative spokesperson for Girramay people and was at the time a board member of

the Giringun Aboriginal Corporation based in nearby Cardwell. Moreover, Emily, Claude and his wife Theresa are all part of the small group of aged people who still speak Dyirbal conversantly. I had occasionally heard the three of them together speaking in the everyday language style of Dyirbal called “Guwal”. For this reason and others, they are all very highly regarded in the community as “traditional” people.

Despite assisting Professor Bob Dixon with a Dyirbal dictionary publication, I still could not understand much of the language, let alone speak it. But Claude knew about this work and would try sometimes to talk to me in his language, perhaps testing my knowledge, as he did on this day: “Where is your home? What is your name?” he greeted me in Guwal Dyirbal. “Ngaja Tahnee, Broomebarra” I replied sheepishly, knowing that this was terribly poor Dyirbal. He laughed good-naturedly, saying only “you need your Guwal name”. I remarked that his ‘new place’ was lovely, and quieter than the old place on the busy road to Jumbun Community and Murray Falls. The new place had a verandah too, which overlooked fruit trees in the yard and the spectacular Cardwell mountain range. We took up chairs here and started to chat about family and what everyone was up to. Claude told me that he had just visited a large Australian museum “down south”<sup>13</sup> in another state not long ago. “Oh”, I said, “What was that like?”

Claude told me that he and his nephew had been brought to the museum. The nephew had been able to pick up an axe made by his grandfather, and Claude had remarked to him how special it was to hold in his hands the same axe his grandfather once held. As well as handling artefacts, Claude was to speak about these artefacts from the Murray Upper/Cardwell area to the contingent of people gathered, “experts” he supposed. But he said he found it hard to do this, to speak, because upon looking at artefacts from his country he was too overcome with emotion to do what he was sent to there to do – “his job” as he put it. A number of pieces were made by old people Claude knew personally and referring to one of the deceased makers it was, as Claude described it, “like he

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<sup>13</sup> Although there was no concerted attempt to hide the name of the museum on the porch (which was either the South Australia or Melbourne Museum; Claude had visited both in the same month) in this text I leave it as the “down south” museum, as this was really the most repeated identifier used by Claude.

standing right there in front of you”. Claude said he had talked to them in Guwal, to the artefacts that were also his family. He told me he had said something like “hello, I’m here”. And then – “I hope they are looking after you here, goodbye, I’m sorry I have to leave you here. I hope they look after you well”.

At this moment Emily, who was sitting quietly to the side, spoke – “well he must have been happy you visited him anyway”. In his characteristic way Claude responded, “yep, yep, yep”. Claude told us how he had come back to his hotel room that night after the museum visit and noticed a distinctive blue curtain on the high window: “the same blue shirt that this fella would wear all the time. His favourite shirt”. Seeming to understand what he meant, Emily commented: “that must have been him. He was happy you came. That someone from his country came and saw him. He followed you back to that place”. Claude nodded and continued, “Oh it was sad to leave that fella. I had to tell them curators, ‘make sure you look after him now. Be gentle with him. And don’t drop him’”. Claude gave a small laugh at this, and Emily and I tentatively joined in. Claude’s joke switched the mood for us all and also signalled the end of his telling.

The recollection Claude gave, and which was added to by Emily, could confirm a more general theoretical assumption made about artefacts as “subjects”. There was for example the strong personification of artefacts: both Claude and Emily switched to “him” and “that fella” with no explanation, such was the natural association. One could infer that because the artefact was in this way living (or alternatively, dying) as subject in storage, so the notion of artefacts having “biography” would seem to apply to an Indigenous viewpoint, where indeed we might track the artefacts’ life all the way back to its acquisition by the museum. But such an inference, of biography for the thing, would be a mistake given its strong association with a deceased family member, an actual human person.

For Emily, and Claude too, their ancestor’s spirit could roam out of its confines to follow you, but it eventually had to return to the material substance it was invariably a part of under the museum. We should note too that in the later community visit to the MTQ that both Emily and Claude attended, Emily refused the curator’s offer to touch the Murray Upper artefacts with her bare hands, stating, “I don’t want the old people following me home”. One could argue that Emily was simply remembering back to



Claude's story and having a bit of fun with it. Yet the fact remains that she did not touch the artefacts. Neither did any of the senior elders, barr one, as far as I could tell. If the artefact does "live" then for Claude and Emily it is not because it has moved here or there, or because it has a remembered biography. It lives because of the ancestor spirit contained, and now partially restrained, within it.

To suggest the eventful relatedness of two people, you might tell another, "they have history". Similarly, the artefact here has a history, rather than a biography, of connection to the Murray Upper family member, through their shared country. To explain the reality of an ancestor-artefact stuck in a far off place, we cannot rely on suggestions that artefacts are merely personified. They are rather ancestralised. As later discussed in chapter eight, for Claude the problematic feeling of being *stuck* did not apply to artefacts stored in on-country keeping places, since the ancestor spirit was able to roam freely in country, returning, or not, to artefacts associated with them in the keeping place. Therefore, we can speak of being 'wild' in terms of its further Aboriginal English meaning, namely, an ancestor that is angry, pissed off, agitated at being drawn away from home through materials they were in contact with, and which are now in museum storage. More tentatively, it is reasonable to suggest that wild artefacts in a museum have consequences 'at home' for people, since an ancestor's history is being drawn out in such a way, both spatially and temporally, that it ruptures the flow of a local Indigenous cosmology.

Following this logic museums should return all artefacts, sacred and not sacred. This is not to make amends for a shady past of illegal acquisitions. Rather, it is to rectify a currently unacceptable situation in which spirits are denied rest at home and reassurance by their living kin. This distance or splitting of the spirit is traumatic for the ancestor; it makes them 'wild', and this wildness is perceived by the community. Thus, in a speech at the MTQ, "don't worry to come home" is what Claude Beeron had said to the artefacts down south, to further placate wild artefacts. Although a Murray Upper artefact "has history", and although we potentially may be able to prove the manner of an artefact's violent appropriation given enough historical research, it is in fact Claude and Emily's understanding of artefacts – as wild – that provides in my view the strongest argument for repatriation of secular artefacts.

Sitting down with Claude Beeron and Emily Murray on the porch in Murray Upper made me aware of how potentially tricky visits to museum store rooms could be. I wondered what could be done to alleviate the problem, failing the obvious solution of repatriation. Moreover, it would be good to know how much this view was shared by others in the community. How unacceptable was the situation exactly? Were there any further challenges perceived by the community in the repatriation scenario outlined above? And did the artefact only have spirit if its maker could be personally identified, as in the case of Claude's visit? I needed to see what the rest of the community thought and I got this opportunity when I accompanied Claude, Theresa and Emily, together with members of their community to a museum just "down the road". Indeed it was not so far as the one "down south" visited by Claude and his grandson. Instead, this was a regional museum, the Museum of Tropical Queensland in Townsville just 200km away from Murray Upper.

### **3.5 Girringun People at the Museum of Tropical Queensland , Townsville**

In September 2017, the Girringun Aboriginal Corporation (GAC) and the Museum of Tropical Queensland (MTQ) launched the *Manggan: Gather, Gathers, Gathering* exhibition. The Girringun Aboriginal Art Centre (GAAC) and the MTQ collaboratively organised the exhibit, which featured old artefacts from the South Australia Museum alongside new artefacts made by Girringun artists. Video of elders and photographs of contemporary country were displayed. As part of the launch, Girringun people were invited to visit the collections store underneath the museum. Artists and elders arrived by bus from Tully, Murray Upper and Cardwell for the morning launch, with the collections visit scheduled for after that. Approximately 15 people made the trip to Townsville, including Claude and Emily. The entire Girringun party included a broad section of North Queensland rainforest and savannah people from the nine traditional owner groups represented by Girringun, as well as a few non-Indigenous Girringun associates.

Claude Beeron, as the senior representative for traditional owners of Murray Upper, had requested of the MTQ that he first talk to the ancestors in the store room under the museum alone before the rest of the community joined him. At this I was reminded of the first time I visited Murray Falls in Murray Upper a few years earlier. With a

Girramay woman and a non-Indigenous journalist making a film called “Going Home to Girramay”, and also my young daughter, we stayed overnight at a camp ground that was away from the main tourist camp site near the falls. This community place was reserved for the Jumbun community people, and as Claude explained, he had to first introduce us to the ancestors at the campsite before we entered to ensure they didn’t “make humbug” for us overnight. It seemed to me that this was similar to what he was doing under the museum: introducing the contingent of people (as only a senior, Guwal-speaking family member could) to calm the spirits, and respectfully prepare them for the intrusion of visitors. The community camp ground like the museum store was not a sacred site, but it was a site of ancestor spirit intensification. Spirit presence there was assumed by Uncle Claude and other elders, as well as the rest of the group as far as I could tell. Uncle Claude’s preliminary talk certainly made it clear to everyone, in any case, that they should adopt a respectful, almost reserved manner, in the way that I had heard called for with the Guwal word *yuray*, meaning ‘quiet, sing or talk softly’, often in response to spirit presence<sup>14</sup>.

Returning to Girringun’s visit to the MTQ stores underground, we were first required to pile into a huge elevator. Even with our large number there was still plenty of space. It was slightly comical. “Big enough for an elephant” someone quipped. We descended to the basement level and when the massive door opened we piled out and walked a short way to a door leading to the Maritime Archaeology and North Queensland collections. We had been told to wear closed in shoes, a rule most people had heeded with sports trainers. After the MTQ curator unlocked the door with her passcard, we slowly filed into the facility. With the soft breeze of floor fans upon us, one of the first responses upon dispersing into the room was “it’s nice and cool”. The curator explained that the fans were a temporary measure for air circulation while they made improvements to the climate control system. Most people were already familiar with the dry airiness of climate control for artefacts through their experience with the local keeping place and museum at Girringun in Cardwell. However, this was clearly on a much grander scale.

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<sup>14</sup> Dixon (2017) recorded a number of texts using this word *yuray* from the Guwal (everyday) Girramay, Jirrbal and Mamu dialects of Dyrbal (p. 369). It was one of the limited number of Dyrbal words still well-known throughout the contemporary community, used as a gentle command to “be quiet”.

The stores were essentially one vast room with many open shelving units that stretched up to a high ceiling. Larger artefacts, such as shields and decorative clothing, lay flat upon the open shelves. There were also a number of head-height, slim drawer units, all labelled with single letters. People started to move left toward the central drawer units, as this seemed to be a good kind of meeting spot. A wide table had been set up near it too, with a selection of artefacts from the Murray Upper area laid out. The curator explained that although she herself wore white gloves, everyone was free to touch and handle any of the artefacts: “these are your things”, she said. She also advised that anything of particular interest to people, she or the collections manager could bring up on the computer to find out more information. With this introduction now made people began to move amongst the open shelves and into the collections.

Although a table with a selection of Murray Upper artefacts had been set up, the experience was free of any predetermined process. So it was interesting to see what kind of items people were drawn to. Older women known as “master weavers” in the group, including Emily Murray, her two sisters, and Theresa Beeron, first looked over the *mind* dilly bags and *jawun* larger bi-cornual baskets, commenting on the skillfully tight weave associated with traditional bag and basket making. Another Jirrbal woman, a multi-skilled artist who made not only baskets but also eel traps, was particularly drawn to one of the baskets on the shelves. Looking at the label she saw only that it was from Murray Upper/Cardwell. She said she believed it was her mother’s weaving. This was confirmed upon checking the computer system. When I later asked her how she had recognised her mother’s work at a glance, she said only, “I used to sit down with her”.

Thus, although people generally recognised all North Queensland artefacts at the MTQ as made by “the old people”, they were keen to place *their* old people specifically and family-member makers by finding out when the artefacts were made as well as where. Further enquiries about provenance were therefore made, for example someone asked the Girringun arts manager if the artefacts were from her mother’s shop. This historical shop, known in the community as “Mrs Henry’s shop”, was popular in the 1970s and ‘80s, Ernie told me, with tourists who bought artefacts from there. The arts manager answered that some, but not all, had come from there. Indeed, it was known in the community that Murray Upper artefacts had moved from Mrs Henry’s shop to the JCU Material Culture Unit, and then subsequently to the MTQ when JCU could no longer maintain the items. In this way there was already a recognised shared history that people were eager to have elaborated, which was not present in the case of the Lamalama for Hafner (2013) who described a sense of disconnection from their artefacts in museums.

Most everyone was excited to see a *nuba* ‘water bag’ sitting up on one of the higher shelves. At Girringun, they had tried to revive this practice of *nuba* making. According to the archaeologist volunteer who wrote about it in a Girringun newsletter, and to whom I spoke with about it, this particular artefact proved very difficult to make. Drawing on the vague memories they had of watching their elders, the archaeologist said it was a process of trial and error for the community, with many factors in the process needing to be adjusted, for example belting the bark pieces on different sides to give different results. In a previous heritage project, elder Aunty Theresa told me about the process of making *nuba* directly:

They get that certain type of bark. They call it calophyllum bark. We call it *nuba*. First they cut that bark out and they cut the outer bark and then turn it inside out I think. And then they would put it together like that. Sew both side. And then they sorta seal that thing there – if they had a lot of that kinda – wax – they probably would do it like that. Two end meet the other. Then they put that lawyer cane around to open it up – seal both sides – sew it with a lawyer cane and seal it with this wax. That’s for their water bucket or collect honey. Or even they would use that...that’s not Alexander Palm, but you see how them barks like that (indicates tree at a distance) that big palm tree up there. Then they cut that – make it as some kind of a dish to carry things. (T Beeron interview, 2014)

Aunty Theresa thus explains that the tree from which the *nuba* ‘water bag’ is made (beach colophyllum) is also called *nuba*. She refers to her old people, the

knowledgeable makers, as “they” collectively, deferring to them and their skill in this, even though she herself was an elder and was attempting to make *nuba* too, probably around this time of her speaking to me about it.<sup>15</sup>

To return to the MTQ, the older women seemed reluctant to bring down the *nuba* bag from its shelf in the museum, so we just admired it from where it was for awhile. Later it was taken down by the collections manager so that everyone could get a closer look at it. The water tight seal that had been so expertly achieved with tree sap and bees wax (just as Theresa contemplates above) was of particular interest. As already mentioned, Emily did not touch artefacts, and neither did most of the Girringun women and men, even though they were encouraged to by the curator. There was perhaps some sense of polite deference to the museum itself by not directly touching artefacts, particularly by the elders it seemed to me. But generally, avoidance was a sign of respect to the ancestors who made the artefacts, rather than deference to the museum.

Relatedly, it is worth noting that a few younger people expressed to me that they would not touch any sort of shaped rocks brought into Girringun (or any rocks in fact if it could be helped) since these rocks might be from another person’s country. A workplace notion of “cultural safety” was moreover invoked by them in this regard. In this way, respect for one’s own old people showed an undeniable parallel, in terms of handling avoidance, with the fear of ‘other’ (that is to say, someone else’s) tribal ancestors. Indeed, I saw just one woman handle an artefact, and this was only because she was certain it was made by her mother, in which case there was no threat of danger to her.

One Girramay man and artist, Abe Muriata, was particularly interested in the *bagur* or swords lined up on a low shelf. He had become renowned for his *jawun*, laywer cane bi-cornual baskets, which were skillfully made after his many years of practice. Abe’s

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<sup>15</sup> Many linguists have recorded such ‘process-type’ narratives as a way to learn Indigenous languages, just as Dixon (2017a) has recorded audio of this process being described in the Dyirbal language (in the Jirrbal dialect). If descendant communities were willing, exhibitions featuring archival language recordings of artefact-making processes could be used to de-emphasise English as the default communicator of Indigenous material culture practices in Australia.

brother was trying to get him to come look at the *nuba* but he wanted first to look at the swords and take pictures. Abe told me he had been trying to make a sword at home but was having trouble finding a piece of timber that was straight. He was intrigued to see that some of the museum swords were in fact slightly bent, so he felt this must mean he could use bent pieces for his swords. He was taking pictures with his phone, and I asked him if I could take a picture of him taking a picture, which he agreed to (see Figure 1).

Abe was one of a handful of people taking up close pictures of artefacts in this way. Mostly everyone seemed satisfied with letting one of the official Giringun photographers, a young Jirrbal woman, Bambam, do the picture taking – to record the event of people with artefacts rather than the artefacts per se. I took a few pictures of people with artefacts on my phone with permission and when it seemed appropriate. I asked to take one for example of Emily and her sister with the *nuba* and some *jawun*; they happily agreed, smiling for the picture (see Figure 2). Once I started this picture-taking business I had the distinct feeling that I should take one of all the elders, so that no one would be left out, particularly as I knew I would print them later for the purposes of distributing back to them. Interestingly, when I asked Claude if I could take a picture he consented readily but was the only person not to smile too much, adopting what seemed to me a concerted neutral expression (see Figure 3).



*Figure 1: Abe Muriata, Girramay elder and Giringun artist*



*Figure 2: Jirbal elders looking at nuba 'waterbag'*



*Figure 3: Claude Beeron, Girramay elder*



Two other middle-aged male artists, a Djiru man and a Girramay man, were over at a set of drawers full of firesticks for some time. The firestick consists of two parts, the anthropomorphic base (*bagu*) with two or more drilling holes and two sticks to go with it (*jiman*), though the apparatus is collectively called *bagu* in the community. The Girramay man was one of the few people present who could make the traditional string used to tie the sticks to the base called *bumbil* – a third part of the firestick apparatus often missing from more recently collected firemakers. The slim drawers holding the *bagu* were open and at eye level so both men could get a close look at the slightly varied shapes and the ochre-painted designs. Like Claude, the Djiru man was also a Giringun board member, but he went further than Claude's apparent ambivalence and was more critical: "they have too many", he replied, when I asked both him and the Girramay man what they thought of the *bagu*. In what could be taken as a general critique of collecting as accumulating, he told me that traditionally these things would have been placed in a tree and left to perish, but that their natural process was these days "being resisted". The Girramay man remained quiet, content it seems to look over the *bagu* and say nothing.

There were indeed many of these *bagu* laid out in a number of drawers, perhaps twenty or more that could be seen. The *bagu* drawers attracted some interest from the rest of the group, though maybe not as much as I expected given that Giringun artists are well-known for *bagu* they themselves produced (Henry, 2016). Perhaps unlike the *nuba* 'waterbag', the *bagu* was an artefact type that they had mastered, and as artists they were as interested in identifying new skills as they were in identifying old makers.

The youngest people present were probably around their late 30s, and this was the first time that most of them visited a state museum store. A few comments were made during and after the visit concerning the wish to see more children and young people there. For example, Bambam had said to one of the senior elders "see, I told ...she should come", referring to her daughter who would sometimes come to the Giringun art workshops on a Tuesday. I never asked Bambam directly what she thought of her visit to the stores, but her comment, along with her keen interest in looking at and photographing the artefacts, seemed to express genuine excitement at being involved with something that might usually only be reserved for elders. The MTQ exhibition, and undoubtedly the closer location (within driving distance), provided an opportunity for a larger section of

the community to interact with their artefacts than is perhaps customary. The visit was also less formal than what might be required when an elder as consultant is brought in to “do a job” as Claude put it. Indeed it seemed to me that, without this pressure to perform a job, the experience for this middle generation of community people was ultimately, if unexpectedly, rewarding. I do believe a subsequent visit was made, though I am unsure if many young people came, or if it was just board members of Giringun that made the visit. Still, having made this collaborative relationship with the museum through Giringun’s art centre, I know Bambam managed to bring her daughter later to the museum for subsequent weaving workshops that they gave for the public at the museum, under the guidance of one of the Jirrbal senior elders. At this, Bambam told me her young daughter excelled, or in her words “she took over!”.

To summarise, the artefacts’ contemporary link to country and ancestors was visibly strong: people saw the artefacts as irrevocably part of their community, and moreover, they made strong connections with artefacts they knew to be made by deceased family members. We could call this the ancestralisation of artefacts. However, I would suggest that the further recognition of an artefact/ancestor’s *distance* from country is what moves ancestralisation toward ancestorification – or “wild artefacts”. Moreover, a shared understanding of wild artefacts would be learned from elders such as Emily and Claude by younger generations, and reinforced with more interactions with the museum. Claude’s speaking to the ancestors under the museum for example (as he did at the Girramay campsite) showed people (less experienced with museum visits) that their artefacts were not just associated with country and ancestors and country, like ghosts who might haunt a site or place due to a close former association. Artefacts were in fact *constituted* from country and kin, namely, with an ancestor maker’s spirit. Abe Muriata said in his speech at the opening of the *Manggan* exhibit, to somewhat foreshadow this outcome: “There is a deep spiritual connection between these artefacts and ourselves. Now thanks to my elder here (Claude), I talk to my basket all the time. It is a part of me” (A Muriata pers comm, 2017).

The fact that the MTQ in Townsville was in the same state as the community may have mitigated against the perception of a problematic distance of wild artefacts. This is evidenced in the Townsville traditional owner’s comments at the opening of the *Manggan* exhibition (about artefacts brought up from Adelaide for it) where she

tearfully said, “Bringing these back to North Queensland is very significant for us” (pers comm, 2017). In this way, being ‘up north’ was demonstrably better than being ‘down south’, both for Murray Upper and other North Queensland artefacts. Claude too spoke at the *Manggan* exhibition opening about his visit to the down south museum to the assembled audience. He told everybody that he had spoken to the artefacts at two down south museums (in Melbourne and Adelaide), and told them, as mentioned already: “you stay here. Don’t worry to come home”. In this way he granted a sort of reassurance to the wild artefacts, as well as a personal acceptance of the situation perhaps given his lack of options to do more. Indeed, with regard to blue sky options, so to speak, I once asked Uncle Claude outright whether Murray Upper artefacts should all be returned home, perhaps to the Girringun keeping place. His reply was dubious, even weary, understanding, as he did, the high cost of collections management: “We-ll, maybe. If Girringun could get more funding”.

### 3.6 Conclusion

This chapter discussed failed arguments for repatriation of secular artefacts and invoked the recent notion of a “philosophy of repatriation” to outline the current context of compromise between museums and descendant communities. It showed that “visiting artefacts” is, for now, the most effective contemporary repatriative exercise we have to address issues of access. Two visiting-artefacts events were described as examples, featuring members from the Murray Upper community represented by Girringun Aboriginal Corporation. The story Claude Beeron told to me about the Melbourne Museum, and the visit to the Museum of Tropical Queensland in Townsville with artists and traditional owners from the Girringun Aboriginal Corporation in which I participated, countered a potentially oversimplified approach to “ancestors and artefacts” in Aboriginal Australia in which artefacts are merely imbued with ancestor spirit. It was argued that artefacts are not just ancestralised, but wild, and for Murray Upper people museum-stored artefacts are signs of a spirit far from home, especially in the case of storage in a museum “down south”.

Potentially, museums visits can create positive reconnections between people and things, particularly when the museums are close to country and show artefacts which people can freely recognise as their own. Indeed, regional museums like the MTQ could

be the answer to community keeping places, which may yet keep people away either due to historical feuding between families, or simply the feeling that one is not represented by that community organisation. Still, distance remains at the heart of the dynamic between descendant communities and their ancestor's artefacts curated off country, and elders like Uncle Claude and Aunty Emily will teach young people that, in visiting artefacts, one is also visiting old people. We should therefore be wary of how we may in fact amplify distance between people and ancestors in our efforts to bring them closer. Given that any sort of repatriation demands, above all, the unification of people and place, our biggest challenge moving forward will be how to address this paradox.

A part of this story, about a visit to the Museum of Tropical Queensland (MTQ) in Townsville, is still to be told, and a postscript can be used here to transition us to the next chapter. Towards the end of the community's visit virtually on our way out, Emily Murray stopped at a recently acquired collection of objects lying together at eye level on shelf G. "Wait now", she said to the couple of family members around her, "I want to see what old man Ernie got in here". At approximately 80 years of age, "old-man Ernie" was a Jirrbal elder who had recently sold some artefacts to the MTQ. Up to this point it was easy to see the Murray Upper and other North Queensland rainforest artefacts in the MTQ stores as a single regional collection. However, Emily's observance reminded us all that the artefacts had come from multiple collectors and they were grouped accordingly on the shelves. Moreover, the collection she pointed out was not from some long-dead colonial officer or anthropologist, but rather, an Indigenous elder still living and well known to the Giringun community. When Emily distinguished these pieces from the rest, I could also not help but feel a sense of guilty complicity for they were clearly labelled "Ernie Grant" collection in my own handwriting. I had registered these objects into the museum and had literally placed them there on the shelf earlier in the year. The next chapter expands upon my work with Ernie Grant and his collection of artefacts, only some of which ended up on shelf G in the Museum of Tropical Queensland at Townsville.

## STORY

*4. The Burden of Keeping in a Queensland Town***4.1 Introduction**

Heritage work, to the extent that it selectively preserves and updates cultural traditions and relations to place, can be part of a social process that strengthens indigenous claims to deep roots—to a status beyond that of another minority or local interest group. (Clifford 2004, p. 9)

Indigenous people are thought of as anchored to ‘traditional’ practices that are abhorrent or out-of-place in the contemporary world. At the same time, Indigenous heritage, as archaeological and exotic, is glorified and revered. (Shaw 2012, p. 108)

Jirrbal elder Ernie Grant had collected artefacts and the stories associated with these artefacts over a long lifetime. It is reasonable to say that this was no easy task. “Keeping” involved the maintenance of cultural knowledge without land, the representation of his people to a sometimes-unreceptive public, and the constant pull to stop keeping – to sell artefacts to service debt for example. Yet keeping was not a just a burden in the sense of being difficult per se. As Shaw argues above, artefacts threaten to keep Indigenous people firmly within the realm of the “archaeological and exotic” by virtue of their association with distant time. On the other hand, Indigenous people must continually assert themselves by, as Clifford describes it, “selectively preserving and updating” elements of culture. I assert that a strategic selection, informed by these conflicting positions, makes all Indigenous people curators to some degree, choosing between keeping and changing, preserving and creating. Herein lies the burden. To be an Indigenous collector of artefacts requires a seemingly impossible and unending mediation between the two different perspectives – between, in short, exoticism and deep roots. In addition to the traditional concerns of artefacts succumbing to mould, fire, or theft, this is the burden of keeping that I mean to describe here.

If the previous chapter highlighted the distant wild artefact and the untethered temporary visitor, the current chapter emphasises deep connections and relationships. To thoroughly ground the reader in a local place and contextualise the rest of the thesis, I describe a set of cultural, social and historical relationships in the small town of Tully,

North Queensland, with Ernie Grant and his artefacts on country at the centre of this nexus. In this regard, Hafner (2013), who as we saw in the previous chapter worked with the Lama Lama people of Cape York in Australia, has stated: “the value of objects as heritage resides in the social networks of the *people who produce and invest* them with meaning” (p. 364, emphasis added). The people around Ernie, and available to “produce and invest” meaning in his artefacts, included Indigenous and non-Indigenous, sympathetic and non-sympathetic, alive and deceased people. To provide some insight into these relationships between an Indigenous collector and others in the community, and thus how meaning for artefacts is produced, the chapter will describe a number of observed and reported encounters with living people and deceased (but ever present) ancestors.

#### 4.2 Growing Up Jirrbal in Murray Upper and Tully

“Uncle Ernie”, as he I most often heard him called, was born Ernest Brian Grant on the 1st February 1935, the fifth child of Tom Grant (1898-1961) and Chloe Grant (1903-1974). His parents worked for white farmers all over the Atherton Tablelands.

Eventually they went to live in traditional Jirrbal country by the Tully River. Ernie credited his cultural learning to his parents, his Uncles, and his old people – mostly Jirrbal, Girramay and Gulngay kin – whom he grew up with in Jirrbal and Girramay country in Murray Upper. His education in the European education system began in the 1940s when the previously whites-only primary school at Murray Upper (afraid of closure due to insufficient enrolments) allowed him and his sister to attend. Being literate at such a young age meant that he was often given the role of interlocutor to whites by his family. For example, as a young boy, during the era of the oppressive “Protection Act” in Queensland<sup>16</sup>, Ernie’s parents asked him to ride on a pushbike to different white farming families and obtain the all-important signatures required for their exemption from the Act. In his 30s Ernie married Enid, an Indigenous woman from the nearby tablelands, and worked in many various timber cutting roles. In due

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<sup>16</sup> Also known in QLD as “The Act”, *The Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* controlled and regulated most aspects of Aboriginal people’s social and economic lives. QLD was the first Australian state to apply a law of this kind, and its specifications were more restrictive than any other’s.

course he was overseeing others in this work. As a result in part of his frustration at whites who would not “take orders from a black man”, as he put it, he moved to Papua New Guinea. After some years there he moved once again back home to Tully.

Although very close to his younger family and kin, Ernie was somewhat socially distant from other Aboriginal elders in the community for a number of reasons. Firstly, he was of a slightly older generation than all the other elders in this research and had grown up among people who were now mostly deceased. Being in his mid-eighties at the end of this research, Ernie had indeed reached an age that was virtually unheard of in the Murray Upper and Tully Aboriginal communities (the only older Indigenous woman I heard of, Ernie’s sister-in-law, was rumoured to be in her 90s when she passed away). Secondly, Ernie was a Jehovah’s Witness. As he himself acknowledged, this distanced him from elders who attended other churches, such as the Assembly of God. Thus, the only time I sat with Ernie and the other elders together was at a weekly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elder’s lunch in Tully. These regular lunches only lasted for a short time before running out of funding in 2017.

As Aboriginal scholars remind us (Langton, 2012; Paradies, 2006), issues of race and colonialism can obscure issues of class within the Australian Indigenous population. Apart from age and religion, it is reasonable to suggest that class was probably another reason for Ernie’s separation from others in this research, and in Ernie’s case, this class distance probably started when he began to receive an education at a young age. Uncle Claude, for example, told me that he played with Ernie’s two younger brothers as a boy, since Ernie went to school. We could further link Ernie’s early literacy and subsequent European social connections to his ability to move out of the insidious poverty of government welfare and irregular work, though it was not a huge step up in the overall scheme of things as I will explain later (when I *do* raise issues of race and colonialism, specifically, the wealth of white sugar cane farmers in the Tully region).

Notwithstanding the few large farming properties in Murray Upper, being in “town” – in either Tully or Cardwell – was in some way an indication of one’s elevated class. Living in your own rented or mortgaged house especially signified to other Aboriginal people that you were wealthy enough to leave the daily troubles of Jumbun (the Aboriginal community in between the two towns) to a small degree. Given that Ernie lived in Tully, while other elders that I spoke to lived either in nearby Murray Upper, or

Jumbun within Murray Upper, the relatively small geographical distance of thirty kilometres between Tully and Jumbun in fact signified quite a large social distance.

The Golden Gumboot sculpture at the entrance to Tully declared its tropical ‘wet town’ status, and welcomed visitors, along with a life-sized depiction of a European pioneer hauling sugar cane with horse and cart. Tully’s main street was called Butler Street after one of the families credited for founding the lucrative sugar cane industry in the area, and it featured all the regular outlets of a small, country town in Australia: a couple of banks, a newsagent, café, takeaway food shop, and two main pubs respectively called the “top pub” and the “bottom pub” that always seemed to have people drifting in and out for pokies and beer. A backpacker hostel was also busy with young international travelers drawn to the small town for banana packing and other farm-hand work.

The main street, Butler Street, was only one-way, so one could drive up a parallel side street into town past the sweet-smelling sugar mill with its billowing smokestacks and the perpetually busy IGA grocery store. The store opened absurdly early I thought, at 5am (“for the cane farmers” Ernie’s wife later told me), and during the day people were usually sitting on a few shaded benches adjacent to the store’s large car park. This was a convenient meeting spot, as I later learned when I sat in on a meeting there between my academic advisor and the grandson of a famous Gulngay rainmaker, Joe Kinjun. In a rented JCU car, I would drive past this meeting place, the returned Services League Club, the Dorothy Jones Shire Library, and also the Tully Primary School across from which Ernie lived, so that by the time I arrived at his house I thought everyone, in typical small-town fashion, must know that the “lady from JCU”<sup>17</sup> had come to visit Ernie Grant again.

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<sup>17</sup> My designation in the community seemed to progress from “Lady from JCU” very early on (when I drove the JCU marked car) to “that girl from Broome” (when I began to get to know people), then to “Tahnee”, particularly for women and people of my own age. Ernie took a long time to call me Tahnee, as the avoidance of the use of people’s first names in their presence was a commonly-observed cultural tradition.



Tully lies within a place known in Dyirbal as *Gaja*. In 2016 there were approximately 2390 residents, with Indigenous people accounting for 12% of that population<sup>18</sup>. Located at the at the foot of Mount Tyson, Tully receives an average rainfall of 4000mm a year, so it is widely regarded as the wettest town in Australia<sup>19</sup>. On a particularly rainy day in Tully, as we both sat under the shelter of his porch, Ernie told a *jujuba* or ‘dreaming’ story. To introduce his and his family’s homeplace it is reproduced below:

Two sisters saw this big black goanna (gugar) and they caught him, at this big waterhole – that’s why it’s called Gugar. The sisters took him down to a big bend in the Tully River. They made a fire and cooked him up and cut his belly open. And they put the hot stones in his stomach. As they did he jumped up and jumped into the river. The white people call that waterhole Alligator Bend now. But we know it as Jalmbuni. He jumped in the river and he turned into a crocodile. And he just said to them, and laughed at them, he said, “now you can’t get me. I’m in the waterhole.” He said, “you can’t catch me because I’m dangerous now”. The two sisters then ‘course couldn’t get their food, and they started to come home back to Tully, at Gaja. And they said to their two sons, Damubarra and Gudami, they said, “look sorry, we got no food for you today. The big goanna got away, and he turned into a crocodile”.

So the two boys, being very hungry, then decided to go down the Tully River to another place. Again, it’s a big bend in the Tully River down there in Jirru country. It is also called in English Alligator Bend. And this is where the two boys got on the raft and it tipped over and they got drowned. The Jirru people came back and told the mothers, and that’s why then they started crying. Why it rains so much in Tully is because they’re crying over their two boys.  
(E Grant interview, 2014)

As a cosmogony story, Ernie’s *jujuba* story explains why it rains so much in Tully. As a cosmology story, it conveys an Aboriginal portrayal of rainforest country through emphasis on land, place names, and significant relationships between agents in the environment. In addition to the linking words that so often punctuated Ernie’s narratives (‘and’s and ‘so’s, for example), the story featured three linked place – *Gugar*, *Jalmbuni* and *Gaja* – demonstrating connections between places in country. Furthermore, it

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<sup>18</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (Jan 2020) *2016 Census QuickStats*, [https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census\_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/SSC32911], accessed 19 January 2021

<sup>19</sup> The town of Babinda, about 80km to the north, famously challenges this “wettest town” claim.

suggests connections between “tribes” of the Dyirbal language group, for example between Jirrbal and nearby Djiru people on the coast. Ernie often emphasised this closeness between all Dyirbal speaking people.

In relation to this it should be noted that in a 2019 Native Title case, *Kinjun on behalf of the Gulngay People v State of Queensland* (2019), surrounding areas of the Tully township were determined by consent to be Gulngay country. Ernie was uncomfortable with the result, however, asserting that a lot of the determined area was more or less “shared” by Jirrbal and Gulngay people who spoke different dialects of the same language (Dyirbal). The Giringun Aboriginal Corporation refer to “clan” groups along the lines of dialect groups, so we can note Dixon’s (2015) description of the location of these spoken dialects: Gulngay is “spoken by Malan-barra people, living around the lower Tully River”; “Jabun-barra Jirrbal, spoken by the Jirrbal-ŋan people...at the base of the mountains towards the coast (*jabun*), on the north side of the Murray River”; “Gambil-barra Jirrbal, spoken by Jirrbal-ji people on the tablelands (*gambil*), around the headwaters of the Tully River and the Herbert River” (p. 9). Evidence from historical sources make it hard to comment either way on territorial borders<sup>20</sup> and show only that boundaries are just as susceptible to change as anything else.

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<sup>20</sup> Lumholtz wrote in 1889: “the small subdivisions of the tribes that live nearest the border are on amicable terms with their neighbours, and...accordingly the borders between the tribes are frequently very indistinct. The family tribes have well-defined limits, and as a rule they are on friendly terms with each other...In a family tribe there may be about twenty to twenty-five, often less. How many such small divisions it takes to make a tribe it is impossible to say” (p. 193-194). On the other hand, in an interview between local white woman Sue Smith and now-deceased Jirrbal elder Tommy Murray, the notion of strict tribal boundaries – that could be negotiated seasonally – was asserted to have changed post-contact: TM: “no other tribe can get into here. They can’t cross the Murray. Murray River...this divide here, that’s all Warami, all that country back to Balara. That’s Beeron family. Claude and all them. They can’t come over the divide into here...Only certain time of year they can go in – you know they gotta come in, see the head man to – if they can come in couple of weeks. Or might be, say in this winter season or summer season, spring, they coming in to something. They only come in that season, whatever they want to get. And they gotta go back there. Stay in their own place...This is all our place, from right back to – right to Ravenshoe. Don’t cross Cedar Creek, but this side Cedar Creek. This side the Herbert, and this side the south Murray”. SS: “And that’s the Murray family? Or Jirrbal people?” TM: “Yeah all Jirrbal. yeah. Well they – these family here now they – their elders and them – they grandmother b’lung to here. But on their father’s side, father b’lung to Cardwell. They Girramay tribe. They can still go. They – NOW they can but don’t know ‘bout those days. Would’ve been hard. You know they wouldn’t have GET married to that tribe. In those days. Only lately”. SS: “There’s mixing more”. TM: Yeah”. (nd, Sue Smith and Tommy Murray interview from E Grant collection, transcribed by T Innes)

A distinction between Jirrbal and Girramay people was certainly made in the community. Yet, similar to the “all-blooded”-ness (where people are “related to each other”) that was described to Dixon (2015) as being “the criterion for being a “tribe” (p. 7), there was a sense also of being “one people” among clans within the Dyirbal language group. For example, when I went to the Girringun Art Centre, I listened to Abe Muriata, a Girramay traditional owner, give a Welcome to Country greeting to other Indigenous visitors. The traditional owner clan groups receiving the visitors included Girramay, Jirrbal and Djiru people (no Gulngay people were there that day). It was a more unscripted introductory speech than what I had become used to working in a university where, in lieu of traditional owners to give a “welcome to country”, an “acknowledgement” of country is more often done, usually in a highly formulaic way. In contrast to this, Abe’s welcome at Girringun was spontaneous and particularly insightful: “We have Girramay, Jirrbal and Djiru artists here. But we are all one people. We share the same language and the same culture. And we welcome you here today” (A Muriata pers comm, 2017). Statements of people’s particular affiliation within the broad Dyirbal language group certainly became important when signing artworks. Feasibly it could well have been art, as well as Native Title, that led people to force the decision between one or the other, though this is something I did not ultimately confirm. In any case, though some participants I spoke to easily identified as either Jirrbal or Girramay, others did not. For example, Aunty Theresa Beeron, the now-elderly daughter of Andy Denham, was herself ambiguous. She told me she said she could have gone either way “between” Girramay (her father’s clan, she said) or Jirrbal (her mother’s) but ended up following “her mother’s line” to settle on Jirrbal. Ernie Grant’s parents were similarly Girramay and Jirrbal, though they spoke multiple local languages. Ernie himself identified as Jirrbal.

### 4.3 The Legacy of Literature

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Take up the Black Man’s burden---  
 Ye cannot stoop to less.  
 Will not your fraud of "freedom"  
 Still cloak your greediness?  
 But, by the gods ye worship,  
 And by the deeds ye do,  
 These silent, sullen peoples  
 Shall weigh your gods and you.

Take up the Black Man's burden---  
 Until the tail is told,  
 Until the balances of hate  
 Bear down the beam of gold.  
 And while ye wait remember  
 The justice, though delayed  
 Will hold you as her debtor  
 Till the Black Man's debt is paid.

Extract from "The Black Man's Burden: a Reply to the White Man's Burden"  
 written by Hubert Harrison (c. 1918)

Although Ernie Grant and Hubert Harrison came from different sides of the world, and Ernie had never read Harrison's poem until I showed it to him, both were born into sugar country and made it their life's work to highlight the link between historical colonisation and contemporary inequality. I cite above this extract from *The Black Man's Burden* by Hubert Harrison, a Caribbean-American activist, to stress the point that my choice of the term "burden" in this chapter is not meant to reference Rudyard Kipling's 1898 poem (*The White Man's Burden*) per se. Rather, it references the burden for colonised people of a critical and creative *response* to the Kipling-type literature that so powerfully justified European expansion in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This response to rationalising ideologies, such as religious proselytism and Social Darwinism, is part of the negotiation between deep roots and exoticism previously mentioned.

It was clear from the very beginning of working with Ernie that he had read a lot of colonial literature regarding Indigenous Australia. During the 1990s as a Cultural Research Officer, then Cultural Resource Officer ("same job just changed the name a little bit", he said), Ernie had repeated access to state archives. For example, he visited the Queensland State Library, the Queensland Museum, and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra. As he got older, he also read sources brought to him by other researchers working with him. I cite Harrison furthermore, then, because the poem fittingly conveys the same deep frustration that Ernie expressed at the frequent derogatory historical accounts of his people, and the incontrovertible evidence of theft of his people's land and resources.

Certainly Ernie had numerous lifetime friendships with non-Indigenous people in Tully who were generally sympathetic to the plight of Indigenous people. Befitting his

religious views as a Jehovah's Witness, he maintained diplomatic relations with European families: as he told me, "I've never felt bad toward white people". However, historical documents from the archives recounting "dispersion" killings, kidnapping of girls, and trophy collecting of body parts (as in the horrific account given by Korah Halcomb Wills' in his diary<sup>21</sup>, a copy of which Ernie had) were an occupational hazard as a Cultural Resource Officer. The artist and cultural theorist Ali Gumillay Baker (2018) describes how it feels to be "Camping in the Shadow of a Racist Text" after her discovery of a cast that Norman Tindale made of her great-grandmother's head: "This evidence of abuse by colonial powers is like a pit of sadness. The pit could swallow me up as I walk. I could fall in and never be seen again" (p. 15). The comparatively benign Kipling poem is only moderately less injurious, since literature like it provided insidious rationalisation for the continued marginalisation of Australia's contemporary Aboriginal people. As Ernie lamented, "it's all 'savages' this, and 'savages' that".

Another contributing factor to the burden of keeping history was how to not offend one's white friends whilst still advocating for a debt "unpaid". Indeed, as far as the contemporary situation, Ernie had an acute awareness (as many Aboriginal people there did it seemed to me) of the extreme wealth inequality between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Tully. For example, waiting in the car one day with Enid Grant, Ernie's wife, I commented on the shiny newness of a Lexus parked in front of us. Enid turned to me and said simply, "cane farmer", as if this was all the explanation that was needed. Clearly there were no Aboriginal sugarcane farm owners in Tully. Neither was there much acknowledgement of Indigenous people as more than 'traditional', that is to say, 'the previous', owners.

At the Tully Information Centre and in few small signs around the town Gulngay people were given as the traditional owners, but there was no public mention of the past conflicts between Aboriginal people and Europeans over farmland, or the contemporary

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<sup>21</sup> Ernie had a photocopy of Korah Halcomb Wills (1828-1896) diary from the Henry Brandon Collection (OM 75 -75) at the John Oxley Library. An extract has been made available by Timothy Bottoms at <https://cairnshistory.com.au/korah-halcomb-wills-1828-1896/>

influence of Aboriginal people in the sugar region.<sup>22</sup> For example, at the nearby Sugar Heritage Museum in Mouriliyan (in an omission that could be a contemporary example of the poet Harrison's "those ye barred" sentiments) the contribution made by Chinese and Pacific Islander workers is clearly expressed, but the 'work' of Indigenous people, even to oppose European expansion, is not presented. A previous Director of the Australian Museum Sydney (in Simpson, 1996) has described the choice of museums to leave out dissenting voices, purportedly in the interests of being non-political, as "itself a political statement" (p. 37). I do not mean to suggest that there should be signs in Tully, or video at the sugar museum, explicitly detailing the European invasion. I only note that many Queensland sugar towns, like Tully, shared a similarly determined commitment to an ostensible non-politicism. Ernie too claimed to be non-political, though in fact he was. Rather than stay silent on the matter as the Sugar Heritage Museum did, Ernie Grant responded creatively, as I will show, through story.

As a consequence of his role as a Cultural Research Officer and all the literature he read, it is perhaps not an overstatement to say that Ernie's working life thereafter was wholly dedicated to a postcolonial response. To describe Ernie's specific version of a response, it is constructive to discuss his cultural awareness workshops, specifically two that I attended. These cultural workshops were a major part of his later working life. Workshops used to be presented out on his traditional lands at Echo and Davidson Creek, but more recently they were being held at the sleepy Tully railway station where his family operated a cultural tour business. The Tully railway was also where Ingan's small museum was to be installed. At these cultural awareness workshops, or "culture talks" as they were more informally called, a large part of the awareness endeavour rested on communicating history from an Indigenous perspective.

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<sup>22</sup> An effort was made to address the contribution of contemporary Indigenous people to the cane farming industry in the Museum of Tropical Queensland's *Manggan* exhibition at Townville in 2017-2018. Along with artefacts, the exhibition showed photographs of a young Jirrbal woman working farm machinery on the land, for example, together with other family photos she had taken.

#### 4.4 Culture Talks at the Railway Station

In addition to having the cultural authority as an elder to talk about rainforest people in QLD, it should be noted that Ernie was a very good public speaker. He was a uniquely calm yet lively storyteller, and one emergency-room-hardened medical doctor who had listened to him at a cultural awareness presentation even generously remarked to me, “I could listen to him for hours”. Furthermore, Ernie had an extraordinary memory. For example, he could name every single river and creek from Tully to Cairns (there were easily nearly a hundred of these waterways). As a young man, Ernie said his family had suggested he might learn to be a *gubi* (a healer, or “cleverman”) such was his suitable disposition. However, he was personally wary of Aboriginal “cleverness” – a power that “could hurt as well as heal”, as he put it – thus he rejected becoming *gubi*.

Ironically, Ernie’s teaching efforts in the community earned him an honorary university doctorate anyway, and he was made “Dr Grant” in his 70s by the James Cook University in Cairns. It was unclear how well this new designation sat with him (he mostly eschewed it with me). But in an acceptance speech at the awards ceremony in Cairns, he addressed the fact that his title was being awarded by an institution named after the Captain explorer (James Cook) who remained, for many Australian Indigenous people, the highest symbol of European invasion and immorality (Rose, 2001). Despite these misgivings, I thought that Ernie accepted the title of “Doctor” because ultimately it would lend authority to his pursuit of increasing cultural awareness via what was for him a more culturally appropriate method. This method was primarily oral story, or as he and his family called them, “culture talks”.

Ernie’s culture talks had been held on his family’s traditional lands for years through an arrangement with the white landowners. However, for reasons I never really learned, only that the deal “fell through”, Ernie had to find someplace else to hold the talks. Fortunately, he had maintained a good relationship with his previous employer, the Queensland Rail, whom he had worked for as a porter shunter for seven years during the 1980s. Explaining to me that “trains weren’t my cup of tea”, he had stopped this work to take up the cultural heritage and teaching work that would be his final career change before retirement, but he still tended to a substantial collection of ferns and orchids that he had established on the platform of the station. His good relationship with

Queensland Rail was such that his family's cultural tours business, Ingan, was allowed to rent the space and base their operation at the station.

Located on the Bruce Highway, just before the turnoff into town, the Tully regional train station was a generally quiet and underused space. It only got busy when passengers travelling on the route from Brisbane and Cairns disembarked each day, or when Ingan had a particularly large group of participants at the workshop. Ernie's youngest daughter Sonya Grant ran the daily business, with the help of his niece. A few Indigenous staff were also employed to do guided activities such as bush walks and kayaking trips down the Tully River. At the time of writing Ingan occupied much of the large Tully railway station. Operations took up a long office space with a small tearoom attached, a presentation room, and a large multiple-use zone set to be used for the Chloe Café (named after Grant's mother) and the proposed family museum. Ernie's culture talks were held in the presentation room for its capacity to hold a long table and chairs. Paintings on consignment hung on the wall, as well as a large topographical map of Jirrbal, Gulngay, Djiru and Girramay country. A few artefacts adorned the deep-set window frame in the presentation room such as a trap made of lawyer-cane and string laboriously rolled from bark fibres. Most of the art pieces, as I understood it, were on consignment from the Giringun Aboriginal Art Centre, based in nearby Cardwell.

In addition to plain aesthetic value, the 'new artefacts' in the room and artefacts brought in from his own collection served to show Indigenous people's ingenuity and adaptation to their unique environment. To others Ernie would often say for example, "my people weren't as silly as people said they were", and further, "possession of gun is what made white people think they were superior". Thus, to counter the racist idea that his people's society was "primitive", the *jawun*, a specific type of broad-bottomed basket, was raised in culture talks as an example of sophisticated Indigenous technology. In addition to carrying food, personal belongings, and children, the *jawun* was crucial to a practice unique to rainforest people in which toxins were leached from poisonous rainforest fruits like *mirrany* 'black bean' in the river. The scientific narrative was well-known by elders. Something like: by directing swirling water via a leaf-funnel through the steamed and scraped fruit in the basket, this leaching system ensured a high-carbohydrate staple food and allowed rainforest people to be more sedentary than other Indigenous groups of Australia. But Ernie could add his own personal recollections to



this for people at the cultural workshops, or any other audience Indigenous or non-Indigenous for that matter interested in narratives about “Aboriginal culture”. He would tell, for example, of how he “waited patiently” for black bean since it took many days to be ready. A few times as children, he and his cousins could not wait and ended up with stomach pains. So went the story.

Ernie was no longer able to access private bushland at Davidson and Echo Creek, but he was also too old now to be walking up and down the Tully River with tourists. At the time I was going to the railway station, the museum section was only half finished, as was the café and kitchen. Ingan participants were able to have their lunch at a collection of colourful new tables and chairs, but the industrial coffee machine was not yet fully installed or working. As for the family museum’s progress, new timber flooring lined the floor, and an independent Indigenous curator living nearby had procured funding to have some shelving installed in preparation for Ernie’s artefacts. A Queensland Museum curator who visited at this time expressed concern for the natural light in the room, but otherwise thought that the space had potential in the hands of the Indigenous curator who was very experienced in addressing such issues. The figure below shows the museum in this ready state (see Figure 4), however, this was as far as the museum got. Ingan later went into receivership, so the artefacts Ernie and I spoke so much about in the next chapter never made their way into the waiting shelves.



*Figure 4: Proposed Museum Space at the Tully Railway Station*

The proposed compromise of ‘country in a room’, as the above space might be called, reminded me of a conversation I had with Girramay elder Uncle Claude Beeron. I had asked Claude how one should “teach culture”, and he had replied, “take em out and shown em”, meaning into rainforest country – the bush or “scrub” as the dense rainforest was called. He continued, “they looking at what you tellen em. You tell em something in a book here, page, writing, it’s just a hand, writing there that’s all” (C Beeron interview, 2017). When I later asked Claude about the role of museums, he said, “It’s alright for older people. I reckon. But the young – like 10, 11 up to 15 or 16 – you take em out” (ibid). Claude’s comments point to the inevitable deficit in any ‘compromise’ of actual land. Yet, the railway station, already a transient place for trains and travellers, seemed an appropriate space to be claimed by a Jirrbal elder who was no longer physically able to go out on country, and for his family who could not access their traditional places which were now on private property. We might thus focus on the more positive aspects of compromise that the railway space represented: it allowed at least some version of cultural ‘reproduction’ to occur, it allowed for economic activity around culture, and it allowed for a statement of Jirrbal presence on land, albeit within a train station, to be publicly asserted on a major Queensland highway.

#### **4.5 Cultural Awareness as Historical Awareness**

For about two to three hours, using a combination of stories, video, and interactive question and answer, Ernie spoke to variously different groups of people at his cultural talks. In addition to the work with tourists and high school students, for example, he also presented to medical doctors as part of their cultural awareness training for professional development. The Cassowary Coast local shire also employed Ernie to deliver cultural workshops to their employees as both an elder and “Dr Grant”. Interestingly, he told me that the Shire advised he should “not hold back” in terms of his confronting historical material. I could not attend a workshop for any professional audiences, though I did attend two culture talks for non-professional audiences on separate occasions: one for high school students on a fieldtrip and another for American tourists. In these Ernie delivered similar content around the history and ongoing consequences of colonialism in Australia.

From reports that Ernie gave to me about his other cultural awareness workshops, it seems the essential message was always the same: historical awareness, particularly atrocities against Aboriginal people, constituted “cultural awareness”. So, as well as sharing his memory about waiting for black bean to be leached of toxins, Ernie also raised his Uncle Willie Masina’s story – about Aboriginal bodies that had “turned white” floating down the Tully River after a shooting massacre in the early 1900s at Weary Pocket or *Julu Julumba*<sup>23</sup>. To address the broader national context, he showed a video *The Secret Country* (Pilger & Lowery, 1986), which described the testing of atomic bombs at Maralinga in the 1950s and 60s, and the subsequent serious health issues for Aboriginal people who were not evacuated from the area (such as blindness in Yami Lester, one of the video’s participants). Although the American tourists later enjoyed boomerang painting with Ernie’s niece, one had to wonder whether the history of a local massacre, and the little-known Maralinga event (but see Cross, 2004; Tynan, 2016 ) was what they had signed up for with their travel agent in the U.S. Indeed, in the two talks I attended, strong audience responses had followed. A few of the American tourists were visibly disturbed: “it’s horrific”, “it’s overwhelming”. Another listener had offered his advice: “you need a strong leader, like Dr King”. It was interesting to me that, for at least one of these international visitors, a correlation was made with Black rather than Native rights in this way. Such a response from the American tourists may simply evidence how Ernie successfully linked indigenous dispossession and inequality with racism more broadly (as a colleague of mine was attempting to do by calling their research project on Indigenous overrepresentation in the criminal justice system “Black Lives Matter”).

In the high school culture talk with Australian male students, it was more difficult to discern a sympathetic reaction. If the students were moved about the culture talk, they did not show it. (Indeed, speaking with some of them afterwards, they were more excited about being able to tan themselves on the station platform in preparation for an

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<sup>23</sup> After introducing Ernie to Google Maps in the 2014 heritage project, we sat at the computer and pinned labels for many significant sites, colour coding them for different themes. Themes included Camps, Boundaries, Story Places, and Massacre Sites. Julu Julumbu was both Camp and Massacre Site, opposite the mouth of Stony Creek.

upcoming music festival in Cairns.) A number of reasons could account for their apparent disinterest, for example, the pressure to appear stoic in front of one's peers, or the fact that they had risen early that morning to catch the bus to Tully so that they were, as Ernie had surmised, "tired from a long day". But one, and then two, students actually lay their head on the table during the culture talk. Rather than indicating tiredness, apathy, or even the age-old tradition of sleeping during the class video, it was difficult not to presume, given the very serious content of the film, that it was instead a challenge to the historic film's relevance to "cultural awareness". Ernie must have sensed the small dissent too, for he said at one point, "You may think this has nothing to do with you, but this *does* affect you" (E Grant pers comm, 2016).

More direct feedback came by way of the European Australian teacher during the lunch break after the presentation. He was skeptical, seemingly about just one of the stories that Ernie had told (about a natural event in which fish eggs had been drawn up into the sky during a storm and dropped, as fish, into another place) but probably overall too. The teacher appeared to caution Ernie as we sat and ate our lunch at the table away from the students: "you have to be careful", he said to Ernie, "you have to be sure that what you are saying is true, because people respect you", as if the historical stories Ernie raised – about the bodies turned white, and radiation causing blindness – would not be believed amongst such nonsensical hearsay about fish falling from the sky. At this point, I could understand why Ernie surrounded himself with artefacts and sources, either physically in the room (such as the net, boomerangs, a sword and shield), or remembered and called upon (such as his mother's baskets, or his parents' blue-green fur blanket made from a *jula* 'green ringtail possum', which had been lost long ago). It is true that artefacts in this way provided a 'lighter' side of history, but they were also a present link to the more painful past that he described. Thus, alongside artefacts at Ingan, the pile of history books on the conference table could also be pointed to intermittently with the comment "so and so writes about this in there" to support his otherwise oral histories.

Ernie told me of more difficult challenges from non-Indigenous people in his workshops. These adult versions of sleeping-during-the-video resistances could be summed up in the sentiment – 'Indigenous people already have rights. What more do you want?' When I asked Ernie why he continued to present this information to a

sometimes sceptical, even hostile, audience into his 80s, he answered, “so these things do not happen again”. History thus provided a lesson for the future, and again, the cultural awareness workshops depended upon re-telling history and other stories of the land and his old people’s way of life. To be “culturally aware” was not just about avoiding eye contact or refraining from first names with Aboriginal people (Fryer-Smith, 2008). For Ernie, it meant hearing about the lesser-known events that had informed his people’s current situation of marginality. It meant knowing more about a colonial war had affected his people’s population and strength of kinship. Finally, it was knowing that his people kept and told their own stories. This was what it meant to be “culturally aware”.

The Ingan workshops provide small examples of Ernie’s more temporary relationships via his professional interactions (as “Dr Grant”), yet a conflict-free personal experience in the town (as “Ernie Grant”) was bound to be similarly difficult. Given that his life’s work was about expanding the Eurocentric historical record from within the Tully community, a majority of which were of European descent, there was always the danger of rousing anger in the rest of the community if he, or other Indigenous voices, were deemed too strident. Moreover, non-Indigenous people knew Ernie to be a diplomat and representative of his people, thus they would communicate criticism toward him. For example, the day after a 1970s documentary film about Murray Upper was shown on national television (“We Stop Here”, 1977), Ernie said a white friend “accosted him” in the main street. The local film showed Ernie’s family in their riverside camp telling stories passed down to them about the poisonings and callous shootings of Dyrirbal people: “Bang. Bang. Bang”, the teller had said in the film, to vividly evoke a moment of the killings. The white man in the street was a descendant of one of the alleged shooting group, and he was angry over the portrayal of his family in the film. When I asked Ernie how he had responded to the white man he told me, “well I just tried to calm him down. I told him it wasn’t him that did that. But you know, he was very agitated” (E Grant pers comm, 2016).

Dyrirbal speaking groups in Queensland have certainly perished at the hands of pioneers with guns (Bottoms, 2013), so there is some irony in the fact that it was Ernie who was soothing the settler’s descendant in the street like this. Arguably the street encounter reflects, on a small scale, a much larger national ‘soothing effort’ undertaken by all

Indigenous diplomats like Ernie. It certainly points to an ongoing overall distrust of oral histories (as shown by the teacher in the student workshop) so tied up in this kind of white response – not just of defensiveness (“it wasn’t me”), but also incredulity (“that didn’t happen”). In any case, the street encounter demonstrated the ongoing negotiation of tension in Tully between black and white over the different historical narratives that told of how Black Indigenous land became White Settler land. Power, land and knowledge were so bound together that, for Ernie, things “taking their turn” also referred to much loss of what is now contemporarily glossed as “Indigenous Knowledge”. I end this chapter with a story that is about reasserting power through claims that one still has access to Indigenous Knowledge, even when land is far away or transformed beyond recognition.

#### 4.6 Ancestors in the Orchard

Gladys Henry, the same “Mrs Henry” who opened an Aboriginal art shop at Bellenden in Murray Upper, compiled a book at around the same time called *Girroo Gurr!* (1967) featuring dreaming and other stories from Tully told to her by local Indigenous people. Ernie was one of those who told a story to Henry for the book, though she called him “Old John” in the publication to conceal his identity at the time<sup>24</sup>. Henry titled the story *The Boy Who Knew Too Much* but conceivably she could have called it *The Boy Who Knew Too Little* given that, according to Henry, the story unfolds after Ernie/Old John’s father becomes worried his son is losing touch with tribal law and language. In Henry’s version, the Butler family is away in town and only Ernie, his brother, and father remain at the Butler farm. After ignoring his father’s warnings to be quiet, Ernie’s father takes him by the arm to the orange orchard outside at the spot where the Butler family had distributed rations to the old people for many years. Ernie retold this story to me in his own words, with the further addition of a later occurrence at the South Australia Museum:

I told this story to Mrs George Henry back in 1960, over incident that happened to me when I was a young boy. We were at Fringford in our little

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<sup>24</sup> Ernie was happy to identify himself now as Old John.

humpy – was couple of hundred yards away from the main house. My mum was in hospital. I forget whether she was having my sister or my brother Earl. But I was at home with my Dad and was a REAL cold winter's night. And real moonlight – was clear as anything. And I was crying. And Dad said shut up, and I didn't take any notice. And anyway he got wild – he said you singing out too much. He said I'll SHOW you and he grabbed me and took me outside. There was an orange orchard there – and it was 'disc-ed' – in between – so it was clear ground in between – in the trees. And the old people used to come there and sit – until Mrs Butler called them for their rations once a month.

But this night when I got up there was about 20-30 people there ALL white. And where their heart was, was a red thing. And – people would say ghosts, they were ghosts – but what they were I don't know. But I got a fright and I said "GO on, get!". And one of them, I can remember, old fella, ran. And hung onto a tree, and stand up. And everything went on. And they carried on as if I didn't exist. They were only from here – wouldn't be from here to that tree out there. 'Bout half way from that tree. And I'd never forget – I shut up of course. I didn't cry anymore when I saw this. I've sat down and I've thought why didn't I ask me Dad, later on, what the hell – how'd HE know – these beings were outside.

Anyway, years went past and I never thought about it anymore. I remembered it. And in 1960 I was 25 yrs old by then and told Mrs Henry that story and she's put her version of it on there. That's the European's idea of what I saw. But in – must have been 1991,92 I went to the South Australia Museum and the lady that was in charge of that part of it – her name was Kate Alport. And she saw that I was very interested in Tindale's stuff. She allowed me – before anybody else ever saw Tindale's stuff, I saw it – not long come back from America then. And because I was so interested in it she said "here's the room and you can sit there". So she gave me the desk and I got all the stuff and was looking through it. But up on the wall was a calendar. And I nearly died of a heart attack. On that calendar was a painting – exactly of what I saw that night. Of beings painted. They had the red where the heart was – and you know just the form of a human being with arms and head and eyes and everything but not – all white, like I saw that night. So somebody else had seen what I've seen...That was many years apart.

So that story that went in there is – the version that I told you is little bit different to the how Mrs – she couldn't write what I saw because nobody would have – you know they, back then they called it mumbo jumbo...all Aboriginal people belief...and there was no way I could have imagined the things because people were sitting down and moving around and...human form, exactly the height and arms and legs the same but they were white – all white. And where the heart was, was a red – thing. It was an incredible experience. And I don't care what anybody says, I know what I saw.  
(E Grant interview, 2016)

Ernie knew that this story would be of interest to me. I wanted to hear "museum stories" in the same way that Henry wanted to hear "dreaming stories". That his childhood

vision of ancestors in the orchard is later validated in, of all the unlikely places, the back room of a museum amidst Tindale documents, is intriguing for so many reasons. But beyond being a story that was, like an artefact, “of cultural and historical interest”, it is important to remember that this was also a story that Ernie simply wanted to share with someone: “there was no way I could have imagined the things,” he said. Apart from convincing me, it is fair to say that Ernie was still convincing himself all those years later of what he had seen. Perhaps this was because he was in danger of becoming “lawless”, as was his father’s concern, since an early western education kept pulling him away from the primacy of Indigenous knowledge and, subsequently, his ancestors. To “take him outside” and “show” him the old people in the orchard where they used to gather for rations could be interpreted as a scare tactic to punish bad behaviour. It was also his father’s consummate reminder: these are your ancestors; this is your law and land, which is not to be forgotten.

Ernie’s discovery of the calendar in the museum appears to be merely a validation of what he had seen (“someone else saw what I saw”), but I would suggest as Ernie searched for information about his people in the archives there was some risk of appearing to value archival knowledge *above* his elders’ orally transmitted knowledge – of being again *lawless*. Thus, the unexpected calendar picture was another ‘showing’: another timely reminder of his old people and their way of knowing. Reflecting Foucault’s well-known maxim ‘knowledge is power’, archives have power not only because they organise what is known, but because they control what is deemed worthy of knowing. Therefore, Ernie’s recognition in the calendar picture can also be seen as a kind of reassurance for him – his people’s knowledge was still ‘powerful’ and could reach him anywhere, even in the back room of a museum.

With this interpretation it is not my intention to pit Archival knowledge against Indigenous knowledge. In fact it is quite the opposite. The calendar picture should rather be seen as a sign of the potential to draw on both kinds of knowledge, through Indigenous scholars like Ernie. Indeed Ernie directly contributed much to the archive himself by recording and assisting others to record interviews with his old people precisely for the benefit of new generations of Indigenous rainforest people. He was engaging with the archives, as many Indigenous people do, whilst also engaging with his old people’s law.



I have said that Ernie's lessons in the workshops amounted to historical awareness, but what is clear now is that cultural awareness in Ernie's workshops could only go so far. Ernie focused on historical awareness, too, because it was suitable for his largely non-Indigenous audience for whom it was not appropriate, or even practical, to share 'Indigenous knowledge'. What I mean by this is that, though an audience might be asked to share in the validity of oral histories (and thus, a different epistemology), they were not asked to share in the knowledge of Aboriginal spirit ancestors and a competing law system (and thus, a different ontology). Importantly, then, Ernie was not made vulnerable to attacks of "mumbo jumbo".

Moreover, though his orchard and museum story did not constitute "secret-sacred" knowledge, it *was* only for certain listeners either open to ontological alterity or culturally entitled to it. Thus, when it came to teaching Indigenous people, he could speak more freely about spirits and since an Indigenous ontological perspective of country and ancestors was part of every Indigenous person's own birthright. Once again, the archive was helpful since it would always be there for young people, so that they could hear these stories if and when they were ready. Baker (2018) is again instructive on this point:

A fundamental challenge we have as Aboriginal people is to make visible our resistance and refusal of colonial "knowing" and maintain our ways of speaking of our long and short histories, as told by us. This challenge is pressing because of the ongoing erasure of our collective memory, and appropriation of our children's memory through colonising objects, ideas and processes of representation and administration. (Baker 2018, p. 18)

Baker helps to show that, for Ernie, telling this story to me was another way of resisting 'erasure', firstly, of collective memory (his father's memory of ancestors in the orchard and his people's memory of archetypal ancestors in the calendar) and secondly, the appropriation of children's memory (his own memory of ancestors in the orchard).

With respect to this, it should be mentioned that the unbroken passing down of stories and knowledge "from elder to younger" in a contemporary context seemed to require a few circumstances to align. For example, a younger person had to show interest: "would you show young people this language recording?" I had asked one of the Jirrbal Aunties

of the Dyirbal songs online. “If they’re interested”, she responded. Moreover, an elder had to have the time and inclination in what was often a busy schedule for them as senior elders (elders like Ernie, Claude, Theresa and Emily were often busy with ‘elder work’ including working with government agencies and researchers). Obviously having the time to simply be with young people was the most ideal scenario but recording those stories like Uncle Jack’s (“not to be forgot”, as he put it) was also helpful for generations to come, particularly when land was inaccessible, or elders had passed on ‘too early’.

An important question to posit at this point is how to ensure that elders’ time is not being monopolised by heritage work unnecessarily. Ironically, in our efforts to address ‘knowledge loss’ we might be aggravating the problem. As Theresa once lamented to me about the many projects she had been involved in over the years, “how many times we gotta tell these stories?”. I understood her to mean ‘tell these stories to the *archive*’ (not ‘tell these stories to young people’, which was less onerous). The task, then, for heritage workers might be to make recording activities less redundant and, dare I say it, more enjoyable for elders. In this way I view access to storehouses of information, or ‘retrievability’, as just one issue for Indigenous communities. It goes, as well, the other way. How to elicit information from elders in the most economical and culturally beneficial of ways is also an issue that need addressing, perhaps, for one, by ensuring that young people are always present and centrally involved in any recording event. Though Ernie and his family had adopted me as such, I was aware that I was not a Jirrbal young person. Still, being a mixed-heritage researcher who had ‘showed interest’, I was something like what elders hoped for (as seen in the Aunty’s comment above about language recordings) when they shared knowledge to young people in the community. My involvement in the documenting of Ernie Grant’s artefacts hopefully made the task a less onerous because in talking to me he was not only talking to the archive, but also, to the next generation of Indigenous people in general.

#### **4.7 Putting Things Down**

Ernie often expressed a concern that time was running out for him and the “old ways” of his people. He even described Claude Beeron and himself, the two most senior men representing Jirrbal and Girramay respectively, as “the last, tail end of the old people”.

As far as I could tell, this perception was due to the fact that he and Claude had been the last people to live in traditional camps as children. Driven by this common “last elder” anxiety<sup>25</sup>, and also by the desire to create a family museum at the Tully Railway Station, Ernie proposed to create written documentation for his artefact collection. As he told me, “I’d like it all catalogued and the information put down on – what I do know about them. Where they’re made of and all that kind of stuff” (E Grant interview, 2016).

The need for artefact documentation was compounded by Ernie’s general wariness over both global and local politics and a concern for the future. At a global level, an upsetting new development that he would frequently cite was Donald Trump’s run for, and subsequent election to, the White House in late 2016. To Ernie this was strong evidence of the backlash against a perceived growing equity for people of colour, and the contemporary endorsement of right-wing conservatism in the western world. At a local level, on the other hand, Ernie discussed the rumbling conflict between some Jirrbal and Gulngay families over legal recognition of rights to land in Tully. He perceived Australia’s Native Title legislation (the main legal arena for asserting Indigenous land rights and interests in Australia) as highly antagonistic to Aboriginal families, and overall a negative thing for his people. This was particularly evident after he was used as a witness for the Gulngay Native Title case, in which he did not necessarily want to be involved. Argument amongst his people in the adversarial Native Title system evidenced further ‘knowledge loss’ since it showed that people were referring too heavily to European historical records (much of it incorrect, according to Ernie) to determine supposed boundaries that were in place<sup>26</sup>. For this reason, “putting things down”, as he had described it, was important “because our tribal ways are fragmenting fast now. Land rights issues coming in causing ill feelings.” (E Grant interview, 2016). Occasionally, Ernie’s disquiet about local and global politics was

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<sup>25</sup> My academic advisor, Rosita Henry, called this common anxiety in Indigenous communities the “last elder” complex.

<sup>26</sup> Ernie reported to me that the Jirrbal and Gulngay groups did live in certain primary areas of land at one point, but “traditionally” they shared a lot of land, particularly along the rivers, which could be moved about on freely without seeking the other’s permission. The stronger break between the groups, and boundaries between the wrong people, he said, had only arisen due to white law (ie Native Title).

linked to his Christian belief in a paradigmatic shift or “end of the system of things”<sup>27</sup>, however, his version of “putting things down” presented some contradictions to this belief, insofar as he still optimistically envisioned a future world for his family. Native Title outcomes demonstrated, whether one liked it or not, the importance of archival records for Aboriginal people. Thus, curating a collection was about helping to keep cultural information, and stories about artefacts, in circulation after his passing.

In addition to writing down information we could say that “putting things down” referred to a second meaning: to laying down worldly things like artefacts. In this regard, Belk (2006) has written that: “The curator may have once been a collector engaged in the active acquisition of objects for a collection, but when such acquisition stops, collecting stops and only the curator's role remains” (p. 3). Under this linear framework Ernie Grant would be defined as a curator, rather than a collector, simply because he had not actively acquired much in the last 20 years. In my view however, he had always been a curator, for even though he was now thinking about passing on information about a collection that would outlive him, he had in fact always been researching and selectively communicating about “Jirrbal culture” and the artefacts he had to assert ‘deep roots’.

This recognition, I argue, is what makes all Indigenous people in settler states curators to some degree. It has been shown that non-Indigenous individuals in other settler states like the U.S. collect native artefacts to feel “a sense of belonging” to a place and “continuity” (Colwell-Chanthaphonh, 2004, p. 587). Yet I maintain that it is still only Indigenous keepers who can most effectively reject exoticism via their assertions of historical, social and cultural connection to a place. This rejection is achieved precisely through the clear choice to celebrate connections deemed to be “traditional”. In other words, Indigenous curatorship occurs when Indigenous people choose continuity and deep roots for themselves, perhaps by consulting with the archive, or actively contributing to it and engaging with it as Ernie did.

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<sup>27</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses believe in a prophecy of Armageddon, which includes the destruction of government by God (Jehovah). A select few will be saved and live in a paradise on Earth, or be anointed to live in Heaven with Jehovah. I never asked Ernie whether he believed in this prophecy.

Many “what next” questions for Ernie’s collection became pertinent (and subsequently, more available for research attention) as an 80-year-old Ernie Grant began to consider how his collection of artefacts and resources would be “put down” and subsequently picked up again by others after his passing. Ernie had several options to consider. For example:

- 1) was it possible to store them indefinitely at a family museum at Ingan?
- 2) could he just sell the rest of the artefacts to the Museum of Tropical Queensland? Or
- 3) should he resign himself to adding his collection of artefacts and resources to the keeping place at the Giringun Aboriginal Corporation in Cardwell?

In this way, the choice was one between Family, State and Corporation. It is probably better to describe Giringun as a “corporation” rather than “community” choice given that Giringun represented eight separate traditional owner groups. In fact, a fourth “community” choice might have been possible in a keeping place in the small Aboriginal community near Murray Falls called Jumbun. Uncle Claude Beeron now held the key for the Jumbun keeping place after rumours the previous Community Director had not looked after the artefacts there. Ernie never raised Jumbun as an option, however, probably because the two most important things for Ernie – security and accessibility – were even more unachievable at that location than even Giringun, as I will later discuss. In the end, he settled on Family and State, as we shall see in the following chapter.

#### **4.8 Conclusion**

In this chapter we have seen that Ernie’s stories were deliberately selected for a particular audience and, just like artefacts curated for an exhibition, stories formed the material that he used to teach and communicate about his people and their challenges in sugar-cane land. To begin making an argument for preservation as a cultural activity, I have selected them now too, as part of ‘data results’ and discussion. All of these stories of encounter – with tourists, professionals, community members and ancestor spirits – make salient the social, historical and cultural milieu in which Ernie and his artefacts were immersed. What has also been shown is that, in his cultural workshops, historical

awareness helped to achieve cultural awareness. Moreover, in response to years of reading racist colonial literature and observing the tensions between black and white in a rural town, it was important that, alongside the written scientific accounts, Ernie's own historical account of his people included narratives drawn from his memory and his people's oral history. Stories, which may or may not have featured artefacts directly, almost always featured his old people. Thus we can add that Ernie Grant's 'postcolonial response', as I have called it, was also about preserving the authority of his ancestors to speak knowledge, through him, to a diverse public.

## 5. *The Ernie Grant Collection*

### 5.1 Introduction

In addition to the general feeling that it was time to “lay down” artefacts, the prospect of a small museum at Ingan, his family’s cultural tours business, meant that Ernie had a more specific reason to document his collection. After years of being either left at the railway station for cultural workshops or stored in locked garage cabinets at home and taken out when needed, contextualising information now had to be produced for an independent freelance museum-trained Indigenous curator, as well as for other staff who might be employed at the Ingan museum. For the first time, Ernie had to produce written documentation – information existing “outside of Ernie Grant’s head” as I had once indelicately put it to him – to arguably convert them into fully-fledged *curated* artefacts (Henry et al., 2013).

This chapter reports on this process of documentation, which occurred over several months in 2016 and 2017. Ernie and I looked at eleven artefacts that he kept in Tully – a shield, four baskets, two swords, an axe, a fire maker, and two boomerangs. For these a booklet was made in preparation for Ingan’s family keeping place. We also spoke about fifteen artefacts that he had lately sold to the Museum of Tropical Queensland (MTQ) – a shadow box, two miniature shields, a contemporary ceramic shield, a sword, assorted boomerangs, two firestick makers, and two cane baskets. While doing a placement there for my PhD project, I added some of this subsequent narrative into the Vernon collections management software system when I registered the collection into the MTQ in 2017. All of the twenty six artefacts – kept in Tully or sold to the MTQ – formed the “Ernie Grant Collection” for the purposes of this research. Later, though, I began to divide the collection into the sub-groups of “Personal” and “Museum” artefacts.

It should be noted at the outset that a typical curation process with an exhibition space as the end result was not part of the story that will be described here for either of these groups of artefacts. For Ernie’s personal artefacts, the Ingan family business went into receivership and so Ernie and his family’s plans for an on-country family museum at the Tully railway station never came to fruition. Similarly, the Museum artefacts have not yet been put on public display at the Museum of Tropical Queensland (MTQ).

Analysis here is therefore restricted to the documentation process up to the point of the business' cessation, that is, to one Indigenous curator's vision for a displayed collection, rather than an actual display and its public effect. Moreover, although I at first aimed for an interview for each of the individual artefacts photographed, Ernie naturally had less to say about some artefacts, and more about others. Sometimes the details of acquisition were an interesting part of the artefact's story, while other times, the teaching purposes of artefacts sold to the MTQ were highlighted. In this way, the unfolding narratives became a set of stories about rainforest life and "culture" set around an artefact, rather than provenance elicitation per se.

For Ernie Grant, this was the "holistic" way of emplacing them. The Holistic Framework that Ernie developed for teaching was integral to how he would tell about artefacts. Consisting of six key factors – *Land, Language, Culture, Time, Place* and *Relationships* – the framework worked as a storyteller's tool for thinking and speaking about culture, and in this instance, for emplacing artefacts holistically. Hearing these stories gave some insight into what made an artefact worth keeping in light of the burden described in the previous chapter. We saw already that material artefacts served as evidence on the table, to contest the ever-powerful fiction of *Terra Nullius*. However, this may frame their value as overly utilitarian: as *only* a response to external factors for a political purpose. In fact, there was, in my view, a further "internal logic and rationality", as Smallacombe (2000) has described it, to preserving artefacts as well. Smallacombe's (2000) expanded comment in this regard is that there will continue to be an ongoing research deficit as long as there is a "failure" to recognise that "indigenous conceptual systems have their own internal logic and rationality, which are not always translatable into the dominant western legal and political system" (p. 161). In Ernie's Holistic Framework we certainly see a useful example of Indigenous "internal logic and rationality" hard at work. Contrary to Smallacombe's conclusion, however, that Indigenous conceptual systems are sometimes radically incommensurate with western knowledge systems, the Holistic Framework demonstrates a rather more optimistic outlook. This is because, essentially, it is one Indigenous collector's tool for translation.

In the past, non-Indigenous people have been motivated to preserve Indigenous material culture through protection themes sometimes associated with before-it's-too-late



salvage anthropology, and for Ernie, a similar sense of urgency was admittedly not far from his mind. Yet, pride in his people's craftsmanship and locally honed knowledge over many generations were also significant motivations. Moreover, the desire to "show our young people what our artefacts looked like", as he put it, and distinguish rainforest Aboriginal people from other Indigenous groups even resulted in the production of new artefacts specifically for his collection. As I will show, the desire to "tell the full story" lead in this way to a different sort of curating, which did not necessarily need a display space.

## **5.2 A Trove in Tully**

Ernie's modest house in Tully was a trove of cultural and historical resources acquired over a lifetime. Artefacts were mostly stored in locked metal cabinets outside in the garage, but a few could be seen in the family's open living and dining area. For example, a large oval-bottomed basket sat on top of a high freestanding bookshelf, and a small bi-cornual basket was just visible inside a glass-doored cabinet. The baskets in this way were only subtly privileged. Nevertheless, they demonstrated that "special importance" within a private collection that leads to separate storage or display within the collection (Akin, 1996, p. 20). Both the oval-bottomed and bi-cornual baskets had been made by Ernie's mother Chloe Grant. They were of great personal value to the family, so an initial query to Ernie was if my use of the word "artefact" was even appropriate. He said it was fine with him, though he did warn me to "just be careful" about using the term in the community. As I understood it, being careful meant being mindful that the term 'artefact, like 'museum', was still loaded with unwanted meaning: it potentially represented something archaic and useless, something a lot 'less' than what it actually meant to people.

As well as keeping North Queensland rainforest artefacts, Ernie also kept history and research associated with his highly studied people and their Dyirbal language. His mother Chloe had been a key consultant for Dixon's (1972) description of their language, so Ernie's literature collection extended to numerous language education

resources, particularly for the Jirrbal and Girramay dialects of Dyirbal<sup>28</sup>. Much of this literature was stored in the “den”, as the family described it, a narrow room positioned off from the main living area. This room served as an office and library, with shelves stuffed full of papers, maps, books, tapes, photographs, PhD theses, and manuscripts. In the corner, a couple of broad timber rainforest swords leaned up against the wall, and further boxed resources spilled into the dining room, where Ernie and I often sat after making room at the table.

Given the volume of paper and resources, one had to wonder at some point whether Ernie was a hoarder. As with his artefact collection, however, resources in the den appeared to demonstrate the no-two-alike rule that differentiates a hoard from a collection (Belk, 1995; Kilroy-Marac, 2018). Moreover, though there was a remarkable number of culture and history resources, everything was methodically organised, as Ernie himself was. For example, historical references were organised by region, and sources on the Tully and Cardwell region were given similar ‘special storage’ previously mentioned, this time in glass shelves. Recognising the level of effort and years of persistence that had gone into his collection of resources, and the fact that Ernie himself had been instrumental in some of the data collection, I eventually began calling Grant’s den “The Grant Library”. So important was this curated archive to Ernie that we could say artefacts were, in some sense, its supplement, though it should be noted that Ernie’s family probably placed more importance on the artefacts than the Grant Library.

In contrast to the so-called Museum Age era of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, when people sought to answer questions through collecting, contemporary scholarship now questions the nature of collecting itself. Thus, in addition to asking whether one is a hoarder or a collector, we now ask questions like, “why do we collect things?” (Akin, 1996; Belk, 1995, 2006; Colwell-Chanthaphonh, 2004) and “how is ethnographic collecting different from other types of collecting?” (May, 2009). Amidst all the critical and reflexive questioning about collecting and why people do it, inquiry specifically

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<sup>28</sup> For example, Dixon RMW, n.d., *Writing down Girramay and Jirrbal* (unpublished education resource), and Dixon RMW & Tully State High School, n.d., *Jirrbal-Girramay Workbook* (unpublished education resource).

related to collecting by Indigenous people is not so addressed. Perhaps the main reason for this is that, in such literature, collecting is frequently concluded to be a repugnant activity, sometimes associated with theft, and usually associated with colonial power and capitalist consumption. For example, Belk (2006) writes that, “Collecting, whether by individuals or museums, is essentially a modernist project of assembling, organizing, and controlling a portion of the world” (pp. 10,11). Given colonisation is essentially about controlling the conquered territory and its population, we might easily assume that “postcolonial collecting” is an oxymoron.

For Ernie “keeping” was associated with having some control. Though it would be better described as wresting back control of the knowledge circulated about his people.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, I would suggest that, in the first instance, this wresting back is what in fact makes his collecting “postcolonial”. As has already been mentioned, Ernie had a consequential role in the 1990s as Cultural Research Officer, for it allowed him to study the historical and anthropological descriptions of Aboriginal people. It was after this period of study that he dedicated serious efforts toward the representation of his people to the public, including via the collection and ownership of rainforest artefacts. This decolonising representation occurred in his cultural workshops as we saw. Another specific example of reclaiming and reinterpreting the archive was when I sat in the corner of the local Tully Library with Ernie and a postdoctoral researcher from Tasmania as they spoke about W.E. Roth’s (1900) unpublished “Scientific Report to the Under Secretary with and Index On the Natives of the (Lower Tully) River”. The researcher read out portions of the manuscript that described Ernie’s old people, to which Ernie would then respond with comments such as “well he’s got that right”, or “why he is so interested in that I don’t know”. In this way, it seemed to me, Ernie expressed indirectly and thus diplomatically his assessment of Roth’s work as generally unhelpful. After discerning the intense scrutiny that his and other Indigenous people had come under for so many years (including Roth’s drawing of sexual positions in the

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<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, Russell Belk, in the article cited above, explains a similar change of personal perspective on collecting. His once negative assessment (collecting as “consumption writ large” in his previous writing) changes to one much less so: “Consuming, in its most literal meaning, is using up, devouring, or burning. Collecting, on the other hand, is about keeping, preserving, and accumulating” (p. 2).

above manuscript), it is little wonder that Ernie now kept files on all the researchers that he worked with over the years. To research the researchers like this<sup>30</sup>, or ‘keep track of the trackers’, so to speak, is perhaps the best example of postcolonial collecting one could observe.

Curating researchers and artefacts, doing culture talks, quietly participating in many new publications about his people – all of these cultural heritage activities informed Ernie’s “postcolonial response”, which I first described in the previous chapter. Moreover, these activities were in keeping with Ernie’s aim to assert more control over the knowledge circulated about rainforest people. In terms of representation in museums, several studies (eg Lonetree, 2012; Simpson, 1996; Smith, 2006) have looked at the idea of the “postcolonial museum”. All share a focus on Indigenous management and consultation in artefact care and exhibits. Yet, by keeping artefacts at his house in Tully and speaking about them to the public over decades at his discretion, Ernie had circumvented the ownership, and thus the power, of State Museums in the first place. Since his collection had never left country, there was no need for artefact repatriation; one could go about the business of curating in one’s own way. Now, for Ernie, curating the collection was not so much a matter of taking back artefacts and their associated knowledge but rather of holding on to this ownership over knowledge as a persisting agent.

Ernie was indeed a powerful agent in his community, even before he began acquiring artefacts. For example, he played some part in encouraging his mother Chloe to allow the English linguist, Bob Dixon, to document their language back in the mid-1960s. As Ernie told it, when Dixon first came to the community Ernie’s mother had asked him why Ernie could not just document their language himself (as we know now, Ernie was uniquely literate at this time being one of the first Indigenous children in the 1940s allowed to attend the Murray Upper school). He had responded to his mother, “I can’t record our language. I don’t know how”<sup>31</sup>. Ernie’s reported role in this event challenges

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<sup>30</sup> I never saw these myself, nor learned if there was a file for me.

<sup>31</sup> Ernie told this story to me at some point, as well as in a speech at the Cairns Institute in May 2017 for the Dyirbal Dictionary Launch.

a “linguist-exploiting-Indigenous-speaker” situation to suggest instead an “Indigenous-speaker-exploiting-linguist”, and their specific skillset, situation. He might thus be viewed as more agentful than even “gatekeeper” – a “gatemaker” or cultural broker is probably a more apt description. Still, though their influence may last many generations, there is an obvious limitation to every individual’s agency. “No object lasts forever” Ingold (2007) has said. No person lasts forever either, and mortality of some sort was surely on his mind when I first asked Ernie to tell me about the artefacts he had collected.

### **5.3 Ernie Introduces His Collection**

To begin written documentation of his collection, I recorded and transcribed Ernie’s personal commentary, encouraging him to proceed in terms of the artefacts that were significant to him. I probably never saw the full extent of his collection at home. For example, he had gathered a good number of stone axe heads during his days working as a farm hand and timber cutter that we did not discuss. But in the end we discussed twenty six artefacts in total.

As we first saw in chapter three of this thesis, when the Giringun group apparently stumbled across part of his collection at the end of their visit into the museum stores, the MTQ in Townsville had lately bought fifteen artefacts from Ernie Grant. This was not too long before we started to document his remaining collection in 2016. In a subsequent 2017 meeting at his home in Tully with two curators from the Queensland Museum Network, the museum’s motivations for this acquisition appeared to be that a unique story about Ernie’s working life on the land in QLD could be told through his artefacts. However, Ernie balked at this sort of emphasis on individuality, for he saw the artefacts as representing a community story. In his first comments introducing the collection, we find out what his reasons were for selling the artefacts:

Now the artefacts I’ve collected – I started way back. Some I’ve had from when I was a young man, some I collected couple of the things in my work in the education field. And the others I’ve been given by various people I’ve worked with and done favours for and that sort of thing. And some I’ve bought. The shield I’ve got that Andy made I paid him for that – to make it for me. I think the sword – I just can’t remember – where the sword came from actually. It’s old, and it might have been given to me by one of the business people. I can’t remember now. But it was acquired through – when I woke up

that – when I wanted to talk about our culture and that I needed the artefacts to – not only that I wanted them in my family as – because being Aboriginal you don't feel Aboriginal without having the artefacts. The stuff I gave to the museum – I didn't give it to them I sold it to them – was a very small part of my collection and – I was very worried there, I was financially strapped there for a while and I thought I might lose the place and somebody would take all the artefacts and that's why I got on to the museum. It was one way of getting myself out of trouble. But also saving the – making sure they were in a safe place. That was my reason for it. But we'll see how we go.

(E Grant interview, 2016)

Of the many interesting points in Ernie's introduction, a first is that he sold "a very small part" of his larger collection due to being "financially strapped". Basically he needed the money to pay debts. He was being threatened with debt collection and he called the MTQ a "safe" place because the museum was perceived to be out of the long reach of the debt collectors (perhaps the idea of safety also alleviated some of his guilt at selling a slight majority of the collection that I saw – fifteen of the twenty-six discussed – though this was never expressed). While it may seem an improbable outcome to casual observers, there was a fear for Ernie that artefacts would be "the first things" that debt collectors would take, as he later told me. Why then did he hold on to other artefacts at his home in Tully, presumably *unsafe* given his concern for debt-collection? In short, the loss of certain other artefacts out of the family, and away from Tully, was simply not acceptable; as he had said of the kept pieces, "I couldn't part with them". We could say, then, that artefacts were sacrificed to the MTQ to save the family from bankruptcy, but also, to protect more cherished artefacts from being seized with other assets (see Figures 5 and 6).



P1  
*bigin* 'shield'



P2:  
*jawun* 'bicornual basket'



P3:  
*bagur* 'sword'



P4:  
*jarrbal* 'baby basket'



P5:  
*juda?* 'wide baby/washing basket'



P6:  
*barri* or *bargu* 'stone axe'

P7:  
*bagur* 'sword'  
(no image taken)



P8:  
*bagu* (w/*bumbil*)  
'firestick (w/string)'



P9:  
*mind* 'grass basket'



P10: *Birraby* 'cross boomerang'



P11:  
*wangal* 'boomerang'

Figure 5: Family Artefacts in Tully



*Figure 6: The Fifteen Artefacts sold to the MTQ*

At first, Ernie did not make an overt distinction between the sold artefacts and the ones he kept: all of the twenty-six artefacts (at the MTQ and in Tully) were envisioned by us both as being part of the same collection – what I called originally the “Ernie Grant Collection”. However, this got confusing after learning that the MTQ named the artefacts there the “Grant Collection”. Moreover, after he and I had spent some time discussing the sold and kept collections separately, we ourselves began to distinguish them as such. For example, Ernie described the pieces he sold to the MTQ as itself “a good little collection” and I began to distinguish the fifteen sold artefacts as the ‘Museum’ artefacts. On the other hand, I began calling the unsold artefacts in Tully ‘Personal’ artefacts, to suggest the Grant family collective who would be the next



caretakers of Ernie's kept artefacts in Tully – in this case, Ernie's children and grandchildren. I considered calling these 'Family' artefacts, but this did not seem right either, since all artefacts were, in some sense, Jirrbal 'Family' artefacts. I do not want to dwell too long on these seemingly trivial matters of semantics, but this whole naming negotiation did eventually generate the unique codes of the artefacts: *M1-M15*<sup>32</sup> for the museum artefacts and *P1-P11* for the family artefacts. Now that this explanation has been given, we can move on to a discussion of just what was at stake in this apparent breaking up of Ernie's collection into the *Personal* and *Museum* and collections.

#### 5.4 Personal and Museum Artefacts

Since we know now that Ernie was compelled to sell because of financial difficulty I only want to briefly discuss 'what makes an artefact valuable enough to keep', and certainly when comparing the list of fifteen Museum (sold) and eleven Personal (kept) objects a few factors appeared to make Ernie's artefacts unsellable. For example, an artefact could not be sold if it was made by a close family member. It could be sold, however, if it was unclear who made it, or if it was deemed to be personal only to Ernie. In the latter sense, one of the items that Ernie reluctantly sold was a painted ceramic shield gifted to him by artist Danie Mellor (M10). The ceramic shield was of certain significance to Ernie as he felt he had a hand in the artist's self-discovery through a period of significant mentorship. However, the ceramic shield was a gift to Ernie alone. Moreover, Mellor the gift-giver was not related to the Grant family. In short, this meant the ceramic shield was Ernie's gift to give.

On the other hand, the small bi-cornual basket (P2) – "in the bookshelf" as first mentioned at the beginning of this thesis – was *not* his to give. It had been made by Chloe Grant, Ernie's mother, who was one of only a handful of Dyirbal-speaking people at the time who could still make a bi-cornual basket from lawyer cane. Chloe had made this basket and two others in the Personal collection – a larger one to carry washing on the Murray Upper farming properties where she worked (P5), and a third small *mind*

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<sup>32</sup> I began this process of elicitation with Ernie some months before registering these artefacts in the MTQ. Our M code numbers therefore pre-date their eventual accession codes at the MTQ.

‘grass basket’ (P8). All three baskets made by Chloe in the Personal collection that I saw conveyed strong memories for Ernie. They also belonged to the Grant family as a whole. This was made clear after the meeting with curators from the QM, when Ernie’s daughter exclaimed, “I hope you didn’t sell that basket!” She was probably referring to a most cherished basket for the Grant family, the small P2 basket first mentioned in chapter two as the “basket in the bookshelf”, which showed another level of skill in precision in makers, as Ernie further described:

this smaller one (P2), how to make that is incredibly complex. How mum made that small one there, that binding for the bigger lawyer cane you dragged it under the fire and pulled it slowly till it got steamy, but you can’t do it cold. I see a lot of them don’t do it now. (E Grant interview, 2016)

Ernie spoke about this particular piece (P2) with a certain reverence, but for all intents and purposes Sonya’s statement could just as easily have referred to any of the baskets that Chloe Grant had made. Other baskets that *were* sold to the museum were not made by Chloe Grant. These were probably made by other extended family members. Indeed, the fact that Ernie could not recall exactly who the makers were probably helped in his feeling that could be let go.



P5 wide baby/washing basket



P2 *jawun*/bi-cornual basket



P8 *mind*i/grass basket

*Figure 7: Baskets made by Chloe Grant*

Well apart from this sense of family caretakership, an artefact was also unsellable if it was deemed essential to the completeness of Ernie’s remaining collection in Tully.

Therefore, Ernie sold several conventionally valuable artefacts made with traditional materials at Murray Upper – such as two *bagu* firestick makers (M5, M6), two cane baskets (M7, M8) and one full-sized undecorated boomerang (M15) – because a traditional artefact type already existed in the family collection. In other words, artefacts sold to the MTQ were redundant in the context of Ernie’s personal family collection. For collectors, the complete collection is usually a strong motivation to keep acquiring. We will see later how this occurred for a shield that Ernie had his cousin make. But these Personal pieces, what we might also call his core collection, were also important for telling a “holistic” picture of culture for future generations of Indigenous North Queensland rainforest people and others. To put it another way, the full story was more important than the full collection per se.



P1 Denham Shield

P11 *Wangaal*/BoomerangP8 *Bagu*/Firestick

P4 Diagonal Design Baby Basket

*Figure 8: Four Personal Artefacts*

Although all of Ernie’s artefacts probably shared time as teaching artefacts, Ernie did distinguish exclusive “teaching/educational” artefacts from “traditional artefacts”. He sold a number these educational pieces to the MTQ, such as the M3 and M4 plywood boomerangs, and the M1 “shadow box” (referring to a themed grouping of objects, in this case boomerangs and spears, usually behind glass, but here only fixed together). Practical advantages of the shadowbox, such as its portability and ‘representativeness’,

made it good for teaching purposes as described in Ernie's following comments about boomerangs and the shadowbox:

I didn't like using our traditional ones because when they threw them they didn't know what they were doing – they were breaking them. I don't know how many I lost like that – letting people throw boomerangs. So these educational boomerangs was used to more or less show people what a boomerang looks like, with some painting on it...It's not a traditional thing the shadow box. It's a – shadow box came along – I suppose in the 60s. Maybe late 50s, 60s. People wanted to try to get all the artefacts in a representation. So it's a mixed cultural thing. It was trying to help provide means of portraying culture without having to cart all this stuff around. Spears and swords and shields and things like that. (E Grant interview, 2016)

Other pieces sold to the MTQ had been useful for Ernie's cultural presentations and educational work due to their transportability too. For example, a sword (M9) was "made to take into classrooms just to show children how Aboriginal people used it"; two miniature shields (M2, M11) were not "original" in terms of adult size, but had been "genuinely made", Ernie said, as young people's practice things (E Grant interview, 2016). When we discussed the provenance of the M2 shield, Ernie said:

I probably went to Jumbun and got someone to make it for me. For the school. Either that or when I was working as a research officer I might have had the...somewhere I had to have this kind of material to present...They're small. It's not made like the original shield. It's about a half size...It was made for young people just for – to practice and learn how to make the proper one later on...if I bought it and paid for it probably would have cost me lot more than that (points to price paid by museum)...either that or I might have done something or exchanged in tribal fashion. (E Grant interview, 2016)



M3 plywood boomerang



M4 plywood boomerang



M1 shadow box



M11 practice shield



M2 practice shield



M9 practice sword

*Figure 9: Teaching Artefacts Sold to the MTQ*

These teaching pieces provide a potentially good curating opportunity to demonstrate how one elder had used portable artefacts for a new purpose. Once made by budding artefact makers and children playing with shields, that is, for “practice”, Ernie had given these smaller versions of artefacts a new but clearly related teaching purpose. Thus, recalling the provenance of the M11 shield (another child-sized shield that the QM paid much more for, the M2 shield), Ernie said:

This small shield has been in my possession for a long time. I can't remember exactly who made it. There's two people most prominently in my mind, and there's also a third one. The one most likely is Davey Lawrence, or Buckaroo as he was known by us. Or Andy Denham. But Buckaroo was most likely the one that made it. If he made it, it would have been in the educational years of 1989,1990, when I was working in the education system. I would have got him to make it for school purposes. Could have be another way that this came into my possession. I might have got someone to make it purposely for the education in schools. What I do know about that shield is that it is our people that made it. Because the paintings on it are of the local area. And it is genuinely made because Bob Murray, Fred Williams and myself when we were young children, between 12 and 16 year old, used to make shields and paint them up identical to that one. It was always those type of shields was made – by boys before they become men and this is how they learnt to do the trade of shield making. (E Grant interview, 2016)

### 5.5 Acquiring Artefacts

We learned in his introductory comment (“now the artefacts I’ve collected...”) that Ernie had been collecting artefacts since he was “a young man”. Moreover, he had an advantageous place in the community in terms of kin and non-kin relationships for acquiring artefacts, and had received them through different ways including purchase, exchange and gifting. To take one interesting example, the very first artefact that we talked about – a large timber shield (P1) – was created when he asked his cousin Andy Denham to make one. Ernie described being close to Andy: as he put it, “No glue on the earth is as strong as the bond that him and I had”. The bond between cousins is demonstrated in the diamond design that Andy Denham painted on the shield, which Ernie spoke about when we first looked at the shield:

This shield that I have on the table here, Tahnee and I are looking at, was made in the 1960s by my cousin Andy Denham. And I said to him, look I haven’t got time to make one, but I said I need one for our family keepsake, so that we don’t lose everything about them. Andy said oh I’ll make one with our mark. As he called it – the design on it – is our family mark. Even though Andy was Girramay and I’m Jirrbal. In our days, that didn’t mean anything. Any more different than the word cousin. We were cousins anyway.  
(E Grant interview, 2016)

We can see how important the physical object is to Ernie here as a communicator of “everything about them” and as an expression of kin connection. As Aaberge, Barnard, Greer, and Henry (2016) describe, while the functionality of shields as defence weapons was of interest to early collectors, from an Indigenous perspective the shield was “a symbol not only of the person in his entirety but also a symbol of his expanded self, that is, his relationships with others” (p. 60). Getting his cousin to make a shield may not be expressing identity within the context of a *buya* ‘corroboree’ as it used to, but in this contemporary context there was still a performative element to its creation: “I’ll make one with our mark”, Andy had reportedly said. In this way, making the shield was providing an opportunity for Ernie and his cousin to strengthen their bond – to not just express identity to others, but also to reaffirm connection to each other. Perhaps this is the closest I would come to attributing to the object a sense of “agency” given it was so effective for this purpose.

In terms of ownership of knowledge, an “expanded self” extended beyond the individual to family and “tribe” (a term elders still used). As Ernie explained, the shield could never really be owned by an individual: “I don’t own this shield design... my tribe does”, he had said. Andy Denham’s clan affiliation was not explicitly clear to me. Ernie identified Andy as Girramay, but he was Jirrbal according to Dixon (pers comm, 2016). In any case, Andy Denham was able to paint the “family mark” of diamonds, which seemed to gently reiterate something that Grant consistently argued: Jirrbal, Girramay and Gulngay people shared the same language and culture and were thus, “one people”.

Given their relationship, it is interesting that Ernie in fact commissioned the shield from Andy. Such a transaction – of money for a shield – might be interpreted as impersonal, indicative even of a distant, non-kin relationship between Denham and Grant. Yet we have heard from Ernie that this was not the case. A specific reason Ernie gave for his payment to Andy can be understood in terms of the historical context of Indigenous exploitation in the region. As he described it, the payment to his cousin was about a respectful acknowledgement of his people’s uniquely honed skills. Ernie often lamented, for example, that from the 1960s onwards tourists who came to visit Murray Falls in Murray Upper would buy boomerangs for a few dollars when they should have paid much more. He described what he saw happening after he returned from extended work overseas:

When I came here from New Guinea people were paying the Aboriginal people 2 and 5 dollars for boomerangs out at Jumbun and I really went to town on that – I said what the heck. This is fundamental robbery in its rawest sense. (E Grant interview, 2016)

In addition to being a form of exploitation that Ernie did not want to participate in, low cash payments to skilled makers was also a disregard for the fact that a boomerang took a lot of time, effort and “cultural knowledge”, as people would put it to me, to make. Andy Denham was a valued craftsperson and payment for this shield by his cousin, as well as extending the appropriate respect for his status as a “tribal person”, critiqued the status quo of underpayment through direct action.

Amongst non-kin, Ernie Grant's relationships were nurtured via a long working career as a farmhand and timber cutter, and later, as an educator in local schools. Just like the senior elders of the women's camp on Murray River, Ernie had grown up with European farming families, sometimes very closely being in their employ and living on their farms. Thus, he still maintained amicable relationships with some of their descendants and I observed numerous polite and warm interactions with European Australian locals in the street and in the Tully RSL. I also came to expect interruptions to our sessions with numerous phone calls and visiting friends to his home.

Moreover, as we saw in the introduction to this thesis, it was a white middle-aged farmer's daughter who had returned Ernie's mother's small bi-cornual basket (P2) to him after the death of her parents. The return of an artefact like this was highly contrary to an expectation in the Aboriginal community that repatriation from such European Australians in possession of rainforest artefacts was generally hopeless. For example, Uncle Claude Beeron told me that his people knew of white families in possession of valuable artefacts who would "never give them back". Artefacts were probably left behind during *buliman* 'police' raids of camps, as he imagined it: "run from the camp, kid on the shoulder, leave the artefacts behind" (C Beeron pers comm, 2016). Even the Director of Girringun, who was trying to get back Nywaigi<sup>33</sup> artefacts for the Girringun keeping place, could not get past the immovable "private collection" response to his enquiries<sup>34</sup>. Although elders were sometimes successful at negotiating land access rights with the white farming families they had grown up with, the return of Chloe's basket to Ernie can be seen as highly anomalous and indicative of the exceptional relationships that Ernie was able to maintain with these families in Tully and Murray Upper.

It should be said that Ernie was very open about how he acquired artefacts in his collection through work, social and family connections, though as can be expected

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<sup>33</sup> Nywaigi is one of the 9 traditional owner groups represented by the Girringun Aboriginal Corporation. Their tribal area is located near Ingham, to the south of Girramay and Warrgamay territories.

<sup>34</sup> The term 'private' in 'private collection' suggests something one cannot easily view or partake in. 'Personal', as we called Ernie's kept artefacts at home, could easily convey the same kind of inaccessibility that 'private' does. However, it surely does not express the same level of exclusivity for a space – like a 'private' room closed to all but a few.



when tracing provenance, questions such as “date and place acquired” could not always be answered. Sometimes he could not remember when, how, or from whom, he acquired artefacts, such as in the case of the broad sword (P3) mentioned in his introductory comment: “I can’t remember now” he had said about it. Ernie believed these provenance type of queries to be oversimplistic in the first place. For example, he spoke of George Henry at Bellenden who “had a bung leg” and could not do some of the physical work on his farm. Ernie helped him out and so George gave him something in return. Ernie had reflected: “How do we talk about that on this form when it asks about ‘date and place’ acquired? ‘My farmer friend gave it to me because I helped him out’?” (E Grant pers comm, 2016).

There was only one occasion in which Ernie was reluctant to tell too much about acquisition of an artefact. Sitting at his dining table, he told me he was given another timber sword (P7), somewhat subversively, by another Indigenous employee during his time working for the State Education Department. The employee was distressed that the school she worked at was, according to Ernie, “throwing a whole shed full of resources away” in the 1990s. Ernie and I had conjectured briefly about why the school would do such a thing, including that, just around the time that the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth) was highlighting Indigenous rights and interests, some of the “resources” might count as evidence of the school’s problematic acquisition. However, I knew he was worried that our continued discussion would implicate this other person. Moreover, though it was from the broader rainforest region the sword was almost certainly not from the Dyirbal language speaking area, for it was much narrower than the broad swords of his people. It was in this way a sort of outlier in the Personal collection. It was not part of the “Jirrbal story”, though I would not that it may have been used (as it was with me) to show what-broad-shields-are-not. At the time he received the sword, he had not thought much of it. Now however, he feared the other rainforest group might “get cranky” that he had held on to it for so long. I did not ask further about it, and of course I wondered whether to include the story here.

As the school employee remains unnamed, I thought in the end that the example should be included, for two reasons. Firstly, it showed how Indigenous people might cooperate to subvert state power over artefacts. The apparently stolen sword might be compared to Vaneigem’s (2001) “pure gift” – where theft is for “the pleasure of giving away” (p.

81). Yet the circumstances of the school throwing stuff out was clearly different because, for one, the sword was more a rescued gift than a stolen one. Indigenous-to-Colonial encounter type relationships have been described in discussion of Indigenous artefacts (eg Jones, 2007; Thomas, Adams, Nuku, Lythberg, & Salmond, 2016), but more rarely addressed are these kinds of Indigenous-to-Indigenous relationships around artefacts, which make possible such subversive, even heroic, acts against the state.

During this research, I heard of another example of Indigenous co-operation, this time from the curator whom Ernie was going to employ to install artefacts into the display space at the railway station in Tully. Museum-trained, the Indigenous curator was now working as a successful independent, freelance curator. The curator told me how, employed by a state museum, they had bypassed the necessary paperwork and taken out artefacts for a regional cultural festival in Mamu country in Innisfail. The curator had set up the artefacts on a table and local Mamu people had wandered over, curious to see artefacts made by their people. After some time talking to these descendant community members, the curator felt great satisfaction when eventually the community took over the role of “expert” and began communicating to other visitors to the table about their artefacts. The curator’s evasion of the museum protocols for moving artefacts was worth it, they said, for this extraordinary outcome<sup>35</sup>. Given that the curator returned the artefacts to the museum without incident, their subversion might not seem quite as dramatic as the school employee’s. However, the fact that the individual put their own high-status job in jeopardy means that we should see the stakes as being just as high.

A second reason to include the dangerous story of the rescued sword is that our discussion proved how Ernie was generally upfront for the greater goal of documentation. To be clear, even when it came to this artefact, he still wanted to include it in the list and create the correct documentation for it. He wanted, in other words, to get the story right by including the sword and the personal relationship behind

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<sup>35</sup> I consulted this individual about including their story here, given they might be identifiable. The individual encouraged me to include the story. I am grateful for this since it is highly demonstrative of those small, but consequential, resistances made every day by Indigenous people.

its acquisition. As we will see, to get the story right would also require further acts of subversion.

### 5.6 Deviating from the Form and Jilbay Knowledge

To begin documenting Ernie's collection, I created a structured questionnaire to be communicated verbally to Ernie at his home in Tully. Provenance questions were included. I also asked about constituent materials and the use of each artefact. As expected, questions on the form quickly proved problematic. We have already seen that Ernie found standard provenance enquiries like "date and place acquired" inadequate since they did not allow for detail about the relationships that might be behind such trades as the 'favour for a bung leg' transaction described above. A story of provenance should include such detail, and a date alone would merely be an example of the "compartmentalisation" thinking that Ernie eschewed (indeed he further described provenance as a "paint-by-numbers" type of approach). Another perceived inadequacy of the form I produced was found in the question "how item is used?" To this Ernie replied, "well it's not a good question. I could tell you that this boomerang was kept in the cupboard! Or I threw it in the air and it landed on my head because I didn't know how to use it" (E Grant pers comm, 2016)<sup>36</sup>.

We might link Ernie's comments to a more broad critique of qualitative methods where "single questions are simply not sufficient" (Schutt, 2012, p. 61); alternatively, we could link his dissatisfaction to the Ingoldian idea that, since movement is "truly generative of the object" (Ingold 2000, p. 346), stored artefacts perish and die through preservation. On the other hand, invoking Kopytoff (1986), we might see in Ernie's observations the unique biographical trajectory of artefacts: one might fly through the air, while another might fall on someone's head. I came to view Ernie's comments as typical, rather, of his long critique of the "western academic" system of inquiry. My

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<sup>36</sup> Admittedly, this "use" question could have easily been clarified by asking instead "how was this artefact traditionally used". However, I was very much trying to avoid any idealisation of "traditional" or "pre-contact" use. If this avoidance tactic is seen among other researchers for the same reason, a question to ask is how much influence a researcher's 'positioning from paranoia', let us call it, has had on the subsequent conceptualisation of things: as having "lives" rather than "function".

form had been adapted from a provenance and description catalogue that Ernie's own niece had once completed for some other rainforest objects held at the Queensland Museum in South Bank, Brisbane.<sup>37</sup> So, as an Indigenous collector of his own people's artefacts, questions on it seem to reflect, for Ernie, the knowledge system by which Aboriginal people had condemned artefact collection in the first place – the Dodson “wedge” we were trying to avoid.

Ernie described having too much knowledge for no reason, or knowledge for nothing, as being *jilbay*, too clever. To highlight how decontextualised, *jilbay* knowledge was unhelpful for teaching, he told me a funny story about a teaching academic he once watched giving a class. The academic had pointed at an example on a white board more and more animatedly to try and get a point across to an uncomprehending audience, and in frustration ended up with his nose right up close to the board. Ernie's simple point, made humorously, was that expert knowledge was for nothing if one could not pass it on with competence. Moreover, knowledge that was worth knowing extended beyond an indoor classroom. It was ‘emplaced’ within a local, natural environment. I agreed with this and hazarded to respond that, for all its flaws, contemporary anthropology aimed to experience and describe emplaced local knowledge too (though I had to concede it had far to go in terms of intelligible widespread dissemination).

As a sort of afterthought, but also probably anticipating Ernie's *jilbay* critique, I made one amendment to my form adapted from a standard museum document: I added an extra field called “Other Comments” (see Figure 10). This might circumvent the trap of perpetuating *jilbay* knowledge by allowing for Ernie's personal and cultural links to the artefacts, whilst also ensuring certain universal categories to be addressed. Indeed, another potential critique, this time coming from institutions like the museum and university, had to be kept in mind. Perez (1996) for example describes the unchanging “categorization schemes” of state museums as beneficial because they “resist reconceptualization based on evolving disciplinary research needs, which eliminates

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<sup>37</sup> The MTQ (Townsville) and the QM (Brisbane) are both part of the QLD Museum Network. Ernie's archive held a copy of the Museum catalogue that his niece worked on, which I viewed.

alterations in response to fads” (p. 160). Here, a commonly perceived downfall of the museum – its stubborn resistance to change – is argued to be its strength. While I would not go so far as to call Ernie’s Indigenous-led curating style “a fad”, I was cognizant that, as an enthusiastic early-career researcher especially, I had to adhere to some benchmarks for recording provenance and cultural information lest the whole effort potentially go to waste. The inclusion of an “Other” field, alongside the more traditional identification questions, was my attempt at compromise. I would try to be aware of the resistant schemes of categorisation (imposed by traditional questions such as “when and where was this acquired, how was it used?”) *as well as* the new research agenda (the social, cultural and place-based categorisations of information for the artefacts).

| Artefact Description Questionnaire_EG Collections                        |          |
|--|----------|
| Name of Object (Jirrbal and English)                                     | Photo ID |
| Who made   |          |
| When<br>Date acquired  |          |
| Locality/Group<br>How item is used                                       |          |
| Comments on circulation/storage history                                  |          |
| Personal significance to EG  |          |
| Other comments (eg: How does particular artefact sit within collection?) |          |
| PhD Project<br>Investigator: Tahnee Innes                                |          |

Figure 10: Original Form for Recording Information about Artefacts

Immediately Ernie gravitated toward this “Other” field. As mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, when he first looked through the form he commented, “it is THIS part that

is important – all the OTHER things I can tell you about this artefact” (E Grant pers comm 2016). So, for example, about the Jirrbal shield (F1) he began with, “red ochre for this shield was hard to find”. He went on to discuss the stages of the shield’s production, from “thing” to artefact, beginning with its transportation from a tree:

the thing must be dragged through the bush, maybe for a kilometre from a tree, where this thing can be found, a heavy huge thing. In its raw state – its green, its still got the heavy sap within it, it hasn’t been dried out, and it’s a huge cumbersome thing. It needs to be dragged through the scrub before its even worked upon to make into a shield. (E Grant interview, 2016)

And further:

This shield’s diamond design is associated with the storm story of Jirrbal people from the Dyirbal language group. When you went to a buya, different shield designs communicated to others who you were and where you were from. A *bigin* was quite light and shock-absorbent, and used to shield men from the blows of a *bagur* at the buya. There are known places in our country where fig trees were used and re-used to make shields. You could see the cut-outs from the buttress roots, where Aboriginal people had taken wood for shields but kept the tree alive. There is a hand-hold on the inside of the shield, and a bump called *dumbul* at the front. (E Grant interview, 2016)

Such narrative from the living collector who is also an Indigenous elder is uniquely authoritative as cultural information for the artefact. In an essay subtitled “Curating from an insider’s perspective” a Yukama beadwork artist and curator from Washington in the U.S. writes precisely of this kind of curator-like cultural insight:

Traditional culture thrives today due to the nurturance of stories that are carried by individuals responsible for their continuance. These community experts serve as curators not only in an object-centered sense, but also in a broader philosophical sense within their tribal contexts. They thus curate not only objects, but also deep spiritual knowledge. (Miller, 2012, p. 25)

Ernie’s narrative provides numerous examples of “deep” knowledge. For example, we see detail about the diamond design being associated with a dreaming story, and we are told that the *bigin*/shield’s function is to indicate clan identity (in this account, of *Jirrbal* people). The shield was also highly associated with its historical function, for Ernie tells of how it was used to block *bagur*/sword’s blows at a buya or corroboree. Moreover, far from offering a parade of everything he knew to impress the listener and recorder (the

verbal equivalent of a hoarder perhaps), there was, on Ernie's part, a deliberate aim to *select* the stories he told, and thus, to *curate* knowledge as the artist Miller says. Stories, knowledge or "cultural information" as Ernie also termed it, which emplaced objects in a culturally understood environment, gave the listener a feeling they were in the Jirrbal scrub instead of a Tully classroom. Ernie did this by telling about pre-shield "things" being dragged through the scrub, "known places" where timber was taken in such a way that important trees could be re-used, and "hard-to-find" red ochre for painting the shield being. Furthermore, to show that Dyrirbal language was integral to a discussion of artefacts, Ernie provided a Jirrbal term – the name of an important part of the shield, *dumbul* – so that, even though his language was no longer spoken on a day-to-day basis, Jirrbal artefacts could retain and express Jirrbal signs. In this way I was struck by the "broader philosophical sense", as Miller puts it above, that was apparent in Ernie's effort to express the cultural and physical environment of the shield. In other words, equally important to "cultural information" was a "cultural framework" for that information – a framework that was arguably a method for curation.

Before elaborating on Ernie's Holistic Framework below, it is first worth noting how frustrating it was for Ernie that we could not go out into the scrub of his country more often. In addition to locked up land discussed in the previous chapter, specifically the sale of 50,000 acres of mostly Jirrbal land in 1963, land inaccessibility was even more of an issue now due to Ernie's advanced age. Furthermore, that land was sometimes unrecognisable for him now after so many years of clearing and development. Indeed, I would argue that, like a curator in a museum rather than in country, Ernie's Holistic Framework was as much a strategy to deal with this existentially difficult "absence" of a natural environment as it was a strategy for avoiding *jilbay* knowledge.

### **5.7 Grant's Holistic Framework**

Ernie Grant's Holistic Framework consisted of six key factors, which he presented in his education workshops like puzzle pieces (see Figure 1). These included *Land*, *Language*, *Culture* in the context of *Time*, *Place* and *Relationships*.

## THE HOLISTIC APPROACH

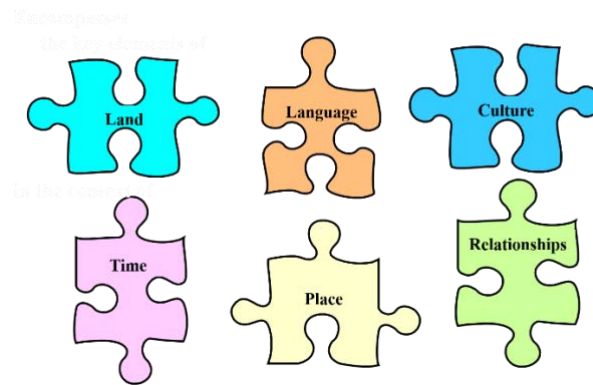


Figure 11: Ernie Grant's Holistic Framework

*Land* was the greater physical geography such as mountains, rivers and sky. It also took account of locally specific flora and fauna on the land (the Jirrbal *Jabunbarra* lowlands, for example, was synonymous with “rainforest country” in North Queensland). *Place* was more social, to include the politically defined local area, significant sites and specific natural phenomena (like a waterfall where the Ernie family’s cyclone story place was). Ernie described *Culture* as “what people do” (Jirrbal and Girramay culture), while *Language* was “what people say” (the Dyirbal language, in the Jirrbal dialect). *Relationships* were all those consequential interactions between everything in the natural, cultural, and social world – people, plants and animals, but also, cyclical weather and spiritual entities. As Ernie would constantly reiterate, none of the six factors could be understood without the other (hence the term, “holistic”). After a few years of working with Ernie, I began to understand why a question like “tell me about this artefact” would prompt Ernie to answer at some length: his goal was always to address the six factors through the culturally salient approach of narrative, and thus emplace the artefact within its spatial, temporal, social and cultural context.

I can demonstrate by paraphrasing what Ernie had to tell me on the topic of turkey traps and linking this information to elements of the Holistic Framework (which I put in brackets). A turkey trap was one of those artefacts that Ernie only had on loan from Giringun at Ingan in the railway station. There was not one physically in his family collection. However, much like a long lost “blue fur” possum blanket his parents once had that he also spoke about, an ideal turkey trap, as an imagined object, existed just as vividly real in his memory as the contemporary Giringun trap at Ingan – in his ‘repertoire’ of cultural objects we might call it. To describe the turkey trap, he began



with a *sound* first, making a turkey call that young people were taught to make to draw in turkeys close (*Culture* – what people do). He told me the call was known by an onomatopoeic term – *wugandanyu* – and that the scrub turkey was called *guyjarri* in Jirrbal and Girramay (*Language*). These birds moved annually from the high tablelands area, called *Gambilbarra*, in Jirrbal territory, down the mountains to lower country called *Jabunbarra*, and eventually to the seaside “for shell” (*Land, Relationships*). *Guyjarri* were only trapped on their way down the hill while they were fat and good to eat, or *jami*. Unlike *jarrugan*/scrub hen, which had a “wormy” taste, scrub turkey was very good to eat (*Culture*). Ernie remembered how there were so many turkeys on this seaward journey that when they roosted in trees en masse the branches would fill with a deafening, cacophonous squawking (*Place*). This local phenomenon does not happen anymore, and traps for turkey are no longer used because of meat options available at the shops (*Time*). Turkey eggs, called *bambu*, remained a favoured delicacy however, and families today still had fun searching the large nests during the warmer months around the Christmas holidays (*Relationships, Time, Culture*).

On various artefacts within his collection, Ernie’s stories were similarly full so as to address Land, Language, Culture, Time, Place and Relationships. I can dispense with writing these labels now, but one should be able to discern the framework in more examples. For instance, Ernie spoke of a stone axe in his collection (P6), and how the head was “probably old” having been more recently reattached to a new handle. More general information about axes was then offered, such as the “important places” to sharpen axes (“blunt axes are useless”), and the fact that an axe was used for many purposes including chopping out dead timber to find *jambun* ‘grubs’ and cutting steps in tall trees to reach honey hives. There were still old trees in and around Jirrbal and Girramay country, Ernie said, which had these step cuts in them. For the great swords or *bagur*, he described how heavy they were and how a man would need agility more than strength to flick it over his shoulder. He stood up to show me this movement, and also recalled that a cache of swords had been hidden somewhere underneath a bridge for the next corroboree. They were probably “long gone now”, and Ernie wondered what might have happened to them. Thinking and speaking through the framework frequently resulted in these kinds of ostensibly meandering narratives. A sufficient “putting down” of information for the collection seemed to be an impossible task since there was always to be more to add to the story.

For this reason, the factor *Time* in Ernie's framework was essential for creating scope and limiting a potentially exponential mapping of information. Ernie would differentiate four eras specifically in his power point presentations: pre-contact, contact, post-contact, and contemporary. Such categorisations of Time were clearly necessary for providing a historical context. More specifically, it seemed to me, they reflected Ernie's own organisation of history. At first it was difficult not to object to the Holistic Framework's seemingly attendant suggestion that "pre-contact" was the benchmark from which Jirrbal culture had eroded toward post-contact, and moreover, that the environment was somehow richer with less European influence. For example, I once asked Ernie, "Isn't the city an 'environment' too?" Ernie replied, "no, there is nothing natural left there". I thought then that perhaps I was being *jilbay* – too clever, applying my own biases or theoretical paradigms to something where it did not apply. When Ernie told me that there was "nothing natural left there" in the city, maybe he only meant to point out that there was "nothing of his remembered culture left there". In other words, there was no recognisable environment for him in terms of the Time *he* specifically had grown up with, when artefacts that he owned were still being used. His childhood was a "post-contact" Time, but since people had more access to traditional lands, they were still engaged in more pre-contact Culture.

Having described theoretical social science approaches to persons and non-persons or things at the beginning of this thesis, one can see how the Holistic Framework is also Ernie's approach to describing a social environment and its context, including non-human elements. Unlike ANT's claim for the potential agency of everything however (even scallops have agency in Callon's 1984 paper), the Holistic Framework did not purport to distribute agency equally to human and non-human subjects. Instead, humans, and human-like spirit ancestors, are central as the "storytellers" that united all these things. As a storyteller, Ernie aimed to have an audience understand an artefact by emplacing it within its "provenance environment", something which all story-telling curators aim to do.

One regularly told story of his, which the community also knew, featured a remarkable interaction of Time, Place and Relationships. This came up when Ernie discussed the boomerangs that he sold to the MTQ (items M12-15). Firstly, he referred to Mrs

Henry's "little set up" in Murray Upper and the "boomerang makers" of that time. Then he referred to the important "respectful" relationship that led to his acquisition of some boomerangs from the local art shop:

Number 12, 13 and 14 (M12, M13, M14) most likely came from Mrs Henry's collection that was out at Bellenden in the 70s and 80s. She had a little set up there where she bought artefacts from Aboriginal people and sold them. And it became quite famous in the end with her stock – pit for a lot of people. Schools use to go there and so on. The people that made those boomerangs there at the time was – could've been a group of people. Uncle Spider would've been prominent among those. Andy Denham was another one. Davy Lawrence or Buckaroo was another one... Tommy Springcart was there. Uncle Jack Muriata possibly could've been one. They were still making – all the boomerang makers there at the time. I didn't make boomerangs from when I was young. Primarily because I – working in the timber and that you never had the strength left to do things like that after a day's work. With chainsaws and so on. The decoration on those boomerangs show that they were made for the tourist trade. Because normally we don't paint them up like that in that fashion. Mrs Henry did give me half a dozen or so boomerangs at one stage. Primarily in recognition for the time I've spent with them over the years as an employee of her husband. And her great respect for Aboriginal people. She sort of gave them back to me to – as a sign of respect more than anything else. She couldn't just give them to anybody. She gave them to someone who would use them in a – in the right fashion. (E Grant interview, 2016)

The story of this shop came up a few times with people in the community. Much of the rainforest Indigenous collection at the MTQ comes from the "Henry Collection" of 588 artefacts – sold first to the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council in 1979, then gifted to the James Cook University Material Culture Unit, then (most of the collection) placed in the MTQ stores (Barnard, [http://www.jcucollections.org/?page\\_id=797](http://www.jcucollections.org/?page_id=797)).

Another exhibition opportunity for the MTQ lies in the telling of this story about Mrs Henry's shop through these artefacts – to form a picture of this place and the Murray Upper people making artefacts for tourists through the Holistic Framework – the story as Ernie relays it above. A further addition to the story is that Mrs Henry's daughter would become the Arts Manager of the Giringun Aboriginal Art Centre in Cardwell – to essentially continue the work of her mother assisting Aboriginal people to make money through art. It is to this new art place, and the making of new artefacts and relationships, that we turn in the next chapter.

### 5.8 Worth preserving: “You don’t feel Aboriginal without the artefacts”

There is a final point in Ernie’s introductory quote to consider that further explains his collecting and why he felt so compelled to curate artefacts on his own terms. As well as wanting artefacts in the family and using them to speak about culture, he states, “being Aboriginal you don’t feel Aboriginal without having the artefacts”. One could interpret this to say that collected artefacts served as personal authenticators of his Aboriginal identity, particularly for interactions with non-local audiences at his cultural workshops who might ignorantly believe that Indigenous Australians looked a certain way (ie black, not fair or brown skinned as Ernie was). Indigenous Australians must often declare themselves, not just to other Indigenous people, but to organisations and the wider public. Even for one’s own Indigenous organisations, a question sometimes raised on Indigenous identification forms goes something like, “Who raised and taught you the ways of your country and law?” Repeated declaratory reiterations in this way, to whomever requires it, might begin to give someone an identity crisis of sorts. In this way artefacts made by Ernie’s mother were useful as particularly close symbols of Indigenous connection because, wordlessly, they could address this unspoken identification question.

Still, from the discussions I had with Ernie, it is likely that the sentiment surrounding having the artefacts was actually more complex than even an identity issue. What I believe Ernie “woke up to” was that, without a treaty or constitutional recognition, the fiction of *terra nullius* in Australia (a legal assertion made by the colonising English that the continent was an unworked, unclaimed “no-man’s” land) would continue to undermine contemporary Aboriginal people’s legitimacy as Traditional Owners as *myth*. Native Title, which supposedly puts the myth to rest, still relies heavily on ethno-historical research, and this shows how written history is still highly valued by European Australia law even during its supposed recognition of Indigenous people’s oral histories. In this context, an artefact as “material culture” can provide symbolic strength as ‘evidence’ by demonstrating the industrious and productive presence of Indigenous people in Australia. In artefacts we have, in short, a symbol for a myth.

If symbolic artefacts serve as the cultural evidence that the West can understand, it is fair to say that Indigenous people should feel strengthened by artefacts in their

postcolonial responses. To have artefacts on display, even passively on the walls of Ernie Grant's workshops, is a political assertion speaking the language of the coloniser: 'We were here', these artefacts seem to say. To bring them down off the walls, to handle them in one's own home and tell their stories allows Indigenous people to speak too, and say further, "We *are* here". Artefacts, therefore, are well worth preserving. I have shown now that the burden of keeping is an ongoing negotiation between Clifford's (2004) 'deep roots' and Shaw's (2012) 'exoticism'. Moreover, at this point I see a clear choice being made by Ernie and his family to assert Clifford's deep roots.

### 5.9 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the artefacts that Ernie Grant called on for his Indigenous education work including artefacts kept at his home in Tully and artefacts sold to the Museum of Tropical Queensland. Artefact acquisition stories gave important insight into the social relationships between Ernie and others in the community, for example, with Indigenous kin, European farmers, and other Indigenous colleagues. We saw that artefacts sold to the MTQ such as the contemporary Mellor shield, traditional bi-cornual baskets, boomerangs and other "teaching artefacts" were all significant to him as an individual, but these were not the same as the artefacts that he "could not part with", and which I began to name "personal". As a core collection, these kept artefacts told the story of Jirrbal culture in the holistic way that Ernie aimed for.

We saw that Ernie was interested in all the "other" information one could tell about rainforest artefacts. His Holistic Framework, including Land, Language, Culture, Time, Place and Relationships, was Ernie's method of systematically telling about all this other information to enplace the artefact holistically within an "origin" context. Although we set out to curate his collection, it was seen that Ernie, throughout a long career in teaching and heritage, was himself already curating. It was argued, moreover, that Ernie's artefact collection exemplifies a little discussed form of postcolonial collecting where Indigenous-led selection and control of heritage communicated to the public, without the involvement of an exhibition space, helps to make one "feel Aboriginal". The next chapter turns to a community of artists and elders who also asserted their identity as Indigenous rainforest people through the symbolic power of artefacts.

## SYMBOL

**6. “I am Girringun”: Shaping Symbols at an Art Centre on Country****6.1 Introduction**

*Preservation*, and the individual curator quietly championing heritage and shouldering the burden of collection management, has so far been the subject of discussion. In these next three chapters we move south to Murray Upper and Cardwell, in the region of Jirrbal and Girramay people where Ernie Grant grew up, to speak about ‘new artefacts’ at the Girringun Aboriginal Art Centre. The Girramay, Jirrbal and Gulngay artists and elders there would likely be described as an origin or descendant community since artefacts made by their ancestors can be found in museum collections across the world. This is why a senior representative of the Girramay descendant community and the Girringun Aboriginal Corporation, Claude Beeron, opened “*Manggan: gather, gathers, gathering*” in Townsville, in September 2017. Given it featured old artefacts borrowed from the South Australia Museum, contemporary pieces from Girringun artists, photographs, and two documentaries made by a young Girringun film make, the Girringun Arts Manager had described the exhibition as “a gathering of mediums, ideas and forms”<sup>38</sup>.

The Arts Manager’s summary aligns well with recent arguments for a “curatorial space” where “assemblages” are made (for example, Sansi, 2020), so it is further interesting to note that *manggan* is a Dyirbal Guwal word, translated to English in the exhibition name as “gather, gathers, gathering”. In September 2017, in his opening speech at the MTQ first spoken in Guwal then in English, Claude Beeron said that he hoped young Aboriginal people would “follow their culture” (pers comm, 2017). This research is focused on community spaces more than exhibition spaces per se. Yet, as I aimed to understand what constitutes a “curatorial space”, and further, what “keeping culture” meant for Claude and his community, his choice of English words in this context was of interest: one did not ‘keep’ culture, one ‘followed’ it. The declaration suggested that there was something to preserve *in the doing* –

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<sup>38</sup> <http://art.girringun.com.au/girringun-at-sa-museum/>

an authoritative code or path to follow for the future that would not be “silly” (and indeed, not European; “don’t go silly like waybala”, Claude had added with a laugh in the same speech).

When I asked another Jirrbal elder and artist what she thought *manggan* meant, she replied after some thoughtful consideration, “it means ‘to pick it up’” (her sister concurred). The sisters’ translation differed only slightly from the one in the MTQ’s exhibition name, yet it seemed to highlight an important distinction that showed symmetry with Claude’s words. Unlike “to gather” where the gatherable objects take precedence as a pre-existing group of like things, “to pick it up” suggests that the objects are now secondary to the person who is doing the picking. As one who selects with intent, the picker, in other words, takes on a role of higher agency. The aim of this chapter is to highlight what the elder’s translation above of *manggan* suggests: that it is *people* doing the ‘picking up’ of things along a path. The attribution of agency to “things”, as outlined in chapter two of this thesis, can perpetuate the problematic overshadowing of people for their artefacts so that the community becomes merely the “source” of collected things. As Claude declared in his speech, there is in fact a choice – to either follow or not follow a certain path deemed to be cultural.

As we will see in this chapter, the art workshops every Tuesday provided an opportunity to “follow culture” by re-creating symbols. Moreover, as a recurring event, they offered a kind of arena for symbols to be interpreted Geertzian-style by a researcher. It was a difficult exercise to grasp the cultural reality from which people at the art centre drew their symbols, but in art practice one could begin to see these forms at least take shape. So, after first relaying a consequential encounter with a senior Jirrbal woman and her ‘new artefacts’, I go on to describe a typical art day at Girringun. In so doing, I aim to describe the “source community”, not as a finite source of artefacts, but rather as a source of symbols that are consistently created. I thus argue that people at the art centre followed culture by ‘picking up’ symbols. This supports the overall argument of this thesis, that preservation is a cultural activity and reality.

## **6.2. Aunt Emily’s Gift**

One of the first elders I met in Murray Upper after Ernie Grant was Emily Murray, a Jirrbal/Girramay woman and a highly active artist at the Girringun Aboriginal Art Centre. Quick to laugh, but also a no-nonsense kind of woman in the community, we will remember

that it was Emily who wanted to see Ernie Grant’s collection under the MTQ in Townsville. Much like Ernie, Emily was well versed in dealing with researchers and their inquiry. I had recorded her life history for a previous research project and gained some insight into her life as a grandmother and artist, asking her lots of questions (“tell me your earliest memory”) which she would generously answer (“falling of a horse”). I observed that she was well-respected in the community given her cultural knowledge, work ethic, and strong family connections. Moreover, although aged in her 70s she easily kept up with people much younger than her on our various trips out to the creeks or seaside.

Aunty Emily (as I came to call her) was known at Giringun as a senior elder because of her age, and also, because she was one of the small number of people who could still speak the Dyirbal language. In the 1980s her two sisters and herself were all key participants in Schmidt’s (1985) description of *Young People’s Dyirbal: An Example of Language Death*. Despite this account of Dyirbal’s demise, the language was still being spoken to some degree amongst Emily’s generation, and indeed I first met her in 2013 via a Dyirbal heritage and language project. The art workshops and trips to country were a good time for elders to speak their language to each other, though the main language in the Murray Upper community continued to be Aboriginal English. As one younger Jirrbal woman told me about Dyirbal, “We know the words, but we can’t talk back’.

Just as Claude and Theresa Beeron’s home was located outside of Jumbun, Emily’s home was also outside the Aboriginal community, in the Murray Upper locality between Tully and Cardwell. She expressed a similar wish to remain “away from trouble” in Jumbun as Claude and Theresa did, though she happily reported that, “the kids still come find me and make humbug”. A high old Queenslander on stilts, Emily’s house stood quite on its own on the main road going in to Jumbun and Murray Falls. Sitting either upstairs on her small veranda or in the garden outside under some shade, we could observe the occasional tourist with a caravan making their way to the Murray Falls camping ground, or wave to her family and friends as they drove past, at breakneck speed it seemed, on the road in and out of the Jumbun community.

On one of my visits to Emily’s home to finalise the language project, I was walking down the steep stairs and saw some large woven baskets lying on the ground, underneath the house. This shaded space was a classic North Queensland feature. Since it provided a large



undercover area outdoors, one could use it for any number of unique purposes. Here it seemed to be predominantly an art and craft space. Various supplies lay about and at the time I was leaving Emily’s mature-aged daughter was painting there. I greeted her and remarked upon the baskets. She responded, “Mum made those. Those too”, pointing to a collection of smaller, colourful *mind*i-style baskets hanging high on a hook. “Oh,” I looked at the hanging *mind*i and turned to Emily saying, “I remember when you first started making those, from that coloured wire?” She responded, “yes, telephone wire”. I asked her if I could take a picture of the baskets and Emily agreed, helpfully taking them down from the hooks and placing them together on a table. She told me that a man, a Jehovah’s Witness, was supposed to come and pick them up to sell: “But he hasn’t come yet. I’m still waiting”. Emily handed me two of the coloured *mind*i and said, “you can have these”. I thanked her and awkwardly offered to pay something, since they were to be sold. But she admonished me mildly and said, “No. You take it. You been here since the start”. She then said that I should see “the new place” where Girringun artists were going to do their art on Tuesdays. “That would be great,” I replied. “I’ll ask Valerie if I can come”, referring to the Girringun arts manager. At this Emily rolled her eyes in her unnervingly youthful way and declared, “Just come!”

Of course Auntie Emily was of only inviting me to come and see the art workshop place, as others had. To come as a university researcher doing a project had to be formalised with introductions at the Girringun Board meeting, and then later, when the Arts Manager allowed me to become a volunteer and researcher at the Girringun Aboriginal Art Centre.

Interestingly, one of my very first tasks at the art workshop was to strip telephone wire from its blue casing and unravel its inner cords – so that the artists could use the individual or doubled strands to make *mind*i baskets just like the ones Emily gave to me that day under her house. This deconstruction exercise was certainly easier than the actual weaving, which was difficult to say the least. A number of elders at the art workshops were highly adept at creating old forms from these new materials. In fact art practice was generally a family affair with skills being passed from one to another. Knowledge of small governance and culturally acceptable forms of praise and encouragement were also being passed on as I will soon explain. Once again, what mattered on Girramay country was not what the art did, but what the people did.



Figure 12: Emily's telephone wire baskets



Figure 13: Baskets made by Emily

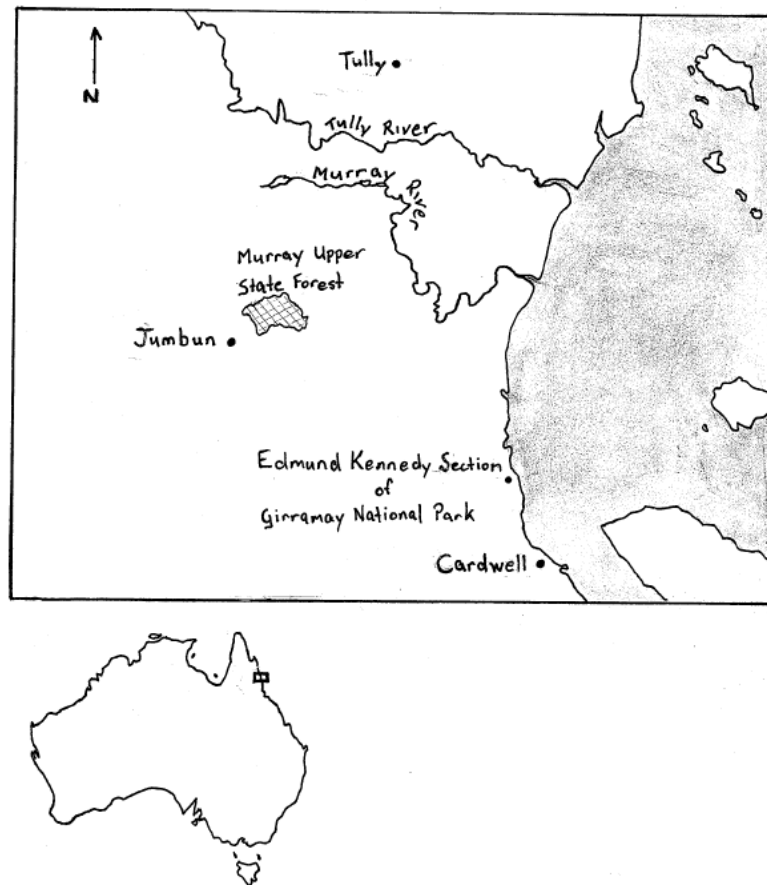


Figure 14: Location of Cardwell, EK, Jumbun, Murray Upper and Tully

### **6.3 Governance, Recognition and Dignity at an On-Country Art Workshop**

Giringun’s weekly art workshops were held here at Edmund Kennedy or the “EK” as it was known among Giringun people, on Girramay traditional land. Located between Murray Upper and Cardwell, the EK was one of only two car accessible areas, via gravel roads, of the Girramay National Park. The EK had been previously used by the QLD Department of Parks and Wildlife and although there were some remnants of the Parks’ work the area was now fully utilised by the Giringun Aboriginal Art Centre. Set along an unsealed road leading to the seaside, the EK block was essentially a collection of sheds and buildings: an air-conditioned office, a toilet and small kitchen with fridge in a demountable, and a few large lockable sheds that held recycled art materials, partially finished art works, resource books, a kiln and even an old loom donated by somebody in the area. There was also a small house, which one of the artists, Girramay man Abe Muriata, had recently moved into as the property caretaker.

Typically, about 10-12 artists in total attended the art workshops regularly each week. Sometimes more people came, on school holidays for instance when artists would inevitably bring nieces, nephews, and grandchildren. The Giringun bus would collect people from Jumbun, Murray Upper and sometimes Tully, so that the art workshop could start at 8am. Only a few people drove themselves. For instance, one Warrgamay artist came from as far as Ingham, about 50km away. Non-artist elders from other traditional owner groups also occasionally visited. For example, Nyawaigi elders from Ingham came for morning tea one week, saying as they left, “See you. Thank you for having us on your country”. Other people from the Giringun office might also drop in throughout the day, to get a board member to sign papers for example. Indeed, the group of regular people in attendance at the art day included Giringun board members and other senior elders, and they were shown almost universal deference by younger people, as well by different tribal elders who recognised them as their peers.

Age and gender varied from week to week in the group, though senior women – like Emily Murray, her two sisters, and Theresa Beeron – were a majority. A few elder men attended regularly, such as Theresa’s brother, Patrick, who was becoming known for his string making, and Abe Muriata, the well-established basket weaver who lived at the EK site, as stated previously. Sons and daughters of some of the elders also came regularly: Aunty Emily’s

three daughters, and also Patrick’s son (who had been the one to visit a “down south” museum with Uncle Claude). Emily’s adult grandson, Jamie, also attended most weeks. All of these individuals identified as either Girramay, Jirrbal or both, so that, aside from the one Warrgamay woman who came regularly, the artist group primarily consisted of an extended Murray Upper family group. Artists from Girringun’s other traditional owner groups also attended – including Gulngay (Tully area), Djiru (seaside people), and Nyawaigi (around Ingham) – but they came more intermittently.

On most mornings of the Tuesday workshop, artists would disembark the bus and gather under the roof of a long and broad carport. The space was breezy and more spacious than the previous indoor art room used at Girringun for many years before the EK. A few people told me they enjoyed being outside, in the shade that the carport provided. After making a cup of tea or coffee and finding our regular seats at four long tables covered in fresh plastic, we would start the day with a debriefing from the Arts Manager, Valerie. With the help of a whiteboard, Valerie would communicate achievements, upcoming projects and other news related to the art centre. Everybody appeared to enjoy hearing about this sort of thing. One morning for example, Valerie confirmed that Virgin Airlines would be naming their new plane *Mungalla* for a place in nearby Nyawaigi country. The news was met with various exclamations, approximated in one of the old Aunties’ often-made comment: “Well, how nice is that!” Another morning we learned Patrick had been selected as a finalist for an emerging artist’s fellowship somewhere, which prompted a heartfelt round of applause.

There was always much news and cause for celebration after Cairns Indigenous Art Fair (CIAF), a major art event for Queensland held every year connecting Indigenous artists and art centres with buyers. As it was held in Cairns, it was a relatively short two-hour drive north from Murray Upper, and thus close enough that most everyone at GAAC could attend with their families for at least one day of the week-long event. Participating in the art fair took a lot of effort, and at the first workshop back, after the 2017 CIAF and a break of a few well-earned weeks, congratulations was given to a male and a female artist from Girringun who had each won awards there. Girringun had also received the runner up award for Best Art Centre that year behind the Aurukun art centre in Cape York, who were as well known for their *ku* camp dog sculptures as Girringun was for their *bagu* (Henry, 2016).

While large exhibitions like CIAF happened occasionally throughout the year, the morning debriefings at the workshops provided a small, regular avenue for individual artists to be recognised, encouraged and supported amongst the group. Such a platform in the community was unique since there was a cultural aversion toward “big noting” oneself as an individual. Hand-in-hand with large exhibitions like CIAF, the Girringun Aboriginal Art Centre provided a way to acknowledge the talent and commitment of artists in a way that was acceptable to the community.

Valerie, the white manager, was key to such recognition for a number of reasons. Among these was that she was a local person from the well-known “Henrys”, commonly known as the first European family to settle in the Murray Upper region. The story of Valerie’s mother Gladys Henry, who had opened a shop near her Bellenden Homestead in Murray Upper, to encourage Jirrbal, Gulngay and Girramay people to continue making their artefacts, was well known among the artists. But another story told to me about the Henrys was that during the protection and assimilation eras, when Indigenous people were being forcibly removed from their traditional lands, “old man Henry” (presumably Valerie’s father or grandfather) had stood at the gate with a gun and warned government officials to get off his property. This had reportedly prevented a number of local Aboriginal families from being sent to Palm Island, an Aboriginal reserve where so many others in North Queensland had been removed to. In response to my asking about this story, Ernie Grant had told me that, while he respected the Henry family, the old patriarch was “probably just protecting his cheap labour” (pers comm 2017). It must be said that the story seemed to accord with the respect that I discerned from Girringun people and others to the Henry family for their part in helping Aboriginal people stay close to their lands. The Henry name was moreover shared with Aboriginal people at Girringun; one of the artists for example, shared the last name was named “Henry”, reflecting the common practice of naming Aboriginal labourers for the station or farming family they were employed by. Valerie was uniquely inside *and* outside the Aboriginal community via these historical connections, thus, she could raise opportunities for open praise in a way that might have been difficult for anyone else.

Though Valerie displayed leadership throughout the workshop day, she would very often recede behind moments of Indigenous governance as she put decisions concerning the art centre to the group. Unlike the more formal Girringun board meetings where there was one representative from each traditional owner group to cast a vote, the art group was comprised

mainly of Girramay and Jirrbal people, as has already been noted.<sup>39</sup> Individuals from groups outside of Murray Upper (such as Djiru, Nyawaigi and Gulngay) would be consulted if they were present at the workshop and an issue applied to their traditional land, but otherwise smaller matters, such as where to take a photograph for media, would be discussed by all and then ultimately confirmed by the Jirrbal and Girramay elders. On matters not related to events on traditional land the autonomy of each individual was more significantly felt. One could not push too hard, for example, for someone to volunteer in one of the many activities Giringun was asked to participate in. In each case of this small decision-making, deference or autonomy was suitably encouraged within the group.

Decisions at the EK workshop in the morning might sometimes extend to more consequential decisions, so that the EK space occasionally served as an informal extension of the broader Giringun Aboriginal Organisation. For example, after many years as the Arts Manager, Valerie had trained a new Indigenous manager, Leela from Ingham, so she could finally retire. Leela told me that after a kind of probationary period of some weeks officially in the role, artists and other non-artist elders assembled at the EK to decide whether they would keep her in the new manager’s position. She had already made her management felt by this time, having fired one of the paid art advisors and another volunteer, both white, in an effort to cut costs and make the centre even more Indigenous led. She told me that, at one point, the artist and elder group asked her to leave the carport area so they could discuss their collective future goals and make a decision about her, which ultimately would impact the entire Giringun Aboriginal Corporation. After a nervous wait by the sheds, Leela was asked to come back and advised that she could continue on in her role since, although a not-for-profit organisation, they ultimately agreed with her new vision to try and “make more money” as artists via the art centre.

This was an interesting development given that I had just been weighing up two positions recently communicated to me on separate occasions by two different, but equally persuasive,

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<sup>39</sup> I had been to one Giringun board meeting in Cardwell where nine board members had gathered around what I perceived at the time to be a thoroughly imposing table, meant (like a *brun* ground years before) for cross-tribal business to take place. In fact, the boardroom table was the previous art table. Not imposing then as I had pre-judged it, just a practical re-purposing of the table (upon which many art pieces, and now boardroom decisions, were made).

women involved with Girringun. On the one hand, a white woman argued that Girringun should be treated “like roads and hospitals” given its strong record. It should always be funded, she said, not left “begging for scraps” from the government every three years. On the other hand, a black woman, and member of the QLD Arts Council, told me that art centres like Girringun should “stand on their own two feet” and somehow become profitable. We could distil these opposed perspectives down to a socialist versus capitalist debate. Or we could emphasise, as other Indigenous scholars have (Langton, 2012), that Indigenous people should be afforded the same opportunity as others to participate fully in the modern economy. Yet, the fact that these arguments came from a white and black woman, respectively, may suggest a less-considered perspective – that Indigenous people are not always comfortable with taking what could be considered charity from the State. ‘Standing on their own two feet’ might thus be more a matter of dignity than economy per se. In any case, the art centre would need to take on a whole new dynamic to compete more independently in the marketplace, and it could easily marginalise those who did not consider themselves professional artists, only social participants who occasionally made extra money through art. As one artist put it, “it keeps me busy”. Still, at the meeting about Leela, the Girringun group’s decision to keep her on indicated their desire to function as more than just an outlet for social activity, which was probably what they had been doing up to that point, supported by Valerie.

When I once asked Valerie what she wanted to know through such research as mine, she answered, “why do people come to art centres like these?”. Few studies have been directly aimed at investigating this question for regional and remote areas of Australia (although, see Bartleet, Sunderland, O’Sullivan, & Woodland, 2019). Valerie thought it might be about confidence building, since she had witnessed more than one young person “come out of their shell” there. The encouragement one might receive through art making might certainly increase one’s confidence. However, as I had seen so often in remote Indigenous communities, it was often the case that it just took a little time for young people to get used to interacting with non-Indigenous people. Once the decision was made to have interactions with non-family and white people living outside the community, “coming out of one’s shell” could happen anywhere. In other words, being shy with white people, and having confidence in oneself were two different things. After being with the artists, hearing their stories, and visiting them in their homes, I thought the answer to Valerie’s question was certainly for the two reasons that have now been suggested. Firstly, people enjoyed achieving and sharing in

the achievements of others in a culturally safe way, and secondly, people aspired to “keep busy” and also make some money, however little, through art.

There was, I thought, a third reason that Indigenous people came to the art centre workshops on country: the workshops provided a regular opportunity for people to re-create cultural symbols with the guidance of elders and ancestors. This was somewhat congruous with “making money” since Indigenous art buyers generally like to buy representations of cultural symbols. In line with this third motivation, the next section shows how one’s “old people” (“old people” included older living elders, as well as people who had passed away) were valued as holders of cultural symbols in the form of knowledge and history, and thus looked to for the authority to reproduce certain cultural shapes. Moreover, old people that were still alive were generally cherished because, simply put, not many Indigenous people lived past their mid-seventies in the Murray Upper community.

#### **6.4 Baskets and Master Weavers**

There were two Jennys at the art workshop, both young Jirrbal women, which is why, to save confusion, one of the Jennys was called by her nickname, Bambam. In the small demountable building that served as the kitchen, Bambam and I must have buttered a thousand Sao biscuits, and peeled a hundred eggs as we spoke about our children and families. Bambam came from an artistic family, and spoke of her mother, Desley Henry, an accomplished artist whose painted murals were “around the place”. Desley’s most well-known mural was a dreaming story she had painted about the Origin of Fire. This mural was reproduced at several places including at the Ravenshoe Museum in Jirrbal tablelands country, in Maisie Barlow’s (2001) book *Jirrbal: Rainforest Dreamtime Stories*, and in one of Ernie Grant’s Dyirbal language resources for schools. Indeed Ernie also spoke fondly about his niece Desley as “a marvellous painter” who had passed away “too young” in 2005. Several of Desley’s *jawun* ‘bi-cornual baskets’ were in art galleries and museums, including the MTQ in Townsville, thus I had heard Desley described, like Abe Muriata, as one of the community’s “master weavers”. When I asked Bambam if she did much weaving at home in Jumbun, she told me no, that she was not as good as her sister. But I observed that she was able to continue learning and practising weaving at the art centre under the guidance of her Aunties who attended.



When I asked one of these Aunties, Aunty Cybil, about weaving she had responded, “well, I’m not an expert”, however, it is fair to say that all of the elder women at the art workshop had a good grasp of basket weaving. Valerie described Aunty Bonnie and Aunty Emily particularly as “one of the handful of people in the world” who could weave a bi-cornual basket. I was able to sit down with Aunty Bon and Bambam one week to have a go at my first basket in the carport of the EK. The start was said to be the hardest part, so Aunty Bon patiently showed me how to begin with four bits of coloured telephone wire. She said encouragingly, “you got it”, though I thought I definitely had not, and after sitting intensely focused for the morning and neglecting my other duties I ended up with a tiny jumbled mess. Valerie had peered over at me with some amusement, whereupon I playfully suggested that Giringun could show it in one of their exhibitions and call it “First Attempt”.

The weaving of a *mind*i grass bag, or *jawun* cane basket, was of course exceptionally difficult to master. One would have to “sit down”, as the Aunties would say, for perhaps years with older weavers to learn it. Time spent practicing amongst other weavers, with only occasional instruction, was important to developing the skill in a more indirect, culturally appropriate way. Thus Aunty Theresa said to me when she relayed her experience of learning to weave from the old Aunties, “We get frighten to ask them, but if we interested we just sit down with them” (T Beeron pers comm, 2017). Although historically in the Queensland rainforest region basket weaving was said to be practiced by men, even exclusively (Lumholtz, 1889/2009 p. 193), at the time that Abe Muriata started learning to weave there were no male basket weavers in the Murray Upper community. Abe said in some promotional media that Desley Henry “started something” that he “ran with” (<https://garlandmag.com/article/craft-classic-jawun/>) with regard to weaving, and so he might yet have learned a great deal from Desley. However, a cultural gender-distancing within the community meant that he could not learn directly from women (or at least admit to it); as Uncle Patrick described it to me, “we can’t sit down with the women” (pers comm, 2017).

As such, it is interesting to note that, just as Abe had studied and photographed the swords at the Museum of Tropical Queensland, he had also studied the weave and design of his old people’s baskets in other museums. At the *Maangan* exhibition opening in 2017, Abe spoke to an audience about learning from the “masters” in the museum, meaning from his old people’s baskets in museum collections. Places like the British Museum where he had travelled to and visited collections therefore described him as being “self-taught”

(<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIOG230997>). I am as wary as perhaps he was of implying that museums should be congratulated for this fruitful access opportunity when they are themselves so closely associated with the colonial mechanisms that decimated potential Indigenous teachers in the first place. Nevertheless, it is remarkable to think that Abe could continue to reproduce the “perfect form” of bi-cornual baskets as he has described it (<https://garlandmag.com/article/craft-classic-jawun/>) of his old people through museum visits to artefacts in this way. Now, he could pass the skill on to other men at the art centre, such as Uncle Patrick, who was keen to learn from Abe.

Compared with the telephone cable or “wire” that was recycled to the art centre, it was more time-consuming to gather the materials used to make traditional baskets such as those found in museum collections – lawyer cane for bi-cornual baskets and lomandra grass for the soft bottom bags, for example. Nevertheless, Giringun people did take the opportunity to gather materials on several occasions. One day I went in the Giringun bus with the artists to collect traditional materials from a section of scrub along a dirt road near Jumbun. It was easy enough for the elders to walk along the road with the younger people (a number of children also came in the bus that day) then turn into the scrub from the road when we saw a promising section. In addition to *bugal* ‘lawyer cane’ for baskets, we looked for *jiman* ‘tetra beech’ and *muja* ‘wild guava’ for traditional fire sticks (also called *jiman*). On this day and other trips into the scrub or the beach, a chair was carried for Aunty Bonnie who had trouble walking for too long, so the group could proceed in this way for some time. Jenny showed me how to strip the outer casing from *bugal* lawyer cane by folding over the vine’s leaves to protect one’s hand from the vine’s sharp needles. She teased, “we don’t need gloves like the rangers”. Indeed, this folded-leaf method was described to me as the “old school” way when I expressed how simple it was to deal with a bush plant that looked just like any other jungle vine, but which North Queenslanders were seriously warned about as children. In terms of a sensory experience, stripping the green outer soft layer to reveal the cane inside was uncannily like the experience of stripping telephone wire, only without the threat of the lawyer cane’s needle-like thorns.

One Djiru man told me that he remembered how his own Aunties had sent him out to hunt long hours for cane when he was young, only to tell him that what he brought back was not suitable. “All day, for nothing!”, he complained. It was good, therefore, to have the Aunties with us this day supervising the collection: “yep that’s a good one there”, Aunty Bon or

Aunty Em would say, letting us know we were on the right track with selection, or to me specifically: “Pull it out! *Away* from you. Not *down!*” The traditional younger/elder dynamic in which young people were supported by supervising elders (either closely or directed from afar, as in the case of the Djiru man and his Aunties) was sustained through the contemporary artist/ranger relationship. Nearly all of the regular artists were senior elders as previously mentioned, while Girringun rangers were younger and “physically fit” as a ranger himself described<sup>40</sup>. State funding for the wider organisation’s management of the Girringun Indigenous Protected Area helped to keep this traditional co-operation and ‘transmission’ of cultural knowledge on country going, for example, through small initiatives such as Feral Weeds program.

Materials hunting took the better part of the day, and again, despite best efforts, not all of it might be suitable for baskets. Telephone cable therefore allowed one to readily practice the important weaving motion before moving on to cane. As Aunty Bonnie told me, “You just got to practice it first and then you can make it tighter next time” (pers comm, 2017). Compared with traditional lawyer cane, phone cable was quite floppy – more similar to the lomandra grass used for *mind*i grass baskets. As a result, cable produced *mind*i grass-style baskets, rather than the cane baskets called *jawun*. Certainly one could not easily achieve the classic two-points of the bi-cornual basket with phone cable. When I asked Aunty Bon which material she liked better – cane or cable – she answered cane because it was “stiffer”, and she preferred its resistant quality over the soft cable. Ingold might say that these properties in cane demonstrate the critical significance of “materials” over “materiality” (Ingold, 2007), or even that baskets made from cane evidence the important unpredictability between humans and materials, such that artefacts are more “grown” than “made” (Ingold, 2000). Admittedly, cane baskets made by Abe were always a slightly different shape. But I thought, on the contrary, that cane was preferred because it produced the general and *expected* bi-cornual shape. Cane was thus rejected by the Aunties if it would not help to produce this expected shape, now a cultural icon for rainforest people. Similarly, rainforest shields or *bigin* were another cultural

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<sup>40</sup> in S.V.A. Consulting (2016). *Social Return on Investment analysis of the Girringun Protected Area and associated Indigenous ranger programme*, p. 5

icon, and for a few weeks artists worked on creating this iconic shape with clay, another material that could consistently produce familiar cultural shapes.

### 6.5 Shield People and Convenient Clay

After the debriefings in the morning is when everybody would get to working on art. People usually had a previous project to attend to and so they seemed to dissipate to various directions – one person selecting pendant beads they had made for a necklace, another mixing paint for a landscape picture. Other times artists focused on a set task, such as one week when mostly everyone sat down to paint miniature clay shields dried from the week before. These small decorative pieces, about the size of a hand, could be used to hold trinkets and were good sellers at Girringun’s shop in Cardwell probably because of their travel size and affordability. Not everyone painted these small shields: a grandson of Aunty Emily’s, Jamie, painted a larger platter-sized clay shield, while Aunty Emily herself painted a wide, shallow bowl.

Places were often painted on canvases and larger ceramics. On her clay bowl, for example, Aunty Emily painted Murray Falls, or *Jibarraji* – a Girramay place associated with a shared *jujuba* ‘dreaming’ story about *yirrinjila* ‘dragonfly’. *Jibarraji* was near her home in Murray Upper, and close to Flat Rock where the Jumbun community would walk and swim, away from the numerous tourists who were not allowed camp there. Aunty Emily was not entirely satisfied with the painted depiction of the falls, however: “It’s terrible”, she said, when I walked over to look. The Girringun artists might sometimes paint shared dreaming story places like this, or places more specifically named for their family. For example, I had seen Theresa’s brother Patrick paint his grandchildren’s “name places”, the sites to which they would return to after death.

To digress for a moment with a story, or two, I only had one example of such a name place elaborated to me, not at the art centre but rather by Ernie Grant in Tully. The Cyclone Story as it was generally known in the community occurred at Davidson Falls (in Dyirbal *Banday Banday*). The story, and thus the place of Davidson Falls, ‘belonged’ to the Grant Family (they have the right to go there, without incident). As a *jujuba*, or ‘dreaming’ story, the Cyclone Story has already occurred, yet it is also a set of events that can be caused to re-occur, especially if one disturbs the three mythic sisters who are still present at *Banday*

*Banday*. Ernie’s mother and other family member names are, furthermore, directly linked to this place and story. Thus, as Ernie told it to me:

*Mija* is a hut. And *bunjaj* is pull up or pullout, like grass. Mum’s other sister *Jinaburray* means twisted foot. Her name is there at the Falls. Uncle Spider’s *Ngarraguny* word is mist on the falls. All the names are there on the waterfall. But to do with the cyclone story, the 3 names are right down at the bottom and I have photos. When you take a photo of the falls you can see the images in the rocks that the old people are saying are the women...

The old people said that if they want to make a cyclone you go there, and you go to the bottom of the falls and you sing out to the falls “I want to talk to you”. I’m saying this in English because I wouldn’t be good at it in Jirrbal anyway. But anyway you stand in front of the falls and first come out is the oldest sister. And it’s her name I haven’t got...She come out, and she’s got a large container in her hand made out of earth, out or dirt. And she says “you want to make a big cyclone do you? You break this one.” And you’ve got to have a look at it and say to her, “no, no. I can’t break that one. That’ll be the end of everything.” The idea being if you break the big basket the cyclone will come and blow the whole world away. So you decline and say “no I don’t want to break that one”.

So big sister goes back into the waterfall, into the cave there. And second sister comes out. She’s got middle sized vessel, earthenware vessel. And she says “you want to make a big cyclone, here break this one”. And you have a look at the thing and you say to her, “no I can’t break that one. That’ll blow all the trees out and it’ll kill everybody. We don’t want that. That language word...it’s in that video there. I’ll try and find it later. Anyway the second sister just tell her I can’t break that. It’s going to be too strong. So she goes back.

And then the young sister comes out then. The young sister’s got a small earthenware vessel. She said here. This one you can break this one and make cyclone. And you say “alright. I’ll break this one”. Because it’d still be a BIG cyclone. Bad one. But it won’t blow the WORLD away. And so you break it and the younger sister then says to you, “now, you got four days to go, and find yourself a place to hide”. And that cyclone will come after 4 days. And you better have a good cave because I’ll be sending big winds.” With *mijabujal* which is the second sister my mother’s name. The youngest one is *jinaburray*. My mother’s name, *mijabujal*. The youngest one, she’s taken up into the sky in the cyclone in the hut, from the hut. Most of the Aboriginal people think that really happens. (E Grant interview, 2016)

In Ernie’s Holistic Framework, *Banday Banday* would be an example of *Place* with ongoing consequences for people, but in this case, it is also a *jujuba* story place. In his retelling of story and place, we see that Ernie refers to the authority of both his old people and photographs (thus, the ‘archive’). As it is the Grant family’s place, the Cyclone Story there explains an ongoing wariness for Aboriginal people who go to *Banday Banday* if it is not ‘their place’. For example, Ernie further told of his Great Uncle Tommy Warren who went to

the Davidson area to camp with Ernie and another man named Ralph. Upon reaching a certain spot upriver, Tommy would go no further with the two men. Tommy walked up and down the riverbank, waiting anxiously for them to return, or as Ernie described it, he walked “a highway” into the ground: “he must have walked up and down looking for a place to hide, he thought we were going to stir it up” (ibid).

It is interesting that an apparent artefact-type – that is, the different sized bowls – should feature so prominently in the Cyclone Story for I had never seen any traditional “earthenware” bowls in the community or in museums. In the previous chapter, the idea of an “imagined object” was raised: those artefacts like the possum blanket that were seldom collected, but nevertheless existed very powerfully in the memory and repertoire of cultural objects for community elders like Ernie. The earthenware bowl seems to exemplify the imagined object in remembered mythic history via the Cyclone Story, yet contemporary ceramic bowls were also now used (perhaps even more so than fabric canvases) to create artful scenes of Place and Land. In this way, we might say that while some once-real artefacts can take on mythic characteristics (as the possum ‘blue fur blanket’ did), some mythic artefacts can take on more everyday associations. As I will soon elaborate, what arguably unites potential binaries of sacred and secular, myth and history, materiality and material is the symbol *with material form*, since it possesses that unique hybrid quality that might be described as ‘conceptual’, but also ‘actual’, weight.

To return to the art workshop and Theresa’s brother Patrick, he had painted an example of *Land* on canvas when he completed a painting in two halves: on the left was an abundant lagoon scene with bream, barramundi, turtle, and also birds flying overhead; on the right, was a monotonous field of cane. This almost forcefully contrasted a “before-sugar” landscape with an “after-sugar” landscape. Fauna in country was also painted upon ceramics, and the Dyirbal names for these were commonly known in the community. In fact, it seemed to be preferred amongst the artists and elders that Dyirbal language names be used for animal and artefacts nouns in English conversation. Uncle Claude had even balked when a young family member used the term “dilly bag” instead of *jawun*: “it make me cringe, that word”, he said. This evidences how English words could even be offensive, their genericism pointing to a lack of care in describing rainforest artefacts. Birds (such as *gunday* the large rainforest cassowary, *guyjarri* scrub turkey, *jarrugan* scrub hen and their nests, and the *gungaga* kingfisher), fish (like *jubar* barramundi and *bugal* black bream), and also *bajigal* freshwater turtle and their

*bambu* eggs were commonly known and depicted in landscapes. All of these animals were still central to daily life and hunting practices, except perhaps for cassowaries, which were now an endangered and protected species. When I once asked Aunty Emily about hunting and eating cassowaries, she told me: “*Gunduy*? No more. We gotta wait til someone hitem with car” (E Murray pers comm, 2014).

In addition to these broad culturescapes, artists might paint diamonds, a design often seen on large rainforest shields of the Tully-Cardwell area. For example, on the day of shield painting at the workshop, another of the aunties who identified as Jirrbal-Girramay painted them on the sides of her clay shield. Ernie told me diamonds were the Jirrbal and Girramay tribe’s identifier, Girramay diamonds being smaller, however. This is why Andy Denham painted a shield with diamonds for Ernie, as we saw in the previous chapter. Andy’s son, an artist himself, once likened to the design to “snake scales” to me, while a 19<sup>th</sup> Century explorer to the Cardwell ranges had described the design as a, “quaint zig zag pattern found on all shields in this part of the colony” (Dalrymple cited in McGregor, 2016, p. 17). Indeed, a Gulngay woman, one of the original elders who started Giringun as a small consulting group in the 1990s, and who did not come to the art workshops often, also painted diamonds in contemporary colours of purple and cream on the small-shield painting day. This demonstrated that diamonds were presently a Gulngay, as well as Jirrbal and Girramay design.

Some people dispensed with painting dreaming places or tribal identifiers and painted more contemporary influences on their clay shields, as Patrick who had painted a cane field had. One of Aunty Emily’s sisters, too, often painted botanical designs like leaves. On her ceramic shield she had painted a single leaf, perhaps influenced by the recent feral weeds project with the rangers, which encouraged artists to paint local flora and the introduced weeds that threatened them. On the other hand, another of Emily’s sisters had added some t-oriented crosses to her shield with diamonds – possibly intended to be the Christian cross, though I never asked her directly about it. A waybala ceramicist employed by the centre said upon observing these, “we need to stop putting crosses”. He would move around the tables like this, sometimes making suggestions, but more often simply assisting the artists with the technical aspects of ceramics.

The painting of the cross was probably discouraged because a potential buyer might perceive the symbol as being in conflict with Indigenous “religion”. But Christianity was a part of life for a lot of the artists, many of whom attended church. One artist whose landscape paintings I saw in his home certainly included the Christian cross – albeit somewhat surreptitiously in the corner of the canvas amongst more prevalent black bream, boomerangs and other local emblems. When I asked the artist about it, he told me that “the power of prayer” had helped him to overcome alcoholism. Looking up to the sky with hands open, he said further, “I ask Him, you know: Lord – help me” (pers comm, 2017).

Another rainforest man from Yidinji country, in Cairns, came to the workshop one week to share his expertise with the Girringun group. He was a professional artist, responsible for a circle of multiple towering shields installed, appropriately, on “Shields Street” in the Cairns central business district. Vinyl cut relief printing, or so-called “linocuts”, was another medium in which he was skilled, and much of his art in this medium reproduced the shapes of old artefacts in 2-dimensional form. With his guidance, the Girringun group were going to create a single large bagu-shaped linocut, filled in and around with their designs. Before assisting them in this, the Yidinji artist showed them his portfolio. He called them brother and sister, and said, “I know yous are shield people too”, as he flicked through the numerous pages with drawing of shields. He had drawn chest plates, explaining, “this is when the white mob used to give our people chest plates and call them chief.” He also showed drawings of places and artefacts, explaining their various meanings: “I did a fire stick. Spear represents a man, digging stick represents a woman. Fire represents a good thing for our people. That gives you an idea” (pers comm, 2018). He thus made reference to historical context and the meaning of certain Indigenous artefacts in the manner that one might expect symbols to ‘signify’ something else.

Just as chest plates signified Australia’s era of paternalistic chief-naming, specific artefact types can indeed become highly symbolic in the context of colonial encounter. As Nugent and Sculthorpe (2018) argue in their discussion of the so-called “Gweagal shield”, a single shield at the British Museum with unconfirmed provenance became “loaded with history” due to its symbolic, rather than proven, associations. Thus, as they write, the shield was “widely believed, although not proven, to have been used by one of the two Aboriginal men who opposed Cook’s landing at Botany Bay in 1770” (p. 28). A strong part of the shield’s notoriety is as a result of the visible the hole in it, which came to represent a shot from Cook’s



firearm. Although the authors note that holes from spears are seen in shields of the time, the symbolic strength of the ‘bullet hole’ in the shield becomes so powerful that it no longer matters if it was a gun or a spear that made the hole. Thus, as they further conclude, the Gweagal shield works as the perfect symbol for a narrative of resistance in Aboriginal Australia against an invading party with guns.

What the Yidinji artist’s visit confirmed for me was that he and Girringun people were similarly “shield people” in terms of the traditional QLD rainforest timber shield. Moreover, this artefact “referent”, we might call it, had to have a specific *shape*, not material or decoration necessarily to indicate their Aboriginal ‘rainforest’ identity. Across the other side of Australia, in the Kimberley in Western Australia, shields are narrow and small because, as my Yawuru Aunty (also a shield maker) put it, there are “not too many big trees” there. This is in contrast to shields of the rainforest in far North QLD, which are a broad oval or kidney shape due to the large fig trees found there. Thus, even when the Yidinji artist replicated significant cuts made in shield from a sword during a *brun* corroboree, the overall lino cut shape was still a recognisable rainforest symbol.

I never saw this general shape vary at the art centre myself, but to know the rule of shape exists one can always look for what happens elsewhere when the rule is broken. I knew for example of a Cairns high school teacher, another Yidinji man, who loathed the new Cairns State High School uniform shirts because in the shirt corner a supposed Yidinji shield had been printed with a more rectangular, than oval or kidney shape. The misshapen design was further problematic because it gave the impression of being something designed by a graphics computer program (because it was designed by a computer program!) rather than by human hands directly. The shape did not therefore represent “people” let alone “rainforest people” as it was supposed to. In short, the iconic rainforest shield shape was all wrong.

It is true that the apparent collective noun “rainforest Aboriginal people” – capturing together Yidinji, Jirrbal and Girramay people among others – is a social construct. And we can agree with Buhrich, Goldfinch and Greer (2016) who tell us to be aware of the scientising tendency to, “draw sharp boundaries that align with environmental parameters” (p. 39), as in the QLD case of the “Wet Tropics”. However, I am less supportive of their further contention that the rainforest ‘cultural bloc’ might be too heavily drawn from historical writing and “ethnographic notions of Aboriginal people as part of the natural environment.” (p. 24). To

recognise that the rainforest shield is a result of its environment, does not mean one is necessarily asserting (as is suggested and critiqued by the authors above) that Aboriginal people *are a result of theirs*. It is only to say that the highly recognisable “rainforest shield” – a broad, oval or kidney-shaped shield – signifies “rainforest people” of North QLD in the same way that diamonds represented Jirrbal, Girramay and Gulngay people. To put it another way, an oval is as good as a diamond. Perspectives of non-Indigenous and Indigenous observers will vary in this regard as the former authors point out, but it is important to highlight that for the Girringun artists (and for the Yidinji artist and teacher too) at least, a rule of shape exists precisely because it is indicative of a regional identity.

It is little wonder that artist’s clay was one of the favoured materials at the centre since it assisted even the most beginner-level artist to produce this rule of shape. Painting and weaving both required skill and practise to produce a good result, however, clay could be used to re-create a miniature shield, and its distinctive shape, with relative ease. One particular week, the professional ceramicist at the workshop was able to bring a good amount of local river clay from near his home in the tablelands. This brought material was exciting for the artists because of its scarcity. However, there was also a sense of strangeness about using river clay in a non-traditional way – that is, for sculpting shapes instead of for painting designs.

River clay from country is called “ochre” in English and was traditionally used more often to decorate the body and other items. In the Dyirbal language, ochres are differentiated by colour, such as *margarra* for yellow clay and *gaba* for white clay. Interestingly, I never heard of artist’s clay from the shop – an off-white colour – being referred to as *gaba*. This was probably because *gaba* was used medicinally, moreover, ochres like *gaba* were strongly linked to a few source locations on country. As Ernie Grant indicated in the Dyirbal heritage project, “special places” and medicinal properties constituted a type of cultural knowledge that was not associated with shop clay: “You burn the yellow one and you get red. You can find red in its own right, but you can make red by burning the yellow one. *Margarra* is the yellow one. You find it in special places. People used to know where those places were” (E Grant interview, 2014). Clay from an art supplies shop was perhaps viewed then as, rather, colourless – valued for its capacity to replicate an all-important cultural shape for new makers, and also, to receive a design as a sort of tabula rasa.

In terms of traditional large shields made from fig tree, Uncle Patrick was the only artist I saw making them. He showed me a completed shield that sat side by side with his father’s shields inside his house in Jumbun near the Murray river (“father and son shields”, I had remarked when I saw them), as well as a half-finished shield drying out under a giant tamarind tree at the back of his house (see Figure 15). Uncle Patrick said would make more, but he was rarely able to access suitable timber from fig trees on other people’s private property. It was also difficult to move the heavy timber all the way back to his house without a car. When I asked Patrick how he got the current timber to make the shields at Jumbun, he replied that the timber had fallen “naturally” on someone’s property: “the rangers go and pick it up. I just asked them for some”, referring to the Giringun rangers who were employed by the local council to do cyclone clean up before and after the wet season. Timber for boomerangs was easier to retrieve, and indeed Uncle Patrick showed me one down from his house, on the riverbank, that he was going to try and cut out “without killing the tree”, in the old way (see Figure 16 ). The few trips that I had taken with the artists to collect other traditional materials happened separately from the ranger activities. As we saw with cane collecting, the expeditions were time-consuming for the workshop day but worth it – as much for the valued social interaction on country between elders and youth as for the procurement of traditional materials.



*Figure 15: Shield Drying in Jumbun*



*Figure 16: Timber for Boomerang*



*Figure 17: Shaping Bagu with River Clay*

Apart from these few occasions of timber shield making, clay that Giringun sourced from an art supply shop bypassed the need to rely on traditional materials, and thus enabled the reproduction of the rainforest shield as an important cultural form. Interestingly, Abe Muriata was even beginning to use clay to make three dimensional bi-cornual baskets. In media promoting the *Clay Stories* exhibition<sup>41</sup> at Coffs Harbour in New South Wales, Abe highlighted the importance of this cultural form numerous times: “When I am weaving the form, I am always working to maintain perfection...I am stubbornly dedicated, making an icon that you don’t see anymore...The ceramic works I create maintain the jawun form but use a different medium - clay”. (<https://www.dailymercury.com.au/news/clay-stories-remote-art-arrive-in-coffs/3729911/>). Far from imposing a shape-emphasis, the clay exhibition provided a practical material for retaining an iconic shape – shape being the first expression of

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<sup>41</sup> The Daily Mercury further acknowledges multiple creators of the exhibition: “*Clay Stories* is an independent curatorial project developed by Sabbia Gallery, its exhibition curator Anna Grigson, five indigenous art centres and the Remote Communities Ceramic Network.” (<https://www.dailymercury.com.au/news/clay-stories-remote-art-arrive-in-coffs/3729911/>).

“perfection” for the bi-cornual basket in particular. So unique was this shape that I now found myself drawing a two-dimensional version of the shape in the air with my index fingers, just as others in the community did, when first describing a bi-cornual basket and its definitive two points to someone.

The *bigin* ‘rainforest shield’ and the *jawun* ‘bi-cornual basket’ were two important cultural forms at Girringun – symbols *shared*, as we have now seen, amongst other rainforest Aboriginal people; the anthropomorphic *bagu* ‘firemaker’ was another artefact type becoming associated with Girringun specifically. Most recently, the artists made a “family” (as I had heard *bagu* described when collectively made like this) of five painted *bagu* sculptures. Made of fibreglass, the *bagu* now stood out the front of the Cairns Performing Arts Centre, all of them slightly different (see Figure 18). I had been there at the workshop for the interesting exercise of selecting the five *bagu* that would eventually be made into the large fibreglass *bagu*. All the artists had drawn more than twenty highly varied *bagu* shapes on sheets of paper, and with the assorted *bagu* on a wall, they cast votes by placing a mark next to five of their ‘favourites’. The five most selected *bagu* of these were a good representation of different shaped fire makers that I had typically seen throughout my fieldwork: three rounded anthropomorphs (a shape I had come to associate with contemporary reproductions by Girringun artists particularly), one acceptable outlier style with a “hammerhead”, and finally, one traditional style with a slim body and almost triangular-shaped head. The latter’s painted decoration also echoed the traditional style, in its two diamonds and classically placed drill holes (three in the “head”, and either three or four in the “body”). To reproduce these shapes – diverse but not divergent – was another example of how Girringun people followed the path of a future culture, just as Uncle Claude Beeron would have it.



Figure 18: Girringun Bagu at CPAC

### 6.6 Articulating Culture with Jamies’ Trucks

A designated space in the thesis for “art practice” potentially aligns with an Ingoldian preference for happenings and change and process over product, while a focus on agency and art could lead us to a Gellian notion of the agency of art. According to the latter view (in *Art and Agency*, a work that view that is so convoluted to me that it must be summarised here by some more contemporary observers), “what analysts need to understand is not what art objects represent or symbolize, but what they do within their social worlds” (Chua & Elliott, 2013, p. 6). During the course of this research, however, somewhat contrary to Ingold and Gell, it became evident that *persistence* was just as important as change, that artefacts *did represent* something, and that the *agency of people* and ancestors was too important to be overshadowed by the agency of things per se. This chapter has so far looked at how people at the Girringun Aboriginal Art Centre selected symbolic artefacts in their artful practice to make the argument that preservation is itself a cultural activity.

Clearly what I am arguing for is a certain type of preservation. Stuart Hall’s metaphor (in Clifford, 2001; Grossberg, 1986) for culture as an “articulated lorry” (or road train if you are Australian) is a helpful image for Indigenous people attempting to be themselves, whatever that may be, in any setting that is said to be decolonising. Here, carriages of culture, so to speak, such as Ritual, Language or Kinship can be articulated and reconstituted – that is to say, moved around, unhooked, and recombined – to ensure both the strength of tradition and

the integrity of continuous momentum. We can further remind ourselves that curating is not merely *preservation* via the extension of a singular life (as in the “biography” of objects), but also *selection* – the “picking up” as Aunty Cybil might say – via reproduction, over and over again, of certain culturally-understood symbols. In this conceptualisation, there is no life to deaden or make still, there is only a re-articulation. Roy Wagner’s *The Invention of Culture* (1975) discussed a similar kind of creativity. He did not argue for the creation of something entirely new as his term “invention” may imply. Rather, he argued for creativity *within certain structural parameters* – as Hall does. We have seen now that, for Girringun people, some previous elements could be swapped out (for example, ‘traditional materials’ in favour of clay or wire), but other cultural shapes such as the ovalness of a rainforest shield, the two points of a bi-cornual basket, and the anthropomorphism of a bagu were much less negotiable.

‘Religion’, or a Dyirbal cosmological worldview featuring *jujuba* dreaming creators, might be viewed as another constant for Murray Upper people, but this was also up for re-articulation. The adoption of Christianity by Indigenous populations has been addressed at length elsewhere, but I will raise it briefly now to show how art can provide helpfully insightful expressions of cultural articulations. Previously we saw that Ernie Grant rejected Aboriginal sorcery and “cleverness” since it interfered with his Christian values, and moreover, that the Christian cross had been painted by at least one Girringun artist. Further interesting is what was not painted in this regard. I occasionally saw artists painting carpet snakes, for example, which were still hunted and commonly talked about. Thus, a Girringun artist had shaped and painted a diamond-patterned carpet snake on one of six ceramic bagu inside the Cairns Performing Arts Centre. But besides Desley Henry’s earlier snake drawing for the Fire Story, I never saw snakes depicted at the Girringun Aboriginal Art Centre as *dreaming beings*.

Anderson (2001), writes about Norman Miller, a Jirrbal artist not affiliated with GAAC, who found himself in the middle of a debate about the appropriateness of him “rejecting the rainbow serpent” (ibid). To young artists requesting that he paint the serpent, Miller refused, explaining, “Eve was deceived by the serpent” (in ibid). To critics who thought he was rejecting Aboriginal spirituality, Miller countered in the Cairns Post that Indigenous people were entitled to “re-examine their lifestyle and maybe reject some aspects of their culture if it does not line up with their faith” (Miller in ibid). While he was not a Girringun artist, Miller’s latter comment as Jirrbal person aptly describes the cultural articulation that I am trying to describe, in this case, a “rejection” of the creation serpent.

In terms of what is *retained*, on the other hand, Clifford (2001) – referencing Hall’s articulation theory – says that for Indigenous people, “a desire called “the land,” is differently, persistently active” (p. 481). To demonstrate the persistence of land for Girringun people, and yet the changeability of things within it, I can refer to the case of Jamie, a young Jirrbal man who attended Girringun’s Tuesday art workshop. Jamie was always painting trucks on a road within a landscape. He had a learning disability because, as I was told, his mother was incorrectly immunised during pregnancy. The rest of the artist group made great effort to look after him, including bantering good-naturedly with him. I even joined in after a time: “Jamie, Jamie, Jamie”, I would say sing-song style, to which he would reply, “Tahnee, Tahnee, Tahnee”. In addition to cassowaries, shields, trees, and mountains, Jamie would incorporate trucks into his painting because trucks were always moving in and around the community of Jumbun in Murray Upper where he lived. By painting trucks, Jamie inserted a moving image of industry into his country, therefore performing a new articulation. He expressed himself not via words, but via the symbol, which he could easily communicate through art.

To the articulation metaphor as *rearrangement*, then, I use Jamie’s trucks to point out the second meaning of articulation (as Hall also intended), which is a sense of *expressive intent*, that is, to successfully pronounce clearly. Jamie’s painting of trucks provides a direct demonstration of this double meaning of articulation – where one makes room in a definitively “old” culture for a new object (sacred Country now features agricultural and other industries), and also, where one pronounces clearly an idea (I like trucks!). Since the metaphorical image of an articulated lorry cuts through linguistic categories of meaning, it is tempting to contrast Jamie’s painting of trucks with Ernie’s preference for narrative as a verbally articulate person. However, my intent is rather to show the various nuanced manifestations of preservation acts in the community. Whether it be visually or verbally, Indigenous rainforest identity is articulated through art and artefact. And preserving – far from being the antithesis to practice, or the resting phase that comes after collecting – is a part of the way of following culture into the future at Girringun.

We saw that the changeability of Land was acknowledged in Uncle Patrick’s painting of a lagoon contrasted against a sugarcane farm, but just as ‘a desire’ for Language is arguably evidenced in the authority of senior language-speaking elders at Girringun, Land in some form is another ideal feature of a ‘cultural path’. Perhaps Land is the most ideal feature for all



Indigenous people, even as another ‘imagined object’ for those removed from traditional country. Ernie Grant’s conceptualisation of Place is important here as that feature of Jirrbal-Girramay and Gulngay cosmology that is kept and remembered (over and above more generalised traditional creator beings, which might contradict the new Christian belief in the formation of the world). Name places were thus specific indicators of one’s individual attachment to Land and Place, and an acceptable retention of Indigenous cosmogony aspects for Christian Indigenous people. In this way, Land could look slightly different under cane, and Place might hold significance in ways other than those to do with larger scale cosmogony, but they were in some form always there, on the cultural path, to be selected by Giringun people.

## **6.7 Conclusion**

Giringun’s Tuesday art workshops provided a less intrusive, pragmatic, and indeed highly insightful window for a researcher into the ways in which QLD rainforest people were social on their country. Therefore, this chapter first discussed the consent for entry into an artist and descendant community as a “gift” to the researcher. It then discussed how the Giringun Aboriginal Art Centre on Girramay land provided structural support for governance on country and a culturally appropriate avenue for an individual’s encouragement. The workshops held in the Girramay National Park were one of the important community spaces where social interactions and business took place in Murray Upper for Aboriginal people, and being makers of ‘new artefacts’, Giringun artists chose which potent symbols to reproduce.

As has now been argued, the weekly art workshops were an opportunity for people to re-create cultural symbols with the guidance of elders and ancestors. Highly distinct shapes like the bi-cornual basket and the broad oval or kidney-shaped shield were important identifiers of a particular Indigenous identity, that is, Queensland rainforest identity. Perfecting these cultural forms took time among “masters”, whether they were living Aunties or ancestors/old people in museums. Curating in terms of retaining, rejecting and re-forming different symbols of culture converged at this place on Girramay country. To address the art manager’s question of why people come to art workshops like Giringun, we can reasonably answer now that it has much to do with the fact that the regular art workshops at the Girramay National Park reinforce two constants of culture for this descendant community, namely, family and land. The next chapter will provide another example of family and land as central.

## 7. *Mija and Country on the Murray River*

### 7.1 Introduction

The Dyirbal word “mija” was described in Dixon’s (2017a) unpublished Dyirbal dictionary as a noun with “a wider range of meaning than any other in the language” (p. 192). Mija is simultaneously intangible and tangible, referring to one’s “homeplace” as well as the material “hut” that one has built, for example. Over two days in 2018, instead of going to the art workshop at the Edmund Kennedy National Park, Giringun artists, elders and other young people went down to a senior women’s camp to make *mija*, or humpies as they are colloquially known in Australia, on the Murray River in Murray Upper. The mijas were made, firstly, to facilitate ‘cultural transmission’ of skills, and secondly, so that they could be photographed for Giringun’s exhibition at the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair. The exhibition will be discussed in the next chapter. In this chapter, I describe one of the days in which the building of mijas occurred. I analyse the process and product of mija building on the Murray River and show how these artful mija certainly reflected the broad meaning of mija as both “hut” and “homeplace”. However, I argue that it is the former notion of a mija – as material hut – that is critical to Girramay, Jirrabl and Gulngay people’s conceptualisation of country.

Indeed, while the process of intangible cultural heritage was valued by the artists that day, the strategic placement of a tangible object on country was also significant as a political statement of Indigenous presence on land. The panorama of Aboriginal mija on the river potentially gives rise to all sorts of obfuscating theoretical or art interpretations, particularly as these mija were constructed for an art project. However, in the intellectual efforts to record and conserve intangible knowledges and art practice we should not forget that *homeland* is also a tangible thing, and traditional owners want access to it. We will see this when Ernie Grant describes the sale of 50,000 acres of land in the 1960s to an American cattle company known as King Ranch. This led to a keenly felt loss of access to traditional lands for Girramay, Jirrabal and Gulngay people. At the close of this chapter, the consequences of the massive land sale, and the failure to recognise country as material land – as “hut” as well as “homeplace” – is finally demonstrated in an account of “waiting for land” from three key elders.

## 7.2 Some observations of Mija building

After not going for a few weeks to the art workshop, I went to the EK down in Murray Upper again. Everything was shut up with no one around. There were only two giant bagu now standing, painted and ready to be sent to Cairns. I hopped back in the car and drove to Girringun in Cardwell to see where everyone was and, pulling up to the curb at the Girringun office, I noticed Miranda across the street picking up her sister, Beryl, from the clinic. I waved and asked, “no workshop today?” She told me they were all “home”, camping down by the river Murray Upper, and she was going there now. I could follow her if I wanted.

We drove the 15 minutes or so that it took to get to Murray Upper, turning after the Murray Upper primary school before Aunty Emily’s house and on to a dirt road. We went past rows of lime trees that belonged, I learned later, to the MacDonald family. Sarah MacDonald was married to the local gravedigger and that morning she came down briefly to the river, where everybody was gathered, on her quad bike with two dogs. She was very tanned and young, and jokingly (also very diplomatically) the senior Girramay elder Uncle Claude called her “boss lady”. She tried to keep her dog Whisky on the bike, but he dashed off down to the river as soon as he was able. Aunty Edith told me a bit about Sarah’s family who had allowed them to camp on their property. They were “good people” who grew up in Murray Upper and went to school with her own children. As well as limes, the family also farmed lychees, which were a more recent addition. Of course sugar cane was the main crop taking up the place, and we drove past much of this to get down to the river where a group of Jirrbal and Girramay women had made their camp for a few weeks (see Figure 19).

After parking up alongside Beryl and Miranda, we went in under the colourbond shelter that was the main shelter of the women’s camp. A camp bed and a few chairs lay out in the open, near a large central fire with three billycans suspended above it. Leela was making up morning tea. Lots of cakes were already laid out on a long table, and I was glad to have stopped in at Innisfail to buy some food, which I added to the table. Valerie was apologetic about forgetting to send out an email to let me know where they were that day, and I in turn

was apologetic that I had not been for a few weeks<sup>42</sup>. After a handshake with Uncle Claude and hugs and greetings for the Aunties, I began cutting up fruit and catching up with Leela. After a short time, Valerie asked, “having a cup of tea Tahnee?”, so, after cutting up the melon, I sat down with Uncle Claude and Aunty Theresa with coffee to catch up. I said to Uncle Claude, “remember when you took me and Amanda down to Flat Rock camp? I saw my first cassowary there, drinking across the other side of the Murray River”. “Oh my, yes” he replied. “That was a while ago. Back when...was alive”, referring to his brother who had since passed.

Valerie then addressed everybody, as she usually did at the EK before starting the day’s work. Some people had already done two mija frames yesterday, she reported; the rest of us had “missed out”. But today was for completing them so there was lots of work to be done. She thanked the four Girringun rangers who were also there: two men and two women dressed in khakis and boots, all of them related in some way to the camping artists. Valerie also thanked Sarah for letting us be on the property. She was off the quad bike now and sharing a double camp chair with one of the artists, looking happy and at ease with everyone. Valerie said something about thanking “the Murris” too (a general term on the east coast of Australia for Aboriginal people, here referring specifically to Jirrbal and Girramay traditional landowners), with the kind of diplomatic neutrality that she did so well.

Valerie then asked Uncle Claude if he would like to say anything and he said not really, just that he remembered camping down here with family as a kid and that it was “a good place to be”. We were all spread out a bit further apart than what we would have been under the art centre carport and some people did not hear him, so Valerie repeated. After some more words from Valerie, Claude then announced, “actually I will tell a story for us”. As I was sitting next to him, I moved away, nearer to Aunty Theresa for this. His story was very brief, about an Indigenous woman who was buried nearby. People knew she was there, he said, because of a beautiful feather that lay on her grave all the time. Unlike Claude’s previous words, Valerie did not repeat them to people on the other side, saying only, “Thank you Claude for that”.

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<sup>42</sup> Part of the appeal of a volunteer labour for both Girringun and its volunteers, it seemed it to me, was that it was a casual arrangement in which neither party really had to report to the other in the manner of a regular employee/employer. Our mutual extensions of apology were thus just a courtesy to each other.



*Figure 19: Women's Camp at Murray*



*Figure 20: Giringun people by the Murray River*

Some photos were taken while Sarah was there, then the artists and rangers got in to the mija making. As Valerie had said, there were already two frames on the riverbed, down the steep embankment from the women's camp. They needed to be thatched now, and there was another mija to do to complete three mijas in total. As with the bagu making, I felt it was not my place to help with the mija even though Auntie Jodie, a Warrgamay woman, asked me to hold something. I held a leaf in place, then stepped away to sit on the sand and watch the artist and rangers continue. Lennie, a white employee, helped at first, and Valerie asked Uncle Claude at the beginning, "are they doing it right Claude?", "Yep, yep, it's all correct", he answered. But soon the Giringun artists and rangers were left to the construction of the mijas without any interference from the non-Indigenous or non-local "helpers" such as me, Valerie and another volunteer there.

The two already-started mijas were ‘humpy-style’ with only one opening, while the third mija was larger with two open ends. As the Giringun group started to place licuala palm leaves on this latter frame, the men ended up being on one side with women on the other. Someone joked with Uncle Claude, who was walking around, sometimes talking to people, that he would have to judge whose side was better. On the “men’s side” one of the men who had not done much mija building before started to put leaves on the top. A younger man began to do the same. Valerie, who had come down again by this time, asked if the rain would get in that way. Abe who was over to the side taking a break from the construction, smiled at this, saying, “they started from the top when they should have started from the bottom”, and so the men started again.

Most of the materials for the mija were found nearby. This included the lawyer cane sapling for the frames and the vine to tie everything together. Miranda said that they had to get more fan palm three times, but that was no problem as everything they needed was only a short walk away: “one nice big one and a smaller tree just over down there”, she said, indicating up the river. During the morning some of the elder women indeed wandered off with a few younger people along the river in search of more materials. Echoing O’Rourke & Memmott’s (2006) comments on traditional mija building – about the preference for “mixed” and “proximal materials”, and also travel for melaleuca bark cladding – the only cladding of the three types that looked to be brought in from further away was the tea tree paper bark. The bark was transported on a ute from the rangers, then walked down to the riverbank. I went to help with this but one of the young rangers told me kindly, “you right. I got it”. Interestingly, some years before, Ernie Grant spoke about the gendered roles in gathering materials for mija:

The men will go and get the bark, women will get the sticks and put them in the ground and tie the knot. Men’ll get the bark and put it on. Each one knew their role. You didn’t see women going and getting the bark (laughs). Or the men getting the sticks. (E Grant interview, 2014)

Clearly, a deviation from this gendered tradition (of men getting the paper bark from elsewhere) prompted amusement from Ernie, and a corrective check from the young ranger for me.

One or two of the elder women were too old for the constructing work and so they watched from the side, sitting on plastic chairs in the sand. Aunty Emily, however, was very active during the whole day, even getting down on hands and knees to finally tie down the leaves with vine and fix the thatch in place. Rick, an older ranger helped her, calling her “mum”, and making her laugh. “It’s a thing of beauty,” I said about the finished mija as Aunty Emily fixed the last of the thatch in place. “Yes, it is a thing of beauty”, Rick said, indicating Emily on the ground. He then helped her to her feet, and we all laughed as she lightly slapped him on the arm for his cheek. Upon completion there were three different mijas – one alexandra palm mija, one tea tree bark mija and one licuala palm mija.

With the mijas finished, the artists placed new artefacts that they had made in and around the mija. Uncle Claude said one of the shields was Gulngay, and I assumed this to be Marty’s shield, who was not there that day. Marty was another known shield maker and one of a few art makers who did not usually come to the workshops. I knew Uncle Claude, too, made boomerangs at home rather than at the workshop. Another Djiru man also made pieces at home, though he did come in one week to shows me clapping sticks he made, “for family” he said rather than for the selling at the art centre. Uncle Patrick had completed a shield too, again with diamonds, to be placed with other artefacts around the mijas. There were three big baskets, as well as eel and wallaby traps, and *bagu* and *jiman* made from “traditional materials” as it would have been described in Stories, Art and Money (SAM), the art software program used to track sales and inventory at the Girringun Art Shop. I had a short conversation with Patrick on the riverbank about his shields and string, and he told me that Abe was helping him to be a professional artist, advising that he could “make a name for himself” through art. We started to talk about how he was doing this, but then he was called away to be photographed with the artefacts in front of the mijas.

First the elders sat down, either holding their art pieces or placing them next to their side: Patrick and Claude, Cybil, Bonnie, Emily, Edith, Theresa, and Abe – while Valerie took a photo from across the other side of the river. Then the rangers sat in, along with Bambam and her teenage children. Finally, the helpers joined – me and Lennie, Angie and Leela. Miranda and Jenny took pictures also – Jen across the river with electronic tablet in hand. A few younger people took pictures all morning on phones or tablets, but Jen was one of the centre’s official photographers, together with Leela and Bambam. After photos with people and artefacts around the mijas were taken, all the art was taken back up the riverbank.

The last thing to do was to cut wood and place it at the mija entrances, which one of the rangers did after photos with people, to make it seem as if a fire was ready to be lit. Most of us sat and watched from up on the riverbank, quite mesmerized in fact, as a female ranger in high-vis fluoro orange work gear cut wood with a chainsaw. Valerie took a few more pictures with Abe, then Lennie and Patrick cleared away the leftover materials with a rake to make it all tidy. The plan was for the rangers to bring in drones the next day and photograph the three mijas in place. One of these shots would be printed and used as a backdrop at CIAF for artefacts to be sold. I asked Aunty Emily what would happen to the mija after this, and she told me, “well we can come visit them if we want. But they’ll just stay there like that. Maybe until the river come and wash it away” (E Murray pers comm, 2018).



*Figure 21 Artists and rangers construct a frame*





*Figure 22: Artists fix palm thatching to mija frame*



*Figure 23: Three Mijas on the Murray River*

### 7.3 Process and Product: A Symbol in the Rainforest

In an ever-fascinating foot note, postcolonial theorist James Clifford (1988) cites Chinua Achebe's example of Igbo house builders to muse tangentially on the cultural valuing of "process" over "product" in a tropical environment.<sup>43</sup> For Giringun people building mija, it seemed that *process* over product was similarly being valued that day. Uncle Claude's story first set the scene, then there was a job to do within a given time frame: the mija frames first had to be tied down, the thatching for each with further collection of materials where necessary, finally, the scene had to be set for the drones the next day with the sand cleared of extraneous materials and the mock fire put up. In these moments of building, the important goal for artists and rangers was to collaborate together, to make jokes and learn from mistakes, to get in there as much as one was physically able and partake in the whole process of mija building. Lending further credence to Giringun's apparent valuing of process over product, the mijas were built in the Murray Upper rainforest rather than back at the Giringun keeping place in Cardwell. Their placement was on a riverbed in the rainforest no less, which in all probability would flood in the wet season. Giringun's incorporation, here, of such "formidable agencies of dissolution" (ibid, p. 241) strongly position the mija as temporary and natural. And we saw that Aunty Em was not particularly concerned with the fate of the mijas, only that they would "stay there" for a while. Interestingly, the apparent abandonment of the Giringun mijas to the elements reflected the traditional practice of burning one's first completed basket. Arguably this demonstrates a similar cultural "aesthetic value" that Achebe describes for Igbo and their Mbari houses (Achebe in Clifford 1988), where water is as effective as fire for encouraging process over product.

The *process/product* binary can easily be transposed to the *intangible/tangible* heritage binary, and an Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) framework has now assisted people across the world to carry on the "process" and "practice" of many forms of self-defining traditional cultural crafts. To cite just one example, at the Roskilde Viking Museum in Denmark, after

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<sup>43</sup> The entire quote from Achebe is given as follows: "The purposeful neglect of the painstakingly and devoutly accomplished mbari houses with all the art objects in them as soon as the primary mandate of their creation has been served, provides a significant insight into the Igbo aesthetic value as process rather than product...this aesthetic disposition receives powerful endorsement from the tropical climate which provides an abundance of materials for making art, such as wood, as well as formidable agencies of dissolution such as humidity and the termite" (Achebe cited in Clifford 1988, p. 241).

walking past the old Viking boats in the main centre, visitors can follow a footpath leading to a workshop next door (called “the boatyard”) to see “master” boat builders constructing new boats behind glass. Although it ostensibly existed to produce art products for sale, we know that the Girringun art centre was similarly helpful for facilitating these kinds of ICH opportunities – what Leela the art manager in training had called “cultural transmission”. As mentioned in chapter three, a similar special art workshop promoted *nuba* ‘water bag’ making skills: to beat the tree bark on a certain side and direction, and to test different ratios of sap and beeswax for glue, for example. It does not appear to matter if it is a museum or an art centre that promotes ICH, the support of infrastructure such as these can do much to support, not just cultural transmission per se, but more specifically, those cultural practices that go so far toward defining the self and community – a sort of ‘self-transmission’.

Having highlighted how important such intangible skills are, I want to assert at this point that the tangible product is also vitally important. We can remember at the MTQ visit that the Girringun artists and elders were highly interested in the old *nuba* ‘water bags’, and they spent some time looking upon the different examples of them on the shelf – to study the craft certainly, but also to be amongst them, appreciating them as artefacts made by their old people from materials of their country. In this way cultural attachment to an artefact comes from its material properties: from the fact that it is made of materials from country, and that it is infused with the spirit of its ancestor maker to be an ancestralised artefact, as was shown in chapter two. Moreover, there is a recognition and connection to place and people that these properties represent – there is power, in other words, in its symbolism. Just as the Viking ship summons an image of adventurous and mobile people, the Aboriginal mijas in this chapter carry quite a bit of symbolic weight. Indeed I would suggest that the mija or humpy is on par with the boomerang as a strong identifier of Aboriginal Australia. As a symbol however, it can be interpreted in a multitude of ways, according to the myriad of intellectual perspectives that one can take when mija as “art” is invoked.

#### **7.4 Mija as Home and Hut**

Being a traditional dwelling made of sticks and leaves, the modernist might consider the mija to be considered a temporary, even unloved, construction. From a colonial settler state perspective, mija served to reproduce the strategic assumption that all pre-colonial Indigenous people were nomadic and not really occupants of Australia (let alone “owners”). However,

historically, mija sites were not necessarily temporary, nor necessarily “neglected” to use Achebe’s term again. For example, in Ferrier’s (2015) survey of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century European writing in the North QLD rainforest, including in the Jirrbal area, we see that the gold prospector Mulligan described “townships” in the rainforest areas of the Atherton Tablelands, while the Swedish scientist Mjöberg noted a “native rainforest village” around Cedar Creek and Tully river – these being in the high and low country, respectively, of Jirrbal country<sup>44</sup>. Though Ferrier describes the cleared “pockets” where camps are built, and the “superior quality” (p. 44) of the mija huts compared to huts made with European materials, she does not explicitly assert, as one could I think, the permanence or scale of such mija camp sites for rainforest people. Maybe this is due to the fact that camps are also described in the historical sources as seasonal, “wet-weather” camps, “on the edges” of the rainforest – they only “stay there for a while”, in other words, as Aunty Emily had said.

Admittedly, Girringun’s mijas were not made to be lived in, cared for, kept, or owned on this occasion. They were rather created as part of an art project and exhibition to emplace, and authenticate, artefacts for sale. One might counter, therefore, that a more ahistorical, or spatial interpretation is a better approach to understanding mija building for Girringun. For instance, it might be reasonable to attribute to Girringun mijas the status of a liminal symbol, since they were placed at the edges of several binary spaces: upon a sandbank, between land and water, and even on the edge of public and private property in an ostensibly “shared space” (ie the river). Moreover, the rangers and artists who usually enacted a nature/culture division of labour – rangers care for country, artists make art – clearly came together that day to collaborate on a common project. Finally, taking account of a cyclical time component, the three mija were created in the month of May, during that strange in-between period of “Autumn” in the tropics of North Queensland, when there is neither the hot summer rain of the wet season, nor the cool winter air of the dry season.

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<sup>44</sup> These two sources cited in Ferrier are, respectively: 1) Mulligan, J.V. 1877, Expedition in search of gold and other minerals in the Palmer districts, by Mulligan and party. *Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly* 3:395-417. Brisbane., and 2) Mjöberg E, 1913, The unpublished diaries from the second Australian expedition., Eric Mjöberg collection, Accession numbers 26851, 26852 and 26858, Box 5, California Academy of Sciences, San Fransisco, CA.

Having now claimed a number of binaries (process/product, land/water, tangible/intangible, nature/culture, wet/dry), we might attempt to perform the poststructuralist's signature move of deconstructing them all. Perhaps we could even describe a Latourian social network and attribute agency to the mijas: it was the mija that brought people together! Yet, if there was agency it was not on the part of the mijas per se. It was "home", not just "house-building", that brought people together: "they're home" as Miranda put it, speaking of the river at Murray Upper. If there *were* binaries, these were created and negotiated by Girringun people. For example, the ranger/artist division really reflected the work divisions prescribed by State funding. The nature/culture binary too was similarly etic, for the rangers, when they look after country, take part not just in nature activity but also in culture activity; artmaking (ostensibly only 'cultural') featured natural aspects quite heavily, in terms of place scapes of plants and animals. Even the male/female parallel work situation of the mija building, admittedly reflecting a typical gendered social distance in Australian Indigenous people's social interactions, was momentarily cut through in the interaction between Rick and Aunty Emily. The playfulness of their relation showed how even the strictest of emic binaries (respected elders/deferent youngers) could be spontaneously negotiated on country if specific kin relationships allowed it.

The available binaries to dissolve are potentially unending in this way. Yet what I am trying to demonstrate is that, in the face of these complex discussions – about the symbolism of art, Indigenous knowledge and its relationship to western academia, and non-human elements as participants in social worlds – a prescribed theoretical framework (for example, "structuralist", or "poststructuralist") all have irresistible explanatory power for an art project, and these can easily draw us away from a more ethnographically informed explanation. What we need to keep coming back to is the place at which mija is discerned from a Girramay or Jirrbal perspective.

Ernie Grant once said to me that the Tully and Murray rivers were critically important for his family living in Murray Upper: as he put it, "we always come back to the river". Therefore, 'family on the river', for the purposes this day of building mija, was not so much temporary or liminal as it was *central*. To link back to the historical-sources discussion above, we can invoke Mjöberg's (1913) further description of mija sites as "base camps" to convey in English the sense of permanency that should be afforded to one's mija, and which could always be returned to as needed (ideally at least). As we saw earlier in the thesis, when he

first greeted me on his country Uncle Claude did not say to me, “hello, how are you” as you would in English. Rather, he asked in Dyirbal, “where is your mija?” (then, “what is your name?”). He thus used the term “mija” to enquire as to my Country and identity before asking my name. To jump across the Australian continent for a moment, my own Yawuru mother has described Country as the place where her *liyan* ‘spirit/sense of self’ originated and is therefore at ease, what could be described as *homeplace*. I cannot easily romanticise any concept of Home, knowing too well that this place is often the site of trauma and abuse for Indigenous women and children. But in addition to the presence of her ancestors’ spirits, it is certainly this sense of intangibility that my mother invokes, where “home” refers to a *relation* between personhood and place that can be recalled and returned to, even if just in the imagination. Salient to this latter point is Babidge’s (2011) challenge to a pure materialist anthropology that might exclude diasporic Indigenous communities from having connection to country, since, she argues, “the substance of social action relevant to connection to country may happen in another place” (p. 88). I will support this idea in the next chapter when the Giringun people appear to move their Country to an art fair in Cairns.

At this stage, however, I continue to highlight the present and material aspect of mija – as *hut*. For Uncle Claude and his community, one’s home is also a concrete thing: a physical place to access and camp at, a place to *inhabit*. At the risk of overindulging in the cross-continent comparison, my grandmother consistently stressed to my mother to “never sell your house” in Broome, since it meant she would always have a place to live. In short, a homeplace is good, but a house is better. We should continue to think of mija, then, as a *material* designation of Country, or as *Land*, as I will now elaborate. For this reason, mija building on the Murray River for Giringun people was a process, yes, but it was also a stamping of an Indigenous symbol upon the landscape, in the backyard as it were of the European Australian landowner.

### **7.5 Difficult Relationships in Sweet Country**

As we saw in chapter four, *The Burden of Keeping*, Indigenous people are acknowledged in various information signs in Tully as traditional owners, but the town and its surrounds are presented to visitors as sweet country claimed through the hard work of European pioneers. Even the most diplomatic traditional owners were still deeply frustrated that their traditional lands and “base camps” legally belonged now to European Australians. To assert finally how mija is a material as well as conceptual home, I want to incorporate the following

conversation, which I recorded for the Dyirbal heritage project a year before this research between the three senior Murray Upper elders Uncle Claude (CB, Girramay), Aunty Theresa (TB, Jirrbal), and Aunty Emily (EM, Jirrbal/Girramay). It was this conversation that made me first think seriously about that idea that country, like an artefact, is in the first instance *tangible*, and that future research with this community should be committed to prioritising this fact. The three senior elders were discussing the topic of land access as we sat up on the bank of the Murray River, behind a house that Uncle Claude and Aunty Theresa were looking after for someone:

CB: Sign there 'do not enter' because of that disease... (farmer's name) out there renting my country I think he probably got that sign too. Hurt a man's feeling you know. Can't take the kids out. Tell you what I'm still going to take a gamble there, still walk though there

EM: Nobody stop me from going through there... dying out we will all die out with it! Kids (say) 'can we camp here tonight?' – we gotta make a road here, we can't growl (the kids)...

TB: We should all be equal

EM: We should be just the same as everybody else...

CB: I gotta jump the fence back home, down here... my country.

EM: No you're not. You follow the family where they go. You the head of the house now

CB: I do get lonely, like to home there. Grandma you know, now and again...

TB: Eyeopener to me when we went up to Burrulula. Pretty country. Lovely. People who own the Burrulula country – they everywhere living in whatever spot they pick. That's their place. Station. All cattle under there (CB: wish we can be like that)

...they got their mission, community... they not perfect, they drink and fight... but they not allowed to make mess. They go near the river. They got toilet... They open my eye, that lot of Aboriginal people got their own place. They got their own house, built brand new houses. Cattle. Everything. What we got? We surrounded by sugar cane. We surrounded by white man property. Wait for Native Title. We got a place picked but, how long are you gonna wait for?

EM: You'll be waiting til we got walking stick and all that... go back to hospital and sit down there and wait (CB: til you die). Them white people still got the place...

TB: King Ranch took up the land, knocked everything down

EM: We was going to school then...

CB: All through out life, digging scrub hen. Never short of food... that's still carried on...

TB: winter now – somebody else like to sleep in there too!

CB: them scrub snake, ngudan

TB: We still got it in us but the land is taken away. And scrub and river. It's there but we gotta go to it

EM: Go ask people, 'Can we get past through there?', then get down the river

CB: That's getting to be a pain that one

EM: I don't care who's there. I just drive a car right around the headland, just to go to the river. Nobody can stop me from the river

TB: Why would we want to go in the...knock all the suger cane, bananas down...we just going through their road just to the river

CB: Why you walk through there? Because you used to walk through there when you was a kid. And you parents took you through

TB: Famous track

CB: Famous track we still follow them track, same way you know.

(C Beeron, T Beeron, E Murray interview, 2015)

‘Country’ for Indigenous Australians has been described in various ways in academic texts, for example, as “nourishing terrain” (Rose & Australian Heritage, 1996), or as a layered “cultural landscape” (Pannell, 2008) with specific places consubstantiated by creator beings and ancestral spirits. Indigenous people are thus required to re-enliven country through ritualised acts of ‘care’, to put it all too briefly. Indeed, I regret that I was unable to participate in any Giringun ranger activities, per se, beyond those that intersected with artist activities to see just how care of country was affected within the parameters of the QLD government’s Department of Environment and Science’s *Parks and Forests* with whom Giringun rangers worked. Still, the hope for these traditional owners is not just to manage country perhaps by back burning to clear an “estate” (Gammage, 2011), or by what contemporary rangers do now through cyclone clean up for example, though these are important activities which demonstrate care and the ongoing Indigenous presence on land. Moreover, it is not just about people re-enlivening the ancestral spirits, though certainly this is a priority too; Uncle Claude we will remember would talk to country, and the old people therein, to respectfully acknowledge them. It seems to me that what is most persistent in the elders’ conversation is their longing to be on the land and access the places they used to. A “desire called “the land,” is differently, persistently active” (p. 481), as Clifford (2001) has put it in his discussion of Indigenous articulations.

Thus, classical descriptions that emphasise ritual and cosmology, while articulate and true for many various Indigenous groups across Australia, are not quite pragmatic enough to explain what is being expressed above. From these senior elders we see that there is concern about how one will access sites on country with their young people, moreover, through the same paths used by their own parents before them. Sugar cane fields, biosecurity protocols at



banana farms<sup>45</sup>, the long wait for Native Title rights (till one is older still, even on the death bed, in “hospital”), and lands rented to strangers (which “hurt a man’s feelings”) are all obstacles to these three elders accessing traditional camping places near the river, and indeed ancestor’s resting places (“grandma”, Claude says). Although country is critical for the learned and shared experiences that define culture, it is for more than just socio-cultural reproduction. It is for the perception at least of a future stability. In this way, it is indeed an *asset* – one’s mija in the sense of a physical house that one owns and can pass down. The elders above want to take their own children and grandchildren and camp at the old places, as their parents did for them. It seems to me that this demonstrates “heritage” in the true sense of the word – heritage as “family asset” – a ‘thing’ having value and therefore kept in the family.

In this respect, Ernie often pointed to the implications of an event in the 1963 (mentioned above as well) when the government sold a tract of largely Jirrbal land – which was to be called “King Ranch” – to an American cattle company. Much land was as a result “locked up” to Aboriginal people but also to the local white farmers who then had to “scramble” for other land to develop, as Ernie put it. The result was a substantial loss, in one fell swoop so to speak, of access to land and water. As Ernie described:

we haven’t got the land it’s been taken off us. Without the land it’s not easy to keep up the old cultural stories and place and stuff like that...without the land what CAN you do anyway? King Ranch was 50,000 acres. Mainly on Jirrbal land. Some partially on Girramay land and little bit on Gulngay land but a big slice of Jirrbal land. That, all the Aboriginal people, regardless of our tribal outcome, we used to all hunt and go out. It’s all gone now it’s all cut up into small farms. And nobody likes us going NEAR the place. So that’s one of the reasons for things taking their turn. (E Grant interview, 2016)

Mrs Henry’s art shop in Murray Upper has been briefly mentioned already (with some of the objects ending up at the MTQ as we saw). We can note moreover that, according to her daughter, one of the reasons Mrs Henry first opened the Aboriginal Art Shop was because

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<sup>45</sup> Referring to the biosecurity protocols that help stop the spread of Panama TR4, a disease of banana plants first found in QLD in 2015 at a commercial banana farm in the Tully Valley (Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, QLD Government, 2020).

“the people were starving” after this sale of land to become King Ranch (V Keenan pers comm, 2017).

Related to this issue of genocide, restricted access to customary land and waters was still keenly felt in terms of the contemporary maintenance of cultural practices. Thus, as Ernie says above, “Without the land, what CAN you do?” His statement clearly indicates frustration but is also a sort of justifying preamble for all the ways around restricted access that Indigenous people now had to find – either through private arrangements or bold serendipity. For example, the times that Ernie and I had been out on country we had encountered several fences. One fence was around council land when we went for lawyer cane (see *Figure 24*), which we subsequently jumped over, another was around private property when we went with his wife and nephew to hunt for axe heads near Silkwood. In the latter expedition, Ernie knocked on the door of a farmer he had known very well, though Ernie thought it must be the farmer’s son now whom he had to ask about accessing the site. On that occasion nobody was at home. Encountering yet another new fence it was decided that we should abandon the axe-hunting mission rather than jump the fence into private property.



*Figure 24: Looking for cane on council land*



*Figure 25: Axes beyond the fence at Silkwood*

There were cases of informal arrangements between farmers and traditional owners where access to land was granted, as we have now seen in the case of the women's camp and mija building by the Murray River. Mija building had taken place by the MacDonald's farm, and the Jirrbal and Girramay women's camp was being accessed via private farmland for several weeks. In fact, after returning to the women's camp in the Giringun bus I was told that we had just driven through *three* farming families' properties to get there. All of the farming families had agreed to let Giringun people through and continued to allow the women to camp on the river, at a prime spot which belonged to a woman who had gone to primary school with the elder's children. When I asked further how this arrangement had come about, one of the Jirrbal women explained to me: "if you're good to them, they're good to you".

Although Ernie had probably been "good" to a great deal of people himself, our unsuccessful axe-hunting mission demonstrated that good relations had to be kept up over several generations. Ongoing good relationships were precarious and difficult to co-ordinate amongst the numerous parties usually required. In short, though privately negotiated contemporary agreements were sometimes possible, such as on the case of the women's camp and the Grant family's use of Echo Creek under a private agreement to present cultural workshops, the loss of access to land and waters through the massive land sale of King Ranch led to things "taking their turn", as Ernie put it. As I understood it, this meant an irretrievable loss of power for Indigenous people who now had to go knocking on doors to access their traditional land.

## 7.6 Conclusion

This chapter described a single day during the Autumn of 2018, in which Giringun artists and rangers constructed the iconic Australian dwelling called '*mija*' on country. On the wide sandy riverbed of the Murray River, three mijas were constructed with different materials to encourage 'transmission' of intangible cultural heritage. Cultural transmission of this kind was an important goal for Giringun, where young people learned the traditional skills of their ancestors from their own elders. The building day also provided an opportunity for family to 'come back to the river', as was so often done in the days before King Ranch. As Ernie Grant told us, this significant land purchase by an American cattle company in the 1960s prevented access to significant areas of Girramay, Jirrbal and Gulngay land for Indigenous people. Today, the same Indigenous families were able to gather on the riverbank, down past private farmland for the specific purpose of building something. Although these mijas would

eventually wash away, the resulting three mijas, as concrete things, were visible for a while at least, and thus, an accurate reflection of the *hut* as well as homeplace meaning of ‘mija’.

As for mija’s multiple meanings, we saw when Uncle Claude asked me where my mija was that mija indeed extends to mean contemporary home or Country. The potentially more romantic notion of mija as ‘homeplace’ gives rise to all sorts of obfuscating theoretical interpretations. However, mija conceptualised as a material ‘hut’ was demonstrated in the conversation of three elders speaking in their home in Murray Upper. Country for these elders is a material place with material paths. One should be able to visit and thus transmit to young people this material conceptualisation of country – as material heritage. Country is thus *land*, and as such, a ‘family asset’. Turning now to the second phase of the Girringun mija experience, I will show how the mijas transformed into photographs for an art fair to create a temporary home for artefacts off country. I moreover compare this strong Indigenous sense of place at the wharf in Cairns with a ‘placeless’ keeping place in Cardwell.

## ***8. Making Artefacts at Home in Cairns, QLD***

### **8.1 Introduction**

An art exhibition seems to be a common place along the trajectory for an Indigenous artefact today, while an on-country keeping place is its end place. In this final discussion chapter of the thesis, two such places for Giringun artefacts are described, namely, Giringun's keeping place in Cardwell and a temporary exhibition space at the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair (CIAF as it was better known, pronounced KY-af). As will be shown, Giringun's keeping place was somewhat isolated from the comings and goings of Giringun people. As a single climate-controlled room it was for all intents and purposes a permanent on-country museum. On the other hand, at the large CIAF venue at the Cairns Wharf, Giringun and other Indigenous people were highly present, and new artefacts at Giringun's display were let out of the glass shelves, so to speak, to express Giringun country to a public audience. It is shown that Giringun's on-country keeping place constituted a generic space (a museum), while the curated CIAF exhibition off-country symbolised a specific place (one's clan camp on Girramay country). The latter exhibition was thus a 'home' for artefacts.

We will see that Giringun's CIAF exhibition took some inspiration from the keeping place in Cardwell, since both displays featured a single mija constructed in the space by Giringun people. At CIAF, however, much effort was made to display new artefacts around the material mija and upon a large photographic representation of Girramay country to emplace the artefacts within a river camp setting. This traditional scene was a text-free way to communicate subtly to a public audience a "pre-contact" era. It was also a way to convey a Giringun sense of temporality in which ancestors and stories are always present within country. I argue that this culturally informed Time and Place was congruent with the contextualising aim of Ernie Grant's Holistic Framework and its three factors of *Time*, *Place* and *Relationships*<sup>46</sup>, and furthermore, that the right emplacement of artefacts in the display was critical to this contextualisation.

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<sup>46</sup> I will continue to capitalise these terms – Time, Place, Relationships – to signify that I am referencing Ernie Grant's Holistic Framework.

An interview with a Girramay artist and key spokesperson for the Girringun Aboriginal Art Centre, Abe Muriata, will further evidence the valuing of emplacing artefacts within a distinct place of ancestors and family by the river. So, after descriptions of the keeping place and the CIAF exhibition, selections of Abe's commentary are provided to show how artefacts were described in the systematic way of an Indigenous curator describing an Indigenous provenance. Abe's interview, recorded many months before the exhibition, can be seen as the oral version of emplacing artefacts. I turn first to the keeping place in Cardwell and the Girringun Aboriginal Corporation.

## **8.2 The Girringun Keeping Place**

We were introduced briefly to the Girringun Aboriginal Corporation in the third chapter of the thesis. Now, at the close of this thesis' discussion, more can be said. In many ways the Girringun Aboriginal Corporation was a success story of Indigenous governance and resilience. Although supported by government funding, its longevity was due to strong Indigenous leadership, a good volunteer base, and a history of familial-type connections between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Board members from all nine of the traditional owner groups (Bandjin, Djiru, Girramay, Gugu Badhun, Gulngay, Jirrbal, Nywaigi, Warrgamay and Warungnu) met regularly to vote on a range of issues involving their projects and other issues in the wider community, such that the Girringun Aboriginal Corporation continues today to be an influential representative body in the region. In addition to the art centre and keeping place, Girringun's other major programs included the Biodiversity & Native Nursery, and the Ranger Program, in which around 15 rangers were employed to undertake work for Girringun's Indigenous Protected Areas (GIPA) and the Traditional Use of Marine Resource Agreement (TUMRA). From Girringun's main office in the seaside town of Cardwell, perhaps 40 Indigenous and non-Indigenous employees and volunteers worked to care for country and also promote cultural transmission.

Judging in the first place by a demarcation of space at Girringun in Cardwell, the artist and ranger operations were fairly distinct. The main façade of Girringun's building consisted of an indoor art shop, whereas a small native plant nursery was, naturally, outside and around the back. Once inside the art shop one could turn to the right and

open one door, then another, into Giringun's keeping place featuring a selection of rainforest artefacts on display. Behind the art shop's high counter, a single glass window provided a means of visual connection between art shop (frequented by Giringun people) and keeping place (much less visited).

Sales for the shop appeared to be generated through scheduled visits such as pre-booked tour buses, as well as via exhibitions and post-exhibition commissions, rather than 'walk-ins' or buyers off the street. Thus, on one occasion while I was volunteering, the Indigenous Assistant Arts manager at the time called out to me as I was sitting and talking with another Giringun worker. Hurriedly walking past with an armload of parcels, she asked me if I would watch the shop while she went to the post office. I finished up my conversation and I quickly walked after her, asking hesitantly, "what if someone buys something". She replied, "you'll be right. The only thing you might sell is a can of soft drink". She was right. I sold two drinks, to staff, putting the coins on top of the cash register because I did not know how to operate it.

Linda, a long-time European Australian volunteer whom the elders called "the arkie" given her degree in archaeology, told me more about Giringun's keeping place next to the art shop. She said it was started in 2002 but officially opened in 2004. They were able to "get objects back" for this, some objects being fully repatriated from the James Cook University of Material Culture Unit, others 'returned' via a long-term loan arrangement with the Queensland Museum. As I understood it, impromptu public tours of Giringun's keeping place were usually given by either Linda the arkie or the Jirrbal woman Bambam.

It was Linda the arkie who first showed me into the keeping place and the collection of approximately 20 artefacts there. Walking through the unlocked two doors and into the keeping place, I commented on a small hand-painted map on a far wall. Local place names were written on the map in the Dyirbal language *guwal*, as people called the everyday style of Dyirbal, differentiating it from the mother-in-law style of Dyirbal called *Jalnguy*. Linda commented that it was good to have a map hand-drawn by one of the Giringun people, even if whoever drew the map "must have been watching TV" because the place labels were crooked. She pointed out some places such as *Bulurru* (Mt Tyson, near Tully) before commenting that the shelves were a bit dusty and might

need a clean. Her concern probably indicated the conditional standards the Queensland Museum had set in order for the artefacts to be loaned to the keeping place, such as having the air conditioning on constantly and set to a specified temperature.

A climate-controlled room, and the fact that a trained archaeologist was giving me the tour, could demonstrate to us the inescapability of a western institutional gaze upon rainforest artefacts for this descendant community. However, such an interpretation may be too simplified. For example, there was actually another keeping place for artefacts located in Murray Upper in the Jumbun Aboriginal community with no museum-imposed regulations. This was hardly ever seen by tourists and researchers. I certainly never saw inside the Jumbun keeping place, nor the artefacts stored there, but it was said that a previous non-Indigenous manager of the community had the key to the place at one time. This individual had reportedly kept old baskets on their desk, which was not deemed to be appropriately respectful by some senior people I spoke to. With the eventual departure of this previous manager (for other reasons, I was told), the artefacts remained under lock and key in the Jumbun keeping place as a precaution, it would seem, against such disregard for their safekeeping. Uncle Claude Beeron now had the key and essentially kept the artefacts at his discretion.

To further argue against the ‘omnipotent western institution’ position, I would also note the many empathetic and co-operative relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people at Girringun. For example, we could remember that “Linda the arkie” was a long-term volunteer at Girringun. She had developed demonstrably good relationships with elders who reportedly teased her for “licking rocks”, a gentle ribbing which indicated, it seemed to me, her status as both archaeologist and friend. Moreover, it was known that Linda the arkie was uniquely knowledgeable about settler violence perpetrated against local Indigenous people. She had recorded several difficult interviews with elders, mostly passed now, about the massacres of Indigenous people in the Tully and Cardwell region through poison as well as shootings. These interviews were never published and remained in the care of Girringun for the next generation of elders. Her respectful care for people and artefacts was therefore informed as much by a close knowledge of Indigenous oral history as it was by a western understanding of archaeological conservation. So, to describe her involvement as ‘white and colonial’, per se, is neither fair nor accurate.



Returning to the keeping place in Cardwell, there was a *mija* or hut in a far corner of the room, which Linda said “one of the uncles” had made. It was not quite to scale, she said, but it still filled the corner space impressively. Two full-sized shields with painted designs on them stood tall behind glass, and Linda marvelled that one of the old Aunties could identify where each shield was from (though sadly, she said, that Aunty had now passed on). Linda explained that the tourists who came in usually liked to see the shield that had been used in a *buya* or corroboree, which she showed me: “you can see the cuts in one side”. There were cane baskets too, laying upon open wall shelves, some painted with ochre and other types of pigment. This decoration was not often done, as Linda described, it was perhaps too impractical for a daily-used object, and painted baskets were probably only for ceremonial or spiritual purposes. We both remarked upon the colours, and she mentioned that one even had an unusual blue colour painted on it. She did not know where the maker could have got this colour traditionally, “but then this particular basket was made in the ‘60s so who knows?” (pers comm, 2017). I asked Linda if she knew about the sheen that was on one of Chloe Grant’s baskets in Uncle Ernie collection, which was possibly lacquered at a later stage, but she told me she did not know about this type of treatment.

It is fair to say that Girringun’s keeping place inspired the curatorial design of the art centre’s 2018 CIAF exhibition in Cairns. The art fair space had a single paperbark *mija* construction and similarly showed artefacts inside the *mija*. Unlike the keeping place, however, the art exhibition displayed shields and baskets by positioning them upon a large-scale photograph of *mija* on the Murray river, so that visually they could be within Girramay country. “New artefacts” (the keeping place had mostly older pieces) could be placed out in the open too, not in a shelf, so they could appear to be in the context of a clan or family camp on the river. It could be argued that the CIAF exhibition was a problematic panoramic of the ethnographic present, but as Ernie Grant might say, this was probably being *jilbay*, “too clever”. The exhibition space, designed by Abe and other elders in consultation with the Arts Manager, simply acknowledged the Time, Place and Relationships that the artefacts, or more precisely their referents, were from. One might go so far as to suggest that artefacts were more as ‘at home’ in Cairns than Cardwell, through this emplacement effort at CIAF. To explain this irony, I now briefly raise a dialectic between Ernie Grant and me about representations of culture and

country “off-Country” (before a more detailed look at CIAF). This will set the scene for the coming discussion of a moving place and its descendant community to an art fair.

### 8.3 Curating Off Country

To demonstrate the problem of trying to learn the Dyirbal language off traditional lands to me, Ernie Grant would raise the example of certain birds with onomatopoeic names. Birds like the *bagamu* ‘wompoo pigeon’, *jigirrijigirr* ‘willie wagtail’, and *duwa* ‘Indian koel’ all gave calls that sounded like Dyirbal names and you could only appreciate this, Ernie argued, when you heard these sounds in country for yourself. Recalling a recent visit he had in Tully from Queensland Museum curators, and also Russel-Cook’s (2016) comparison of the an exhibition featuring Indigenous Australian artefacts in London and Canberra, I once questioned Ernie about the issue of cultural displays off country: “can artefact exhibitions travel to teach people, say *overseas*, about Indigenous land and culture?” Once again he referred to the Dyirbal language in his answer: “It’s like language...it cannot be learned off country. The framework makes it so simple” (E. Grant pers comm, 2017).

Here, what first appears to be an insurmountable problem (it *cannot* be learned off country) is in fact addressed through the Holistic Framework, which Ernie offers as a kind of compromise and solution (“the framework makes it so simple”). I went on to wonder aloud to him, “Does this mean that, logically, things should remain on country?” (I think I meant to say ‘ideally’, but Ernie was unphased by the choice of word.) “Yes, logically”, he answered, “or else, someone from this country accompanies the object.” “What if someone from country is not available to go?”, I pressed. Then someone who was knowledgeable about “the framework” (Land, Language, Culture, Time, Place, and Relationships) would suffice, he answered. “Someone like Bob?”, I continued, referring to the linguist Bob Dixon, essentially to see how far this situation of compromise could go since Bob was neither Indigenous nor from Murray Upper. Surprisingly Ernie answered, “yes – he has been with the people, and had beers with them.” An alternative, then, to “someone from this country” was someone familiar with the language and people, someone who had engaged with elders over time in both a professional and informal way. It was not ideal or “logical” for artefacts to be off country, or for a white person to be speaking for them, but if someone who knew the

‘cultural framework’ for the artefacts could accompany the artefacts, this, it appears, would be an acceptable compromise. Not everyone will agree with Ernie’s conclusion here. Nevertheless, it was interesting to learn that, even for someone who had first doubted ‘learning off country’, cultural learning was possible if people and place somehow travelled with the artefacts as a sort of moving embassy.

Some weeks after the mija building day in 2018 in an example of traditional owners more logically accompanying new artefacts for sale, members of the Giringun art group and their families travelled to the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair in Yidinji and Gimuy Walubarra country. Cairns is also rainforest country, so some of Giringun’s material culture heritage is shared with Yidinji, Gimuy Walubarra, Djabuguy and other rainforest people around Cairns. The Giringun display, being just a 2-hour drive north of Tully (a relatively short drive for the larger states of Australia) was therefore not as far as the “overseas” situation that Ernie and I discussed. It was, nevertheless, off Giringun country. As a distinct and different tribal group of makers at the fair, the Giringun Aboriginal Art Centre had to represent themselves and their own specific culture to an audience, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, via the new artefacts they made. It is to the CIAF exhibition that this chapter now turns.

#### **8.4 Giringun Mija at the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair**

The Cairns Indigenous Art Fair is held every year at the city’s wharf. It consists of the main exhibition inside a grand, high-ceilinged wharf building, an adjacent temporary market with stalls, and an outdoor entertainment area with stage and food vans. The fair is attended by non-Indigenous visitors, buyers, and service providers. Many Indigenous artists, their families, employees, volunteers, and entertainers also attend, probably in even greater number and staying longer too. Frequented thus by Indigenous people, and led moreover by an Indigenous CEO, people and objects all worked together to reinforce the space on the waterfront as a kind of contemporary, if temporary, “blackfella domain” (Trigger, 1986). Clearly this is not in terms of Trigger’s “exclusion” and “social closure”, given waybalas are free to enter. However, it is a domain in terms of the “condition(al)...access and participation of Whites” (p. 115) that

Trigger specifies, through the unspoken agreement that upon entering the space all waybalas become potential buyers<sup>47</sup>.

Girringun's mija display did much to support CIAF as a blackfella domain. Senior Girringun elders still remembered mijas as a visual identifier of a demarcated Aboriginal space in Murray Upper, separate from waybalas, up until the 1970s. As Uncle Claude had said to me: "we used to have own humpies you know, away from the main house. Not that flash you know, but good enough for blackfella" (C Beeron pers comm, 2017). Thus, as a symbol of general Indigeneity, the mijas themselves were not out of place in another tribal country. Mija signified, too, the coming together of numerous and different Indigenous groups under a single roof, for a collective purpose. This purpose was selling art, in addition to showcasing specific place-based cultural heritage as aligned with different Queensland art centres.

Girringun's installation space for the 2018 CIAF featured new artefacts upon a large format photograph of the three riverbed mijas on the Murray riverbank. This photographic image covered an entire wall of the installation. For visitors wandering along into the display, the realistic scale of the image contributed to a sense of immersion within a Girramay landscape. The photograph also served as the visual backdrop for new artefacts for sale, mostly hung at various points upon the image. On a second adjacent wall, smaller photographs showed Girringun people and the process of mija building. A single mija finished on site at the fair with paperbark thatching further extended the mija scene three-dimensionally into the display space. Placed in and around the material mija was a *jawun* basket, a *bagu* firemaker and a *mugaru* butterfly-style fishnet.

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<sup>47</sup> Strictly speaking, the notion that other Indigenous people might buy art from CIAF was not inconceivable. However, there was an expectation, once directly expressed to me by a young Girringun artist, that buyers at CIAF would have to be "rich", and thus, white. This extended to (white) institutions such as museums and other galleries, who were major buyers at the fair.

One could only look upon the material mija, not touch<sup>48</sup> or walk into it (as Giringun people had done on the riverbank in Murray Upper). So, as a sensory difference this may have slightly disrupted a full sense of immersion. Moreover, one's eye was inevitably drawn to the hard concrete floor that the mija rested on, a somewhat incongruous base, at least when compared with the river sand that the mija had been constructed upon earlier. Perhaps these were not issues for a casual observer. One could certainly walk in between the photographic wall and the constructed mija, aiding in the sense that one was walking through a family camp. I did not hear directly from visitors myself, but the artists reported a good reception and, evidencing the high impact of the display, Giringun received the Art Centre award at CIAF for their mija installation.



*Figure 26: Giringun's 2018 Installation at CIAF*  
(Photo Credit: <https://ciaf.com.au/galleries/ciaf-2018-art-award-winners>)

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<sup>48</sup> Visitors did occasionally touch the mija, in the way people eagerly do at museum displays. The mija was certainly robust enough, and neither did I see Giringun people discourage it. But the art gallery setting, with its signs of “No Photos”, seemed to generally discourage people from taking this perceived liberty.

### 8.5 Emplacing New Artefacts in a Family Camp on Country

Girringun artists recognised that to present art in this way was a commercially astute decision, one which communicated authenticity of new artefacts to a buying public. The artists themselves did not need further authenticating of these new things. Girringun people knew that the art pieces were intrinsically ‘artefactual’ due to their from-country materials and the traditional crafting skills used to make them. It is why they interchangeably called them “artefacts” as well as “art”. There was an implicit assertion to the fact that the new artefacts belonged to a different Time, and I would suggest that the display served to *communicate* as well as *convince*, that is, to communicate which Time such artefacts properly belonged. This was important to clarify to any audience wanting to know about ‘Indigenous Culture’. As Aunty Theresa had told me with a knowing smile in an interview about the use of baskets for making ‘porridge’, “we go IGA for food now”. At CIAF, there were no textual clues in the large photograph to communicate the time that artefacts like these were once used on a day-to-day basis – no labels shouting, “This was used in Traditional Time!” Rather more subtly, new artefacts were shown in a *Place*, that is, in a family camp, of the kind that was lived in at such time when such artefacts were used (for hunting, food preparation, corroborees and so on).

We can note too that there were no old photographs dragged out of the archives to enplace the new artefacts either. Perhaps it was simply easier to be in control of a newly composed image of land, as the rangers manifestly were when they photographed the mija with a drone were after the building event. However, I would suggest that by using a new photograph a sense of continuous place could also be conveyed to CIAF visitors. An old photo might have been contrary to this important assertion – that Indigenous Place is happening *today*. Moreover, installing a new photograph for new artefacts meant that current traditional owners were appropriately respectful of ancestors by not reproducing either images of their ancestors or their ancestors’ perception of time as living people too directly, particularly with new artefacts placed upon those images. For the same reason, there were no contemporary re-enactments by people – no holding of the artefacts in the way that their old people had done. This meant that, in an off-country location designed to encourage spectacle, a specifically Girringun sense of

temporality, where the past is always in the present and apprehended by contemporary people, could be subtly and appropriately revealed.

To explain further what it is I mean by ‘appropriateness’, I am emboldened by Horton’s (2016) idea for a “transcultural materialism” to exchange perspectives of “time, culture, and geography” (p. 126). As she reminds us, materialism studies have already opened the possibility of a shared ground, where “the “interrelationships among all things’ foundational to many Indigenous philosophies” (ibid) is prioritised. “Interrelationships” between human and non-human elements is precisely what Ernie Grant’s Holistic Framework attempts to assert. A further relevant point for the present chapter is Horton’s characterisation of this space as “the shared ground of modernity”. This builds on the movement already happening in New Materialism studies, where, as Horton describes, “indigenous precepts are respected as intellectually challenging propositions about a cohabited planet rather than seen as the beguiling belief of ‘others’” (ibid). Returning to Giringun’s mijas at CIAF, we can see that a method of sharing perspectives at CIAF is working in a similarly challenging way: “we are all moderns” the contemporary photograph display might be saying. Indeed, within this Indigenous-claimed space at the wharf, it becomes possible to try and share this notion of a past-in-the-present with others.

I can briefly draw further parallels in this sense with Horton’s discussion. Her paper centres on two exhibitions that are 60 years apart: 1) European-American artist Catlin’s 1846 tour of Paris with Ojibwa people to perform *tableaux vivants* ‘living pictures’ and 2) the Saulteaux artist Houle’s 2010 installation of drawings of Ojibwa people, called *Paris/Ojibwa*. Like the former Native American performances in Paris, Giringun artists were deliberately re-constructing an Australian Indigenous ‘traditional scene’ for viewing by others. Just as Horton (2016) described for the Ojibwa, Giringun people were also “performing themselves” (p. 134) when they sat posed with their artefacts as their ancestors once did for the photographic archive on the second wall of the exhibition. But in the mija exhibition space dominated by the larger photograph of country, unlike Caitlin’s *tableaux vivants*, there was less interest from Giringun people in re-enacting the past with their Indigenous bodies. One could say that it was the new artefacts that gave this performance, though this would again suggest the agency of the objects, and moreover, the strong positioning of the audience as spectator. Perhaps the

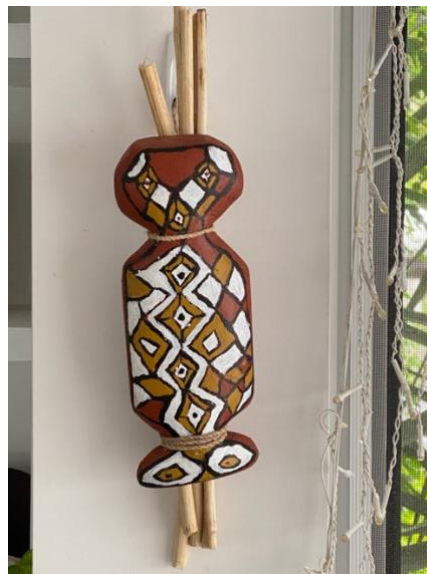
better approach to describing the artefact's involvement in this space is in terms of its contribution – a contribution to the 'holistic' space or context as Ernie Grant would describe it.

A significant part of the artefacts' contribution rested on Giringun's placement of them within country and camp for the display. This further encouraged an audience to 'see' the camp place as their old people once did. Informed either by the elder's own experience, or the many archival photos they had inevitably seen of their old people in camps, artefacts were thoughtfully positioned in the right place within the display camp at CIAF. We will remember from previous discussion that in the case of baskets, for example, the practice of hanging them up high continued at the contemporary woman's camp on Murray River, under Emily's place, and inside Ernie's house. *Bagu* 'firemakers' were placed up high too and upright, if possible, as a continued ideal in the CIAF display. Ernie Grant told me that in pre-colonial times the *bagu* "looked after the camp" like a watchman while you were away, and this high and upright position was associated with that protective role. In contrast to *bagu* and baskets, shields belonged on the ground. Therefore, three shields were placed on either side of the photographic *mijas* at CIAF. Indeed, the *mija*-in-landscape photograph upon the wall provided a practical solution for correct placement of all the artefacts for sale: whilst the three shields could appear to be appropriately on the ground via the wall photo, in fact they were at eye level, and thus highly visible to a buying public.

While the large-scale photograph allowed for certain cultural placement rules to be followed, it must be said that rules were sometimes broken for the sake of art sales. For example, at the art workshop one day, when a Gulngay man was putting some final touches on his *bagu* made with traditional materials and string, he jokingly said to me, "this rope is choking my spirit". He was a respected and knowledgeable elder, and though clearly made in some jest, the comment seemed yet to communicate his reluctant acquiescence to a new installation solution involving the string or "rope". *Bagu* were traditionally kept inside a basket, which was *then* hung up in the camp, but for the purposes of contemporary art display traditional-sized *bagu* were now more often tied with traditionally rolled *bumbil* 'string' around its neck. String used in this way allowed the *bagu* to be hung from a hook on the wall for galleries and in private homes of collectors (see Figure 27). As has already been mentioned, apart from



occasional apprehension about making *mind* ‘small baskets’ (which were once used by Indigenous “clever” sorcerers called *gubi* to keep *jangin* ‘human flesh’), the community handled *bagu* quite differently compared to other artefacts because of its spiritual association<sup>49</sup>. I had been told of this deferential handling by a number of different elders, but as Abe Muriata described it: “cannot hit a dog with it, you cannot hit a child with it, spank a child with it”; anyone who broke these rules of respectful handling would “go crazy” (A Muriata interview, 2017). I remembered back to the visit under the museum where Girringun people had observed rows of *bagu* laid flat in a slim drawer. No objections about storage were made at that point, perhaps because it was understood that (if the *bagu* had to be there at all) this drawer was best for their preservation and was also where the *bagu* could be most discreetly managed. To see them in drawers, knowing the preference for ‘right place’ and ‘right handling’ of *bagu*, however, surely caused a similar reluctant acquiescence at some level for the broader descendant community.



*Figure 27: Bagu with jiman and string by Girringun artist Philip Denham*

As we saw in Ernie Grant’s curating, *Time, Place and Relationships* were the terms he used in his Holistic Framework to provide context for *Land, Language and Culture*. For new artefacts, a camp with a fire conveyed an appropriate Time (a past time associated

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<sup>49</sup> See Henry 2016 for more on the jigubina spirit associated with the bagu firestick.

with pre-contact) and Place (a clan camp by the river). This in turn helped to communicate the relevant scope of Relationships for artefacts, which Ernie once described as being essentially between “people” and the “environment”. As perhaps a stronger example of this holistic articulation of Place and Relationships, I leave the CIAF exhibition now and turn to an interview with artist Abe Muriata<sup>50</sup> in the community. Abe worked very closely with the Arts Manager as both artist and Girramay senior elder, and so, his commentary here in 2017 might be seen as the oral version of artefact emplacement, which provided the impetus for the 2018 CIAF mija exhibition.

### **8.6 Abe Muriata Narrates a Day in the Life of a Pre-contact Clan**

In the year before the CIAF exhibition, I sat down in the office at the art workshop to interview Abe Muriata. My only suggestion was that we “talk about artefacts”. After a few failed interjections, I realised that he wanted to go through a systematic outline of a day-in-the-life of his old people. So, I ‘stopped quiet’, as my family would have described it, so that he could proceed uninterrupted. After stating that he would first discuss the “pre-contact” era of his people’s use of artefacts (*Time*), Abe outlined his intended scope in the manner of a “clan group” (*Relationships*):

a clan group, that’s in the tribe consisting of 2-3-4 hundred people, living in a specific area within their tribal group area – to sustain themselves and to be healthy and to, well to THRIVE – you have to marvel at how they did survive and thrive... let’s deal with this one little, say a clan group, within the tribe. And let’s deal with its existence first. (A Muriata interview, 2017)

Abe later specified the clan group as consisting of “about 10, 15 people”. In this way a relevant family scope was foundational to his subsequent discussion of artefacts. As he further stated: “Each and every artefact is vital to the health and well-being of every member of that clan group...Now that’s repeated right through the whole tribal area – on a grand scale” (A Muriata interview, 2017).

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Much like Ernie, Abe was highly systematic in his oration. To communicate the relationship between artefacts and people, he spoke of various pre-contact hunting practices and the role of artefacts throughout the scope of a sort of ‘typical day’. In the morning the *jawun* ‘bi-cornual basket’ was first used to catch small fish; it was then used to treat *mirrañ* ‘black bean’. *Bagu* and *jiman* ‘firemaker’ could be used to start a fire again if it had gone out the night before. Later in the day, men in the clan began a hunt for wallaby with a spear and spear thrower. During this hunt the men might “stumble across honey” and need to send someone for a *nuba* ‘waterbucket’ to fill it up with honey and comb. To conclude this pre-contact, typical-day narrative, Abe then commented on the life-giving functionality of all artefacts: “Every artefact was ordered – was GIVEN that reverence because it sustained us so well” (ibid).

Abe’s manner of organisation is similar to what has been described for Joseph Neparrnga Gumbula’s 2009-2010 exhibition, *Makarr-garma: Aboriginal Collections from a Yolngu Perspective*, held at the Macleay Museum in Sydney. Here, Conway (2018) writes that an “archetypal” (or “perfect day” as Gumbula himself put it), in which an initiation ceremony is about to take place, is the “organising principle” for his exhibition. Walls were painted to reflect the changing colours of the day, with live performances occurring in the dedicated midday space too since, as Gumbula explained, “Initiation happens at midday. Ceremony happens at midday” (p. 126). In a section called “Indigenous Curation” Conway also reflects on curating as being “not merely the process of assembling and presenting, but the *thought* and *care* that goes into it” (p. 130). ‘Thought and care’ could be another way of describing an Indigenous framework like Ernie Grant’s, or the day-in-the-life-of-a-clan narrative that Abe Muriata told. Indigenous curation is not just selection and care by an Indigenous curator per se, then, it is an Indigenous-conceived notion of selection and care.

Remarkably, most of the pre-contact tools that Abe mentioned in his narrative were featured at the 2018 CIAF, evidencing Giringun people’s efforts to ensure a complete display according to their definition of ‘complete’. This evidences the desire to tell a full story in the exhibition and Giringun people’s strong motivation to continue making as many different artefacts as possible. Moreover, it demonstrates the exceptionally broad skills amongst the Giringun craftspeople. A net, for example, was technically difficult and extremely time consuming when made with *bumbil* ‘traditional string’, and

yet, one sat on the ground at the entrance to the mija at CIAF. Emphasising the shortage of netmakers, Aunty Theresa spoke to me once about her father who could make these nets:

He'd make a rope, and then he'd make a net. You know anybody who make a fishing net? I can't. But they would make this so long and then he would make that net. Then they tie it up in lawyer vine – lawyer cane. You know make it as a butterfly net. They spread it out, when they use it. They drag it along the river. In swamp area. They get fish, turtle in still water. Mainly turtle. (T Beeron interview, 2014)

A string maker was in this way as well-respected as the weaver, for all that could be subsequently made from string. I knew of only one Giringun person (Theresa's brother) who could make such a net as Theresa describes, using string made from the bumbil tree (*ficus congesta*)<sup>51</sup>. It was my understanding that there was such a net at CIAF for most of the week, and that it was the only artefact not for sale. Thus it functioned at the CIAF exhibition, not as art for sale, but rather to 'complete the story' being told in the display, in the way of Giringun's Keeping Place display in Cardwell or Ernie Grant's cultural workshops room at the Tully Railway Station<sup>52</sup>.

From a sustaining tool to a sustained craft, Abe moved on from his clan's "pre-contact" day to what he called the "contact" and "post-contact" times, as Ernie did earlier. Abe commented on the transition of artefacts – from "everyday tools" that were life-sustaining and "revered", to its new classification as "artefact", a label created by European individuals and institutions:

Contact area there is a winding down. There is a shutting down of a lot of the associated knowledge, laws, customs, and everything that associated with what the pre-contact did. It's a shutting down and a transitioning into a post-contact era where there is...a European ...regulation...or there's a restriction on its...use, teaching, things like that. During contact years, artefacts were

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<sup>51</sup> Dixon's unpublished Dyirbal Thesaurus and Dictionary (in several parts) has Dyirbal plant names, most of them matched with scientific names. In a launch at the Cairns Institute in mid 2017, limited prints were made available to some local public libraries including the Ravenshoe Library.

<sup>52</sup> As the reader might remember from chapter four, there was also a net at the Tully railway where workshops were held by Ernie Grant. It is likely that this was the same net displayed at CIAF, though unfortunately I never learned this for certain having completed fieldwork before it occurred to me to ask.

being collected – as curios. Because of its unique shape. And uses. And associated beliefs. It was collected...mostly for institutions, I believe. People like Boyd and them they were collecting for – I don't know what the institutions were back then – universities and galleries, stuff like that. It was a specimen for their collection mainly – so – while it still had maybe a story or a meaning associated with him, with it, when it being collected...it was lost...it lost most of its...its spirituality I suppose you could say because – if it was just said it was a firestick, that's all it was known as. It wasn't known as a sacred firestick, or the attached – it did not come attached with the...with the reverence accorded to it by its maker. (A Muriata interview, 2017)

Whilst clearly describing early collectors' perceptions of artefacts as mere "specimens" for a collection, Abe does not easily describe what is lost for the artefact once it is collected in a post-contact context. Is it "spirituality", or is it "reverence" that is diminished when there is European "regulation" and "restriction"? Moreover, it was at first unclear to me whether Abe meant these associations were lost to Aboriginal people because of European restrictions on teaching, or to the collected thing itself once it was collected, documented and re-named as 'artefact'. In his final comments about the contemporary interest in his people's old artefacts this is clarified – as neither: the associations are lost primarily *to the European collector*, who has only "wonderment" for it, and to the institutions these collectors are inevitably associated with:

Today, artefacts in museums are...today artefacts inspire thesis. Today artefacts inspire thesis, it...fills the greatest institutes, some of the greatest institutes on the planet Earth. You know it is housed, and preserved, in some of the greatest institutes in the world. And what else. It is a wonderment to our scholars. Do scientists study them? No. It is a wonderment to scholars and people. Scholars and laymen. Because – it's just a wonderment. BUT the traditional owners, the remnant of the traditional owners that, from where it came, still have the spiritual connection. (A Muriata interview, 2017)

Thus, after astutely acknowledging that rainforest artefacts have inspired theses like the current one, Abe states that "scholars and laymen" have "wonderment" for an artefact. It appears that this wonderment is at least more laudable than what "scientists" show (ie no interest at all), but scholars and laymen nevertheless do not have "the spiritual connection" to an artefact that traditional owners have, "from where it came". Reverence and wonderment are in this way altogether different: reverence is experienced by the traditional owner still on country, while wonderment is experienced by the novice observer.

Several points in Abe's narrative resonate with Taylor's (2020) discussion of "decolonising museums". One relates to her comment that museums should be "more exigent with their Indigenous interlocutors: not let them put forth statements such as 'this object' is sacred to us', but instead push them to formulate what is at stake in this claim" (p. 100). To articulate what exactly is meant by a 'spiritual connection' and to 'formulate what is at stake', is a difficult thing for any person to do (whether it is "them" or "us" as is unfortunately suggested in Taylor's comment). Rather than simply press informants to analyse themselves, in the way Taylor urges, it might help to remember that participant observation can assist with an insight as often as interviews or speech. We saw, for example, that some young people at Girringun did not touch rocks brought into the office because they were afraid the rocks might be linked to different lands, and thus, different ancestors. We witnessed further at the MTQ museum visit that rainforest people generally did not touch artefacts either due to a certain respect and reverence. Although hints can be gleaned by paying attention to what people *do* as much as what people *say* in this way, it should be noted that 'speaking', for the Girringun artists, was an act that was highly valued. Ultimately, then, it is best to pay attention to *both* doings and sayings.

Performative 'declaratory speech' and more overtly political 'who-speaks-for-country' designations were indeed significant. We saw that Uncle Claude, as the most senior Girramay elder on country, told a story about a woman with a feather on her grave before mija building could occur to informally mark out the beginning of the building day for the present Girringun community. This story, as a declarative act, could not be repeated by anyone else, even if some people did not hear it in the wind. Moreover, in the same way that Uncle Claude prepared ancestors for visitors coming into a community camping place on Girramay country, he also talked to the artefacts before anybody else came down into the museum stores at the MTQ. On the other hand, at the museum down south, Uncle Claude could *not* speak. Being too overcome with emotion, he had difficulty doing what he was sent down there to do, that is, to identify and place the artefacts. In short, speaking, or more correctly speech from the right person, could certainly *do* things.

In terms of new artefacts, Abe Muriata also 'did something' when he talked to his art to deliberately impart his own spirit into these pieces, as revealed in his own speech at the

opening of the *Manggan* exhibition in 2017. Abe referred to Uncle Claude, “my elder” as he called Uncle Claude, to say: “There is a deep spiritual connection between these artefacts and ourselves. Now thanks to my elder here, I talk to my basket all the time. It is a part of me” (A Muriata pers comm, 2017.) An interesting question at this point is how long would it be before museum professionals and others came to see Abe’s ostensible art pieces as, rather, artefacts? His art had not been used according to a traditional function in the way that Ernie and his nephew defined artefacts as against art (“what you gonna use that for?”), or in the way that tourists at the Girringun keeping place seemed to be impressed with (visible cuts in a shield from a sword). But many of the rainforest artefacts now at the MTQ had not been used ‘functionally’ either, in the ways that are valued above. These MTQ artefacts were also at one time ‘art’, originally sold at Mrs Henry’s shop in Murray Upper for tourists from the 1960s onwards. It might simply be a matter of saying that art becomes artefact when it acquires history, but how much history is enough? The answer is by no means clear. We have probably all heard that a thing becomes art when an expert says it is. Perhaps a thing becomes an artefact, similarly, when a descendant community member declares it to be an artefact.

### **8.7 Country Materials and Ancestor Makers**

The issue of art and artefacts in anthropology, and how to distinguish between them, has been taken up by others (eg Gell, 1996; Kisin & Myers, 2019; Morphy, 2002; Sandals, 2011). Regarding Indigenous art makers in Australia specifically, Myers (2005) has invoked Clifford’s Art-Culture System to discuss “art” versus “culture”. After reminding us that binary classifications (whether art and culture, or art and artefact) are “rooted in distinctive institutions such as art museums”, Myers concludes that “Aboriginal objects are not simply assimilated to this new context” (ibid, p. 99), that is, to the context of an either/or classification.

The art/artefact classification has not been a focus in this thesis because, similarly, it was not a classification that was significant in the community. A formal distinction between “traditional” and “non-traditional” art pieces was sometimes made in conversation by artists at the Girringun Aboriginal Art Centre. This was perhaps a reflection of the descriptor “traditional materials” put into *Stories, Art and Money* (a computer program Girringun used to organise their inventory at the art shop). However,

the more salient classification of difference, ostensibly between ‘old’ and ‘new’ artefacts, was actually between deceased makers (ancestors) on the one hand and contemporary makers (living kin) on the other. Another significant distinction was between artefacts made of materials from tribal lands or “Country” (like lawyer cane, lomandra grass, fig tree) and materials from elsewhere (clay from the shop, recycled plastic materials like telephone wire and other resources, such an old keyboard that was painted on). As such, when I persisted to ask the Girringun artist Abe Muriata directly what he considered the difference between art and artefact to be, he took much time to answer as he deliberated the question:

while it may have the story art is a different...what would I say. Art is a different spirit. It only takes the form. It take the form...it takes the colour...but it uses...the culture...Mainly the culture. And it adds its own spirit in the form of...in the form of visual presentation, maybe art is – it only uses the culture. It is not culture. It only uses culture. Here we make an art and we add the story to it. (Abe Muriata interview, 2017)

The previous two chapters discussed Girringun people’s art precisely as “visual representations” that “use the culture” and “take the form”, to use Abe’s words, through a recognisable shape. Art, in other words, as symbol. Abe’s further point that a new art product or symbol “is not culture” appears to fit with Ingold’s preference for “becoming” over “objectification” (2012), and similarly, with Ernie Grant’s definition of culture as “something we do” (not something we conceptualise or interpret). Still, Abe also said in answer to the art/artefact question that “we add the story to it”. This adding of the story by Girringun people could be considered culture, then, as ‘something we do’ – as part of art practice and meaning-making. Moreover, though art is “a different spirit”, people’s adding of the story to arguably make art and artefact more alike supports another Ingoldian contention, that “stories always, and inevitably, draw together what classifications split apart” (Ingold, 2011, p. 160). With this in mind, and taking note of how Ernie Grant often decried unhelpful ‘compartmentalisation’, I want to conclude this chapter by highlighting the story as a unifying force for art and artefact. Story draws art and artefact together, I argue, to create a symbol.

To clarify, one might assume that “the story” refers only to a ‘dreaming’ or *jujuba* story, but this was not strictly the case. The deferent cultural behaviour around *bagu* for example (as Abe had put it, “cannot hit a dog with it”) was in fact not that closely linked



to a dreaming story in my observations. One might say that this is surely just an example of “cultural loss”, and that in former times the *bagu* ‘firestick’ must have been more strongly associated with a dreaming spirit called *jigubina* (a playful yet troublesome spirit who tries to frighten people perhaps by following them, making loud noises, or shaking trees). The Girringun elders were knowledgeable about this spirit<sup>53</sup>, however, even in three stories about *jigubina* told to Dixon (2017) during his fieldwork decades before (by different Dyirbal speakers, now all deceased), only one elder mentions the firestick directly in a ‘*jigubina* story’. Thus Dixon transcribes this to English as: “*Jigubina* is always flying across the sky. He throws the firestick out in front” (G Watson in R. M. W. Dixon, 2017, p. 211). In these stories, it is rather the *jigubina* who is the focus, not his *bagu* and *jiman* firestick. According to Ernie Grant’s mother (ibid p. 151) Chloe, who tells one of these stories, *jigubina* could tickle you until you died. She ends her particular story of *jigubina* with mention of the spirit man going “down to the south to get a painted basket (*mind*)” (ibid), thus mentioning yet *another* artefact with the *jigubina*. In fact, the *bagu* story for Ernie included a more profane narrative, namely a refrain of advice I heard along the lines of ‘it is important in the rainforest to keep your firemaker dry’. So, in short, story was not restricted to sacred narratives occurring in *jujuba* times.

Furthermore, we might think that by “story” we must mean some Aristotelian beginning, middle and end type narrative. However, a story can conceivably be much more contracted than that, as in the two short clauses that Sacks describes: “the baby cried. The mommy picked it up” (in Thornborrow & Coates, 2005, p. 3). To demonstrate, the example of *bumbil* ‘string’ at Girringun appeared to come with an associated story about ‘ripping the hairs off your leg while rolling the bark strips. Unless you had long pants on’. Theresa’s brother who was a master string maker told this story one week in front of young and old Girringun people at the art workshop as a kind of ritualising element of his string-making lesson for everyone; in short, ‘When you roll string on

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<sup>53</sup> I once mentioned *jigubina* as a “shooting star” to Uncle Claude. He knew about it, but only laughed at the association, “oh, yes, shooting star”. It was unclear whether this evidenced a minimising of *jigubina*’s association with this story as a whole, or just with its “shooting star” label, which I had read about (Dixon 2017).

your thigh, it hurts'. The master string maker made it much more interesting in his retelling at the Girringun art workshop through the instructive actions of his body. Nevertheless, it was as uncomplicated and indeed poetic as the baby and mother narrative above. As he sat and rolled bark fibres on his leg the story was imparted simultaneously to future Aboriginal string makers, to white volunteers, and to a mixed heritage researcher, as another part of 'cultural information', as Ernie Grant would put it. I heard this kind of storying around artefacts at the art workshop and on country fieldtrips from those elders with the experience and authority to tell them. One might call these 'profane' stories, or they might just as easily be called "Indigenous Knowledge" (IK), the latter being a political term that global Indigenous communities use to assert and retain control over their knowledge. This includes who gets to "teach" or impart this information to others, as Theresa's brother did.

Indeed to tell and re-tell descriptions of processes in crafting and functional explanations of "pre-contact" use is a way of asserting ownership of knowledge around artefacts. We saw this occurring in the example of local Indigenous people taking over "telling the story" from an Indigenous curator at the Ingham cultural fair. Fienup-Riordon (2003), cited at the beginning of this thesis, discussed how the re-owning of knowledge and artefacts can be achieved through an insistence on Indigenous categories. Thus, her Yup'ik interlocutors reorganised harpoon and kayak parts in the collection stores of the museum they visited to reflect their own classifications. This was not just to do with the Yup'ik's "detailed vocabulary" of names (ibid, p. 32), but also the functions that each piece was associated with. To implement their own form of categorisation was a strategy for reintegrating the pieces back into their own learning framework, so that they could "teach and learn" about them; as Fienup-Riordon wrote, "it was not the objects the elders coveted but the opportunity to use them both to teach and learn" (p. 40). Ernie's Holistic Framework was similarly developed to teach and learn. When Abe took charge of our interview and organised his story according to pre-contact camp and clan, this was also a way of "re-owning" his people's artefacts through control of the teaching framework used to facilitate learning.

The 'story' is what has ostensibly been under discussion in this chapter, yet, what we have also been discussing are the symbols that make these contracted stories, or whatever one wants to call them, so powerful and memorable. Just as the *bagu*

firemaker symbolises the capacity for fire in the humid rainforest, *bumbil* string symbolises the valued trees of country from which the bark fibres are initially pulled. Moreover, the picked-up-baby story draws on a *cultural* symbol (a caring mother) in the same way that the string-maker's story at the art workshop does (the labour, patience and indeed pain of Indigenous string making). In sociolinguistics, this alignment of story and symbol, and the resulting effectiveness of a storytelling, might be described as "cultural resonance", as in Thornborrow & Coates (2005): "if this narrated moment resonates with high cultural values for the group, that story will be better received than one in which the cultural resonances are weak" (p. 12).

The interlinked, and culturally resonant, story and symbol here can lead us to think about "material" in another sense. On the one (literal) hand, material is *physical substance*; it is *in* the hand, like hand-axe or a *barri* to use the Dyirbal word. On the other (metaphorical) hand, material is *useful* for some greater project, like an anecdote one tells about the *barri* to hold their student's interest in class. We usually see artefacts as being made of material in the former sense. For rainforest artefacts: *gugulu* 'clap sticks' made of *gurrmba* 'nutmeg tree', *bagu* made from milky pine and *jiman* made from tetra beech, *bigin* 'shields' made from *magurra* 'fig tree', *jawun* 'basket' made of *baygal* 'lawyer cane' and *bugal* 'smaller lawyer cane', and *mind* 'grass basket' made of *jindarigun* 'lomandra grass'. But after years of being kept, talked about, and re-made, what else are these things 'made of'? What I want to suggest is that iconic rainforest artefacts are also material for stories – symbols picked up along the path of culture that Uncle Claude first described at his MTQ speech. Giringun stories, whether pre- or post-contact, sacred or secular, help to keep defining 'Indigenous rainforest culture'. Moreover, the way that Giringun people retain symbols through these stories is precisely the kind of selection with a knowledgeable eye that can truly be called Indigenous curatorship. A descendant community, by selecting and rejecting aspects of culture and making new artefacts, thus continue to curate themselves as much as any external object.

Regarding this point, I raised the work edited by Roger Sansi (2020), *The Anthropologist as Curator*, in the thesis introduction to comment that the self-referentiality of researcher as curator can detract from a discussion of Indigenous descendant communities as post-repatriation curators. Yet a point made by Sansi is

relevant here in terms of the Girringun community's production of space and place both on the Murray River and at CIAF. Sansi writes that after the comparative anthropology of the evolutionists and the single-site ethnography of cultural relativists, it is an emphasis on the "curatorial" which could form the basis for a third paradigmatic shift in anthropology. "Multi-sites" and "assemblages" are the key terms for understanding and articulating the inter-global and inter-species connections preferred in this new "curatorial space", a space which is defined by one of the authors in Sansi's book as: "a way of linking objects, images, processes, people, locations, histories and discourses in physical space" (Winter cited in Sansi, no p). I agree that the curatorial space is a fruitful clearing of space for anthropological work. Girringun's mijas on the Murray River that appeared to move to Cairns for an art fair demonstrated a multi-site, and further, new artefacts emplaced upon a photograph of Girramay country demonstrated an assemblage of sorts. However, to show how flexible the curatorial space can be as a stage for sharing culture, I think we must still emphasise the curator as *participant* (not collaborator), with the term 'participant' retained as a full acknowledgment of the continued dialectic between state museums (who hold hegemonic power) and descendant communities (whose power, vis à vis the museum, is emerging). Martinon's (2013) edited collection *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating* centers around a further related critique or "slogan" as Romualdo (2015) describes it, "Stop curating! And think what curating is all about". The point of the current chapter has been precisely to 'think about what curating is all about' and conceptualise curating as firstly, knowledgeable selection by a participant, and secondly, articulation and representation to an audience. This culminates in a curating of the self and the community.

## 8.8 Conclusion

The Girringun Aboriginal Corporation was an organisation where numerous different types of activities converged to achieve several aims. Broadly speaking, it ensured representation for Aboriginal people in the community through the co-operation of several different traditional owner groups. More specifically, it encouraged one of the most valued aims of the organisation, namely, "cultural transmission". The art centre was certainly a major part of cultural transmission in terms of art practice, and this translated, subsequently, into political strength within the far North Queensland region.

Thus, we saw that artefacts were repatriated from the Queensland Museum and kept in the Giringun keeping place in Cardwell.

The significance of the Giringun keeping place in Cardwell lies in its unspoken assertion that rainforest artefacts belong in rainforest country. However, since it followed all the protocols of a conventional museums space it was also ideologically distant from Indigenous community – a space rather than place. A comparison of Giringun’s keeping place and their art exhibition at CIAF in 2018 showed that Giringun people had more curatorial agency when they could assert the CIAF exhibition as having a sense of Indigenous Place, namely, a family camping place on Girramay country. In this Place, Giringun and other Indigenous people were curators of their own cultural presentations for an art market. Abe Muriata’s narrative was included to demonstrate that emplacement of artefacts could be achieved via oral story, indeed, the CIAF exhibition was a visual extension of this oral story. The outcomes discussed here show just how a community art centre and art fair did much to empower a descendant community to present “new artefacts’ in the way that Abe Muriata first articulated in narrative. Moreover, the “wonderment” described for European collectors was felt by Giringun curators as a deep respect and pride for what the old people did to live in pre-contact time; as Abe said: “you have to marvel at how they did survive and thrive”.

## 9. Conclusion

At the beginning of the thesis, I suggested we begin our discussion of a rainforest people and their material artefacts with two provocations. The first was Ingold's (2007) statement: "*Despite the best efforts of curators and conservationists, no object lasts forever*" (p.10), the second was "*why bother preserving heritage at all?*". My responses to these provocations have now been made clear. In the first instance, to conceptualise Indigenous rainforest artefacts as mere objects clearly reduces them to these unsustainable things. In the second, there is plenty of interest from the Indigenous people in preserving heritage, even when there is none from anthropologists. These critiques and responses have been important to state at the outset so that we could move on to the actual question that this thesis concerns itself with, that is, what is Indigenous "curating" and how are material artefacts involved in it? Via a case study in the Queensland rainforest the thesis has argued that material rainforest artefacts within the community are curated as spirit, story, and symbol. Moreover, this curating does not always occur in a traditional exhibition space. To be as clear as possible about the assertions and contributions made around this idea of Indigenous curating, I now offer a summary of conclusions for the reader in the following unambiguous statements:

### 9.1 A Universal Language for Artefacts is Being Developed

Chapter two, *The Interesting Nature of Artefacts*, served as the theoretical background for a thesis that argues artefacts are curated as spirit, story and symbol. It showed how we have reached a point where articulations of artefacts (as definitively constituted of "spirit" and "story") are no longer exclusively limited to an emic, insider, or Indigenous perspective. Whether it has been called subject, witness, or agent, the ethnographic artefact has been given the theoretical room it needed to expand. A universal language is being developed for its translation so that an artefact becomes recognisable as more than just an "object of historical or cultural interest" to people outside of the so-called descendant community. This development culminates arguably in Henry, Otto and Wood's (2013) description of an artefact as "phenomenon". The case of Ernie Grant's curating effort over several decades has demonstrated a unique "internal logic and rationality" (Smallacombe, 2000, p. 161), where spirit, story and symbol are central to the expression of rainforest artefacts, and thus, to their translation.

Storying is arguably an essential part of any translation process but is especially salient in Indigenous research. The first story in this thesis was about the Grant family's basket in a bookshelf. This lawyer cane, bi-cornual basket, an example of perhaps the most iconic of all Indigenous rainforest artefacts, was crafted by Ernie Grant's mother Chole, returned to him by a white farming family, and displayed by Ernie within a glass cabinet in the family room. I would hear many stories about artefacts that were not always so focused on 'provenance' or 'biography' of the object in this way throughout the course of this research. For example, sometimes Ernie told stories for artefacts which were not physically present in his collection – borrowed, remembered, or imagined artefacts, such as a turkey trap, a blue-fur possum blanket, and an earthenware bowl. Here we began to see that Ernie was a collector of stories as well as artefacts, and that indeed these two concepts could not be separated.

As more-than-an-object, Chloe's basket in the bookshelf was a material example of Indigenous keeping and caring where artefacts were revered as items made by ancestors and of Country materials. This research looked well beyond Ernie's shelf, and the cabinet of curios image in general, which has come to stand for the ongoing display of like-with-like objects, as in the eerily crowded Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford in the United Kingdom. Ernie's collecting and curating was rather informed by a different cultural story to those colonial collectors who filled these museum spaces, and my approach here has been to focus on how curating occurred outside of the museum and exhibition space. Visiting regularly with a group of artists and elders in Tully, Murray Upper and Cardwell over more than two years from 2016-2018 and witnessing their varied interactions with artefacts demonstrated just how deeply embedded curating as a cultural practice was within this descendant community. In fact, I would say that the universal theoretical language has merely been an exercise of 'catch-up' to the way that this community conceptualises artefacts as spirited, storied and symbolic.

## **9.2 Wild Artefacts are a Valid Argument for Repatriation**

To encourage the reader to experience that same sense of disorientation that descendant community people can feel upon being led into museum stores with community artefacts, the thesis discussion began 'at the end', in chapter three, inside the institutional space of a state museum collection. At the Museum of Tropical Queensland in Townsville the reaction of Girringun people ranged from nervous excitement to simmering resentment. Yet it was universally informed by respectful 'reverence', as Abe Muriata later put it, for artefacts still

inextricably linked to ancestors. Giringun people recognised (or were taught to recognise by elders during the visit) the displacement of ancestor spirits drawn away from country and toward artefacts they had made as living people. Moreover, without regular physical and verbal interaction with living community people these artefacts became *wild* in a further sense – listless, unstable, representing traumatic removal, even dangerously haunted. “Don’t you worry to come home”, Uncle Claude had said to the artefact in a museum down south. His intervention was a verbal reassurance to the ancestor manifested in a material object, so that they might become more connected to living kin and, subsequently, less ‘wild’. Community visits to museum stores go some way to addressing wild artefacts. They are a large part of Hennessy et al’s (2013) “philosophy of repatriation”, a philosophy which has emerged, I argued, after the failure of repatriation arguments based on theft, sacredness or rights discourse.

Repatriation of secular artefacts is only compelling/reasonable/defensible if one can view rainforest artefacts as Giringun elders did: as a material source that ancestors are drawn to (‘ancestralised’), and further, as an artefact too far from country and without regular kin connection and reassurance (‘wild’). To be clear, my assertion with regard to repatriation was that *an emic conceptualisation of artefacts as wild is currently the only effective argument for repatriation*, it was not automatically an extension of that position, that *all artefacts should be repatriated*. Thus I stated it was possible that, under this ‘wild’ conceptualisation, artefacts might simply remain wild, like wild country that is not visited. If, on the other hand, artefacts are strongly recognised as ‘family’, then they should be cared for on country, or in other words repatriated. In lieu of the State adopting an emic perspective, I further suggested that Queensland rainforest artefacts are better off ‘up north’ than ‘down south’. A state museum such as the Queensland Museum, or better still a regional museum such as the Museum of Tropical Queensland, is a more convenient location for community to access. Most importantly, as the story from Claude Beeron further showed, it is a less traumatic physical distance for ancestors linked to artefacts in storage. The holding of regional artefacts at regional state museums in large Australian states like Queensland are, for now, a good ameliorating measure.

The fact that ethnographic collections were invariably acquired by some long-dead colonial officer only adds to the alienation that descendant community people can feel toward their



artefacts. Of artefacts selected by an outsider to represent their cultural group, any person might reasonably ask: “Who created this collection and for what purpose? Why are they so interested in this artefact and not the other?” This is why an argument for Indigenous co-operation in historic, colonial collecting practices is so effective for subverting legitimate alienation (‘look and see how you were involved in the selection of this collection!’). Helpful though it may be for mitigating alienation, it was not my intention to give credence to this position by focusing on Indigenous collecting. Rather, it has been important to somehow look beyond the issue of repatriation, per se, and even raise the notion of a problematic homecoming through a case of Indigenous collecting on country. As I showed, “keeping” for Ernie in the sugar town of Tully involved the maintenance of cultural knowledge without land, the representation of his people to a sometimes-unreceptive public, and the constant pull to stop keeping. By highlighting these difficulties, I was not arguing for the hopelessness of keeping (or of repatriation). Instead, I was drawing attention to the fact that Indigenous curators must take account of one’s family, one’s community, and one’s ancestors in the face of so many challenges. The case of the museum-trained Indigenous curator who took artefacts to a community fair demonstrates my conclusion in this regard: the hegemonic authority of western scientific knowledge requires some creative forms of defiance.

### **9.3 Subversive Decoloniality May Be the Best Kind**

It is little wonder I was drawn to a quietly insistent diplomat and to an artist community of families since I have always preferred my own politics to be more subversive. We have seen that Ernie Grant was well-known in Tully as a keeper of Indigenous history. He was perhaps less known as a keeper of Indigenous artefacts. Chapter four, *The Burden of Keeping*, showed how keeping artefacts required a public if cautiously subtle negotiation between two positions that Clifford (2004) has described as “deep roots” and “exoticism”. Ernie could talk about artefacts in a cultural workshop in the regional sugar town to assert what I have called Indigenous ‘presence’, and what others (Gilchrist, 2020; Withey, 2015) have called ‘sovereignty’, through Indigenous curating. Yet, he always had to be mindful of the ways in which artefacts, ingeniously designed and crafted though they were, might yet reproduce racist stereotypes of “stone age men” (Mjöberg, nd). The moral rationale of colonisation famously asserted in Kipling’s poem *The White Man’s Burden* requires an ongoing postcolonial challenge that is a response and a burden. I used these terms to invert Rudyard Kipling’s imaginings of a difficult yet necessary task and allude to the fact that a response to

imperialism and settler racism is also, unfortunately, difficult yet necessary. The burden of a response from Indigenous people requires creativity and diplomacy, particularly if one wants to be persuasive in a settler state, or even continue to live in a small town amongst the firmly entrenched colonisers. As such, we should see Ernie Grant as a skilled curator of relationships as well as artefacts.

Like his negotiation of deep roots and exoticism, Ernie similarly balanced his elders' orally transmitted knowledge with the archival and historical knowledge he later interacted with in his working life. Specifically, I argued that his dramatic observance of the archetypal ancestor (a white figure with a red heart) on a calendar in the reading room of a museum was another 'showing' of his ancestors. This was several decades after his childhood experience on a farm in Murray Upper, where his father, exasperated by his young son's lawlessness, had showed Ernie their lively ancestors in the orchard to teach him respect for elders, for the old people, and for their people's way of knowing. Ernie's recollection of these events together provides a sobering reminder to all of us working in cultural heritage and with Indigenous elders: it is extraordinarily difficult at times to continue valuing Indigenous knowledge in a broader world that does not typically value this knowledge. As Ernie lamented, he could not speak about dreaming stories to just anyone in his working life (those people with whom he had not curated a specific type of relationship) since he would inevitably be open to the highly effective and disempowering attack of "mumbo jumbo".

A desire to translate his world view within the western state education system clearly inspired his Holistic Framework with its six ostensibly quantifiable elements (Land, Language, Culture, Time, Place, Relationships). Chapter five discussed our attempt to document his collection of rainforest artefacts for a family museum, and we saw that for narratives about Jirrbal culture, including artefacts, Ernie would use the framework to convey a "holistic" context. This meant referring to artefacts in terms of their associated Land, Language, Culture Time, Place, and Relationships. This holistic context was, Ernie asserted, a way of teaching about artefacts that better reflected an Indigenous worldview. Interrogating this assertion, I argued that the Holistic Framework was also helpful for the more fundamental aim of telling "the whole story". In other words, it was a curator-storyteller's tool for organising an oral story just as much as it was a tool for organising the world. This is not to take away from the ontological basis of the framework, as if to refer merely to 'Indigenous stories about the

world'. On the contrary, Ernie's Holistic Framework provided a uniquely available insight into the 'Indigenous world of story'. Stories told about sold artefacts (to the MTQ), and kept artefacts (at home in Tully), were provided as examples of Indigenous curating in the Tully.

I furthermore raised others' arguments for collecting being about control then suggested that Ernie's Holistic Framework, and his collecting, were ways of taking back control of the extensive knowledge circulated about his people since the late 1800s. For example, we saw how he sat in the Tully community library across from a white academic and quietly challenged W.E. Roth's (1900) writings about his people. In terms of collecting, we saw that he commissioned a shield from his cousin so that his young people and others could see what a Jirrbal shield looked like without having to go to a museum. These small but significant resistances show that it does not matter too much whether we call his stories 'narratives', or 'cultural information', as Ernie put it sometimes. It was rather that an Indigenous collector was now doing the collecting, telling the story, and adding to the archive, moreover, through an Indigenous-created learning framework. This is what makes Ernie Grant a 'postcolonial collector', and this is what makes his collecting a 'postcolonial response'. Postcolonial collecting by museums and anthropologists has been tentatively raised elsewhere (eg. Lipset, 2016), but the characterisation of an Indigenous descendant-community person as a postcolonial collector has been hitherto little-recognised.

#### **9.4 Giringun Artists Articulate Culture through Shape and Symbol**

At the Giringun Aboriginal Art Centre, I argued that artists articulated culture (to invoke Stuart Hall's articulation theory) through symbols, and more specifically through shape. Art workshops on Girramay country provided a regular opportunity for people to re-create persisting symbols of culture and identity with the guidance of elders and ancestors. Shapes like the oval rainforest shield and the bi-cornual basket were forms of cultural knowledge that could be safely communicated to the public as symbols of rainforest identity. Moreover, an artist who could shape these forms well could express some form of indirect and acceptable pride through a respect and admiration for the shape. For example, one "master weaver" described the bi-cornual basket as "the most perfect thing". On-country materials required collecting skills (as we saw in the case of stripping lawyer cane without gloves). On the other hand, clay and to a lesser degree telephone wire were useful materials for enabling an artist to create these important shapes and have them persist in the community. This was important for

when artistic and other skills in “traditional” materials were still being developed, or opportunities for fieldtrips as a group were limited. Clay and wire, in this way, allowed for *shape* to be another material manifestation of rainforest symbols.

Following culture seemed at times to be a matter of personal choice, as borne out, for example, in the choice to attend an art workshop. Yet art was only one way to follow culture. Culture also included following patterns of Indigenous governance, which included a good deal of individual as well as community autonomy. We saw this during the mornings of the weekly art workshops.

To further draw out this point, I raised the exhibition called *Manggan: gather, gathers, gathering*, in which Giringun artists collaborated with the MTQ and South Australian Museum. Giringun’s arts manager described the exhibition of artefacts, Giringun art, film and photography, as “a gathering” of ideas and different art mediums, invoking art discourse around postmodern assemblages. Admittedly, the dinner table discussion between Ernie, his nephew and myself about scrub hens and knowledge-gathering showed how we humans are similar to scrub hens who poke, sift, and gather leaves into a single shared nest. Yet we also analyse, interpret and reflect critically on that nest so that, as Ernie had put it, eggs can hatch “like ideas”. Thus I contrasted the definition of ‘gathering’ at the exhibition, taken from a linguist’s translation, with the more agentful, the more human, definition of ‘picking it up’. This latter translation of *manggan* was given to me by two Aunties and was preferable as a subtle way to highlight individual Indigenous agency within the parameters of a strong cultural path. “To pick it up”, as the Aunties had described, seemed to gently emphasise the *collector* and their vision instead of the collection per se, the Indigenous *curator-of-self and community* instead of the less potent counterpart in hunter-gatherer.

Again, cultural shapes were not so changeable since they had to be recognisable as rainforest shapes, but the materials to make them and the choice to pick up either this or that shape (a basket or a bagu shape, say) was up to the individual person. Recalling Hall’s articulation theory of culture (in Grossberg, 1986) even those less verbal artists like Jamie could articulate (in the sense of attaching or removing) to articulate (and express who they were).

### 9.5 Mija/Country is Home and Hut

The structuring and arguing terms spirit, story and symbol may leave one with the impression that intangible cultural heritage is the primary and only concept of value for Giringun people – like Country conceptualised as a ‘spiritual place’. Certainly we have seen how Giringun people valued just being with their Indigenous family: activities on Country like looking for lawyer cane or learning how to make a *nuba* ‘water bag’ were part of an all-important cultural transmission of a rainforest people’s intangible cultural heritage. Still, the frustration that four elders voluntarily expressed to me at no longer being able to access traditional lands was also critically insightful as an insistence on material things. The women’s camp positioned up the bank and the mija built down on the dry Murray riverbed were effective due to their recognisability as an Indigenous symbol upon the landscape, but the *material presence* of the camp, mija and Indigenous people was also powerful. I therefore raised the dual meaning of Dyirbal word “mija” as both *homeplace* and *hut*. Figuratively the women may have been “camping in the shadow of a racist text” as Baker has described (2018), but literally it remains that they were camping in the backyard of several European Australian farming families and asserting their own Indigenous presence of “family on the river”.

Moreton-Robinson (2015) states that, “Pursuant to the Mabo decision and the subsequent Native Title Act 1993, we Indigenous people have in effect become trespassers in our own land until we prove our native title” (p. 16). This is still true. Remarkably, however, due to their historic and diplomatic relations, Giringun women were able to “take the kids” along Murray River and pursue cultural learning on country over these weeks. In other words, Giringun people were able to use some land in the way that they wanted without native title. The women were agents for post or de-colonisation if we view the ‘post’ or the ‘de’ in terms of real action and consequence, as described by Tuck & Yang (2012): “Decolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life; it is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools” (p. 1). Still, a repatriation of land was only limited and conditional – another sort of “philosophy of repatriation” (Hennessy et al., 2013). The recent focus on sovereignty for Australian Indigenous people, particularly after the 2017

Uluru Statement from the Heart<sup>54</sup>, is another recent decolonising force that will surely challenge the adequacy of this mere “philosophy” for the future.

### 9.6 Concluding Remarks: Less Wild Artefacts and Future Research

The last discussion chapter in his thesis, *Making Artefacts at Home*, was in many ways a resolution of all that had been argued in the thesis, since it showed what happens when a descendant community is left to select and display their own artefacts on their own terms. Instead of drawing out distinctions between art and artefact, I preferred to use this unique opportunity, where the problem of “ancestralised” or old artefacts was not an issue, to see how a descendant community shows “*thought and care*” (Conway, 2018, p. 130) in an exhibition of artefacts. It was seen that thought and care was driven fundamentally by respect for the “old people”, for example, by *not showing* their images, but also, by *showing* their shared land and persistence of land through time. I argued that the symbolic strength of *mija* is such that they could be used to emplace new artefacts in this way, and connect them to country, making them ‘at home’ in the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair.

By ‘at home’ I meant within a specific cultural context, or more precisely, using terms from Ernie Grant’s framework, the right *Time* (pre-contact), *Place* (on the Murray River) and *Relationships* (used by a clan, with each artefact being only part of a full repertoire of tools for “thriving”). Shields were placed low, baskets up high and a large format photograph of the three *mija* on the riverbed provided the backdrop for this emplacement of artefacts. By comparison, for the permanent Enchanted Rainforest display in Townsville, the Museum of Tropical Queensland similarly uses a green painted wall and a plastic rainforest tree with video to arguably evoke a sense of immersion. The difference at CIAF appeared to be one of scale, however, where a family clan’s home, rather than the Australian rainforest ‘environment’ per se was the main concept used to make artefacts feel at home.

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<sup>54</sup> The 2017 Statement from the Heart is a painted and written invitation to non-Indigenous Australia to treaty from Australian Indigenous signatories. It is strengthened again through the power of a symbol (the first Yolngu bark petitions of 1963).

To further evidence this river camp significance, and the fact that this was indeed an Indigenous-led “curatorial rationale” as Conway (2018) might describe it, Abe Muriata’s interview at the art workshop in the previous year was provided, almost in full. This narrative clearly showed his pre-planning of the exhibition. Abe spoke of the clan camp on the river and gave an uninterrupted account of all the old artefacts that he remembered his old people (and he imagined his ancestors) using in a ‘typical day’. The significance of Time was furthermore acknowledged in his distinctions between Pre-Contact (when tools were used to survive and thrive) and Contact eras (when the role of artefacts changed to be objects of wonderment for scholars). It is difficult not to contrast the commercial success of Girringun’s CIAF display, and the success of Girringun’s keeping place in terms of longevity, with the apparent failure of Ernie Grant’s family museum. However, I would stress the point that Ernie Grant’s long career as a knowledge selector and history communicator – a curator, as I have argued of “Jirrbal culture” – in fact demonstrated its own kind of successful dissemination and longevity. Like Abe and the Girringun artists who made art on country before they exhibited anything, Ernie had communicated and “talked about artefacts” to the public from an Indigenous perspective and, importantly, from within the community according his own logic and rationale. This surely makes him a successful curator.

As Ernie’s curating outside of a museum context shows, in order to make a genuine commitment to postcoloniality state museums cannot simply employ curators with Indigenous heritage in museums and think this will suffice. It is not even enough, in my view, to assert an Indigenous ‘voice’ as a researcher. Rather, we all have to “take Indigenous forms of knowledge seriously”, as Taylor (2020) put it, by looking for this knowledge when it is publicly taking place in the community, and then highlighting it with a critical lens. This includes long-term investigations of these knowledges, as has now been provided here, so that Indigenous curating can be better understood, legitimised and implemented within all institutions holding Indigenous artefacts. Indeed, for the scholarly fields of Indigenous Studies, Museum Studies and Anthropology, access to this descendant community has been a gift, as I suggested in the interaction between myself and Aunty Emily at her house in Murray Upper. And it is through describing, in the first place, what *is* rather than what *should be* that research with Indigenous people can be just so: a subversive advocate for people whose cultural rights often remain invisible to a hegemonic legal framework.

Precisely to provide further examples of community-driven postcoloniality, and to gain insight into multiple senses of Indigenous curatorship outside of the museum or university, several chapters of this thesis have been focused on a descendant community. As people of a black minority in a white settler state, Giringun artists and elders did indeed carry out a kind of “radical care”, as Martin (2015) calls it. Martin describes this for the U.S. context and how it is cause for hope during particularly evident racial tensions in the country:

While I can't fully say how we are going to move through our present state of racial trauma, I do know that our need for spaces that offer healing from this suffering is imperative. And this is where imagining curatorial practice as a habit of radical care becomes really invigorating. (Martin, 2015, p. 54)

Radical care for healing means making people and artefacts less ‘wild’. This word is meant in the multiple Aboriginal English senses that I have described – that is to say, less abandoned, less pained or agitated by an injustice. It seems to me that this kind of curating is indeed “compassionate” (Bickel & St Georges, 2020). Future research should therefore address how care for Indigenous artefacts might be further developed as, also, care for people and society. Here it has been a descendant community who have shown compassion for their ancestors and for a postcolonising yet still uncomprehending public. To care for wild artefacts, to care about addressing systemic racism, and to care for community and identity by continuing to create cultural symbols – all of this demonstrates how compassionate care is part of Indigenous curating practice.



*Appendices*

**Appendix A. Booklet prepared for Ingan Museum in Tully**

*Grant Collection, Tully  
Information as told by  
Ernie Grant to  
Tahnee Innes (2016-2017)  
Items P1-P11*



As told by Ernie Grant to Tahnee Innes 2016-2017

*begin* 'shield': P01

## History:

This *begin* 'shield' was made by my cousin Andy Denham in the 1960s. He was the last person I knew who could make shields like this. I asked him to make it so we could have a shield for our people, as all our shields seem to have ended up in museums across the world. This shield has not been used in a *buya* 'corroboree' because the last one, which I attended as a boy, was held in the 1940s. The shield is made in the proper way, and I have used it to show people what our *begin* were like.

## Material and Cultural Significance:

This shield's diamond design is associated with the storm story of Jirrbal people from the Dyirbal language group. When you went to a *buya*, different shield designs communicated to others who you were and where you were from. A *begin* was quite light and shock-absorbent, and used to shield men from the blows of a *bagur* 'sword' at the *buya*. There are known places in our country where fig trees were used and re-used to make shields. You could see the cut-outs from the buttress roots, where Aboriginal people had taken wood for shields but kept the tree alive. There is a hand-hold on the inside of the shield, and a bump called *dumbul* at the front.

## *jawun* 'bicornual basket': P02



### History:

This small *jawun* 'basket' was made by my mother Chloe Grant at the Butler's place, Yabun. It was made before I was born. The Butler family gave it back to us and I have cherished it ever since.

### Material and Cultural Significance:

This basket has the curved, two-pointed bottom making it a so-called bi-cornual basket. These baskets were used in the creek for leeching toxins from rainforest fruits like black bean, zamia and yellow walnut. The old people were still using these baskets up to the 1990s. You could carry food and other things, too, by putting the basket's handle strap on your forehead and resting the basket between your shoulder blades. This basket has a flat back for this purpose, with the front face being more rounded. The large handle has come off of this basket, but it still has the smaller handle used for hanging it up at camp. It also has a sheen finish made from the sap of various trees such as bloodwood and grass tree. Mostly women made these when I was young, but Aboriginal men knew how to make them as well. The baskets took a long time to make because of their very close weaving. It was quite a skill to learn, and traditionally the first one you made would be burned and the ash rubbed on your arms. I would often see half made ones around in the camp before they had been finished. Baskets were a big part of our day-to-day life, back when we had the time to make them.

*bagur* 'sword': P03

## History:

I probably got this from a farmer in Tully who I had done work for but I'm not really sure. It may have been made by Andy Denham but again I am not sure. It is quite old and probably was used at the last *buya* 'corroboree' in 1940 at Gayambul.

## Material and Cultural Significance:

Like the shields of our people, most of our swords are probably only found in museums now. This one is made of Creek Penda, a hardwood found in the rainforest creeks. Our people used Bloodwood too, and other hardwoods from both the rainforest and the open forest, like bluegum, watergum and possibly red stringy. This sword doesn't have it, but usually there was *bumbil* 'string' wrapped around the handle and fixed into place with a mixture of tar from *gaywi* 'tar tree' and beeswax for a good grip. The *bagur* was very heavy and not carried around much. *Bagur* were used mostly at *buya* 'coroboree'. Men would take turns to throw it in an overhand fashion, to strike another man standing with a shield in his hand. Women did not use these at the *buya*, they used their fighting sticks (*nyalma*) instead.

*jarrbal* 'baby basket': P04

## History:

This basket was probably made by Ida Henry or Daisy Denham around the 1960s. It was given to me by Mrs Henry at either Glen Tyson or Bellenden.

## Material and Cultural Significance:

Our baby baskets were called *jarrbal*/'jurabal' but I have not seen a baby basket like this anywhere else. It has a unique design with diagonal stitching and a kind of cross tying at the top.

*juda* 'wide baby basket': P05

As told by Ernie Grant to Tahnee Innes 2016-2017



History:

This large basket was made by my mother Chloe Grant around 1930 at the Butler's place, Yabun.

Material and Cultural Significance:

Although this basket was of the style used for carrying babies I remember my mother using this type of basket to carry washing, at Yabun for example. My parents were working at Yabun when my young sister passed away at Marabal. Victor Butler's cousins lived at Fringford where we also lived and worked later on. I've seen my mum make a few like this for washing.

*badi* or *bargu* 'stone axe': P06



#### History:

The handle of this axe was probably put on in the 1960s, maybe by Andy Denham. But the stone axehead itself is quite a bit older.

#### Material and Cultural Significance:

The handle was wrapped in lawyer cane and fixed to the stone axe head with tar tree *guywi* and beeswax. There were places you could go to sharpen the axe head. These were important places. You needed a sharp axe - to cut out *jambun* from logs or to get honey. Steps could be cut into trees with the axe, and these steps can still be found in some of our trees like the *zamia* trees.

## *bargu* 'sword': P07

No Image

History:

Material and Cultural Significance:

No details given yet



*bagu* 'firestick': P08

History:  
No details given

Material and Cultural Significance:

The bagu, jiman and bumbil, is collectively called bagu. The base is usually made from milky pine wood because it has the right texture to create friction with the least possible effort. This particular one is painted with jigabina face (spirit flying man) who had three landing places. While you away hunting you put it up on humpy, to mind the place.

The paint design comes from the maker's specific story place location.

The colours comes from a particular Aboriginal story background. There are four essential colours – white, red, yellow and black.

## mindi 'grass basket: P09



History:  
No details given

Material and Cultural Significance:

These kind of bags were made from jindarigun rushes – which grow everywhere. This is a small basket made for a very specific purpose – to carry valuable items. They carry spiritual things too (eg flesh for fishing). There is a nautilus shell that goes round the neck – beads too (gaban gaban, warigal, murrigan, quandong) – guynjul when it was cut up.

If someone gave to you they had high regard for you – not like money. It is for adornment – not clever, not magical. I have never seen men make it. Jindarigun grass on bottom too. Can be made with lawyer cane handle.

## birrabu 'cross boomerang': P10



History:  
No details given

Material and Cultural Significance:  
This one julu julu. Made out of rainforest hard wood. But could be julu julu, jarragala, rivergum, or jidu.

Mainly for fun and games more, people made them and threw them at occasions. Others youthrew them for object of being able to fly and return – for satisfaction of being able to make one that there and came back.

The skill required to make them come back was deeply culturally ingrained in Aboriginal I boys and their teachers. Like bending the ends to make them come from either right or left direction. Twist and a bend on them. The only way in hard wood is by putting in ashes and heating and bending while wood is pliant. The middle join – you had to be taught how to bind the two pieces together with lawyer cane. One side bottom flat, round side on top – the round on the inside of the circle when you throw. Never used for intent like other boomerangs to intimidate – this one purely for fun, "enjoyment" (not sport).

*wangal* 'boomerang': P11

## History:

Not sure who made this one.

## Material and Cultural Significance:

This boomerang not gamin - Jarragala and budam budam. These should have been sold for \$200, not \$5! Not everybody was a good boomerang maker – same as climbing trees. Andy Denham was one of those who made ones what came back to your hand. My Dad was one too.

Herbert river cherry, finger cherry also. But these were the main ones.

They WERE made out of warigal tree (as Dixons says) but too soft, not lasting.

This one jarragala.

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