

Reclaiming the past can be personal

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Date: 09/04/2007
Words: 467
Source: SMH

Publication: Sydney Morning Herald
Section: News and Features
Page: 2

THE award-winning Australian film *Ten Canoes* was inspired by a black and white photograph of 10 Yolngu men poling bark canoes across the Arafura Swamp. It was taken by the anthropologist Donald Thomson in the 1930s.

But Professor Thomson's pictures are not the oldest of the Yolngu people of north-east Arnhem Land. Those were taken about seven years earlier, between 1926 and 1929, only shortly after first contact with white Australia, by Reverend Thomas Theodor Webb and Professor Lloyd Warner.

Since the 1940s the Webb and Warner pictures have been locked up in the University of Sydney's archives. Although part of the A. P. Elkin papers - one of the university's most significant collections - they remained off-limits because of cultural sensitivities, until now.

In the past two months, Joseph Nepparnga Gumbala has catalogued, described and digitally copied the 400 images. The university's first indigenous research fellow and the recipient of a \$245,000 Australian Research Council grant, Dr Gumbala has given names to the faces and rituals in them and later images and marked them "red", "amber" or "green" to indicate what is for public consumption and what is sacred.

Next week the Yolngu elder, musician and indigenous scholar will return to Arnhem Land, at the northernmost tip of the Northern Territory, with an external hard drive full of photographs and re-introduce his people to their ancestors. Many have never seen pictures of their parents and grandparents, uncles and aunties.

While poring over the archives, Dr Gumbala found images of his father, Djawa Dhawirrngu, and mother, Maranginy Wayngbarrnga, aged in their 20s and 30s, which he gave the Herald permission to publish.

"I sat in the archives and looked at [the picture of my mother] for hours," the 54-year-old said.

"When I return and sit down with the elders, people will feel something. They will get that spirit back. I don't want to see people losing this history."

The project would expose some of the millennia-old knowledge and culture of the Yolngu to mainstream Australia, he said.

Dr Aaron Corn, a mentor on the project, said digital storage technology was also reviving lost aspects of Yolngu culture and would one day allow the Yolngu to view

materials that have ended up in Europe and the US.

Lyn Riley-Mundine, of the university's Koori Centre, said it was an especially worthwhile project for Aboriginal people. "For some of us, our family tree starts with our grandmother because so many people were taken or moved around," she said.

"It's also important because it's now Aboriginal people saying 'this is the way it was', not non-Aboriginal people."