

The Northern Myth

Buzzfeed, the Garma Festival and the noble savage

For mine it is but a few short steps from the BuzzFeed treatment of this year's Garma Festival to a neo-romantic and naive view of contemporary Aboriginal society as "noble savages". But BuzzFeed can easily do better than 16 Photos, as we can see in this piece by Simon Crera, 16 Powerful Photos Of The Oldest Living Culture On Earth, which looked at the 2014 Garma Festival.

Robert Gosford



Buzzfeed, home of the “incredible” listicle, has lifted its game in the past few years, particularly with the recent strong political writing work of Mark Di Stefano, among others. *Buzzfeed*’s stock-in-trade is the visual earworm that jumps out of your phone or off your screen ... who could possibly resist clicking on “18 Things We Learned About Matty From “The Bachelor” Australia” or “This Is What Those Pull-Together Sticky Bras Look Like On Different-Sized Bodies“?

Buzzfeed isn’t alone in propagating this inconsequential fluff and there’s no shortage of sites where a photo is not worth a thousand words, but a thousand click-throughs.

I was more than ready to be underwhelmed when I saw that *Buzzfeed* had loaded a post about the last weekend’s Garma Festival in north-east Arnhem Land, particularly when the header was “16 Photos That Show The Strength And Spirit Of Australia’s Aboriginal People“. The Garma Festival has been run by the Yothu Yindi Foundation for the last 19 years and this past weekend’s event was a slick and well-produced forum for indigenous political and economic issues, though the claim to be “Australia’s own Davos” is a clunky and unnecessary over-reach.

Garma has always had a strong focus on culture and the annual *bunggul*ground, art exhibitions, training sessions and live music performances add both levity and depth to the more serious business at hand. This year’s event leveraged off the Uluru Statement and indigenous constitutional recognition and was stacked with the heavy, middle and light-weights of current Aboriginal political activism and a swag of national and Territory politicians.

And where the politicians and their ideological bag-carriers go, so follow the media. As ever the southern press tagged along—who’d knock back a few days in Arnhem Land if the alternative was Canberra in winter? But once the heavy hitters like Turnbull and Shorten have strutted their stuff the media is left with the worthy and (generally) dull who make neither for sparky TV nor much other than wordy or stodgy filler.

Organisers of the Garma Festival long ago realised that the best approach to a successful event was to temper the serious political and economic focus of the weekend with two broad themes—cultural maintenance and a strong focus on youth—that provides a depth and value that no other Australian indigenous forum comes close to. This is a well-thought through strategy that, for the media and thus how Garma is seen by the rest of the country, provides a friendly mix of the serious business with the camera-friendly light and colour of traditional cultural performance through the *bunggul* dance ground, contemporary music and sculpture and art from the local Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre.

A consistent thread through these exhibitions and performances is a focus on cultural maintenance through respect for history, innovation and integrity—something that the Yolngu of north-east Arnhem land have long done better than just about anyone else. This focus on quality and cultural integrity is an important element of Garma’s well-deserved and growing reputation.

This year, as usual, most news reports included at least some images from the *bunggul* and for mine *The Guardian* led the pack with a photoessay—*Garma*

festival 2017 brings together song, dance and politics – in pictures—that neatly bought the primary elements of politics and culture together in a collection of photos by AAP wire photographers, amateurs and working journalists like *The Guardian's* own Helen Davidson based out of Darwin.

This year's *Guardian* coverage isn't a classic photo essay or photojournalistic reportage such as you'd see, for example, at the *Lens blog* at the *New York Times*, but it is at least a coherent group of photographs placed in context and with enough accompanying text to allow the uninformed reader/viewer to make some sense of the personnel, issues and events at Garma. The piece succinctly sets out Garma's purpose and the rationale behind the mix of culture and politics and text attached to photographs of individuals—the lead shot of Djunga Djunga Yunupingu is a good example—is respectful and informative, putting their roles in useful context.

Well back in the pack is the aforementioned “16 Photos” post from *Buzzfeed*, put together by Anna Mendoza, credited as a *Buzzfeed* photo editor based in Sydney. Whether Mendoza has ever been to Garma—or the NT for that matter—is unclear but the subhead for the piece—“*Beautiful, inspiring and 100% deadly pictures that shine light on Australia's Indigenous culture*”—is as inaccurate as it is vaguely patronising. To be fair, *16 Photos* has a few pars of introductory text, including this (reasonably) accurate account of the *bunggul*:

One of the highlights of the festival is the bunggul (dance) performed every sunset at the four-day festival. Unique to the region, the traditional ceremonial dance allows the senior holders of the Yolngu songlines to share their stories.

But the photos that follow have no accompanying explanatory or contextual text apart from photographer credits. All have come from *Buzzfeed's* AAP subscription and, apart from the fact that they all feature performers and attendees at the 2017 Garma Festival, give the reader/viewer no guidance by way of narrative flow or consistent thread that is the key to photography's role as a visual art-form and information source. Good photo-journalism informs, challenges, excites and ignites curiosity. Throwing a few images at a screen with any—or little— apparent thought does everyone a disservice.

And almost everyone loses. The reader/viewer loses because they only get half—or less—of a story (or even worse a, confused jumble), the photographers lose because their hard work is diminished by poor presentation and lack of context and third parties with interests in the story—here the Garma Festival organisers, the Yolngu of Arnhem Land and more—lose out because their culture risks being diminished and disrespected.

Maybe *Buzzfeed's* analytics stats are the only real winner out of this exercise

For mine it is but a few short steps from the *Buzzfeed* treatment of this year's Garma Festival to a neo-romantic and naive view of contemporary Aboriginal society as “noble savages”. As Associate Professor Helen Gardiner of Deakin University explained in a recent piece at *The Conversation*, the idea of the noble savage:

... became a romantic foil to the alienation and inequities of capitalism and was restated by the neo-Marxists of the 1970s. Yet another version of the noble savage can be found in New Age romanticism. Indigenous peoples are credited with special powers, such as healing or enhanced spirituality. New Age practitioners might seek to recreate or dance through Indigenous ceremonies, often with little idea of their original meanings. Dream catchers and unattributed dot paintings on bags produced in China prove that there is money to be made from this model of the myth.

But BuzzFeed can easily do better than 2017's *16 Photos*. That much we can see in this *Buzzfeed* piece by Simon Crera, *16 Powerful Photos Of The Oldest Living Culture On Earth*, which looked at the 2014 Garma Festival.

Crera's piece isn't perfect, but it shows that it is possible to do an on-line treatment of sensitive subjects in a visually interesting, culturally sensitive and informative way.