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TWO-WAY LEARNING

Sharing Conservation Education at the Warmun Art Centre and the Grimwade Centre





BY GABRIEL NODEA AND ROBYN SLOGGETT

FOR THE GIJA PEOPLE OF THE KIMBERLEY REGION in northwestern Australia, *Ngarranggarni* is the belief and knowledge system that guides the Gija way of life. Gija ancestors established *Ngarranggarni* when they created the land, law, plants, animals, and people. *Ngarranggarni* guides contemporary Gija life, governing family and clan relationships and Gija people's connection to, and responsibility for, their clan country. It defines who Gija people are and sets out clear rules for how to behave properly as a member of Gija society. Gija Elders, respectfully referred to as The Old People, are responsible for keeping *Ngarranggarni* strong, and for teaching younger generations. This knowledge cannot be passed on without the permission of The Old People.

ORIGINS OF THE PARTNERSHIP

Warmun is an Aboriginal community of around four hundred people situated on Gija lands that stretch along the Great Northern Road between Broome and Kununurra. Across Indigenous Australia, local art centers play an important role in keeping culture strong. The Warmun Art Centre (WAC) has responsibility for supporting contemporary art production, as well as for caring for the important Warmun Community Collection. The collection comprises artwork and artifacts produced for education from the late 1970s by Gija Elders. This was when senior Gija knowledge holders began two-way education programs with the Catholic Church to ensure that Gija children were not removed from Warmun for schooling and could learn in both Gija and Western education systems.

In March 2011 floodwater, *warrambany*, broke the banks of Turkey Creek, engulfing the township and inundating the Warmun Art Centre. The room that held the Community Collection was filled with water, and the art and objects swirled around until the muddy water subsided, leaving the items saturated and moldy. The next week, senior Gija representatives from the Warmun Art Centre and staff from the Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation (CCMC) at the University of Melbourne met to plan how best to preserve these severely damaged works.

Funds were limited, so treatment of the collection became part of the teaching program at the Grimwade Centre. For the next three years, Gija Elders visited Melbourne regularly to advise on treatment decisions and to talk about the collection with students, staff, and the public. In 2014 the return of the collection to Warmun was celebrated with a performance of the *gurrir gurrir* joonba, with dancers and singers telling the story of the journey of the spirit of a Gija Woman after her death in a car accident at Warmun in 1974 during a flood. For Gija people and for staff at the university, three years of working together clearly demonstrated the value of sharing knowledge. As a result, a continuing partnership was formalized in an agreement signed in Warmun in April 2014.

DEFINING THE PARTNERSHIP

The partnering agreement, titled *Bangariny-warriny jarrag booroonboo-yoo: Two good ideas talking together*, opened with the explanation of "How We Built the Idea." After laying out the origins of the partnership, this section stated that:

> The partners now wish to grow this relationship further to enable increased opportunities around knowledge, education, and employment outcomes.

A history of education is embedded in the Gija Way—from

(Left) Ralph Juli, studio manager, Warmun Art Centre, and Jordi Casasayas, technical officer, Grimwade Centre, preparing to mount objects for exhibition at the Warmun Art Centre in 2015. **(Right) Casasayas and Juli hanging works from the Warmun Community Collection**. Photos: The Grimwade Centre and Warmun Art Centre.

> Bush, to Boarding School, to Warlarri (White Tree), to the Bough Shed, and now Beyond—to the University of Melbourne. The focus of this new and bigger partnership will be "Two-Way Learning" in Arts and Education and will be multidisciplinary.
>
> The University wishes to gain a better understanding of its place in Australia and wants to learn more about our Indigenous history and how this could impact on education and learning into the future.

Gija people, like First Nations people across Australia, are intrinsically conservators, and cultural conservation is embedded in the Gija way of life. Senior knowledge holders have maintained Gija knowledge, culture, law, and language for tens of thousands of years. Their responsibility to educate Gija young people parallels the responsibility academics have for teaching university students; knowledge must be properly passed on and properly understood.

The agreement declared that the purpose of working together was to enable:

> The CCMC (and the University of Melbourne) to understand Gija knowledge as a demonstration of Indigenous knowledge in Australia to improve the University's teaching, research, and engagement and make it more relevant to Australia; the University will learn how to work with Indigenous communities in proper ways, including ongoing support for education and employment opportunities for Gija people;
>
> Warmun Art Centre (and the Gija people) to become stronger by supporting opportunities for Gija employment, education, and shared learning that are not available at the moment, through teaching, research, and engagement programs, focused on curriculum that is developed by Gija people with support of the University.

The agreement rests on three principles: that the partnership will create employment for Gija people; that Grimwade Centre conservation students will be taught on Gija country by Gija teachers; and that Grimwade Centre conservators will pass on knowledge and skills to Gija art workers for the ongoing care of the Warmun Community Collection. Gija Elders regularly visit the University of Melbourne to give public lectures and workshops, and to talk with staff and students. Their university-based teaching ranges across Gija history, art, economics, science, education, and more, reflecting the disciplines taught on campus. Gija art workers also regularly visit the Grimwade Centre on an annual basis for conservation education and training. In the past this has included training in conservation framing, mold removal, basic cleaning, triage responses, and preventive conservation. Similarly, staff and students from the university visit Warmun, working with Gija art workers in the Art Centre and passing on conservation knowledge.

NGARRANGGARNI GIJA ART AND COUNTRY

Gija Elders are the lead teachers for the master's subject, Ngarranggarni Gija Art and Country, which brings Grimwade staff and students for a week's intensive learning at the Warmun Art Centre and on surrounding Gija land. Two clan leaders, male and female—supported by other Gija Elders, artists and art workers, and younger family members—share knowledge with conservation staff and students. Students are taught about the *Ngarranggarni*, an expansive and complex ontology that continues to encode, nourish, and maintain Gija law, language, social organization, trade, kinship relations, custodianship of country, and the practice of song, dance, spirituality, art, and philosophy. Artwork, ceremonial practice, and performance are part of the curriculum, but it is the visits to Gija country that enable students to acquire new knowledge in ways that are otherwise impossible.

Teaching opens with a formal welcome and *mantha* at the Art Centre. During the *mantha*, students are led through smoke from a fire made with snappy gum leaves and are formally introduced to their teachers. The *mantha* keeps students safe while on Gija country and teaches them the importance of being properly welcomed—and the danger of not following proper procedures. *Manthas* are critical first steps in any visit and are conducted when the students arrive at a new location in any part of Gija country. Making *nalaja* (a cup of tea) for the Gija Elders is an important part of a student's daily responsibility, securing relationships and teaching respectful interaction.

After *nalaja*, Gabriel Nodea guides students through the story of the creation of Warmun, using artwork he created to explain the relationship of hills and other landmarks visible from the Art Centre. In this class, students learn about the journey made by Gija ancestors as they moved across country and created Warmun. Students then tour the Art Centre before being seated in the *narwan* (cave) gallery where the Warmun Community Collection is displayed and where—often joined by local Gija school students—they are taught about two-way learning in Warmun. Students are also taught about the history of the *gurirr gurrir*, a joonba (performance) that was introduced at Warmun in the mid-1970s. A performance of the *gurirr gurirr* also takes place at night, either at Warmun or out oncountry (similar to the US term "in-country"). Other learning activities occur at the Art Centre before students pack to join Gija Elders out for three days of oncountry learning.

BEING ONCOUNTRY

Senior knowledge holders have clan responsibilities for specific parts of Gija country, and each year teaching responsibilities are rotated among the clan leaders from the eight Gija clans. Lessons on Gija history include accounts from the Killing Times, when massacres



Shirley Purdie and Max Thomas conducting a water *mantha* at the Balowa River in June 2018. Photo: The Grimwade Centre and Warmun Art Centre.

of Gija people occurred (1890–1926) as cattle stations were built across Gija country. Visits to these sites make this recent history vivid and help students understand the effects of intergenerational trauma. Visits to rock art sites introduce students to images of animals, historical figures, and ancestral stories. Cattle stations are located on Gija clan land, and Gija teachers talk about the Station Days and the places where they grew up, working from a young age as unpaid, or extremely low-paid, station hands.

Elders also share knowledge about traditional food collection, with a highlight being the collection of *sugarbag* (honey) from hives of native bees. Kangaroo, emu, and bush turkey are also part of sharing food while oncountry. At night performances, storytelling takes place before everyone settles to sleep on the ground under the stars.

Ngarranggarni sites are central to Gija knowledge; visiting these sites and hearing the ancestral stories is an important part of oncountry learning. As a result, the devastation felt by the Gija community when one of these sites was destroyed by granite miners in 2020 reverberated strongly among Grimwade students and alumni.

In 2020 and 2021 COVID-19 lockdowns meant travel to Warmun was not possible. Elders were adamant that teaching conservation students remained a priority, and teaching was conducted via Zoom from Warmun to an enthusiastic and grateful student cohort.

KEY PRINCIPLES

This partnership is kept strong by ten key principles embraced by both organizations. They include:

- being a two-way relationship, with WAC and the university having equal voices in working together;
- acknowledging that the University of Melbourne sits on the land of the Kulin Nation;
- respecting the traditional owners, past and present, of the Melbourne area;
- recognizing that senior teachers and their knowledge are very important; The Old People must be listened to, be taken seriously, and be the guides;
- sharing information with each other to ensure transparency and to build trust;
- being open and honest in communication and raising issues when needed;
- understanding that mistakes will be made and that partners should be supported and learn from these mistakes when they happen;
- taking responsibility for their role in the partnership;
- ensuring there is ongoing mutual benefit in working together;
- respecting Gija culture.

The Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation and the Warmun Art Centre share the goal of conserving cultural objects and knowledge in order to sustain cultural practice, pass on knowledge about Gija culture and about conservation, and develop new ways of teaching and learning. The passion and commitment of both partners has nurtured, maintained, and grown the partnership, providing the basis for a strong future of working together.



Gabriel Nodea teaching about Warmun kinship and skin names at the Warmun Art Centre in 2018. Photo: The Grimwade Centre and Warmun Art Centre. Photographer: Lisa Mansfield.

A MODEL OF EDUCATION

From the time of *Ngarranggarni*, when the Gija ancestors first laid down the country, the law, the people, the plants, and the animals, and for over tens of thousands of years, Gija culture has remained strong. The generosity and support of the Gija Elders who are committed to two-way knowledge education have enabled Grimwade Centre staff and students to gain an understanding of the depth and richness of Gija knowledge. For Gija Elders at the Warmun Art Centre, conservation of important cultural material and training to ensure its care are a significant part of keeping culture strong.

The partnership between the Warmun Art Centre and the Grimwade Centre demonstrates the importance of two-way education as a conservation learning strategy. This model of education was built by Gija people when, at a time of crisis, they saw education as the mechanism for preserving cultural, social, community, and individual identity. The partnership evolved out of a more recent crisis when significant cultural material was at risk. It is founded on an understanding that knowledge is generated by powerful ancestral spirits whose agency is relevant in a university education. It confirms the resilience of millennia-old knowledge systems that now play an important role in contemporary tertiary education. Finally, it demonstrates the willingness of Gija people to share this knowledge in appropriate ways and their belief that conservation is important for future generations.

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