

16. The American Clever Man (*Marrkijbu Burdan Merika*)¹

Bruce Birch

A Note on the Recordings

At the time the first recording of the story of the ‘American Clever Man’ was made, none of those present realised that the central character in the story was based on David H. Johnson, mammalogist with the 1948 American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land.² In fact, the text remained untranscribed and only dimly grasped until early 2009, when art historian Sabine Hoeng made the link to Johnson. Hoeng (who coordinates a bilingual Iwaidja–English publishing project based on Croker Island) had recorded a brief reference to the same story in October 2008, and, when Archie Brown brought up the story again in a March 2009 recording, she was inspired to search the relevant literature for references to an American who had travelled alone through Cobourg Peninsula—soon locating the following note in Mountford’s introduction to the records of the Expedition: ‘On 19 October...Johnson reached Oenpelli [now Gunbalanya]³ after walking 160 miles [260 km] from Cape Don, without a native to guide him. He had been successful in making a collection of mammals which can be compared with that made by the naturalist Gilbert over a hundred years ago.’⁴

This matched the information from local Indigenous people that the man in the story was American, that he was practising taxidermy on small mammals, and that the events took place in the immediate aftermath of World War II. I then transcribed and translated the 2006 recording, and set up an interview

1 The Iwaidja term *marrkijbu*, which is often translated as ‘clever man’ or ‘shaman’, refers to a man who possesses, as a result of training and practice, an unusual capacity to manipulate aspects of both the natural and the supernatural worlds.

2 The story of the ‘American Clever Man’ was first recorded on 26 July 2006 as an oral text spoken by Archie Brown, a member of the Yalama clan, who is based on Croker Island and who was born and grew up on Cobourg Peninsula. This recording was made at Wanjurk in Mountnorris Bay during a trip funded by the Dokumentation Bedrohte Sprache (DoBeS) program of the Volkswagen Foundation as part of a grant awarded to linguists Nick Evans (then at the University of Melbourne) and Hans-Jürgen Sasse (then at Cologne University) to document Iwaidja, a highly endangered language spoken now mostly on Croker Island and the Cobourg Peninsula.

3 The name ‘Oenpelli’ is an approximation of *Uwunbarlany*, which is the placename in Erre, the original language of the area, now no longer spoken. The cognate placename in Kuwinjku, which has now become the dominant language of the area, is *Kunbarlanya*, today typically written as *Gunbalanya*.

4 Mountford, C. P. (ed.) 1956, *Records of the American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land. Volume 1: Art, myth and symbolism*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., p. xxix.

in September 2009 not only with Archie Brown, but also with David ‘Cookie’ Minyimak, who I had been told had accompanied Johnson on local hunting trips while he was based at Cape Don. I also invited two other men who had been based at Cape Don at that time—Charlie Mangulda and Khaki Marrala—who both knew the story well and could therefore help with filling out details. These additional recordings were then transcribed and translated with the help of Iwaidja-speaking language workers at Adjamarduku Outstation on Croker Island, forming the basis for a film I presented at the Barks, Birds & Billabongs symposium in November 2009.

Johnson at Cape Don

The story of the American Clever Man begins at Jamarldinki (Cape Don) at the western tip of Cobourg Peninsula, where a lighthouse settlement was established in 1918. Johnson was based there during September 1948, collecting animals, transforming them into museum objects using his skills as a taxidermist, and packing them in boxes ready for shipment to Darwin via the regular supply boat, *Sheena*. For his travels in the vicinity of Cape Don, Johnson employed the services of Buckley Darrarndarra, a man of the nearby Kamurkbarri clan estate, and his canoe, the *Yinbi* (named, like all canoes, after the place where the tree from which it was made once grew). Darrarndarra took along two of his sons, David ‘Cookie’ Minyimak and the late Johnny Williams, on his trips with Johnson, and it is from Minyimak that we have a firsthand account of Johnson’s travels on Cobourg.

The people living at Cape Don observed Johnson with growing amazement as he went about his business. It became increasingly obvious that Johnson was no ordinary ‘Balanda’ (as white people are known throughout Arnhem Land). Johnson went out at night alone into the bush, shooting bats and other small game (he was apparently an excellent shot),⁵ and would spend the following day skinning them and then returning them to a life-like state by means of taxidermy. Adding to the unusual impression was Johnson’s apparently immaculate appearance. He is said to have worn only pale-coloured (*bidbarran*) clothing and yet to have emerged from the bush as clean as when he set out. According to one informant, he was never seen to bathe, but was nevertheless always ‘clean, no dirty’ (see Interview Extract II below). This impression is confirmed by Expedition colleague Raymond Specht, who states that Johnson ‘always seemed neatly dressed even after a hard day(s) in the field’.⁶

5 Ray Specht, Personal communication.

6 Ibid.



Figures 16.1 and 16.2 Views of Arnhem Land Expedition mammalogist, David H. Johnson, performing taxidermy, 1948

Photograph by Howell Walker. By permission of the State Library of South Australia. PRG 487/1/2/204/1 and PRG 487/1/2/204/2.



Figure 16.2

Photograph by Howell Walker. By permission of the State Library of South Australia. PRG 487/1/2/204/1 and PRG 487/1/2/204/2.

When local people looked for an explanation of Johnson's atypical abilities and behaviour, they came up, unsurprisingly, with the notion that he was a *marrkijbu*, a person with a heightened ability to manipulate aspects of both the natural and the supernatural realms—a 'shaman' or 'clever man'. Johnson did indeed fit this description well, at least in relation to his knowledge of, and control over, aspects of the natural environment. He not only had the professional training of a mammalogist, and therefore an advanced understanding of the animals on Cobourg and their behaviour, but was also a skilled 'backwoods man', accustomed to, and unafraid of, spending long periods alone in the bush. Johnson himself records that he was

put ashore at Cape Don on 18 September...The following three weeks were spent on the Cobourg Peninsula with headquarters at the Cape Don lighthouse...Local trips were made by boat to Popham Bay on the north shore of the peninsula and to Black Rock Point on the south shore... From the latter locality a trip was made overland on foot to Knocker Bay on Port Essington.⁷

Johnson's description is in accord with the Indigenous account as far as the places he visited are concerned, although it diverges in terms of what occurred there. It was at a place called Madirrala in Knocker Bay that Johnson's status as a *marrkijbu*—if not already confirmed—was placed beyond doubt in the eyes of Indigenous observers. By this stage of his visit, we can assume that Johnson's unusual behaviour had already impacted strongly on the population at Cape Don. One imagines his daily activities being reported on and discussed around campfires at night. One event, however, that occurred during his period on Cobourg Peninsula stands out from all others. At Madirrala, the story goes that Johnson not only saw a *yumbarrbarr* (a gigantic malevolent spirit which feasts on human flesh, and of which local Indigenous people are naturally terrified), but was contemplating catching it.⁸

David Minyimak tells the story briefly the following way.

⁷ Johnson, D. H. 1964, 'Mammals of the Arnhem Land Expedition', in R. Specht (ed.), *Records of the American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land. Volume 4: Zoology*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., p. 429.

⁸ The earliest mention in literature of the *yumbarrbarr* on Cobourg Peninsula occurs in John Lort Stokes' 1846 account. Stokes writes: 'The natives in the neighbourhood of Port Essington are, like all others on the continent, very superstitious; they fancy that a large kind of tree, called the Imburra-burra, resembling the Adansonia, contains evil spirits.' Stokes mistakenly interprets *yumbarrbarr* as the name of the tree, rather than the name of the malevolent spirits who are said to inhabit it. The tree alluded to could be the milkwood (*Alstonia actinophylla*), one of the trees that *yumbarrbarr* are said to inhabit, along with the banyan and the tamarind. Stokes, J. L. 1846, *Discoveries in Australia: With an account of the coasts and rivers explored and surveyed during the voyage of H.M.S. Beagle, in the years 1837–38–39–40–41–42–43. Volume 2*, T. and W. Boone, London.

Interview Extract I⁹

Madirrala.

[We arrived at] Madirrala.

Well, jarraran hunting. Mirrnayaj.

[My father, my brother and I] went looking for crocodiles.

Jumung jadrirrang barakbarda,

When we came back,

abiny ngartung, 'Ay!'

he [Johnson] said to us, 'Eh!'

'Artayang burrang warrkbi.'

'I saw a big man.'

'Nganduka?'

'Where?' [We asked him.]

'Balkbany barakbarda arlirr ari.'

'He appeared over there near that tree.'

'Kardayang? Nuyi?'

'You saw him? You?'

'Anamanyi, but...'

'I would have liked to have captured him, but...'

'too big.'

'[he was] too big.'

'Awardudban.'

'So I left him there.'

In this part of the country, *yumbarrbarr* are believed to inhabit trees—that is, to actually live inside them. Their presence can be diagnosed by certain signs, such as the accompanying presence of human remains in the vicinity—victims of the *yumbarrbarr*'s appetite for human flesh.

While the bulk of the Indigenous population lives in fear of *yumbarrbarr*, *marrkijbu* or 'clever men' do not. On the contrary, *marrkijbu* have the ability to 'tame' *yumbarrbarr*, and to use them as an extension of their own power, getting

9 All recordings excerpted and quoted here are stored with associated metadata and time-aligned annotations in the online Dokumentation Bedrohte Sprache (DoBeS) Archive based at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen, the Netherlands. Interview Extract I, dvR_091112, Begin Time: 00:01:41.456, End Time: 00:02:06.805 (DoBeS Archive), Recorded at Adjamarduku Outstation, Croker Island, 12 November 2009, Narrator: David 'Cookie' Minyimak.

them to perform difficult or even mundane tasks. For example, Archie Brown and David Minyimak, in a separate text, have described an incident during a Kuwarr ceremony when one of the ceremonial leaders, Paddy Compass Namadbara, a *marrkijbu*, instructed 'his *yumbarrbarr*' to frighten them by throwing rocks at them as they sat around the campfire at night, as punishment for their perceived flippant attitude towards the Kuwarr ceremonial process.¹⁰

Thus, given both his apparent lack of fear of the *yumbarrbarr* and his statement that he wanted to catch it, Johnson's behaviour would have consolidated the already strong conviction in the minds of local people that he was indeed a *marrkijbu burdan Merika*—an 'American clever man'.

Johnson, on the other hand, mentions an encounter of a different kind at Knocker Bay:

Sambar deer were seen twice, and tracks many other times on the western and southern shores of Port Essington. At Knocker Bay [known to the locals as Madirrala] a female and a half-grown fawn were startled from a stunted thicket of mangroves and ran out into the shallow water of the bay for a distance before turning back to shore and disappearing into other thickets.¹¹

Given the potential for miscommunication across the cultural and linguistic chasm separating Johnson from his Indigenous support crew, and given the already mounting evidence of Johnson's special status in the minds of his hosts, it is plausible that Johnson recounted his sighting of sambar deer to Darrarndarra and Minyimak on their return from crocodile hunting, and that this was misinterpreted by them as a sighting of the *yumbarrbarr* which was believed to inhabit this locality.

The partial homonymy of the words '*yumbarrbarr*' and '*sambar*' suggests the possibility that Johnson might have even mentioned the word '*sambar*'—a term for the deer which was most likely not in general usage on Cobourg—and that this was misheard as a reference to the malevolent spirit. This particular mishearing would have been further encouraged by the developing understanding of Johnson as a 'clever man'. *Yumbarrbarr* are known to inhabit particular places. Madirrala was one such place, and therefore the sighting of a *yumbarrbarr* there was not unexpected. Thus, the conditions were conducive to the misunderstanding, and Johnson's sighting of deer was interpreted as a sighting instead of a local malevolent spirit with a similar-sounding name.

10 W_081001 (DoBeS Archive). For a discussion of the Kuwarr ceremony (known in the neighbouring language Kunwinjku as *Ubarr*) in the context of the Arnhem Land Expedition, see Garde, this volume.

11 Johnson, 'Mammals of the Arnhem Land Expedition', p. 432.



Figure 16.3 David 'Cookie' Minyimak, 2007

Photograph by Sabine Hoeng

The following edited extract from a recording made in September 2009 gives an impressionistic survey of some of the key elements of Johnson's stay at Cape Don. Present were Charlie Mangulda (CM), David 'Cookie' Minyimak (DM), Khaki Marrala (KM), and Archie Brown (AB).

Interview Extract II¹²

CM: Riwularrung ba war, ngabi nyirran from Kunbarlanya.
When the war finished, I came back from Gunbalanya.

12 dvR_090904, Begin Time: 00:00:09.690, End Time: 00:06:16.603, (DoBeS Archive), Recorded at Adjamarduku Outstation, Croker Island, 9 September 2009, Narrators: Charlie Mangulda; Archie Brown; David 'Cookie' Minyimak; and Khaki Marrala.

And we bin there Jamarldinki, and bingkung that Balanda.

We were all there at Cape Don when that Balanda [Johnson] arrived.

Cookie janad ijbanaaniny barakbarda. He know.

Cookie [and his father] went around with him [while he was] there. He knows.

[...]

AB: Ngabi I was mightbe about a...fifteen or eighteen years old.

I was about fifteen or eighteen.

AB: Karlu, birta ngabi aburranymin [inaudible].

Hang on, maybe I wasn't that old.

CM: Ngabi I bin still young baraka Jamarldinki. Everybody bin young.

I was still young when we were at Jamarldinki. We were all young.

AB: Mightbe I was thirteen. Thirteen or fourteen.¹³

CM: We bin still young.

[...]

DM: What, I'm going to start from Cape Don?

Do you want me to start the story from when he was at Cape Don?

When I'm going to start?

Where do you want me to start?

[...]

But I don't know his name. I forget.

AB: Karlu, you don't know his name, but you just start it straight away.

Ngabi I don't know.

I don't know.

[...]

DM: Rimany warrkbi barakbarda.

He captured that man there.¹⁴

13 According to AB himself, he was born at Minarri at the neck of Cobourg Peninsula about the start of World War II, in which case he would have been only eight or nine at the oldest.

14 DM refers here to the events believed to have occurred during Johnson's solo walk to Oenpelli. See Interview Extract III.

Ba wardiyad bingkung. Bartuwa, he bin start right up to Inybarlmun.
When he got to the stone country. He started out [from Cape Don], and went straight to Inybarlmun.

Bingkung. From Inybarlmun,
He arrived there. From Inybarlmun,

barakbarda yabiny wal mana rtuwa wardiyad.
he went like the wind down to the stone country.

AB: Durr, durr!
Go, go!¹⁵

DM: Barakbarda angmanamin start.

That's where your part of the story starts.

CM: Malany yungkudnakandung wurnbarran. Kurrurnbarrakan Kajaji, eh?

Where did you go camping? You spent a night at Kajaji [Black Rock Point], didn't you?

First, kudbunbaning Kajaji yungkudnakaniny.
First, you went and stayed at Kajaji.

Kajaji yungkudnakaniny kudbunbaning arruman.
You and your father.¹⁶

DM: Iyi, yinirrk Kajaji ngadbunbaning.
Yes, we stayed at Kajaji first of all.

CM: Lda janad Balanda.
And that Balanda as well.

And yawaran Waladirra angbaharl.
And he went to the headwaters of Waladirra Creek.

DM: Iyi yawaran Waladirra.
Yes, he went to Waladirra.

CM: Warang numiwang, all night.
He went out [hunting] all night.

15 AB is encouraging DM to continue the story, but in the next line DM tries to hand it back to AB.

16 CM has stepped in to take over the narrative at this point, seeing that it was stalling.

DM: Rirrkbung kirrimul ba wukan.

He stuffed [those animals] and sewed them up so that they looked like they were alive.

CM: Anang all that kalakalak anang, bartuwalda anirrkbung.

He shot birds as well, then stuffed them and sewed them up.

Ringuldangung like real live one.

He made them look as if they were alive.

Ruka abiny.

That's what he did

He bin work all night.

He worked all night.

[...]

Mungardk.

Possoms.

Marduny.

Bandicoots.

Animangung barakbarda all kind.

He collected lots of different kinds [of animals].

And anirrkbung, ayuwirrang kirrimul...

And when he sewed them up, they returned to...

like kijalk properly.

like they had a real body.

Nganduka kudbinminy? Yungkudnirran Jamarldinki, eh?

What did you do then? You went back to Cape Don, didn't you?

Yungkudnakaniny barakbarda, kurrubularrung, yungkudnirran Jamarldinki, kurrumbuldarukun.

You went there, and when you were finished, you went back to Cape Don and then he [Johnson] left.

DM: Jadnirran Jamarldinki, ba kabala yardirran Dawin kayirrk.

We went back to Jamarldinki, and the boat went back to Darwin.

[...]

AB: Nganduka ba jumung yumbarrbarr rayang?

Where did he see the yumbarrbarr?

[...]

KM: Rayang ba yumbarrbarr baraka Madirrala.
He saw the *yumbarrbarr* at Madirrala.

Baraka jambang aring raharrandung.
He was leaning against a tamarind tree.

DM: Jarrurakany wuka barangayirrak.
We went off looking for *whatsitsname*.¹⁷

KM: Raharrandung baka jambang.
He was leaning on that tamarind.

DM: Madirrala ba rayang barakbarda.
Madirrala. That's where he saw it.

CM: Madirrala, oh yeah.

DM: Walmurja ba jumung yumbarrbarr. Nanimiyardmanyi ngarrumbanawunbuni.

The *yumbarrbarr* lived in the monsoon vine forest there. If he had wanted to, he could have killed us.

[...]

DM: Iyi ngadnakandung kubuny.
Yes, we went by canoe.

AB: Old Buckley [Darrarndarra].

DM: And nother one, my brother, bin pass away Darwin.
And also my brother [Johnny Williams], who died in Darwin.

CM: Ruka ajaldi Budawin.
He's buried in Darwin.

DM: Iyi, ajaldi Budawin.
Yes, he's buried in Darwin.

DM: That Balanda from Jamarldinki ijanakaniny kubuny right up there.
That Balanda came with us by canoe [to various locations].

Yardirran Jamarldinki,
Then he came back to Cape Don,

¹⁷ 'Whatsitsname' possibly refers to 'crocodile', as in DM's telling of the Madirrala episode, he and his father went hunting crocodiles, leaving Johnson by himself (see Interview Extract I).

and he start from Jamarldinki to there wardyad, Kunbarlanya.
and starting out from Cape Don, he went to the stone country, and then Gunbalanya [formerly Oenpelli].

CM: First awaran kani.
First, he came this way.

That one now, Knocker Bay.
That place we were talking about, Knocker Bay.

And baning there, buwularrung they bin go back Jamarldinki.
And he stayed there. When they finished there, they went back to Cape Don.

He bin long Kajaji artbung.
He also went to Kajaji.

AB: Robert Cunningham country.¹⁸

CM: Yawaran barakbarda, alright yardirran kani Jamarldinki, before yabiny move yawaran.
He went to those places, then came back to Cape Don before setting off.

He bin walk kani Inybarlmun.
He walked this way, to Inybarlmun.¹⁹

One night there, kuburr Mangulhan.
Spent one night there, the next day Mangulhan.

Only one day.

How that Balanda? Mightbe scientist properly.
How did that Balanda do that? He must have been a real scientist.

Mm.

[...]

CM: Not bajubaju, but all in white, eh.
Not just his shirt, he was dressed all in pale-coloured clothes.

DM: Tall!

18 The senior traditional owner (now deceased) of the Akarlda clan estate, the largest estate on Cobourg.

19 'This' is used deictically here—that is, towards where CM was located at the time of the recording.

CM: But yawarang bush, when he bin come out from bush ardirrang, clean!
But after being in the bush, he would come out as clean as when he started!

DM: He was in the bush.

CM: No dirty.
Not dirty.

CM: Like 'Ari Yurrngud', eh.
Like Jesus, eh.



Figure 16.4 Archie Brown, 2009

Photograph by Adis Hondo

Johnson's Solo Walk to Oenpelli

On completion of Johnson's stay at Cape Don, his next action was perhaps, by this stage, no longer surprising to the locals. In Johnson's own words: 'On 8 October, I left Cape Don and walked overland to join the main party at Oenpelli... This twelve-day trip provided an intimate view of the entire length of the Cobourg Peninsula, with its remarkable fauna of large introduced mammals.'²⁰

As far as we know, Johnson never wrote a detailed account of the trip, and our knowledge of it from the Balanda viewpoint is therefore sketchy. All we know at this stage is that Johnson made the trip alone, shooting game along the way, and that his passage was aided by the existence of a vehicle track for a large part of the journey. The Indigenous account, however, is far from lacking in detail. In this account, Johnson makes the trip of more than 200 km in an amazing two days, spending the first night at a sawmill settlement in the area known as Inybarlmun, on the neck of the Cobourg Peninsula, before heading south to the escarpment or 'stone country' north of Gunbalanya. On arriving there, he visits a dangerous ancestral site called Dilkbany. Here he captures the spirit of Marrarna, a man of the Alarrju clan, whose remains had been deposited there in the country of his paternal ancestors some years earlier.²¹ From Dilkbany, Johnson takes Marrarna's remains first to Gunbalanya, where he joins the main party of the Expedition, though not informing them of Marrarna's capture, then via Darwin back to the United States, where Marrarna is resurrected as a strong young man. Johnson is said to have made a fortune as a result.

These extraordinary events went unwitnessed. Rather, knowledge of them is inferred on the basis of a letter and accompanying photograph that arrived in the settlement of Minjilang on Croker Island many years later, addressed to Marrarna's brother's daughter, Ada Brown. Ada reportedly burst out crying when she saw the photograph, recognising it as an image of Marrarna as a young man. The source of the letter, its actual contents and the date it arrived are not known at this stage. The photograph no longer exists. It is said to have been buried with Ada Brown when she died.

Encouraged no doubt by Johnson's established reputation as a 'clever man', the story of Johnson's solo trek to Gunbalanya, including the unusual events which happened along the way, and the ensuing resurrection event in the United States, has evolved as an explanation of the mysterious letter and photograph that arrived at Minjilang many years later. In the following interview extract, Archie Brown, the son of Ada, tells his version of the story.

²⁰ Johnson, 'Mammals of the Arnhem Land Expedition', p. 429.

²¹ Marrarna's subsection name was *Nangila*. His semi-matrimoiety affiliation was *Yarriyarnkurrk*, specifically the *Kujurn* ('white clay') matrilineage, and his *nguya* 'patrilineal clan affiliation' was Alarrju. Hoeng, S. B. 2009, Northwestern Arnhem Land genealogical database, Unpublished ms.

Interview Extract III²²

Abalduwunduunma jumung ngabi babam. Old man.
I'm going to talk about my grandfather.²³ Old man.

Badbawarda. Burrang. Abalduwunduunma ba jumung yawaran...
The other one. The elder [of the two brothers]. I'm going to talk about when he went...

ajikbiny, ajikbiny from Jamarldinki. Ba Balanda.
he set off from Cape Don. The Balanda.

Ngarri jadbaning Jamarldinki. Kirrk.
We were living at Cape Don. All of us.

Ajikbiny burdan Jamarldinki. Awaran warrin.
He set off from Cape Don. Overland.

Awaran warrin, balkbany...Inybarlmun.
He walked overland and came out at...Inybarlmun.²⁴

Anadbung. Minarri.
He came across [people living] there. Minarri, actually.²⁵

Anadbung. Sawmill aring barakbarda.
He found them. There was a sawmill there.

Mana wurnbarran barakbarda. Dirran kuburr,
He might have spent the night there. Next morning,

yajikbiny barakbarda, lda Mangulhan yabulakuny.
he set off from there, and headed down to Mangulhan.²⁶

Mangulhan, barda yawurtiny yarimany alan ba jumung yawara alan
Mangulhan. He would have taken the road.²⁷

22 dvR_060726_T1, Begin Time: 00:12:53.060, End Time: 00:17:44.310, (DoBeS Archive), Recorded at Wanjurk, Mountnorris Bay, 26 July 2006, Narrator: Archie Brown.

23 *Babam* is a reciprocal kin term indicating a particular type of grandkin. The term refers: 1) to one's mother's father and his siblings, of both sexes; and 2) in the case of a man, to his daughter's children, and in the case of a woman, to her brother's daughter's children. In this case, the narrator is referring to his mother's father's brother—that is, Marrarna.

24 Inybarlmun was the site of a timber mill established by Reuben Cooper. Cooper died in 1942, and, at the time of Johnson's walk, the mill was run by the Ah-mat brothers. This was also a major base for Indigenous people of the region, so the news of Johnson's 'overnight' stay there would have been transmitted readily.

25 Minarri was the precise location of the timber mill in the Inybarlmun area.

26 Mangulhan is the name for a region within the estate of the Alarrju clan, to which AB's grandfather, Marrarna, belonged.

27 Bray records that Johnson had told him there had been 'an old motor track to follow most of the way'. J. E. Bray, 1948, Private Journal of John E. Bray, collection of Andrew Bray, Canberra.

Buwa alan. Wularrud. Wara mangawala.

There was a road there in the old days. It went right down there.

Rimany alan yawurtiny,

He took that road and headed inland.

Yawurtiny jumung Dilkbany. Yawurtiny Dilkbany, rayang baraka...

He went up to Dilkbany, and he saw that...²⁸

Rayang wuka wardyad. Ngabi babam.

He [Johnson] saw him [Marrarna] among the rocks. My grandfather.

Darrkal. Darrkal ba jumung Dilkbany wardyad.

There was an opening. An opening in the rocks there at Dilkbany.

Rayang lda aring. Maju rayang lda yabarrkbungkuny yawurlhany.

He saw him standing there. When [Marrarna] saw him, he [Marrarna] must have taken off inside.

Yarakan wardyad. Rakan wardyad, ardirran arimalkbany.

So he [Johnson] threw a rock. By throwing that rock, he managed to bring that old man back out again.²⁹

Abalkbany. Abalkbany barda rimany rildariny burruburrukang.

He came out. [Johnson] grabbed him and put him in a small bag.

Rildariny burruburrukang barda ijbanyakandung.

He put him in that bag and the two of them left.

Ijbanyakandung yarimandung.

He carried him off.

Warlmun janad, barakbarda. Warlmun, maju warlmun, ijalkud ba kijalk warrkbi janad.

It was his spirit that he took. It seemed like a spirit, but it must have been the actual body itself.³⁰

Ijbanyakandung. Yarildariny ijbanyakandung. Kunbarlanya.

They headed off. He put him in the bag and they headed for Gunbalanya [Oenpelli].

Marrakarrak baning Kunbarlanya.

28 Dilkbany is the location of an *iyarliyarl*, a dangerous ancestral site. Transgressions committed at this place are believed to result in the release and spread of fatal disease.

29 The act of throwing a rock, when performed by a *marrkijbu* 'clever man', is commonly recognised as a method of exerting power over someone or something.

30 The narrator is going to some trouble to specify the state of his grandfather, presumably in order that it 'makes sense' in the context of his resurrection in the United States.

His son lived at Gunbalanya [Oenpelli].

Kani ngaldahardama ba jumung kani janad aju marrakarrak.
His son who is buried here where I'm talking now.³¹

Mana Kunbarlanya baning.
I think he lived at Gunbalanya [Oenpelli] then.

Aa...iyi. Kunbarlanya baning.
Ah...yes. He lived at Gunbalanya [Oenpelli].

But karlu rujiny. Yawaran. Ba Balanda.
But he didn't show him. He just left. The Balanda.

Karlu abiny wamung. Jamin janad wajuk.
He didn't tell the others [that is, his colleagues] either. He kept it to himself.

Jumung anakandung rimandung.
He was carrying it with him.

Yabingkung Budawin yawaran wuka Merika jumung burrang kunak ijalkud.
Back in Darwin, he took a plane to the United States, to a major city.

Lda rimalkbany. Bartuwa.
Then he took him out. OK.

Barakbarda ba bidbarran ba Balanda, jumung rimany,
That white man, that Balanda, the one who took [my grandfather],

barda kurljakbiny. Ringuldiny kalkirrirr burrang.
became rich. He made lots of money.

Abukung ba jumung mana baraka boss one, jumung yarildangkalan wuka.
His bosses gave it to him, the ones who had sent him here.

Bartuwa. Rimalkbany rildakbirran.
OK. He opened the bag and took him out.

Rildakbirran, bumany...pija murrkud.
He took him out, and they took...lots of photos.

Well janad ruka babam imalda there abiny change.
At that point, my grandfather had already undergone a change.

31 The text was recorded at Wanjurk, in Mountnorris Bay, where Namadbara is buried. Namadbara was the son of Marrarna's brother Jumu, and the kin term *marrakarrak* refers to him in this case.

Dirdan balkbany jumung kirrimul warrkbi kijalk.
He'd assumed the body of a living man.

Karlu artbung ba jumung kirrimul adbunudba, ayaldi nganduka ngamin.
He no longer resembled the bundle of human remains, the way we put them there.

Ba rtuwa balkbany kijalk aring. Rildakburliwan. Anildakburliwan.
He stood there as a living person. He spoke to [Johnson]. He spoke to all of them.

'Ngabi.'
'It's me.'

'Ngabi. Ngabi yarrumbilimany.'
'It's me. I'm the one you captured.'

'Ngabi yambilimany.'
'You took me.'

Kijbungkun janad jirrak.
He identified himself.

'Ngabi Marrarna.'
'I'm Marrarna.'

'Ngabi ngangurnaj barakbarda.'
'That's my name.'

'Ngabi ayunmardyarrwuny...'
'My sons' and daughters' names are...'

'Ilarri; Nawarlaj; Mayabany.'
'Ilarri; Nawarlaj; Mayabany.'

Ringijbungkung barakbarda aju. Ruka jumung aju Wilyi kani.
He identified this man buried here. The one buried here at Wilyi [a reference to Namadbara (Paddy Compass)].

Barakbarda...lda wurduwajba, jumung janad aniwujban.
Him...along with his sisters.

'Ngabi nganduwurakbung.'
'My elder brother,' [he said].

'Ngabi aburakbung.'

'My younger brother.'³²

'Jumu aniwujban. Wanadjanad.'

'Jumu fathered those two.'³³

Barakbarda.

That's what he told them.

From there, bartuwa, barda ardirran arildangakan ngarrung pija.

After that, he sent that photograph back to us.

Bumany pija, riwularrung kirrk ringjungkung.

They took photos, and when they'd finished he mentioned [his daughter's] name.

Ringjungkung ngabi nganmingkang aju Minjilang.

He spoke the name of my mother, who is buried at Minjilang.

'Yangkabalangan jumung pija barda janad.'

'You must send this picture to her.'

'Banangaman.'

'She can keep it.'

Ringjungkung.

He spoke her name.

Ba ngabi ngandumany. Ringjungkung.

My mother. He spoke her name.

Ardirran arildangakan jumung Balanda barda ngarrabilimany ba pija.

That Balanda sent the picture back [to Minjilang] and we got it.

Ardirran barlkbarakan wuka youngfella.

That old man had resumed the body of a young man.

32 The narrator corrects himself here. Marrarna, as stated elsewhere in the text, was the elder of two brothers.

33 Jumu was Marrarna's younger brother. Jumu's children were Namadbara and the narrator's mother, Ada Brown.

Bartuwa, Ngarrabilimang that pija, kayang barda marrakarrak wiyu, bardalkany.

OK. We received that photo, and when she saw her own 'father', she burst out crying.

Barda ngarrarakinngurn...

So we asked her...

Barda ngarrarakinngurn ngabilijanad.

So we asked her, me and him [my younger brother].

Ngabi lda ruka aju Minjilang.

Me and the one now buried at Minjilang [my brother].

'Malany ba pija angbardalkany?'

'Why did you start crying when you saw the picture?'

'Ya, babam,' abiny.

'It's your grandfather,' she said.

'Ay, nga.'

'Ah, I see.'

Barda arrumbujiny.

Then she showed us.

'Nuwurri babam badbawarda burrang, riki abiny.'

'This is your other grandfather, the eldest one.'

'Jamin aniwujban wanad.'

'The father of [my cousins].'

'Ngarrumbayang wardad mayakbu.'

'My father and their father were brothers.'³⁴

'Ngarrumbayang wardad aniwujban badbawarda babam ngarrimung ngadnduwujban ngabi lda...'

'His children have the same paternal grandfather as me and...'

'yaja ba...'

'your uncle [Namadbara]...'

³⁴ The narrator's mother uses the term *wardad...mayakbu* 'one patriline', referring to the relation between herself, and her cousins, whose father had the same father as her own father.

'baning Kunbarlanya.' Kunbarlanya baning durdu. Wukany.
'who lives at Gunbalanya [Oenpelli].' He was still living at Gunbalanya [Oenpelli] at that time.

Ba ruka Wilyi aju.
This one who's buried here at Wilyi.

Bartuwa.
OK.

Kamandung ba pija.
She used to have that photo.

Mightbe jarrajurrkbang ngalaj pija yajaldi.
Perhaps we buried her together with that photo.

Baraka rimardyarrwuny.
That was her 'father'.

Ya.
Yes.

Bartuwa. That's the end of the story.
OK. That's the end of the story.

Conclusion

The story of the American Clever Man allows us a rare insight into how the Indigenous people of North-West Arnhem Land tried to make sense of the activities of an alien culture in their midst, as instantiated by the Arnhem Land Expedition, exposing the fact that observation and analysis during the course of the Expedition were inevitably reciprocal in nature, the result of the interaction of two distinct culturally reinforced world views.

Beyond this, the story demonstrates the nature of communication across a cultural divide. The sections of the Indigenous account involving Marrarna's capture and subsequent resurrection remind us that the act of interpretation is necessarily constrained by the culturally specific contextual knowledge brought to the task by those doing the interpreting, and that the details of the interpretation often tell us as much about the interpreters as about the interpreted, while at the same time expressing much about relations between the two. In the same way, non-Indigenous people have historically interpreted complex areas of Indigenous culture by situating them, inevitably, in a cultural context which was familiar to them. Many early British observers of Indigenous

social organisation in the Cobourg region, for example, were convinced of the existence of a hierarchical caste system there, along the lines of that already known to exist in Hindu culture.³⁵ Such an interpretation might be explained by the fact that both the actual Hindu caste system and the imaginary Arnhem Land version resonated strongly with the class stratification of British society, which formed the cultural milieu of the observers and thus constrained their observations.

The story of the American Clever Man should not be read as a falsifiable account of historical events. Rather, it presents us with an example of how the art of storytelling can be used to communicate across a cultural gap, offering perceptive insights into the nature of relations between mainstream and Indigenous cultures in Australia. To take one example only, the fact that the Johnson character profits enormously and gains prestige in his own culture by capturing the spirit of an Indigenous person provides a powerful metaphor for what has been termed the 'Aboriginal industry' in Australia, whereby non-Indigenous people have historically been the main beneficiaries of funding for projects involving the Indigenous population, via their role in administration, evaluation, coordination, and so on.

Johnson is perhaps unfortunate in being characterised not only as a 'grave-robber', but as one who amasses great wealth on returning home with his 'prize', as there is no evidence that he personally exhumed or removed any human remains during his time in Arnhem Land, his focus being the collection of small mammals.

While the actions of Johnson's character in the story in removing human remains might not constitute an accurate description of events, they are, however, far from wild fantasies whose origin is only to be guessed at. Rather, they reflect one of the many activities undertaken by the Arnhem Land Expedition while based at Oenpelli, conducted chiefly by the physical anthropologist Frank Setzler, who removed skeletal material from the area around Oenpelli, placed it in boxes, and sent it ultimately to the Smithsonian Institution. Not until 2010 were the last of these human remains repatriated to descendant communities.

One theme of the story—perhaps the overriding one—is the denial of the anonymity of these remains, facilitated via Marrarna's resurrection. Marrarna's first act when he comes to life in America is to identify himself. 'It's me,' he tells his captors. 'My name is Marrarna.' His next act is to identify his family back home. In a sense, one could say that Marrarna's character in the story acts as 'spokesperson' for all of the 'anonymous' human remains now stored in

³⁵ See, for example, Earl, G. W. 1853, *The Native Races of the Indian Archipelago: Papuans*, Hippolyte Bailliere, London, pp. 216–17.

museums around the world, and their 'anonymous' descendants who are now involved in attempts to repatriate the bones of their ancestors—sometimes in the face of opposition from the institutions who now claim ownership of them.

The story of the American Clever Man represents an unplanned but invaluable legacy of the 1948 American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land. It holds up a mirror for those who participated then, as well as for those who follow in their footsteps today.