

Ngarranggarni

Gija Two-Way Learning and the University of Melbourne

Gabriel Nodea and Robyn Sloggett

Introduction

Warmun is a small township owned and managed by Gija people in the east Kimberley region of Western Australia. Situated between Kununurra and Hall's Creek, Warmun is also located on the ancient *Wirnan* (sharing and trading) exchange route that stretched inland from the coastline around Derby to the west, to that around Wadeye to the north-east. Trade and shared knowledge have always been an important part of the social, cultural and spiritual fabric of Gija life, and it was along this route that Gija people—working through complex ceremonial networks—shared resources, cultural products and practices.

Ngarranggarni is the belief and knowledge system that guides the Gija way of life. The Gija ancestors established *Ngarranggarni* when they created the land, the plants, the animals and the people. *Ngarranggarni* defines who Gija people are, and sets out clear rules for how to behave properly as a member of Gija society. In particular, *Ngarranggarni* guides contemporary Gija life, governing family and clan relationships and Gija people's connection to, and responsibility for, their clan country. The Gija Old People hold the senior knowledge about *Ngarranggarni*. They own the

knowledge and are responsible for keeping it strong, and for teaching it to future generations. This knowledge cannot be passed on without the permission of the Old People.

On one level, this article is about an educational partnership between the Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation at the University of Melbourne and the Warmun Art Centre, but it is also about the contemporary influence of *Ngarranggarni*, which has become an important part of the education programs at the Grimwade Centre, and is now extending beyond conservation as new academic disciplines at the university, such as history, microbiology and earth sciences, contribute to the partnership.

Warrambany (angry water), 1974

The small Warmun township is home to some 500 Gija people. It is situated on the banks of Turkey Creek, with people living on either side of the creek. Warmun had been a trading camp and meeting place for Gija people for generations, but following the enactment of legislation in 1968 to bring equal pay to Aboriginal people working in the Kimberley cattle industry and the subsequent forced removal of Gija people from

many of the cattle stations, in the early 1970s Warmun became a refugee camp. People were physically removed from their country, so that simple acts like finding food and water, as well as complex activities like ceremony and caring for country, could no longer be carried out. This made Gija people feel disempowered and sad. They felt as if they had been pushed aside from the country they had looked after through all time, and that they could no longer make decisions about caring for country. It brought down their spirits and made them feel like they were losing their strength. Children were removed to Wyndham (200 kilometres to the north) for schooling, food was scarce, and life was very difficult.¹

Out of these difficulties, Gija Old People, the clan leaders who held and owned Gija knowledge and so were responsible for the wellbeing of their communities and the maintenance of Gija society, determined that education was critical to the preservation of Gija society. Soon after Warmun was legally incorporated as an Aboriginal community in 1977, the Old People, who held senior *Ngarranggarni* responsibilities, approached the Catholic Church to establish a school at Warmun, so that children could be educated locally. In May 1979 two Josephite nuns arrived,



Sister Theresa Morellini and Sister Claire Ahern, and the Two-Way education structure proposed by the Old People was implemented.² Under this Two-Way system, Gija children were taught Western curriculum and educational requirements by the nuns, and Gija language, knowledge and social responsibility by the Old People. As the Old People could no longer take children onto their clan country, they created paintings and objects as educational material. It is these artworks and objects that form the basis of the significant Warmun Community Collection. Many of these Old People became some of Australia's most important artists, including Paddy Jaminji, George Mung Mung, Hector Jandany, Jack Britten, Rusty Peters, Rammy Ramsay, Queenie McKenzie, Peggy Patrick, Phyllis Thomas, Lena Nyadbi, Mabel Juli, Nancy Nodea and Madigan Thomas.

In 1974, the passage of Cyclone Tracy from the Western Australian coastline to the Northern Territory resulted in flooding across the Kimberley. The newly established Warmun township was struck by tragedy. The *warrambany* (angry water) from Cyclone Tracy flooded Turkey Creek, resulting in the death of a Gija woman who was in a car that attempted to cross the flooded

creek at the crossing immediately to the west of the township. Her spirit returned to Warmun to pass on the story of her spirit journey across country in a dream to Rover Thomas who, although not Gija, was a respected member of the Gija community. Thomas had come from the desert and settled at Warmun, where he was accepted as *Joolama*, and given this skin name, one of 16 Gija names that identify the eight skin groups. These define the relationships and behaviour of Gija people to one another, and to Gija country.³ This story, known as the *Goorirr Goorirr* ceremony, became one of the most important events in the history of art in Australia. In the passing of knowledge by the Old Woman to Rover Thomas, the legacy of this flood was the development of some of the most important art in Australian history. Thomas joined the great Gija artists who developed an art movement that led to the education of Australians across the country, extending knowledge of Gija beliefs, lore and history. The name of Warmun also became known on the world stage when, in 1990, Thomas represented Australia at the Venice Biennale.

In 1998, after Gija Old People and artists decided that they needed their own art centre, the Warmun

Art Centre was opened. Today the international reputation of the Warmun artists continues to grow, as evidenced by the commissioning of Lena Nyadbi's *Barramundi Dreaming* for the roof of Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, and by the international exhibitions to which Gija artists regularly contribute.

Warrambany, 2011

The Warmun Art Centre is situated next to Turkey Creek, and is reached by a small one-lane bridge. On Friday 12 March 2011, following days of heavy rain, *warrambany* again rushed along the creek, which broke its banks, flooding most of the township and completely inundating the Art Centre. The contemporary artworks were washed out of the building and along the creek, and the room that held the significant Community Collection filled with water, swilling the art and objects around the room and finally, when the water subsided, leaving them saturated and mouldy.⁴

As soon as Art Centre staff realised the potential impact of the floodwaters on the Centre, calls were made to secure assistance. Argyle Diamonds, part of the mining company Rio Tinto and operator of the Argyle Diamond Mine in the eastern Kimberley, provided helicopters and staff to airlift the

Community Collection to Argyle Diamonds' offices in Kununurra, about 200 kilometres north-east of Warmun. Arnhem Northern and Kimberley Artists Aboriginal Corporation (ANKA) secured support from its members, in particular Waringarri Artists in Kununurra, and from the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, and arranged for logistics company Toll Holdings to provide, at no cost, a refrigerated truck to bring those works that required conservation treatment to storage at the Public Record Office Victoria in Melbourne, some 3,000 kilometres away. In the meantime, Warmun Art Centre staff, artists, and Gija Old People began to work with two staff members of the Grimwade Centre (Lyndon Ormond-Parker and Marcelle Scott) on a plan for the treatment of the precious items from the Warmun Community Collection.

In Ngarranggarni, all natural events have a cause and a reason. Ancestral spirits are responsible for floods. The Rainbow Serpent was the source of the floods that led to the tragedy at Turkey Creek in 1974, while the question of what caused the 2011 flood remains open. What is clear, however, is that just as the 1974 flood led to the forming of important new relationships, so too did the 2011 flood.

Conserving the Warmun Community Collection, and Two-Way Learning.

In the days following the 2011 flood, fibrous mould was observed growing on a number of artworks, and it was clear that treatment could not wait for the approval of grant applications. In consultation with Gija Old People, the decision was made to incorporate treatment of the collection into the teaching program at the Grimwade Centre. In this way, these objects—made in order to educate young people about Gija culture and knowledge—would be used to educate a new generation of students. It was Patrick Mung Mung, son of the great Two-Way Learning man George Mung, who first identified this logical sequence of events when he visited the University of Melbourne in October 2011.⁵ By the time financial support was received from a range of philanthropic foundations, government agencies and departments, and the Friends of Warmun support network, a program was in place that brought together Grimwade Centre conservation students and staff with Gija Old People to manage the conservation treatment of the flood-damaged works.

Treatment of the collection in Melbourne took two years. During

this time a number of visits took place between Warmun and the University of Melbourne. One reason for these visits was to check that the treatment of the works was being undertaken in ways that were culturally appropriate: that proper permissions were in place, that Grimwade Centre staff and students and others who might be involved were properly authorised to do the work, and that the processes for informing people of progress were adequate. A recurring question from Grimwade Centre staff concerned how to undertake conservation properly when dealing with Gija cultural material. A consistent answer was that to understand how to behave properly, it is necessary to come regularly onto Gija country, as this is where knowledge is held and best shared.

In June 2013, the collection arrived back in Warmun, where a new storeroom had been purpose-built to museum standards, to house the collection. The return was celebrated with a performance of the *Goorirr Goorirr joonba*.

It did not take long for the collection to be reintegrated into the education programs at Warmun. Shortly after the return of the works, students from the Ngalangangpum School began to visit the Art Centre

Rusty Peters and Gordon Barney at Narwan, teaching University of Melbourne Master's by Coursework students and Ngalangangpum Warmun community school students. Image courtesy of the Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, University of Melbourne, and the Warmun Art Centre.

for talks from the Old People about the collection, and a decision was made to build a display and teaching space in the Art Centre. The Art Centre's studio manager, Ralph Juli, and staff from the Grimwade Centre (Sophie Lewincamp, Jordi Casasayas and Vanessa Kowalksi) worked together to prepare works selected by the Old People for exhibition. This space, known as the Narwan, or Cave, has become a focus for teaching language and culture.⁶

Building knowledge and understanding for the long term

Following the return of the works and further discussions about how best to work together into the future to ensure a long-term relationship between Warmun and the University of Melbourne, both parties decided that a formal relationship would be a good next step. In November 2013, the then chairman of the Warmun Art Centre, Mark Nodea, and board

members Roseleen Park and Sadie Carrington attended a two-day meeting in Melbourne. A draft 'Partnering Document' was developed, identifying what each party needed to do to ensure the success of the partnership. This was written in plain English following discussions in Melbourne and then at Warmun. In early April 2014 a group of representatives from the university travelled to Warmun for the official signing of the agreement. On 8 April 2014, at the Warmun Art Centre,



Gabriel Nodea and Robyn Sloggett, 'Ngarranggarni: Gija Two-Way Learning'

Professor Ian Anderson signed the document on behalf of the University of Melbourne, and Mark Nodea signed it on behalf of the Warmun Art Centre. Other signatories include Rusty Peters, Mabel Juli, Shirley Purdie and Patrick Mung Mung from Warmun Art Centre, and Robyn Sloggett from the Grimwade Centre. This partnership brings together Gija Old People at the Warmun Art Centre and staff at the Grimwade Centre at the University of Melbourne in a teaching and research partnership that is built on the Two-Way Learning model developed in Warmun more than 40 years ago.⁷

The Partnering Document opens with the following background, under the heading 'How we built the idea':

The Warmun Art Centre and the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation at the University of Melbourne have been working together since 2011, after major flooding in the Warmun Community.

A strong relationship grew when Melbourne University began fixing art works damaged in these floods. The partners now wish to keep growing the work they are doing together to bring about more opportunities around

knowledge, education, and chances for employment.

Teaching and learning has always been right at the heart of Gija ways—from Bush, to Boarding School, to Warlarri (White Tree), to the Bough Shed, and now Beyond—to the University of Melbourne.

This new and bigger partnership will concentrate on 'Two Way Learning' in Arts and Education and will be about different areas of knowledge, not just conservation and art. Universities call these areas 'disciplines'.

The University is poor at understanding its place in Australia and wants to learn more about our Indigenous history and how this could make a difference to education and learning into the future.⁸

Although this background does help explain the history of the partnership, this is not the complete story. It is true that the flood created the partnership, but in Warmun, understanding the cause of the flood itself is a critical part of understanding what caused the partnership to come into existence.

In order to do this, a structured education program was needed.

Further discussions strengthened the idea that a formal university teaching program led by Gija Old People on Gija country would be one of the most important steps in the proper sharing and understanding of Gija knowledge. Gija Old People formalised the decision that their important knowledge system should be taught to students as part of the Grimwade Centre curriculum, and led the discussion about what new subjects, which would incorporate Ngarranggarni knowledge, should look like, and who should teach them. As a result, the Grimwade Centre's Master by Coursework in Cultural Materials Conservation introduced the subject Ngarranggarni Gija Art and Country, which is offered as an elective to students at second-year level.

Led by staff and Old People at Warmun Art Centre who worked on the content and program, staff at the Grimwade Centre developed the subject outline so that it could be approved at Master's level. Running in parallel with this development were a number of other education programs, including training at the University of Melbourne for Gija artworkers, joint research programs, and seminars and public programs. Although the most senior Gija people in the Art Centre managed the development of the

University of Melbourne students and staff being welcomed to country with a *manthe* ceremony, which is a welcome, but also ensures that people are safe while on country. Image courtesy of the Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, University of Melbourne, and the Warmun Art Centre.



partnership—particularly the teaching program—other people helped build the strong relationship between the two organisations. Richard Thomas, chairman of the Art Centre, helped put together the first trial of the subject, which was led by Patrick Mung Mung at Texas Downs Station, one of the many cattle stations where Gija people worked after the cattle industry was established across the east Kimberley in the late 1880s. Richard Thomas’s writings and poetry about Gija philosophy and history are used in the subject. The Gija Rangers have also strongly supported the program, getting country ready for visits and assisting during the teaching program by sharing knowledge and helping with logistics.⁹ Children from the Ngalangangpum School also come out onto country and sit with the university students to watch, listen and participate as the Old People teach.

In Melbourne, an important support network has emerged: the Friends of Warmun, who work to provide additional resources and support networks for the partnership, including fundraising to support payments to Gija people for their teaching and sharing of knowledge.

Overall, the partnership has engendered much deeper and richer knowledge for University

of Melbourne staff and students, students at Warmun, artists and artworkers in the Warmun Art Centre, the Friends of Warmun network, and the public. Through these programs, the aim of the partnership—to increase opportunities for sharing knowledge, and to foster education and employment opportunities for Gija people to help preserve and share Gija knowledge—is being met.

New technologies

Warmun Art Centre has a well-equipped media centre. During the June 2016 delivery of Ngarranggarni Gija Art and Country, every aspect of the subject was filmed. This included the welcome smoking ceremony, undertaken by traditional owners to keep students safe while on Gija country; digging for ochre, led by Mabel Juli at the place where her father’s spirit looks after the source of her family’s valuable white ochre; finding and tasting sugarbag under the expert guidance of Shirley Purdie; introduction to the Art Centre Studio by Ralph Juli; visiting Redleg’s Cave to learn about the story of a white man who protected Gija people during the killing times, and who was in turn killed by white station hands and to this day protects Gija people; the *wanga* and *joonba* performed for the students; and, most importantly,

Lena Nyadbi teaching students about her country, her history and the importance of being Gija. These recordings are a rich resource for the future, and are being added to during each visit as part of Ngarranggarni Gija Art and Country.

Conclusion

This article outlines what has become a well-known story. A story of how, in far-away Melbourne, a greater understanding of the value of deep and rich Australian Indigenous knowledge was brought about by the generosity and support of Gija Old People, who understand that all exchanges of important knowledge must be Two-Way. It is also the story of the resilience of an old and continuous belief system that has an important role to play in contemporary tertiary education in Australia, and the preparedness of Gija people to share this knowledge in appropriate ways. The model for the partnership is not a university model, but rather one that was built by Gija people when, at a time of crisis, they saw education as the mechanism that would preserve cultural, social, community and individual identity.

At the centre of these two histories of Two-Way Learning rests the senior knowledge that is owned and

managed by the Gija Old People, and the stories of the floods and the role of the Ngarranggarni ancestral figure—the Rainbow Serpent. In many cases, stories that are part of belief systems such as Ngarranggarni are referred to as myths. Today, Gija people can point to the place where the Rainbow Serpent lives, and it is certainly the case that, at the University of Melbourne, education is being led by the belief that knowledge is generated by the agency of powerful ancestral spirits.

The year 2017 brings the third visit by students for Ngarranggarni Gija Art and Country. The Elder owning and managing the teaching this year is Mary Thomas, whose country at Chinaman's Garden will be the focus for the visit. There are five clans who are yet to host students; at both the University of Melbourne and at Warmun, everyone looks forward with anticipation and excitement to each visit, and remains grateful to the Old People for protecting and sharing their important knowledge.

This article has been independently peer-reviewed.

Gabriel Nodea is chairman of the Warmun Art Centre, and deputy director of the Arnhem Northern and Kimberley Artists Aboriginal Corporation (ANKA). For more than a decade he has been cultural officer at the Warmun Art Centre, and before that he was a member of

NORFORCE (North-West Mobile Force of the Australian Army). Gabriel is passionate about the preservation of Gija knowledge, culture and history. He is currently working on a Gija history that encompasses the tens of thousands of years that Gija people have lived in the Kimberley. **Professor Robyn Sloggett** is director of the Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation at the University of Melbourne. Her research interests include attribution and authentication of Australian paintings, the development of the Australian art market, collection development and history, the materials and techniques of artists, and the preservation of cultural materials held in Australian Indigenous communities. She holds qualifications in art history, philosophy, and cultural materials conservation (applied science).

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- 7 Sadie Carrington et al., 'Conservation and the production of shared knowledge', in J. Bridgland (ed.), *ICOM-CC 17th Triennial Conference Preprints*, Melbourne, 15–19 September 2014, Paris: International Council of Museums Committee for Conservation, 2014.
- 8 Warmun Art Centre, and the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, University of Melbourne, 'Gija "Two Way" Knowledge partnering document, Bangariny-warriny jarrag booroonboo-yoo, Two good ideas talking together', plain English version, 8 April 2014, p. 2.
- 9 The Rangers are Indigenous land and sea managers who undertake cultural and natural resource projects to protect and improve the biodiversity and cultural values of the region. Each Ranger group looks after and manages country using a combination of traditional cultural knowledge, Western science and modern technologies.