Objects between cultures

LOUISE HAMBY CELEBRATES NECKLACES FROM REMOTE AUSTRALIA THE 'GIRRINGIRRING' OF GAPUWIYAK IN NORTHEAST ARNHEM LAND

Ruby Guyula (Gapuwiyak), necklace made from Abrus precatorius (Crab eye seeds).

Minawala Bidingal (Gapuwiyak), detail of necklace made from Crotalaria goreensis (small seeds) and other seeds.

A SMALL INLAND COMMUNITY IN NORTHEAST ARNHEM LAND IS THE SITE WHERE WOMEN ARE CURRENTLY MAKING OBJECTS FOR THE BODY that balance between the space of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal art practice. Artists produce certain necklaces for the *balanda* (non-Aboriginal) population yet they do not wear the necklaces themselves. Do artists make these necklaces simply for the market place? Alternatively, are the objects holders of cultural significance to the makers? These provoking questions and others point to an area of Aboriginal art that researchers have not documented in any detail and are deserving of further research.[1]

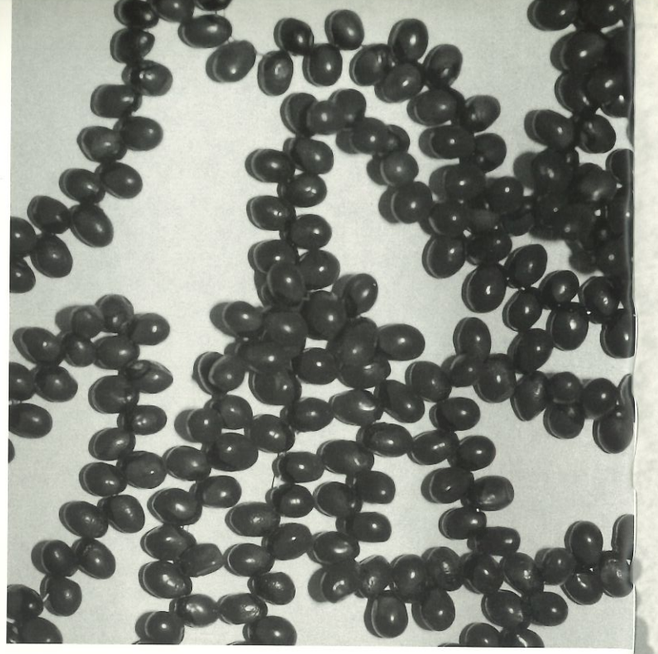
The necklaces or *girringirring*, from Gapuwiyak made from tiny seeds strung together in long lengths, provide a means to explore cultural practices and objects that often fall between two worlds.[2] In both cultures, artists construct similar forms; sometimes the objects perform the same functions. Aboriginal making practices however differ dramatically from conventional makers of jewellery in a number of ways. Environmental and cultural practices directly affect working spaces, tools, and materials. Land is important to the artists as the source of materials and often has Ancestral and social links to the makers. Women use natural products for the core of their work including seeds, shells, feathers and hand-spun string. Artists in Gapuwiyak are dependent on the land and seasonal conditions for the seeds used in making necklaces.

For coastal communities, such as Maningrida and Elcho Island, shells are a prime material source at any time of the year. Djarryjarrminypuy Birritjiama currently resides in Gapuwiyak, but her home is Galiwin'ku on Elcho Island. She includes shells in her *girringirring* that she collects on trips to the island. In her long necklaces, she breaks passages of small densely packed seeds regularly with small patterned *Neritina* shells. Often on Elcho Island, artists make entire necklaces with shells of different varieties. Djarryjarrminypuy's combination of seeds and shells in this manner is a connection of the two countries where she lives, coastal and inland.

The making of *girringirring* for sale differs in method from the making of ceremonial *girringirring*. Older women and men with appropriate levels of knowledge make ceremonial armbands, headdresses and belts. These are the items that Yolngu wear themselves mainly for ceremonies. In their camps, it is possible to see women making ceremonial feathered string from the Banyan tree, *Ficus virens*.[3] Artists later make this feathered string into other articles in private. However the practice of making necklaces for sale is more egalitarian and provides scope for young girls and other women to be involved as it is not necessary to have a high level of ceremonial knowledge to participate in this activity. Groups of women sit on the ground under the shade formed by either a big mango tree or a pole built structure covered with tree branches. The surface for working and sitting on the ground is a tarpaulin, blanket or sheet. Several people, normally family groups share supplies and work together. Children assist in the collection of the materials and in part of the preparation.

Gapuwiyak artists produce from seeds the majority of girringirring. In the mid-dry season, starting in June, artists start to make these items and as different seeds become mature, more and more necklaces appear. Artists known for their excellent fibre containers move this activity down on their list of priorities and make *girringirring* with a passion. It is not necessary to know that there is a buyer for the work in order for women to make necklaces. Women take or send their necklaces to either of the art centres in Nhulunbuy and Yirrkala that distribute them to shops and galleries across the country or sell them to the local *balanda* population. Women have sold seed necklaces to Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre in Yirrkala as long as it has been in operation. Older women occasionally make extremely long necklaces, up to five metres in length. Near the end of the dry season, there are not many buyers and the money paid to artists becomes extremely low. In one art centre artists are paid the same price for necklaces that range from a metre to ones five times that length. The women, however, continue to make them until the seed season is past. Why do the women make them? Some reasons include enjoyment of the process, being with other women, cash income and a continuation of a practice of making necklaces that is hundreds of years old. It could be asked, 'Why do they make them so long when they get paid the same as a short one?' Perhaps it stems from other cultural practices not obvious to those who have not been a part of Yolngu life.

Artists divide the long necklaces into sections by changing the pattern, colour or seed type. Ceremonial feathered string



Above (left to right): Lucy Ashley (Gapuwiyak), necklace made from Crotalaria goreensis and other seeds. Walinyinawuy Djambarnpuyngu (Gapuwiyak), necklace made from Abrus precatorius (Crab eye seeds).

ropes are also very long and divided into sections by change in colour or material. Is it possible that the long necklaces have more than a superficial resemblance to these important ceremonial feathered ropes used in mortuary rites? The ceremonial ropes are markers of places and relationships between people. A group of feathers makes tangible a place to which spirits return. Nancy Williams, who has discussed the symbolism of ceremonial ropes, says: "Certain other ritual objects exhibit parallel symbolism."[4] Perhaps more mundane objects, such as necklaces, can relate to their more ceremonial counterparts.

A favourite seed for use in the necklaces is from the plant *Crotalaria goreensis*. There is no Yolngu-Matha word for this plant because it is a plant introduced by *balandas*. Women make most of the necklaces from this generic 'no name' seed. Having no name in language is often culturally revealing. An example from the fibre area is the flat mat. Historically mats, now flat, were conical in shape performing both ceremonial and everyday functions. They have several names in language, one being *Nganmarra*. Missionaries introduced the concept of a flat mat in order to have a more saleable item. The flat mat never received a name; the women simply call them 'mats'. The seeds from *Crotalaria goreensis* lie in the limbo between the *balanda* and the Yolngu culture.

Individual *Crotalaria goreensis* seeds are on average one mm thick and two mm by four mm in length and breath. If an artist makes a necklace with a circumference of four meters, it could contain as many as 4000 individual seeds. The small scale requires patience and often strains the eyes of the makers. These seeds are popular due to their abundance, ease of collection and to their great variety in colour. According to Lucy Ashley, an artist from the Wanapuyngu clan, "they are Aboriginal colours". Diversity in the colour palette occurs naturally: various colours, greens, yellows, oranges and reds are present depending on the maturity of the plant, facilitating pattern making with only one material. Artists gather many pods, each containing about 15 seeds, from the surrounding bush. To provide contrast artists seek black seeds like the ones from the Black Wattle, *Acacia auriculiformis*, which are known as *gaypal*. Sometimes the makers store the seedpods in sugar tins and the small seeds in Log Cabin tobacco tins. The threading process is similar for all seeds. Artists spread the seeds on a plain rigid surface, a tin-lid or a styro-foam meat tray being popular choices. With a needle threaded with fine fishing line the artist punctures a hole in the seed and threads it on the line in one action. As the necklace lengthens, the artist pushes the seeds along the line, attached to the hand-fishing reel. The artist wraps the threaded seeds around the reel while she works. Fishing line is the standard foundation core for seeds because of its strength and availability in the ALPA (Arnhem Land Progress Association) store, plus the fishing reel is convenient for storage of the necklace until it is finished.

Placement approaches—symmetrical, asymmetrical and random—reflect a variety of individual styles. Some necklaces, like the ones of Diane Muncur, maintain an almost monochromatic arrangement of *Crotalaria goreensis* broken by a set-repeating pattern of another seed. A pair of small light brown nugget shaped seeds fractures the monochromatic stretches of the necklace. Young artists, Milpuna Bidingal and Caroline Mununguri, enjoy making symmetrical arrangements and patterns. Milpuna employs a slightly larger flat black seed in pairs for every centimetre of *Crotalaria goreensis*. She varies the regular intervals of small seeds by random placements of blocks of colour with only the occasional light green set as a highlight. Caroline Mununguri's necklace is a delightful combination of blocks of seeds two centimetres long divided by the same type of black seeds as Milpuna uses as separators, but threaded in the long direction of the seed. This creates a flat area emphasising the colour break more than a different threading.

Milpuna's aunt, Djupuduwuy Guyula, a talented fibre artist, makes extremely long patterned necklaces, up to five metres, from the small seeds with unusual blocks interrupting the pattern.[5] Sometimes she employs thin olive green crystal shaped seeds as a separator. Djupuduwuy experiments with double strand chokers that join and then separate in a repeating pattern. She occasionally makes choker style pale golden grass stem necklaces. She threads the pieces on fishing line but the ends are attached by hand spun kurrajong string. These pieces are identical to museum pieces collected over a hundred years ago except that Djupuduwuy has incorporated fishing line as the threading material. The University of Pennsylvania Museum and the Queensland Museum both contain Yolngu necklaces like those made by Djupuduwuy.

Minawala Bidingal is an older experienced fibre artist of the Ritharrngu clan, who also participates in the seasonal rush to make *girringirring*. The combination of unexpected materials and techniques is characteristic of both her necklaces and fibre objects. She finds exotic seeds to mix with the staple small *Crotalaria*. Minawala sometimes has as many as seven different seed types in the same necklace, large irregular ones next to tiny symmetrical ones. A younger fibre artist, Lucy Ashley, who often works with her also tends to search for the novel in her necklaces. In 1996, Lucy produced a necklace that she described '*nyumukuniny binana girringirring*'.[6] Areas of approximately three centimetres of small banana like pods distribute themselves throughout the small *Crotalaria* seeds. Lucy and Minawala have both produced necklaces entirely of small dark brown kidney shaped beans, threaded in an interlocking manner to accent their form.

In contrast to varied small seeds, another larger seed selected for its spectacular colour is *Abrus precatorius* or Crab's eye. The vine produces pods, which contain bright red, shiny, oval seeds with a black spot at one end. It is possible to find Abrus seeds that are pale pink and at opposite extremes albino and totally black ones. From the turn of the century in western Arnhem Land, Aboriginal people have used Abrus seeds in decorative articles, particularly headbands. Surfaces of baskets from the 1940s and 1950s have Abrus seeds attached to them. It is difficult for women to sell necklaces of Abrus to commercial shops because the seeds are poisonous and can be fatal if eaten. However their beauty warrants their purchase, just don't eat them! Walinyinawuy, Ruby and Ngangiyawuy Guyula make superb strands composed totally of red Abrus seeds. Walinyinawuy creates necklaces that are often four to five metres long.

Artists sometimes make necklaces for sale from spun fibre combined with feathers. People wear this type of *girringirring* for ceremony. Dave Wapit #2 and his wife Diane Moncur produced a necklace of many strands of hand spun fibre from the Kurrajong shrub, *Brachychiton megaphyllus*. The artist plies the string together with small amounts of fibre, in this case, synthetic white fibre-fill. Historically, for ceremonial purposes this would have been *raman*, white down from feathers. In contemporary practice it is acceptable within the community to use new materials such as synthetic fibre-fill and mass manufactured feathered boas from shops in Darwin. Part of this acceptance is due to the qualities that the new materials possess, such as colour and manipulative ability, in the same manner as the previous substance.

'Brilliance' that comes from rich colour, patterning and reflected surfaces are qualities that draw viewers into the world of smaller objects worn to adorn the body.[7] Vibrant colour and patterns in painting that are 'flash' are part of Yolngu aesthetic. Women from Gapuwiyak produce the same effect in their necklaces. They are dense objects carrying with them connections to country, links to past traditions and an embracing of the contemporary marketplace outside of the Aboriginal community. The women from Gapuwiyak and its outstations give a glimpse of their rich culture through the window opened by the appearance of their *girringirring* in the greater Australian art community. The seeds, the sparks of brilliance, have no monetary value, yet the meticulous approach and selection will make these long necklaces collectibles for the next generation.

endnotes

1. Louise Hamby is completing a Ph.D. thesis at Australian National University on the many aspects of fibre forms in northeast Arnhem Land. She has examined Arnhem Land collections in museums and worked in various Arnhem Land communities since 1992. Gapuwiyak has been her fieldwork site since 1996.
2. *Girringirring* is a Yolngu-Matha word which refers primarily to jewellery, necklaces and is applied to ornaments worn on the body. It can also refer to grasses used for making necklaces. Yolngu-Matha is a combination of northeast Arnhem Land languages.
3. Yolngu is the term used to refer to Aboriginal people from northeast Arnhem Land.
4. From *The Yolngu and their Land* by Nancy Williams, 1986. Stanford: Stanford University Press p41.
5. An example of Djupuduwuy's style of necklaces is represented in the travelling exhibition *Circles around the Body*.
6. Translates to small banana necklace. Most of the women with whom I work do not speak English.
7. ..Brilliance is a term first used by anthropologist Donald Thomson in the 1930s as the translation of *bir'yun*. Howard Morphy popularised its usage as a Yolngu aesthetic term, particularly for paintings with fine cross-hatching that seem to shimmer or shine.

Louise Hamby is a freelance writer and curator, and a lecturer at the School of Design Studies, College of Fine Art, The University of New South Wales, Sydney. In November 2001 Object galleries will host *Art on a String*, an exhibition curated by Louise Hamby and Diana Young, presenting necklaces and other works made by women artists from Arnhem Land and the Central Australian Desert.

This essay is one of an ongoing series of peer reviewed articles in Object, enabling writers to formally receive merit for their writing. The article was 'double blind' reviewed by two qualified referees.

Background image: Caroline Mununguri (Gapuwiyak), necklace made from Crotalaria goreensis (small seeds) and Acacia auriculiformis (Black Wattle seeds).