

JOONBA JUNBA JUJU

Song & dance cycles of the Kimberley

29 April—23 May 2014



Joonba, junba and *juju* are three names from Kimberley Aboriginal languages for a specific form of performance driven by narrative. In Gija and Miriwoong languages the word is *joonba*, in Ngarinyin *junba* and in Bunuba country *juju*. Bringing together different countries and language groups from across the Kimberley, *Joonba, Junba, Juju* is part of a gradually unfolding project that has strengthened these song and dance cycles in the region.

This exhibition is one in a series by an alliance of four leading Aboriginal-owned art centres in the Kimberley working together as Kimberley Aboriginal Artists (KAA). Mangkaja Arts Resource Agency, Mowanjum Arts and Culture Centre, Waringarri Aboriginal Arts and Warmun Art Centre present: *Joonba, Junba, Juju* – an exhibition focused on the power of material objects made and used for these song and dance cycles, complemented by digital media presentations of these performances.

With rising dust, a thick crust of body paint and songs in diverse Aboriginal languages, the sharing of performance unfolds. Central to this project from its inception has been the concept of *wirnan* in the East and *wunan* in the West. In the past, groups travelled on foot

to visit neighbouring and distant communities. *Wirnan/wunan* refers partly to the formal network whereby people exchanged objects, materials and ideas. Transactions were governed by protocols determined by relationships of mutual obligation and kinship. Just as commodities such as shells, spear shafts, honey, meat, fruit and vegetables, wax and string made from kangaroo sinew were traded - so too were song cycles.

These cycles of song and dance incorporate painting, theatre, story and history. A socially significant form of entertainment, they are learned from childhood and practiced throughout life. They are intrinsic to Aboriginal art and cultural practice across the north of Western Australia.

The artefacts presented in *Joonba, Junba, Juju* are cultural documents that are still in use today. The objects and narratives are at once ephemeral and changing yet they hold steady knowledge specific to the languages and country of their genesis. Handcrafted objects that may appear humble often articulate complex narratives that encode constellations of knowledge associated with recent histories, *Ngarranggarni* (Dreaming), ethics and deeply personal experiences.

Working together, singers, dancers, objects and the audience become key to the telling and retelling of story. In this show are masks, headdresses, painted dance boards, thread-cross totems, spears, sticks and effigies of

animals, characters and other spirit entities. These are objects that have been produced today but they draw from, and are part of, a much longer cultural continuum.

The narratives, choreography, music and design of a song cycle are either developed by senior men and women or they can be gifted by a spirit through a series of dreams. In this way they are spiritual but also very human creations arising from personal experiences, local environments and particular moments in time. These individuals then become the custodian responsible for the direction, performance and circulation of their *joonba, junba* or *juju*. There are multiple layers of meaning in operation that are not

equally available to every singer, dancer or audience member; one learns and gathers greater depths of understanding over time.

Over the past four years, KAA art centres have worked together to facilitate the practice and sharing of *joonba, junba* and *juju* within and between our communities. This project has initiated camps, recordings and public and community performances which have seen senior artists, singers and dancers continue to pass on their knowledge and skills to younger generations.

In many ways contemporary art practice in the north of Western



Australia sprang from *joonba*, *junba* and *juju*. The inspiring continuum of this art form will undoubtedly lead to new incarnations and influences across the spectrum of art and cultural practice in the Kimberley today. Understandings of this art practice outside of the region may be in its infancy but the strength of this practice locally is full of possibilities.

These performances have always been exciting, revelatory and shape-shifting experiences. It is in the viewing and appreciation of *joonba*, *junba* and *juju* by audiences today, within and outside of their communities of origin, where revelation now lies.

Joonba, Junba, Juju has received support from the Department of Culture and the Arts, Western Australia and the Federal Government through the Ministry for the Arts. We gratefully acknowledge the support of Tania Creighton and Holly Williams from UTS in developing this iteration of the project.

We are honoured to have Sydney performers Richard Greene, Clarence Slockee and Matthew Doyle at our opening, in the true spirit of *wirnan/wunan*, through which this project emerged.

Kimberley Aboriginal Artists

Previous page: Balmarra preparations, Courtesy Waringarri Aboriginal Arts
Above right: Gabriel Nodea and Dougie Macale perform *Lalanggarrany doo Binjyirminy* (the Crocodile and the Bat). Image copyright Alana Hunt, courtesy Warmun Art Centre.

Warmun Art Centre

Gabriel Nodea

What is so special, or the very most important thing, for Gija people is that they can adapt to change quickly in this rapidly changing world. They have responded to change, often instigated at the government's whim, since early colonization up to this day today. Everyone has their ways of maintaining and preserving culture and Gija people have their ways. When it comes to our law, culture, country and language Gija people know what is right from what is wrong. Everything from *Ngarraggarni* (Dreaming) to real life events are kept alive in our traditional archives, and that archive is our *joonba*. Within that we always have our *wirnan* systems, of sharing and caring, accompanying us on our journeys.

Gija people strongly believe in the myths, beliefs and legends that are found in our old *Ngarraggarni* ways of life that are very well alive today. Like how the dreaming, *Goorirr Goorirr* came to Rover Thomas and he explained and sang to Gija people about country and in languages he didn't know because he was from the desert. But Gija people knew what he was singing about and helped him put those stories and songs together to make that *joonba* because they believed him.

Many of our old people have passed away and left us, now there are only just a few of the old elders left behind. *Goorirr Goorirr* and other



joonbas like the *Binjyirminy* we are presenting here, and all our law, culture, country and language are all fading away slowly. Today this world is full of confusion, difficulties, complications and way beyond the old Gija ways that kept our world alive. It's not like the way it all used to be now; it's even changed in the short 45 years of my life. But it is all still here, just now it is all over the place. There are only a small handful of us Gija people left. But we strongly believe we need to get together in order to preserve everything we have in this rapidly changing world.

Waringarri Aboriginal Arts

Chris Griffiths

My father's *joonba* is a patchwork of things that actually happened to

him and songs that came to him in a dream. He combined the songs in that dream with a camping trip that my whole family went on to the Spillway when I was a kid. While we were camping, just on day break, Mum and Dad saw a light on the hillside, and they were arguing the point about what it was. My Mum said it was a fire, and Dad said it was that old man, that old *joomeng, joomeng* (devil, devil).

When the sun had come out all the kids went straight for the water. There was about 15 of us swimming. Before my Dad went off fishing he decided to count heads to make sure all the kids were safe. But there was one missing; this was my sister. Dad started to panic and told Mum, and they split up; Mum went down stream, and the old fella went upstream.

Dad found my sister's tracks upstream and saw them disappear into the water. He knew she had crossed the other side of the spillway. At the time the spillway was at its peak. So he swam across, fighting the rapids to get to the other side. When he finally reached, he found her tracks again. And he followed them to the bottom of a big hill, which was upstream. And he found her there.

If Dad hadn't grabbed her she would have been gone forever, and become a wife for that *joomeng*, *joomeng* man. On the top of that hill is the cave for that *joomeng*, *joomeng*, you can still see it today.

When the art centre was set up in Kununurra in the mid 1980's, it became a place for us to perform and share these dances.

For me dancing is everything. When my mob start dancing, I've got to be in it.

I travelled with my parents when I was a little kid. We'd travel for culture and law, and end up near Derby. That's how far we used to go. And now, because I travelled with my parents doing culture all the time, it has soaked into me and made me feel as though I've got a responsibility and a role to carry on my culture and help other young fellas to follow in the footsteps of the old people.

This leads back to *wirnan*, which is how this project began. *Wirnan* is about trade, but it is more than just trade. That trade is connected to huge ceremonies and it is here during



ceremony that we'd share our *joonba*.

Today when we travel for ceremony we're fed and given clothes, blankets, fuel to travel and cash. In the early days it was boomerangs, spears, woomera, and coolamon – these things were like our money is today.

KAA is an alliance between art centres that are part of that *wirnan* line.

Our old people remind us of who we are and where we come from. It is our responsibility as young fellas to carry on our culture. This is it.

Mowanjum Art and Culture Centre

Junba: telling a story through dance, has been performed by the Worrorra, Ngarinyin & Wunumbal peoples of the Western Kimberley for thousands

of years. *Junba* comes to someone through dreams, who then instructs the making of dance boards and totems to illustrate the story in symbolic form. Music would be composed, sometimes by another person, and then the dance is choreographed. It is all four of these elements: the dream, the dance boards, the music and the dance, which make up *junba*.

Junbas are precious and were traded between peoples for other *junba*, for ochres, pearl shell and other valuable and precious objects.

Mangkaja Arts Resource Agency

That's Our Corroboree.
We follow him, the song and the dance. Culture yeah.
- Spider Snell, Snr Walmajarri Elder.

Mangkaja Artists and senior men of the Fitzroy Valley Region share significant cultural songs and stories of the four language groups in this *junba* exhibition. They have given permission to share the head dresses and dance items that are currently used in traditional dance and corroboree for people to see and understand that culture is strong and alive in the Kimberley.

Great pride is taken in this presentation and the exhibition gave rise to new pieces being created to exhibit alongside headdresses that are over 20 years old, remade and reworked for each performance over the decades. Young and old men have been involved in the process, learning the *junba* and some dancing it for the first time. The dance of the *Joowarri*, led and taught by senior Gooniyandi elder Mervyn Street, was performed to open this exhibition in Darwin, its first public performance since the 1950's.

I am glad I kept the song for so many years and thought about singing it again to pass it onto other generations.

The stories in this exhibition and the items on display inform precious cultural songs that are part of the life and culture in Fitzroy Valley. They are hard and powerful *junba*, and those who hold them carry great responsibility for their protection and continuity, therefore the decision to show them publicly has been taken very seriously.

Kimberley Aboriginal Artists presents:

JOONBA JUNBA JUJU

Song & dance cycles of the Kimberley

29 April -23 May 2014

UTS Gallery, University of Technology, Sydney

Warmun Art Centre

Gija Country, Warmun (Turkey Creek), WA

warmunart.com.au

Waringarri Aboriginal Arts

Miriwoong Country Kununurra, WA

waringarriarts.com.au

Mangkaja Arts Resource Agency

Bunuba, Gooniyandi, Walmajarri, Wangkajungka Country
Fitzroy Crossing, WA

mangkaja.com

Mowanjum Art and Culture Centre

Worrorra, Ngarinyin and Wunumbal Country Mowanjum, WA.

mowanjumarts.com

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Courtesy Mowanjum Arts
and Culture Centre. **Pre-
vious page:** Gooniyandi
headdress preparations.
Courtesy of Mangkaja
Arts Resource Centre



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