Observations on ‘Dolobbo bim’ (Bark Paintings) in Arnhem Land 1948
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RESEARCH OUTLINE
1. Compile 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.

Thinking from a Yolngu perspective, we need to ask the following questions:

SMITHSONIAN’S NMNH 1948 ARNHEM LAND BARK PAINTINGS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTIONS</th>
<th>FRONT</th>
<th>BACK</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are there differences in Yolngu interpretations of bark paintings now as compared to 1948?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>When were the backs of the bark paintings written on?</td>
<td>Before 1950</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Are species depicted geographically specific?</td>
<td>Probably. Further research required.</td>
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<td>Are these bark paintings depictions of animal and plants species?</td>
<td>No</td>
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<td>What happens when there is more than one interpretation of what is depicted? Is there a right or wrong answer?</td>
<td>Further research required.</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Did Yolngu depict species collected on the Expedition?</td>
<td>No, not necessarily.</td>
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Further research:
1. Locate 1948 lists of the bark paintings and their means from Milingimbi, Liverpool River, and Gumbalanyra possibly within Australia.
2. Determine what inscriptions on backs of bark paintings 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 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 ‘gumur’ (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).

Acknowledgements:
I would like to thank Joshua Gorman, Dave Rosenthal, and the Gumbalanyra, Yirrkala, and Groote Eylandt communities for their kind assistance with this project. I would also like to thank all of the Smithsonian staff members who have made this study possible as part of the NHRE Summer Intern Program. Special thanks to Kristin Samper, Elizabeth Cottrill, Gene Hunt, and Virginia Power.

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Background: The 1948 American-Australasian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land (AASEAL) was conducted between March 1948 to November 1948 around Groote (now called Gumbalanyra), Groote Eylandt, Yirrkala, Milngimbi 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.*

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

Objects collected by the Expedition are dispersed throughout institutions across the world. The ‘Yolngu Dolobbo bim’ (Kurruwi 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 or their bark paintings as the Expedition members were collecting at the same time.

A number of images taken during the Expedition showing how to make a bark painting.

Yolngu Bark Paintings: Made from the bark of a stringy bark gum, eucalypts torredonta, 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 abstract recursion and narrative tracks (metaphors) in Yolngu culture and aesthetics.

Yolngu Categories of Relating:

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 Bitjui told Rose (1988:332): “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 brogla sings out, the jabalika (dark catfish, associated with flood waters) starts to move.”

Schematic image of aseasonal cycle from Watson and Chambers (2008).