Observations on 'Dolobbo bim' (Bark Paintings) in Arnhem Land 1948

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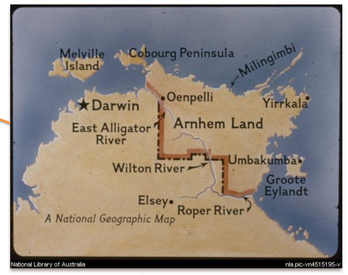
WHAT ENTITIES CAN BE IDENTIFIED IN NMNH 'DOLOBBO BIM' (BARK PAINTINGS) AND WHAT CORRELATION EXISTS TO THE BIODIVERSITY OF THE 1940S AND OTHER SPECIMENS COLLECTED BY THE EXPEDITION?

Map of Australia, 1948.
Photo attributed to Frank Setzler. Courtesy of the National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Setzler Photographs, Box 36, Lantern slides, arnhem_land003



Map of Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, 1948.
Photo attributed to Robert R. Miller. Courtesy of the National Library of Australia, nla.pic-vn4515195.

Background: The 1948 Australian-American Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land (AASEAL) was conducted between March 1948 to November 1948 around Oenpelli (now called Gumbalanya), Groote Eylandt, Yirrkala, Milingimbi Island, Winchelsea Island and Chasm Island in North Australia. The Expedition included seventeen non-indigenous researchers from the United States and Australia who came from a variety of scientific disciplines including anthropology, archaeology, botany, ethnology and medical research.*

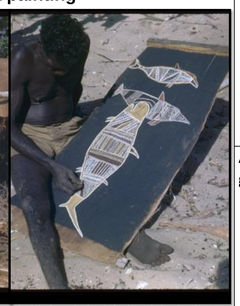
Objects collected by the Expedition are dispersed throughout institutions across the world. The Yolngu 'Dolobbo bim' (Kunwinjku term for bark paintings made by Yolngu generally) discussed were commissioned by Expedition ethnologists. It is not known if the Aboriginal artists depicted the same species of animals on their bark paintings as the Expedition members were collecting at the same time.

Series of images taken during the Expedition showing how to make a bark painting

Aboriginal man cutting bark from a stringybark gum for painting, Groote Eylandt, Northern Territory, 27 April 1948. Photo attributed to Robert R. Miller. Courtesy of the National Library of Australia, nla.pic-vn4495444

Five Aboriginal men bringing in bark for painting on, Groote Eylandt, Northern Territory, 21 April 1948. Photo attributed to Robert R. Miller. Courtesy of the National Library of Australia, nla.pic-vn4533194

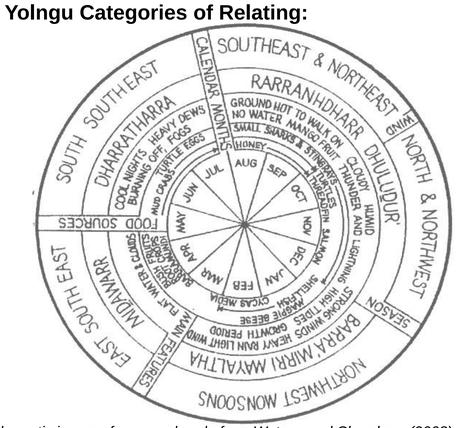
Aboriginal Australians at their camp, Yirrkala, Northern Territory, 30 August 1948. Photo attributed to Robert R. Miller. Courtesy of the National Library of Australia, nla.pic-vn4534892



Aboriginal man bark painting in Umbakumba, Groote Eylandt, Northern Territory, 1 June 1948. Photo attributed to Robert R. Miller. Courtesy of the National Library of Australia, nla.pic-vn4511925

Yolngu Bark Paintings: Made from the bark of a stringy bark gum, *eucalyptus tertrodonta* ,by men, bark paintings traditionally adorned the inside of temporary shelters during the wet season and depicted a range of cosmological beings. The ninety bark paintings in the NMNH's collection form part of the over 400 bark paintings collected by Expedition. Bark paintings were made to remind people of their relationship with their garma (public) and mardayin (sacred) lore, they became important intercultural artifacts, and a way in which the Expedition sought to document Yolngu culture and aesthetics.

Yolngu Categories of Relating:



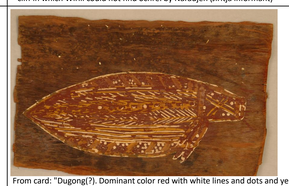
Schematic image of seasonal cycle from Watson and Chambers (2008)

Yolngu understand the world to be fundamentally interrelated. For example, one portion of the seasonal cycle is conceptually linked to a range of faunal species. Many of these species are associated with human beings through patrilineally derived categories of identity. In this way, humans, animals and seasons are brought together as part of a system. As Sally Bijibiji told Rose (1988:382): "'March flies are telling you the (crocodile) eggs are ready.' The value of this kind of information is manifest: the moment at which crocodiles start to lay eggs is quite unpredictable by the western calendar, but it is entirely predictable if one pays attention to march flies ... The other type of biting fly tells you that the bush plums are ready. 'When the brolga sings out, the jarlalka (dark catfish, associated with flood waters) starts to move.'"

RESEARCH OUTLINE

1. Collate list of animals depicted in bark paintings and animals collected from Australian and US collections
2. Take photos of the backs of the bark paintings
3. The identification of species
4. Statistical analysis of species listed in the bark paintings as compared to species listed as collected by the Expedition.
5. Collect genealogies of artists of bark paintings and data about associations between animals and moieties in 1948
6. Interpretation

SMITHSONIAN'S NMNH 1948 ARNHEM LAND BARK PAINTINGS

QUESTIONS	FRONT	BACK
Are there differences in Yolngu interpretations of bark paintings now as compared to 1948? **Yes**	 From card: "the top cross-hatched band is a cliff, below it are wavy bands of yellow ochre at Guranga, Caledon Bay...The middle transverse band is a bank or cliff in which Wirili could not find ochre. by Naradjen (Jiritja informant)"	 Dr J. Gumbala (Jiritja informant) in 2010 : "crosshatched bands are saltwater"
When were the backs of the barks written on? **Before 1950**	 From card: "Dugong(?). Dominant color red with white lines and dots and yellow lines."	 Rebecca Richards (2010): "catfish?"
Are species depicted geographically specific? **Probably. Further research required.**	 From Card: "Baracuda. Painted by Minimini"	 Rebecca Richards (2010): "Tiger shark?"
Are these barks paintings depictions of animal and plants species? **No.**	 From Card: "Four Turtles and two groups of eggs. Painted by Burawanda"	 Dr J. Gumbala (Jiritja informant) in 2010 : "Totem"
What happens when there is more than one interpretation of what is depicted? Is there a right or wrong answer? **Further research required.**	 From card: "two scorpions. Painted by Burawanda"	 Thomas Amagula (informant) in 2010: "Head lice"
Did Yolngu depict species collected on the Expedition? **No, not necessarily.**	 From Card: "Four coconut trees. Painted by Charlie".	 Rebecca Richards (2010): "Pandanus Palm?"

Sources Cited: May, S. K. 2010. *Collecting cultures: myth, politics, and collaboration in the 1948 Arnhem Land Expedition*. Lanham M.D: AltaMira Press

Rose, D. B. 1988. 'Exploring an Aboriginal land ethic', *Meanjin* 47(3): 378-387

Watson, H., and Chambers, D. W. (3rd Ed.) 2008. *Singing the Land, Signing the Land*. Geelong: Deakin University Press

The Expedition, 1948. Photo attributed to Frank Setzler. Courtesy of the National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Setzler Photographs, Box 36, Lantern slides, arnhem_land002

Charles P Mountford and Groote Eylandt artists, 1948. Photo attributed to Howell Walker. Courtesy of State Library of South Australia, PRG487/1/2/205/1. Out of cultural consideration, part of this image has been digitally obscured.

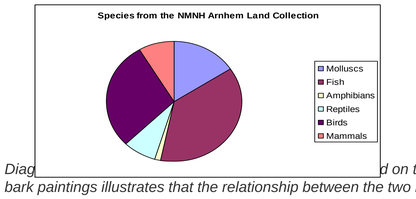
AN ANALYSIS OF THE BACKS OF THE BARK PAINTINGS

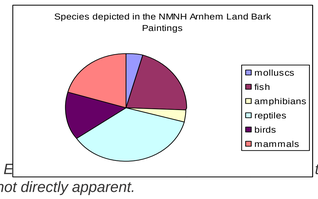
Analysis of backs of barks was determined by:

1. Photographing the backs of the bark paintings
2. Comparison of inscriptions found on the backs of the bark paintings with archives/database/field notes
3. The identification of Aboriginal and the scientific names for the materials and species depicted

Initial findings

May (2010) has argued that Frank Setzler, NMNH archaeologist, played a marginal role in the Expedition collecting. However, Setzler's diary suggests that he played a larger role in the collecting of bark paintings than has been previously suggested. Furthermore, Bunn (personal communication) argues that an itemisation of the bark paintings completed before the separation of McCarthy and Seltzer's bark painting collection to the AM and the NMNH was completed at the AM in 1956. Archival data suggests that such itemisation in fact took place in 1950.





Diag[illegible]d on the E[illegible] the bark paintings illustrates that the relationship between the two is not directly apparent.

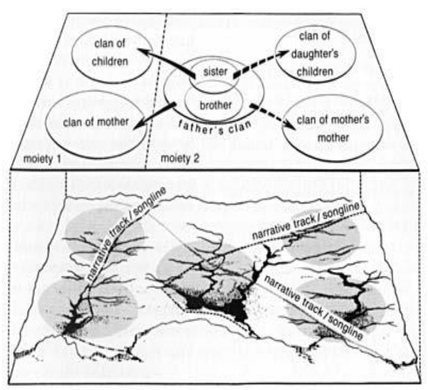
Further research:

1. Locate 1948 lists of the bark paintings and their meanings from Milingimbi, Liverpool River, and Gumbalanya possibly within in Australia;
2. Determine what inscriptions on backs of barks at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery refer;
3. Determine whether or not the backs of the bark paintings at the NMA, NSW Art Gallery, South Australian Art Gallery, and Queensland Art Gallery are annotated;
4. Establish information sharing between with the Australian Museum and NMNH regarding information held by each institution regarding each other's separate bark painting collections.

Biological specimens collected on the Expedition may have partially influenced the cultural depictions produced. However, further research on the mitigating force of Aboriginal lore, song cycles, and kinship systems expression of this relationship is required.

Yolngu Categories of Relating:

This diagram, adapted from a diagram by Watson and Chambers (2008) shows how '*gurruṯu*' (an abstract recursion) and narrative tracks (metaphors) are worked together in Yolngu life to create a working system of land tenure in much the same way that Westerners use numbers (an abstract recursion) and qualities (metaphors) in constituting a working system of land tenure.



Schematic image of the relationship between land tenure and the kinship system from Watson and Chambers (2008).

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* Participating Institutions included the Smithsonian Institution, the National Geographic Society, the Australian Museum, and the Australian Institute of Anatomy.