

Decolonization in the field? : Basel - Milingimbi back and forth

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DECOLONIZATION IN THE FIELD?

Basel – Milingimbi back and forth

Text: *Beatrice Voirol*

Abstract

With regard to decolonization, ethnographic museums are special targets for criticism. For a long time they pursued «salvage ethnography», taking advantage of colonial structures to assemble their collections. The little island of Milingimbi in East Arnhem Land / Australia first attracted the attention of the Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) in the early 1930s. Three different individuals were involved in compiling the collection as it is constituted today, one of the largest collections from Milingimbi outside of Australia. Taking this collection as an example, my contribution takes a closer look at decolonizing practices in the museum field. It retraces the transition from collecting under colonial conditions to current attempts within the MKB to decolonize the Milingimbi collection. The article describes the practical efforts not only of MKB as an institution, but particularly also of Milingimbi as a community.

Keywords: *Milingimbi, Museum der Kulturen Basel, collection, digitalizing, Makarrata*

Today's situation in anthropological museums is contradictory. Storages are filled with objects collected under colonial conditions, with its context of violence, racism, and exoticization. How can we as museum curators decolonize such ethnographic museum collections? The Milingimbi Collection from East Arnhem Land / Australia in the Museum der Kulturen Basel is taken as an example to reveal possible practices of decolonizing museum collections. This contribution highlights four contact scenarios. In the first scenario, I argue that colonial conditions enabled the collection of ethnographic artefacts. In Milingimbi it was the Methodist Mission which set up a store that served museums. In the second scenario, I show that the colonial premise in ethnographic museums had not changed by the 1960s. Bark paintings from Milingimbi were no longer regarded as ethnographic objects, but as art. However, this did not lead to an essential change in thinking among museum curators. New technologies are discussed in the third scenario. Tentative attempts of sharing information on objects digitally are

a basic requirement when it comes to decolonizing the way ethnographic museums think and act. The fourth scenario is more subjective and describes how Milingimbi as a community has shaped this relationship in a new way. We are now discussing possibilities of cooperation between the Museum der Kulturen Basel and Yolngu people from Milingimbi to make collections digitally and physically accessible, while trying to respect indigenous policies, build up and share knowledge, and negotiate conditions of the collection.

First Contact – or Collecting Endangered Culture?

When the Swiss entomologist Eduard Handschin, from Basel, got to know the Milingimbi-based missionary Thomas Theodor Webb in Darwin in 1931, nobody in Basel knew anything about Milingimbi, a tiny island off the shore of the north coast of Australia. On behalf of the Council for

Scientific and Industrial Research of the Commonwealth of Australia, Eduard Handschin spent two years in Indonesia and Australia doing research on the buffalo-fly (*Lyperosia exigua*), a major threat to the growing cattle industry. Taking advantage of his stay in Darwin, he acquired a few ethnographic items and sent them to the then Museum für Völkerkunde Basel, today's Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB).¹ For his collection, he relied on art dealers and missionaries such as Thomas Theodor Webb (Handschin 1930-32: 134). In the end, Handschin sent 180 Australian objects to Switzerland (MKB 1931: V_0169, 1932a: V_0176, 1932c: V_0183), most of them from the top end of the Northern Territory. There were also a few objects from Milingimbi, mainly spears, but also a *yidaki* (didgeridoo), two pendants, three arm ornaments, and a *bathi* (dilly bag), all of them with indications of origin. Besides that, no further documentation of indigenous names or functions was given. So, it was through Eduard Handschin that these early objects became part of the Australian collection of MKB and the museum got to know the missionary Thomas Theodor Webb in Milingimbi. It marked the start of a long-lasting relationship between Basel and the island of Milingimbi.

Due to its remoteness there was little white settlement in Arnhem Land before the missionaries arrived. The Commonwealth divided the Northern Territory into different areas, one each for the Anglican, Catholic, and Methodist churches, respectively. The Methodists were assigned the area of the north coast. Even though today the missionary era in Arnhem Land is not viewed as negatively as the often violent invasion by settlers, it is still a fact that «the first missionaries crossed geographical and cultural boundaries and established missions without consultation» (Baker 2005: 17). This also goes for Milingimbi: in 1923 the Australian Methodist Church opened a mission in Milingimbi, the biggest island of the Crocodile Islands group in the Arafura Sea. In 1926 Thomas Theodor Webb was appointed superintendent of the mission. Webb, who succeeded the first missionary, James Watson, showed a keen interest in Aboriginal culture:

In 1939 Webb produced the district's first clearly articulated policy statement, giving directives for mission work and imparting positive regard for the Aborigines and their culture. He initiated language study, contributed articles to Oceania and the Missionary Review, and published two informative booklets, The Aborigines of East Arnhem Land (Melbourne, 1934) and Spears to Spades (Sydney, 1938). [...] [He was the] most profound thinker of the mission in his era, and the most anthropologically

informed [...]. He gave the mission an intellectual leadership that was previously lacking, but was often frustrated by the apparent indifference of the Mission Board in Sydney. (Kadiba 2002)

The citation highlights Webb's «positive» attitude towards the Yolngu people of Northeast Arnhem Land. However, his «positive» attitude did not make up for his contempt for the Yolngu way of life which stood in contradiction to the Western, Christian principles and practices Webb was trying to promulgate. Although he acknowledged the traumatic impact of «civilisation» on Aboriginal people, – «[a]s must be obvious to all observers, contact with our civilisation has meant for the aboriginals the most complete and utter tragedy it is possible to imagine» (Webb 1944: 43) – his line of argument is clearly rooted in the colonial mindset based on the idea of the evolution of mankind, with the white race at the top:

We are dealing with a people who in general culture are among the very least developed of all the races of men. We on the other hand represent not only the most advanced accredited religion, but also the most complex and highly developed general culture. We represent the dominant and aggressive civilisation of the Western world, and [...] unconsciously we expect any advancement of these people in economic and social life, and also in religion, to be along conventional Western lines. (op. cit.: 54)

Even if his purpose was «a realisation of a true value to the aboriginal of the elements of his own culture» (op. cit.: 54), Webb declared that one «must be prepared to carry on our work very carefully, very patiently, and for a very long period if we would see the real salvation of these people» (op. cit.: 56). One of the ways to promote progress among his flock was to establish a store in the hope of enabling Milingimbi people to trade their artefacts for goods and materials. This marked the beginning of a mission enterprise which, after some time, was successfully dealing in Milingimbi artefacts and art. «The success of this enterprise quickly became evident, and by 1930 Webb was in a position to furnish museums and individuals with collections; mission staff no doubts were able to purchase from his stock» (Pinchbeck et al. 2016: 24).

Like many other institutions, MKB was also a client of T. T. Webb. In two consignments, Webb sold a total of 122 objects to MKB (MKB 1932b: V_0182, 1933: V_0194). The collection is well documented as far as indigenous designations are concerned while the exact places of origin are mostly missing. Even Handschin's collection, obtained from missionaries and art dealers, was more specific. The Webb collection

¹ Subsequently, the abbreviation MKB will be used instead of «Museum für Völkerkunde und Schweizerisches Museum für Volkskunde».

also comprises the first paintings on bark, an object category that would arouse much interest during the 1950s and 60s, not only at MKB, but generally as works of fine art. Another crucial object in the Webb collection is a painted skull. Information about the skull is limited: «skull of aboriginal girl» (*op. cit.*). It is unknown how the skull came into Webb's possession. The skull was to play an important role later in the relationship between Milingimbi and Basel.

In August 1932, Eduard Handschin returned to Basel and became a member of the commission of the Museum of Natural History. An article published 1 May 1933 in the *National-Zeitung* covering a lecture Eduard Handschin had given at the Geographisch-Ethnologische Gesellschaft in Basel provides insight into the conditions in the Northern Territory. The article's title «Empty space in Northern Australia» alludes to the «*terra incognita*» concept of the first colonists on the Australian continent: it claimed that only 2000 non-Aboriginal people were living in this huge area. The article describes Western attempts to industrialize the Northern Territory, makes a detour via the natural environment, and finally ends up speaking about Aboriginal people. It acknowledges the difficulties Aboriginal people were having adapting to a Western lifestyle, given their «primitive Stone-Age culture background», but does not doubt the trajectory of development as such. The article states that Aboriginal people had been «domesticated» and were now in the service of the white man. It ends with the remark that the «nigger in pants» (*Hosenneger*) was the white man's worst caricature (Anonymus 1933). «The Hosenneger became a figure of fun among the European public in the 1880s and 1890s, at a time in which African colonial subjects educated in Germany and / or by Germans in the colonies were beginning to articulate their own self-image» (Rosenhaft and Aitken 2013: 27). The adoption of European clothing by indigenous people as a metaphor of appropriating a Western lifestyle was presumably seen as an act of brazenness by the colonizers. Obviously, the term «*Hosenneger*» not only became part of common Swiss parlance, it was also extended to Aboriginal people. The term illustrates the colonial ambivalence: the colonial takeover was never questioned but the attempts of Aboriginal people to adapt to a Western lifestyle were perceived as a caricature – in line with Bhabha's modern concept of mimicry (Bhabha 1994: 121-131) – and served as an instrument of colonial power play.

From today's perspective, the ambivalences of the colonial era are striking: Without having set a foot in the field, Eduard Handschin brought home stereotypes of Yolngu people from East Arnhem Land. Commissioned by MKB to collect whatever he could lay hands on, objects found their way to MKB as representatives of «traditional» Yolngu culture. Trapped in

his role as missionary, Thomas Theodor Webb tried to find a way to preserve Yolngu culture while, at the same time, fitting the Yolngu people into the colonial economy. The mission station became a magnet, attracting people not only from across Milingimbi, but also from the mainland. They came to the mission station to sell objects to fund their changed lifestyle, a lifestyle that had been imposed on them by the mission and that many had adopted.

Second Contact – Collecting Endangered Culture or Fine Art?

Roughly two decades after Handschin's and Webb's collections arrived at MKB, the little island of Milingimbi again came up on the agenda of the museum. An opportunity to enlarge the Milingimbi collection arose in the person of Karel Kupka, a Czech artist and anthropologist.

In 1956 Kupka travelled to Milingimbi and assembled a collection of artefacts. Being an artist himself, he quickly formed close relationships with master painters in Milingimbi such as Djäwa, Dawidi, Dayngangan, and Lipunja (Rothwell 2007: 3). On his way back to Europe, Kupka offered «200 specimens of Aboriginal art and craft» to MKB director Alfred Bühler, explaining that he wanted to show them in exhibitions in European museums (Museumsarchiv MKB 1956-1963: 12.12.1956). Bühler who «[...] had close personal connections to contemporary artists in Basel and beyond» (Kaufmann and McMillan 2009: 141) took an interest in the collection (Museumsarchiv MKB 1956-1963: 18.01.1957, 23.03.1957). He wrote to the chair of the commission and told him that the museum had been offered a collection, «probably the complete and best you can get», mentioning, at the same time, how fast indigenous culture was vanishing and how hard it was to get an export permit from Australia (Museumsarchiv MKB 1956-1963: April to May 1957). After intensive fundraising, the money was sent to Karel Kupka, just before the opening of the exhibition *Kunst der Uraustralier* at MKB, featuring main pieces of the collection. Bühler let Kupka know that the exhibition was received very positively (Museumsarchiv MKB 1956-1963: 20.06.1958) and that «[...] it had to be extended by four weeks due to the large public interest» (Kaufmann and McMillan 2009: 144). Kupka made two further trips to Australia in 1961 and in 1963, but when national regulations in Australia began protecting indigenous cultural heritage more thoroughly, collecting became more difficult. On top of that, MKB faced budget cuts, meaning that only parts of the 1960s collections could be acquired. Nevertheless, a total of 467 objects (MKB 1957: V_0292, 1962: V_0312, 1963: V_0354, 1964: V_0401, 1966a: V_0411, 1966b: V_0412) came to Basel

through Karel Kupka, many of them bark paintings. They also included objects like brushes and colourants used for painting besides a series of carved and painted animal figures. Ornaments and ceremonial objects are also to be found in the Kupka collection. This made MKB one of the institutions with the largest Milingimbi collection outside of Australia. Despite the tightened regulations in Australia, both Kupka and Bühler tried to get out what they possibly could get out of the country to expand the MKB Milingimbi collection. Whether this was only due to their shared interest in art is questionable.

Creating art is fundamental to Yolngu culture (Morphy 2007: x), but the Western concept of fine art was new. «In the case of Indigenous Australians they embraced it quite happily» (*op. cit.*: xii). The anthropologist Donald Thomson was the first to record the names of Milingimbi artists whilst doing field research in Milingimbi in the mid-1930s (Pinchbeck et al. 2016: 29). This kind of individualization of artists was supported by the mission from the 1950s on. Several individuals in Milingimbi were able to earn a living as an artist.

For a long time, Australian indigenous art was not acknowledged as fine art. This slowly changed in the 1950s and 1960s. Morphy (2000: 130) understands art as a value-creating process with «both the creation of a new kind of values in objects and the increase of their value in terms of exchange». Karel Kupka and his Milingimbi collection was part of this development. «For this his [the Aboriginal painter's] work merits to be shown in art galleries and not only in museums or odd curio ships [sic!]» (Kupka 1956: 267). This mindset was also reflected in the way bark paintings were shown in the exhibition *Kunst der Uraustralier* at MKB: «[...] the presentation was one that followed the standards of art museums of that period» (Kaufmann and McMillan 2009: 143). Besides Basel, Kupka also had exhibitions in Sydney (1956), Geneva (1962), Paris and Rome (1964), and Prague (1969) (De Lary Healy 2010: 206).

Despite this «Aboriginal art» exhibition, the thinking of both Kupka and Bühler remained in the traditional mode of «salvage ethnography». In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue *Kunst der Uraustralier* (Museum für Völkerkunde und Schweizerisches Museum für Volkskunde 1958: 3) one is reminded of the arguments of Webb and Handschin. Bühler states that the fate of Aboriginal people would probably be the same as that of many other «primitive people». Their number would gradually decrease until they vanished completely. They would give up their culture and their way of life. He stressed that, with regard to this imminent threat, it was the duty of institutions like MKB to purchase testimonies of the perishing indigenous culture of Australia at the very last minute.

Kupka acknowledged that bark painting was a flourishing artistic form: «The interest in Aboriginal painting is considerable and constantly increasing, and native painters are much and sincerely encouraged in their work» (Kupka 1956: 267), but at the same time he remarked:

Unfortunately with these ancient traditional patterns used for bark paintings, some local painters mix new influences. Rudimentary painted landscapes, hunting scenes et cetera are saddening in their emptiness, and it is unfortunate that their fabrication is encouraged by incompetent searchers for curiosities. (*op. cit.*: 267)

When Kupka said, «more painters and competent collectors should be interested in Aboriginal work and by good choice encourage this true art» (*op. cit.*: 267), it hints at the dilemma with art in the discourse on decolonization. On the one hand, artists were known by name and bark paintings were accepted as genuine art. On the other, there was the view that «bark paintings as objects made for sale in a post-colonial context were in some sense inauthentic [...]» (Morphy 2007: xiv). The questions that Christian Kaufmann raised about the Basel Kupka collection, thus, remain unanswered:

What we do not know is the kind of dialogue Karel Kupka had with the [...] Milingimbi artists who were painting their work for him. Did he give them guidelines? Did he reject works? And if so, were rejected works destroyed (or were the same barks repainted)? (Kaufmann and McMillan 2009: 150)

What we also do not know for sure is why indigenous master painters began engaging with the emerging art market. Was it purely for financial gain? Or were they also looking for innovation and enhancement?

Third Contact – or Digitalizing the Collection?

This time it took longer until the threads were picked up again in the Milingimbi-Basel relationship. In search of Milingimbi material, Australian scholars contacted MKB in 2013. The Australian Council Linkage Grant «The legacy of 50 years of collecting at Milingimbi Mission» of the Australian National University and Museum Victoria (Dr Louise Hamby and Lindy Allen) was documenting significant holdings of Milingimbi material in institutions in Australia and around the world. The project's concern was how museums could possibly change their handling of the material and their interactions with people in the community, now and in the future. Within this project, MKB was significant, owing to the collections of Thomas Theodor Webb, Eduard Handschin, and Karel Kupka.

Between the second and third contact, fundamental changes led to the questioning of the legitimacy of ethnographic collections. Harsh critique was aimed at anthropological museums for being a product of colonial violence and reproducing colonial world views, Eurocentric narratives, and racist representations, notably in German-speaking countries where colonial history is widely invisible (Kravagna 2015: 95-96). With the New-Museology-Movement of the 1980s and 1990s, not only names of ethnographic museums were changed into more globally embracing appellations, interaction with source communities was also promoted as a new practice. Exhibition practices shifted from regional to thematic focuses (Kraus 2015: 7-37, Modest 2012: 84-88). MKB was among the first ethnographic museums to change its name. In 1996 the «Museum für Völkerkunde und Schweizerisches Museum für Volkskunde» became the «Museum der Kulturen Basel». The comprehensive refurbishment and extension from 2008 to 2011 also led to conceptional changes, with the focus now more on thematic presentations, present-day topics, and critical self-reflection (Schmid 2011, 2012). In anthropological museums, provenance research and the question of repatriation became increasingly important, both issues generating a lot of public attention. Deriving from art history, the term provenance research is closely linked with Nazi-confiscated art. However, between Nazi-confiscated art and colonial collections in museums there is an important difference. Cultural and historical contextualization of objects and collections is part of the basic work in anthropological museums, in other words, provenance research has always been a topic because it's constituent to their *raison d'être*, although it is true that in the last few years provenance research has been intensified (Förster et al. 2018). The same applies to repatriation. After collecting human remains, mainly during the high time of colonialism in the late 19th and early 20th century, it is only in the last few decades that repatriation has arisen on the agenda of anthropological museums. Whereas international and national law is not clear on this issue, there are recommendations such as the UN declaration of 2007 or the International Council of Museums' 1986 guidelines which help museums deal with human remains (Fründt 2011), but there is still plenty of room for interpretation. Whereas physical repatriation is often ethically, legally, and politically complicated and complex, and therefore still rather a rare phenomenon in museums, visual and digital repatriation is sought increasingly, despite the technical challenges it poses.

Making collections digitally accessible is a rather new development and has not yet been fully exploited. It provides accessibility for everyone, but it also raises the ques-

tion as to who owns the digital objects: the source community – but who is «the source community»? – or the museum (Hoffmann 2015)? The research design of «The legacy of 50 years of collecting at Milingimbi Mission» targets – among other objectives – the digital repatriation of data collected in different institutions, among them MKB, to the local art and culture centre in Milingimbi. The obvious aim of the digital repatriation is to make objects accessible again to the Milingimbi community, in compliance with Yolngu policies. People get the opportunity to study old designs, stories, and former artistic interpretations on the computer screen. And relatives have the possibility to view the artworks of their forefathers.

An essential element of the project was the cooperation between the scientific side, headed by the two project leaders Louise Hamby and Lindy Allen, and representatives of the source community. A key figure was the late Dr Gumbula, an indigenous elder and descendant from a long line of important leaders (Corn 2017). As a widely acknowledged indigenous authority in Milingimbi and beyond, Dr Gumbula was involved in the project because he had the knowledge to identify, interpret, and re-assess the collections within Yolngu frames of reference. Together with the project leaders, he worked in different collections, including Basel. It is thanks to a visit by Dr Gumbula and multiple visits by Louise Hamby and Lindy Allen to Basel that the MKB database is now replete with numerous indigenous references, providing access to new forms of local knowledge and complementing the old museum data that no longer has to stand as the exclusive source of information on the objects. The Milingimbi community on its part has regained admittance to cultural heritage whose existence had been forgotten or lost.

Dr Gumbula used his own classification: *garma* means open and accessible to all, *dhuni-makarr-garma'mirr* is material that needs special supervision by elders, and *ngarra* is material that is classified as restricted (Pinchbeck et al. 2016: 16). These codes are widely accepted in the Milingimbi community and also essential when it comes to digital accessibility in compliance with Yolngu law. MKB also follows this classification.

Having the digital files in a community centre like the Milingimbi Art and Culture Centre allows local people to reengage with their culture:

[...] recent engagement by Aboriginal people with ethnographic collections may be seen to represent a new kind of collection-making, in a process of cultural reclamation spanning material objects dispersed in museums around the world. In contemporary life in Arnhem Land today, Yolngu are seeking ways of reaffirm-

ing their identity and taking an active role in how they are perceived by others, and the reinterpretation of items collected by others over the past century plays an important role. Paintings and other objects not only tell people who they are (Corn and Gumbula 2006: 190), but are key to the mediation and transmission of knowledge to younger generations today and to balanda (outsiders). (Hamby with Gumbula 2015: 188)

Little is known about indigenous agency in the era of colonialism. The involvement of indigenous representatives in a scientific project like this has shown that the relationship between the Milingimbi community and MKB has changed considerably. Making material culture (digitally) accessible again leads to new indigenous involvement, as experienced in the *Makarrata* that succeeded the digital repatriation.

Fourth Contact – or Making a Fresh Start?

When visiting Milingimbi for the first time in 2016, I carried with me a box containing three objects from Kupka's 1956-fieldtrip to Milingimbi. The accompanying big envelope contained the museum data on the painted skull Webb had sold to MKB in 1934. In Milingimbi, the project «The legacy of 50 years of collecting at Milingimbi station» had a tremendously stimulating effect on Yolngu people. Out of discussions between Louise Hamby, Lindy Allen, Dr Gumbula, and Keith Lapulung Dhamarrandji, the Milingimbi Community Liaison Officer, an idea had emerged that harked back to a traditional peace-making concept called *Makarrata*. A *Makarrata* is a Yolngu form of conflict resolution which is highly ritualized and brings parties together to settle serious issues, such as accusations of sorcery, abduction of women, or murder. The term is often translated as «pay back». Spearing was once part of the *Makarrata*, but in 2016 no actual spearing was involved. The concept is fundamentally rooted in Yolgnu law and culture, or as Keith Lapulung Dhamarrandji, who chaired the proceedings after the death of Dr Gumbula, explained: «This is the law of the law, not the changeable law created by men» (Eccles 2016). This statement hints at an Indigenous concept of time: «It's been here since eternity and contains not only all of the past and the present but all of the future as well» (*op. cit.*).

Our joint vision for the Makarrata with Lapulung and Gumbula was that the galleries, libraries, archives and museums [...] alter with the way in which they engage with the Yolngu at Milingimbi. This forum allows the Yolngu to meet face to face on their country with those who are currently tasked with the care and safekeeping of their things held far away from where they

were made. It allows the Yolngu to voice their opinions and raise issues of concern and assert their right to advise and give guidance on what is culturally appropriate and ethical in relation to the collections [...]. (Allen et Hamby 2016: 10)

The *Makarrata* was held from 14 – 16 August 2016. Everyone contributed to the event. The Milingimbi community invited the participants to come to their land, after elaborate discussions about the right way to hold a *Makarrata* and where it had to take place according to Yolngu law. The data on the painted skull and the objects I was carrying with me were my contribution to the occasion. The purpose of taking items from the collection was to enable people in Milingimbi to interact directly with the objects, because digital data of an object and the object in all its physicality are still not quite the same thing. Furthermore, copies of the acquisition documents and all the documentation on the skull we had were handed over to Keith Lapulung Dhamarrandji to open the dialogue. We all met in a place that had been chosen as the *Makarrata* ground. This was the place where we sat and talked, where people of Milingimbi danced and sang, and where we shared food. Participants explained their connection to Milingimbi and told people about their holdings of cultural material from Milingimbi. The objects I had brought back were displayed. Initially just throwing a distant glance at the pieces, people began to freely interact with them after a while. Objects were touched and enacted to show us foreigners how they were used. The three days in Milingimbi were a time of dialogue, discussing the community's requests, and listening to in what ways museums could help on a very pragmatic basis, from digitalizing collections to inviting Milingimbi people to different museums in Australia.

The *Makarrata* evoked much interest; Australia's national broadcaster ABC even telecasted a feature on this event in *Australia Wide*: «Yolngu hold *Makarrata* ceremony to build bridge between art world and community over artefacts» (ALPA 2016). A concrete outcome of the *Makarrata* was «The Milingimbi *Makarrata* Resolution» in which the participants agreed on a range of crucial contents, such as:

The Makarrata has planted a seed of mutual hope for the establishment and strengthening of our relationships as joint custodians of these precious things. We are committed to continue this dialogue and, through the deep listening that has begun, work towards important and shared outcomes. [...] We put forward this Resolution as an inspiration to Indigenous communities and cultural institutions across the world to find common ground to ensure the dignity and integrity of the heritage of Indigenous peoples is maintained appropriately in perpetuity. (Allen and Hamby 2017)

The *Makarrata* resolution was not only published in English, but also in Yan'nhangu, Djambarrpungu, and Gupapungu to make sure that as many people from the Crocodile Islands as possible were able to understand it.

Back at the office in Basel, I thought about how to take the idea of the *Makarrata* further. How could I involve practices of decolonization? After having experienced how important objects were for people in order to reconnect with former techniques and designs, I enquired about the possibility of an artist-in-residence programme. Artistic interventions, artist-in-residence programmes, and artistic research projects could be a way out of the crisis of representation. The exchange between anthropological museums and indigenous artists relies on approaches and languages that are different to the ones academics have pursued for decades (Wonisch 2017: 5-7). A generous fellowship from the Georges and Mirjam Kinzel-Fonds made this possible.

As a result of these actions, I travelled to Milingimbi again in October 2017. As on my first trip, I took objects from the MKB collection with me. The objects, two *bathi* (dilly bags) and two necklaces, created a link with the people. Taking advantage of the presence of many people, I showed the objects to everyone interested, as they were not restricted. A linchpin for my project was the Milingimbi Art and Culture Centre. The two managers offered me advice regarding the artist-in-residence programme. Rosita Holmes and Christopher Durkin spoke about the idea of two senior female weavers coming to Switzerland. Their visit could be seen as a twist in the so far male-dominated relationship.

Where my consultations on the skull in October 2017 will lead to is not yet clear. With the help of Lindy Allen, Louise Hamby, and the Community Liaison Officer, Keith Lapulung Dhamarrandji, we were able to identify the clan to which the skull belongs. This is crucial for the future dialogue, as I now know whom to address and clan members know that they can contact me.

However, there is more to this and it includes smaller but not less relevant efforts such as following the indigenous protocols of how objects should be stored, what the conservation measures are, how objects should be exhibited, and how the Milingimbi community is to be informed before publishing pictures and texts and providing access to Milingimbi cultural material. These are issues that need to be negotiated and will therefore lead to more exchange and discussion between Basel and Milingimbi in the future.

Conclusion

Museum collections always have to be understood in the contexts of time and the political and historical circumstances. Whereas previously, collecting Milingimbi culture was determined by the supposed necessity of rescuing material before the culture «dies», over the last few decades emphasis has shifted to opening up the collections and making them accessible. Today it is beyond doubt that colonial conditions had an influence on the practices of collecting. They favoured collecting or even made it possible in the first place. What this implies, or should imply, for current museum practices has not yet been clarified. In the spirit of the *Makarrata* and the project «The legacy of 50 years of collecting at Milingimbi Mission», the concern is to thoroughly decolonize the present and thus also the future. It is fundamental to make the circumstances of acquisition transparent. This is not about legal or moral concerns, but about establishing a common starting point for the future. As every contact situation is different, it is essential to understand in what way the source community is related to objects and collections held in museums. Objects might have a high social and/or political relevance for source communities. However, source communities are not a homogenous entity, given the many different voices and agenda that shape a community. Consequently, it has to be clear who is speaking. The current and future cooperation between Milingimbi and anthropological museums all over the world, including MKB, is just the first step.

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