

Picturing relations: Groote Eylandt barks symposium
Symposium funded by the Gordon Darling Foundation

The Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne
23 September 2006

Fred Gray and Umbakumba: the 1930s and 1940s

Dr. Mickey Dewar

Curator, Territory History, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory

The bark paintings shown in the exhibition: *Creation Tracks and Trade Winds* from the University of Melbourne's Art Collection, of Groote Eylandt bark paintings c.1946 from the Leonhard Adam collection, are windows onto a distant world.

As well as works of art with their own aesthetic, the barks are documents which tell of the environment, people, animals, trade, commerce and culture of the people of Umbakumba in the period of the 1930s and 1940s.

Fred Gray, the man who came to be associated with the community at Umbakumba, collected photographs which documented his life and the people he knew. Examination of the Gray photographic collection is a kind of mirror to the barks, similar but different. Boats, goats, fish, pearl shell and people fill the photographs and the barks.

We can never really know the past – a foreign country, as Hartley observed, they do things differently there. But the past is with us in the memories and artefacts of today, and so today through the medium of the bark paintings and the photographs, we can go back to another time, another place.

* * *

Fred Gray was born December 1899, at Kidderminster, England, the son of a Police Chief Constable.¹ He was not an outstanding scholar but achieved a gold medal for perfect attendance at school never missing a day. He served briefly in the Royal Air Force during World War I and then was apprenticed to a farmer. Farming, the growing of vegetables and flowers, was his passion and it remained so for the whole of his life.

In 1924 he immigrated to Australia with hopes of taking up land. He took various labouring jobs and saved enough money to purchase land but drought left him broke and he worked at a variety of jobs including a stint as a bodyguard for gem stone dealer and Broome businessman T.B. Ellies. Finding his way north in about 1928, he invested in a pearling venture, the *Oberon*, operating out of Broome with a Japanese crew. The bottom fell out of the industry with the advent of new plastics and by 1930 prices for pearlshell were low. Gray moved to Darwin in 1931. He took up work with Ellies' son Charlie at his jewellery shop in town. There was not enough work for them both, and after a year or so, Gray decided to move on and try his luck at sea again. This time his quarry was not pearlshell but trepang. He borrowed the money to invest in a boat, the *Northam*, for his first trip to Arnhem Land. Gray set out in 1932 with, among others, Joe McGinnes.² On this trip Gray met many Aborigines from Arnhem Land and made some friendships that lasted for the rest of his life – and because Gray lived so long, the friendships endured from father to son, son to grandson. Trepang harvesting and processing had been practised on the coast for at least two hundred years by seafarers from the Indonesian archipelago, the Bugis and Makassans. Riding the monsoonal winds, the fishing boats and crews would travel south to the Arnhem Land coast, returning home when the winds changed, heralding the start of the dry season. Aboriginal people worked alongside the fishermen collecting, boiling, smoking and drying the trepang for

¹ Much of the information in this paper is derived from the photographs (MAGNT PIC043 Fred Gray collection) and copies of records that the Gray Estate bequeathed to the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (originals donated in 1982 to IATSIS), and from the many hours I spent talking to Fred Gray 1982 – 1995. The definitive source for Gray's life and work in Arnhem Land would be Keith Cole, *Fred Gray of Umbakumba*, Bendigo, Keith Cole, 1984. His wife, Marjorie, also published her account of life on the island, *Life with the Aborigines*, London, Regency Press, c.1986. Gray does not especially feature in this account. Every time a crisis happens, Fred seems to be absent, "on Thursday Island".

² Joe McGinnes went with Gray only on this voyage. McGinnes was to receive enduring fame for his activism and work for Aboriginal people, and was instrumental in the formation of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI).

trade north, ultimately to China. Between the Aboriginal people and the trepang crews there was an exchange of gifts, technology, culture and language and some Aboriginal people went back with the fishers to live with them for a time in South Sulawesi.

What has been called the Territory's only really successful export industry was taxed out of existence by early in the twentieth century.³ There were some sporadic efforts to revive the industry (as there are occasionally today). Some Anglo Australians and Japanese took it up, particularly in the 1930s, when pearl shell fishing became less economically viable.

Gray was a witness to what came to be known as the Caledon Bay massacre, which was a series of eight killings in Arnhem Land with ensuing high profile court cases. It has been argued that this event was the catalyst in the formulation of a federal policy towards Aboriginal people.⁴

There is not time to go into this now, but it is sufficient to note that for most of the decade of the 1930s, Gray worked along the Arnhem Land coast, in close cooperation with the Aboriginal people of the region. This was a time when the Australian press, Northern Territory Administration and local missionaries argued that the region was not safe for a white man. It was also not legal for a white man.

Arnhem Land had been declared a Reserve in 1931, a policy that protected Aboriginal people from non-Aboriginal incursion, but indirectly was also a policy of containment. This policy differed from the Queensland policy whereby people were taken off their own country and transported to remote Aboriginal reserves. The federal policy in the Territory was largely to put reserves where numbers of Aboriginal people lived and there were no significant competing European industries. Nonetheless, Gray remained in the Arnhem Land Reserve area, despite protests to Canberra from the Northern Territory Administration in Darwin and from such respected individuals as Melbourne University academic Donald Thomson. Gray was not, in fact, to receive official permission to remain in Arnhem Land until 1942, a decade after he had first started working there.

Groote Eylandt was a beautiful and exotic place in the 1930s. Its people identified as separate from others in Arnhem Land, fiercely intelligent with a reputation for strength and the ability to defend themselves. The rugged coastline, rock art and longstanding Makassan ties made Groote a special place.

It was a maritime society, where everyone knew the latest news because the old men would travel along the coast by canoe, talking and trading information. Not only the Makassans were dependent upon travel by sea but also the Europeans: by this time, Gray in the *Oituli*, and later *Wanderer*; the Anglican missionaries in the *Holly*, the Methodists in the *Aoretta*.

It was also remote: the Anglican mission at Emerald River on Groote Eylandt, had been set up in 1921 not for the local Anindilyakwa, but for the Aboriginal children with white fathers from the nearby mainland. Yirrkala, the Methodist mission, founded as part of the wash-up from the Arnhem Land killings, was established in 1935.

When plans were made to set up a Catalina Civil Aviation refuelling depot for Qantas Empire Airways at Port Langdon on Groote Eylandt in 1938, Gray moved nearby and established a settlement that became known as Umbakumba.⁵ Shell Petroleum was awarded the contract. Gray said his motivation for establishing Umbakumba was because he believed unregulated interaction between the Aboriginal people of the region and the staff from the Flying Base would be undesirable. Keith Cole said that the Church Missionary Society (who at the time managed Emerald River and Roper River missions) requested him to be based there to avoid trouble between the white and the Aboriginal people.⁶ Gray acted as mediator between the Flying Base staff and the Aboriginal people who came to Umbakumba, who were employed in construction of the base, through supply of bush tucker, garden produce and other commodities.

Life on a mission or settlement, however, was hard, physically hard. Gray had an ambitious program at Umbakumba that involved the building of a dam, well, dormitories, school and

³ Alan Powell, *Far Country: a Short History of the Northern Territory*, Melbourne, MUP, 2000 (1982), p. 106.

⁴ See for example, Mickey Dewar, *The Black War in Arnhem Land*, Darwin, NARU/ANU, 1992; Ted Egan, *Justice All Their Own*, Melbourne, MUP, 1996.

⁵ M. Dewar, *Strange Bedfellows: Europeans and Aborigines in Arnhem Land before World War II*, MA (Hons) thesis, 1989, University of New England, p. 170.

⁶ Keith Cole, *Fred Gray of Umbakumba*, Bendigo, Keith Cole, 1984, p. 64.

staff houses. This program also included extensive agricultural planting for the community with the intention of selling produce to the Air Base. Fish and pearlshell were also sold. During World War II, in 1942, the RAAF took over the base from Qantas. The good relationship with personnel there continued and the blokes from the base would come over to Umbakumba to help with the building program and generally socialise.⁷

Fred Rose was stationed there as a meteorologist and anthropologist when he undertook the first of his research on the people of Groote. A friend to Gray, he was his Best Man when Gray chose to marry in 1946. The wedding was hosted by Gray's friends, Violet and Captain Mansbridge in Melbourne.

Gray was particularly concerned about the lack of school available to the children at Umbakumba but could never persuade a teacher to stay. In any case, the community was not supported by a mission or government and payment was not available. He had known a woman in England in 1923 when he was a pupil farmer, Marjorie Southwick, and she had remained a close friend of his parents while Fred was in Australia. She was also a trained school teacher, excellent pianist, scout leader and expert at needlework. After no real contact with Marjorie for 21 years, Gray invited her, by telegram in 1944, to marry him and come to Umbakumba to teach the children. Marjorie said yes.

The wedding cake showed an image of the lagoon at Umbakumba with Aboriginal figures above and below. Gray and Marjorie left the church under an archway of crossed spears. When Marjorie arrived at Umbakumba she said she had, 'never felt so desolate in my life'⁸ and they moved across to the empty air base the next day. Eventually they returned to live at Umbakumba.

It is hard to know how Marjorie viewed the relationship. They did not have any biological children of their own. Certainly she and Gray had close relationships with the adults of the community and also the children who attended the school (and when he and Marjorie moved to Darwin in 1958 some of their Aboriginal children came with them, Bellima Mamarika, Betty and Richard Herbert, and they were brought up as their own). Gray told me that in the evening the children would come in and they would sit around singing songs in beautiful harmony.

They would sometimes take the children out for all day picnics and excursions on the boat, the *Wanderer*.

In 1948 the American-Australian Arnhem Land Scientific Expedition came to Umbakumba and used the community as a base, staying there three months. The Expedition used Gray and the *Wanderer* to transport scientists to places along the Arnhem Land coast with three base camps at Umbakumba, Yirrkala and Oenpelli.⁹ The expedition was funded jointly by the National Geographic Society of America, the Smithsonian, and the Australian Commonwealth Government. The project started after Charles P. Mountford gave a lecture on Aborigines to the National Geographic Society. Howell Walker, an ex-American serviceman, was the expedition photographer for National Geographic.

But this time was a comparatively social interlude. In the evening Marjorie and Fred would visit the expedition tent, drink cocktails, play Bingo and listen to music. The association was income generating, but also provided a social aspect not only for Gray, but especially for Marjorie whom Keith Cole reports 'fell very flat' after their departure.¹⁰

So the decades of the 1930s and 1940s were a time of change. The foundation of the settlement at Umbakumba and the extensive building and agricultural program, the establishment of the Flying Boat Base at Port Langdon, the events of the Second World War, establishment of the school and dormitories... within this period there was great change. It is apparent in the written and photographic records that men such as Tindale, Rose, Elkin, Mountford and the other scientists from the National Geographic expedition, and, to a lesser extent Gray, viewed Aboriginal people as a legitimate topic for scientific study. Gray corresponded with a number of these men (and they were all men) and he provided typewritten sheets of information and diagrams, based on interviews and his own experiences in Umbakumba and in Arnhem Land generally, about language, kinship, design and the ceremonial practices of Aboriginal people.

⁷ The base was completely abandoned in 1945. Keith Cole, *Fred Gray of Umbakumba*, Bendigo, Keith Cole, 1984, p. 66.

⁸ Marjorie Gray, *Life with the Aborigines*, London, Regency Press, c.1986, p. 24.

⁹ Keith Cole, *Fred Gray of Umbakumba*, Bendigo, Keith Cole, 1984, p. 97

¹⁰ Keith Cole, *Fred Gray of Umbakumba*, Bendigo, Keith Cole, 1984, p. 111.

Wilbur Chaseling, the Methodist missionary at Yirrkala, from the outset, supported the sale of artefacts, as a cash generator for the mission, but also through art as a psychological facilitator of issues of cultural change. He noted that 'several tonnes of artefacts and sacred objects were sent to the museums' as a mechanism to 'develop their independence and respect for these sacred sites'.¹¹

Gray in conversation, always expressed the view that sale of art was a useful generator of income. He appeared to approach the sale of art in the same way as sale of goats' milk, home grown tobacco or lettuces. Gray differentiated between rock art or art associated with cultural ceremonial practice – and artwork produced on request, on bark, even when such works incorporated the same images or designs. He believed that the object itself had the ceremonial power, and these were painted after they were constructed, but that flat barks painted, were decorative in function and not linked to any internal cultural practices, that is, they were produced for the sole purpose of commerce with Europeans.¹²

Gray's interest in Aboriginal material culture, artwork and artefacts, appears to be chiefly commercial,¹³ such as the shells collected for sale to Harvard University. It is apparent from the photographic evidence that Gray supported the creation of artwork produced specifically for the purpose of sale. Rose criticised Gray for appropriating and selling objects including spears, as 'souvenirs' to visitors and personnel at the airbase.

In the years I knew Gray, he consistently expressed, not overtly but implicit in discussions, that Aboriginal artwork, like cassava, pearl shell or fruit, were legitimate products for sale, with the money returned to offset the expenses incurred in the operation of the community. This is not to imply he was unaware of Aboriginal spiritual cosmology, but he did not include the artwork produced at Umbakumba in that category.

Gray did not specifically include a category for artwork sales in the records of Umbakumba. He did not ever accumulate much Aboriginal art or material culture in a personal collection. Those one or two pieces he did acquire in the last decade of his life were gifts. He thought the artefacts wonderful, but not in the sense of a collector. Gray always described them in terms of his relationship to the donor or artist.

Fred and Marjorie left the island in 1958 and moved to Berrimah, where they set up 'Little Umbakumba'. Marjorie returned to England to live in 1967, at first to look after her father, but then because she preferred life in England. In the 1970s, Fred moved to the Nineteen Mile, which he also called 'Little Umbakumba'. Aboriginal people, poets, writers, missionaries, orchid growers, cat lovers, neighbours and others would all drop in. Gray maintained his strong ties to the island, to his Aboriginal family and to the people who lived there. It was a great joy for him to go and visit and talk with the people there.

In the last decade of his life I used to spend quite a bit of time with him drinking endless cups of tea. Like many older people, Fred felt that the best times were the days when he was young and he would tell me stories about living and working in Arnhem Land and the people he knew there. The people on the island also retained a special relationship to Fred. In a deal brokered some months after his first stroke, at the request of the community, in 1995 Fred Gray made his last trip to the island. He was buried on the beach at Umbakumba after a funeral that lasted most of the day, just as the sun was starting to set across the lagoon in the late afternoon.

Dr Mickey Dewar, Curator Territory History, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory
23 September 2006

¹¹ Wilbur Chaseling quoted in M. Dewar, *Strange Bedfellows: Europeans and Aborigines in Arnhem Land before World War II*, MA(Hons) thesis, University of New England, p. 166.

¹² Typed notes, by F.H. Gray to Professor Leonhard Adam, University of Melbourne, n.d. c.1945, MAGNT collection. Gray's actual notes say, 'Only trade with bark pictures is with the white man... I have never at any time during my stay among the aboriginals had a painting done on bark as a picture brought to me unless I have previously asked for them... Natives will produce and sell on request to Europeans'.

¹³ Margie West, in *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Sylvia Kleinert and Margo Neal (General Editors), Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 597.

LIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS USED, WITH NAMES, WHERE KNOWN
(italics indicate literal transcription from the reverse of the photographs)



PIC043/0678: Picnic on *Wanderer*

NANGARAMA WITH HAT

MRS [MARJORIE] GRAY

NARRPIAKU

NARRPIINDA

JUNYURRPIN

JARWLAKAIA

MIEENA

WAKABA

KAKABA

Going to Air Base with members of K November 16 1947



PIC043/0748: Bagged pearlshell

JABOMA JABOMA

NANGIRRMA

NAMBAREICHUA

JABRUNKA

MALKARRAWADDA

6 ENANARRKOO

7 KULPADJA

8 JUNGALLIA (D)

9 NENINGUNDRA



PIC043/0751: Eating and sorting pearlshell

*JIM DALTON
NERREHUNGA
ENENARRKOO
JABRUNKA
MIANGUJERA (D)
FRED BLITNER
BARANGUA
3 IN FRONT
NOUAWIA (DAVID) (D)
NUNGIRRMU (D)
JUNGLIE (D)*



PIC043/0860: Family on beach

*BADA WURRAMARRA (D)
& FAMILY
OLD & YOUNG WIFE
STANDING MILLIANGMULA'S MOTHER*



PIC043/0874: Digging the well

*FROM TOP
NANGIAKA
NONANBUKA WURRWILLYA*

NANDJLLA
F.H.G.
NEIKUNGAPA MOMINAMANDJA
DIGGING WELL BACK OF HOUSE 1948
ADMINISTRATION BUILDING BUILT OVER THIS SITE IN 1976



PIC043/0880: Shifting soil on tracks
NANGURRMA WURRWILLIA
TOPPING UP DAM BEFORE CYCLONE CAME



PIC043/0943: Digging cassava
KULPUTJA DIGGING CASSAVA
C. 1948?



PIC043/0986: Gray and children

OR BACK

(D) MIANGAJEIA

F GRAY

MERRACHUNGA

MIDDLE ROW

1 NANGURRAMA

2 (D) NUMANAJABOMA

3 LERRIMARIA

4 NABINCHELMA

5 NARRPIAKA (ALBERT)

6 (D) NEMDANTUNGA

7 ALOHA

8 NUMARGIAKU

9 NARRPINDA MAMARIKA (INDIA)

10 NIMIRRI BOMA

11 NAKARAMBA

12 D/C NANDJILLA

BOY IN CENTRE

JAPONIA

BOTTOM ROW

TINDJAMELLA

WAKABA

TARRKANAIA

DJIBELENDIA (AT BACK)

KAKAGU

TUPLAKUDGA

(IN FRONT?)

TAMILLIGIA JOYCE

ABOUT 1944-5



PIC043/0987: Children, girls and boys in lines, girls not identified

BOYS

1 *JAPONIA*

2 ?

3 *JAPALMA*

4 *NAKAPUNTA*

5 ?

6 *NABINCHELMA*

7 *NUMANGAJABOMA*

8 *NARRPIAKA (ALBERT)*

9 *NAKARAMBA*

10 *NEMAKWINGA*

11 *BONAIA*

12 *NONDJIRRKA*

13 *WANYIPA*

1939-1940



PIC043/1164: Man on the beach

1938

KALANGA



PIC043/1781: Artist and bark

NENUNGUNDA

1940



PIC043/1808: Man and cassava
*KULPAJA &
CASAVA
GARDEN*