

Friday essay: Dr Joe Gumbula, the ancestral chorus, and how we value Indigenous knowledges

Written by Aaron Corn, Professor of Music and Director, Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music (CASM) and National Centre for Aboriginal Language and Music Studies (NCALMS), University of Adelaide



A sacred paperbark tree at Djiliwirri, the most sacred homeland of the Indigenous elder and public intellectual, Dr Joe Gumbula, in 2004. Aaron Corn

In September 2001, the preeminent Indigenous elder and public intellectual, Dr Joe Gumbula, spoke to a class of students at the University of Melbourne. In death, he told us, he would no longer be Joe Gumbula. He would no longer need that name, he said, because the ancestors of his most sacred homeland, Djiliwirri, had already named his corporeal body for features of the living environment as recorded in song.

His knees, he said, are the fruit of the native apple tree.

His feet and legs belong to the emu, as does his heart and his stomach.

His front belongs to the ancestral ghost, Murayana, while his back is Murayana's iconic hollow log coffin.

His spine is the pathway worn through the scrub by the koel cuckoo.

His eyes are nuts of the cycad palm.

His white hair is made of the fine wispy roots of the paperbark tree and the foam they produce in the swamp during the Wet Season at Djiliwirri.

His head and all his knowledge are honeycomb from the hive of the Honeybee ancestor, Birrkud

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a. His nose is beeswax, and his mouth is the entrance to the beehive.



Gumbula with his family receiving his honorary Doctor of Music degree at the University of Sydney in 2007. Author provided

Gumbula, who passed away in 2015, was one of Australia's greatest thinkers. Now, his name is Birrkuda, [the Honeybee](#). His voice has joined the ancestral chorus at Djiliwirri, where he dwells for all of time, and there, within the living environment, his songs can still be heard by those who attend to listen.

Honey from the paperbark tree

Born in Miliŋinbi (Milingimbi) in 1954, Gumbula was descended from a prominent line of Yolŋu leaders of the Gupapuyŋu clan from northeast Arnhem Land, whose contributions to understanding between Indigenous and other Australians have been influential since the 1920s. Researching the representation of his parents and grandparents in ethnographic and art collections worldwide became the passion of his life's work.

Gumbula apprenticed as carpenter in his teens, and moved to Galiwin'ku in 1971, where he became a lifetime member of the seminal Yolŋu country and gospel band, Soft Sands. From 1989 to 1996, he served as a sworn officer of the Northern Territory Police Service, retiring with the rank of Constable First Class and a commendation for bravery.

He simultaneously became a recognised master-singer of Manikay, the exquisite Yolŋu tradition of public ceremonial songs. The academy struggles to recognise intellectual expressions outside the medium of text, yet the Manikay tradition perpetuates a body of knowledge that has enabled the Yolŋu to live in Australia for untold millennia.

Manikay as performed in a public ceremony in Ramanginiŋ in 2008.

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I first met Gumbula at his home in Galiwin'ku in November 1997 while undertaking my PhD research on contemporary popular music in Arnhem Land. He adopted me as his child - a common enough occurrence for which Yolŋu law provides.

Gumbula had been composing his own rock songs since 1985, and had recently found new work as a vocational trainer in contemporary music skills for Northern Territory University. He proudly showed me the new music-video that he had just completed for his most-loved original song, Djiliwirri, which celebrates the continuity of Gupapuyŋu clan law from his parents' generation to the present. Named after the most sacred homeland of the Daygurrurr Gupapuyŋu clan, it remains a visionary work that incorporated clips from the 1964 documentary film, *Dja* lumbu, which featured Gumbula's father, Djäwa, leading a public hollow-log burial ceremony at Miliŋinbi.

"Djiliwirri" composed by Joe Gumbula and Fred Dhamarrandji, and performed by Joe Gumbula with Soft Sands in 1997.

In September 1997, just before we met, Gumbula had completed a long and arduous process of learning to become a leader of public ceremonies. He had attained mastery in performing his hereditary Manikay, and had learnt to conduct large complements of singers, dancers and artists in ceremony across a complex array of contexts. By building his expertise in Yolŋu law, he had accrued sufficient *märr* (essence) to earn the right to lead public ceremonies, and had been recognised by his elders as one who is *liya-närra'mirri*: learned and wise.

Further reading: [*Friday essay: the remarkable yi d aki \(and no it's not a ‘didge’\)*](#)

As a function of my adoption as his child, Gumbula first taught me how to accompany on *yidaki* or didjeridu so that he could sing Manikay whenever we travelled together. He coached me in closely studying the musical and lyrical content of the Manikay series that he regularly performed and the knowledge codified within it. Over the years of this process, I came to understand fine details about Gupapuyŋu clan homelands and ceremonies that I could not have learnt by any other means.

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How sulphur-crested cockatoos perch in lofty paperbark trees to cry for the dead.

How emus stomp the earth and soak their feathers as they drink from freshwater streams.

How the poisonous spines of eel-tailed catfish protect the souls of the newly deceased like warriors' spears.

How tortoises comb through white weeds on the floor of the lake at Gapuwiyak, just as elders comb white clay through the hair of youths being readied for initiation.

These are among the myriad natural phenomena of the Yolŋu homelands that the Manikay tradition records and ascribes ceremonial significance. They are repeatedly observable both in nature and in the ways that Yolŋu engage with them.

Singing ancestral records

In Yolŋu epistemology, whenever people sing Manikay, their voices are not their own, but rather mingle with those of the ancestors themselves - all those who have gone before and all those who are yet to be. The Manikay tradition codifies all the observations and strategies for living given to the Yolŋu by the original ancestors who originally named, shaped and populated their myriad homelands in northeast Arnhem Land.

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Thinking through songs [its own layer of ash](#)

I have spent my entire career collaborating with thinkers, such as Gumbula, who come from outside European intellectual traditions. Their relationships with the academy are sardonically illustrated by the Iranian philosopher, Hamid Dabashi, who asks, [“Can non-Europeans think?”](#)

He questions why the work of European philosophers is just plain philosophy, while they deem their African counterparts to be

ethno

-philosophers. Why is it, asks Dabashi, that Mozart is a composer of music, while equally-sophisticated Indian musical expressions are the subject of

ethno

-musicology?



The source of a sacred freshwater stream at Djiliwirri in 2004. Author provided

It is through this systemic lens of alterity that the academy has typically engaged with the Manikay tradition, and indeed all Australian Indigenous expressive forms. It typifies them as conduits for cultural ideas and values, and perhaps even spiritual and political ones, but rarely

intellectual ones.

Clearly, learned exponents of the Manikay tradition, and others like it, should be considered thinkers in their own right. But what of the myriad media through which such thinkers choose to express their ideas?

For most intellectuals within Euro-diasporic traditions, the arrangement of typographical characters on a white page is a tried and familiar medium for communicating theoretical ideas built upon observable evidence with reference to existing scholarly findings. Scholars within these traditions, myself included, are trained from an early age to know that books and other texts can convey facts and, therefore, knowledge.

We know that not all books and texts are factual. Yet this never brings into question the prevailing academic assumption that text is the ideal medium for conveying evidential knowledge that is observable and repeatable.

But what if there were other media that, like text, were so intimately associated with language, that they too could convey knowledge in such ways? Academics routinely entrust text and, to a lesser extent, film with conveying their original contributions to human knowledge. We usually do this unquestioningly on the basis of established precedents. Does not the Manikay tradition, with its own intimate relationship with audible language stretching back to established precedents in ancestral times, exhibit comparable mechanisms for conveying meaning?

The Manikay tradition has been carefully curated over successive generations to maintain an observable and repeatable record of this expansive body of knowledge, while simultaneously being able to accommodate both reinterpretations of old observations and additions of new ones.



Knowledge across cultures

Gumbula was my most prolific teacher, Yolŋu or otherwise. Driven by his personal quest to trace the extensive legacy of his family's recorded history, he was adamant from the outset of our relationship that intelligence should flow between us equally in both directions.

He would teach me about Yolŋu music and its centrality to Yolŋu law and knowledge, and I would help him to build networks that would lead him to collections of interest in museums and archives around the world. This grounded our relationship in the ethos of Matjabala, a Gupapuyŋu clan process for forging bonds with other groups to share knowledge and resources through equitable ceremonial exchange.

Gumbula constantly drew on his knowledge of Manikay and its centrality within Yolŋu law to challenge my learnt academic perceptions about what knowledge is, and how it can be manifested. I came to realise that all ethnographic scholarship about the Yolŋu, since its beginnings in the late 1920s, could not have existed without the cooperation of learned Yolŋu leaders who had been willing to engage with visiting academics.

As Gumbula and I taught, wrote and performed together, our aim was not to bring Yolŋu knowledge into the academy, but rather to bring the academy into a more equitable dialogue with equally valid traditions of Yolŋu knowledge production and dissemination. We called our approach not only bi-cultural, but also [*bi-intellectual*](#).

Gumbula began teaching in Australian Indigenous Studies courses at the University of Melbourne in 2001 and, through his 2003–05 visiting senior fellowship there, embarked on extensive travels to investigate his family's recorded history in collections around the world.

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In association with the National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia, he and I worked with his family to make archival recordings of their Manikay repertoires through field trips to their remote homelands. Later, at the University of Sydney, he taught in the Australian Indigenous Studies program in 2005–06, and was awarded an honorary doctorate of music in 2007.



Gumbula with his wife, Pamela Ganambarr, at the launch of his Makarr-garma exhibition at the University of Sydney in 2009. Author provided.

Gumbula led three projects funded by the Australian Research Council on Yolŋu collections. In 2009, he curated an innovative exhibition on Yolŋu knowledge at the University of Sydney's Macleay Museum called Makarr-garma, and his 2011 book on early ethnographic photographs from Arnhem Land, [Matjabala Mali's Buku-ru'anmaram](#), received a prestigious Mander Jones Award from the Australian Society of Archivists.

Inspired by photographs found in the Melbourne Museum and in the University of Sydney Archives, his final project was to start the process of producing a rare Makarrata reparations ceremony at Milinjibi after a hiatus of some 80 years. He sadly passed away before it came to fruition in August 2016.

Though charming and charismatic, Gumbula was fearless and unyielding. He took pride in challenging colleagues to think and work in new proactive ways. His research leaves [an enduring impact](#) upon the ways that scholars and collecting institutions represent and engage with Indigenous peoples, heritage, and knowledges.

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Aaron Corn receives funding from the Australian Research Council. He volunteers as a Co-Director of the National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia.

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