

# Wrapt with String



## Abstract

In Australia Aboriginal people have always been “wrap” in string, conceptually and practically in historical and Ancestral times. This article has a geographic focus on Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, and a temporal concentration on the 1930s and early 1940s. The Donald Thomson collection from the region will be the main source of images and objects relating to string. His collection provides a representative view of life during those times. Donald Thomson (1901–1970), anthropologist and photographer, was a man holding great interest in material culture and its role in the social lives of people. String in its various forms is a strong element

of his Collection, beginning with the making of string to its final inclusion in objects of both ceremonial and everyday use. The raw materials, bundles of string and objects made from string such as nets, bags and items of body adornment were all collected. String worn on the body, part of bodywear, will be at the core of the discussion for this article. Past context plays an important role in understanding the contemporary use of string. The relevance of the items to contemporary fiber practise in Arnhem Land is essential. This article will examine continuity and change in the use and thoughts about bodywear made primarily from string.

**Keywords:** string, bodywear, Arnhem Land, Australia, Aboriginal, Donald Thomson

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# Wrap with String

String has been of utmost importance to Aboriginal people in Australia, taking a central place in ancestral stories as well as ceremonial and everyday life. Fibers have been spun into string and rope and then wound, bound, tied and attached to others to form new objects or left in their non-manipulated state as a valuable resource. Hooks attached to lengths of rope or string formed lines to catch fish and secure dugong and turtle. Looped bags were made entirely from string while it was added to baskets as handles or as decorative stitching. String had a use in binding together the parts for spears, axes and temporary container forms, and in some instances ceremonial objects were created by wrapping string around other fibers and the surface painted with ochers. Feathers were added to create ceremonial string ropes that joined the living together as they danced for the soul of the deceased or celebrated the events of turning a boy towards manhood. When the ceremonial strings were no longer usable as a rope they could have an extended life when reassembled and attached to a basket or an armband. The world of string was immense both conceptually and practically in historical and ancestral times. Aboriginal people were “wrap” in string and its possibilities both then and now.

In an attempt to gain a better understanding of string in Aboriginal Australia this paper has a geographic focus on Arnhem

Land, a reserve located in the top part of the Northern Territory. The temporal focus is on the late 1930s and early part of the 1940s. To assist in this process of examination, one historical collection from the region is the source of the images, objects and thoughts relating to string. The Donald Thomson Collection from Arnhem Land is well documented for the time period and the collection as a whole provides a representative view of life during those times.<sup>1</sup>

Donald F. Thomson (1901–1970) was a man of many talents and interests. He is best known as an anthropologist and photographer with training in botany and zoology. He began his anthropological research in Cape York in Queensland in the 1920s. Arnhem Land was the site of his work from 1935 to 1937. He returned there during the Second World War to organize the Aboriginal Reconnaissance Unit and stayed from 1942 to 1943. He had many objectives for his stay in Arnhem Land, including collecting material culture items from the inhabitants. He assembled over 4,500 objects. The photographic component of the Arnhem Land collection numbers around 2,500 images.<sup>2</sup>

Much recent information about the material culture items has been gained through the use of photographs. Donald Thomson’s photographs can be viewed on many levels, esthetically, anthropologically,

and as social objects. For the purposes of this article I have focused on the anthropological use of the photographs for eliciting information about the making and use of string objects in the Thomson Collection and sometimes for objects that are not in the collection, but feature in some of the photographs. This information would almost certainly go missing from the ethnographic documentation without the visual record.

### Types of String

The importance of various types of string is reinforced by historical examples from the Thomson Collection but also by the recounting of ancestral stories. Some ancestral figures from the Arnhem Land region were involved with the manufacture and use of string. A selection of these will be examined in conjunction with specific types of string. It is from ancestral times that strings made from different materials acquired their affiliations with particular groups. In Arnhem Land the two main groups or moieties are Dhuwa and Yirritja. People of both moieties from eastern Arnhem Land refer to themselves as Yolngu. They speak several languages which as a group are referred to as Yolngu matha. Moiety classifications are markers of identity for some of the items made from string and in some cases for the string itself. There are several words for generic string, one is *raki*, another is *guwal*. Names for string vary slightly in meaning and are specific when linked with other identifiers such as the fiber from which the string is spun.

The words generally mean string, fishing line, rope, and do not have multiple meanings or extensions. For example the word *wana* can mean arm, front leg of animal, branch and, by extension, armband or creek. In Yolngu matha the word *yarrata* means string, line and by extension the male line of descent (Zorc 1986: 278 ).<sup>3</sup>

Several types of string are made in the region including those made from plant fiber, possum fur, human hair, and composite string which may include combinations of materials including feathers and some manufactured materials, particularly wool yarn. String is and was used by everyone in Arnhem Land: men, women and children for work and play, as in making string figures. The gender of the makers of string is more flexible in today's society where skills are highly valued and may be possessed by someone who is traditionally not of the accepted gender. The roles of men and women were more restricted during the time that Donald Thomson worked in Arnhem Land. Women were the primary makers of string for mundane or everyday use, usually plant fiber string. However men made heavier string or rope used particularly in fishing or sailing. Men were also the main makers of ceremonial feathered string and string made from fur and hair. For feathered string women made plant fiber base string to which men attached feathers. Fluidity in regard to gender must be kept in mind with the making of ceremonial strings now and in ancestral times. The gender of ancestral makers was sometimes the opposite of those who are the makers of today.<sup>4</sup>

### Plant Fibers

By far the most dominant form of string is made from plant fibers. All of the trees that follow are Dhuwa with the exception of the peanut tree. Makers employ mainly fiber from tree bark and some from the roots. Most string is made from the kurrajong tree, *Brachychiton megaphyllus*, which is found throughout Arnhem Land and known as *balgurr* or *balwurr*. Banyan trees, *Ficus virens*, are also very popular but are not present in the same quantity. The string made from the tree and aerial roots is softer than string from the kurrajong. Other bark fibers used are from the cocky apple, *Planchonia careya*, beach hibiscus, *Hibiscus tiliaceus*, and the peanut tree, *Sterculia quadrifida*. String is also made from the inner leaves of the sand palm, *Livistonia humilis*. The bark fiber is prepared the same way for all the trees, with different makers having personal variations. The following description of preparing and making string from kurrajong is based on work with women who make the string from the community of Gapuwiyak in eastern Arnhem Land.

For string making, a straight tree with a trunk diameter of approximately 1.5 inches (4 cm) is chopped down slightly above ground level. A second cut is made below the branches; the usable portion varies in length but is normally about 24–36 inches (60–90 cm) in length. Some women then place the cut lengths on a rack over the fire or directly on the coals. The lengths are rotated at regular intervals to ensure that the entire surface of the wood receives equal heat. The outside

of the wood is blackened but not burnt. After heating the cut piece, the outer layer of bark is loosened at one end. This end of the trunk is smashed with the end of an axe to facilitate the separation of the outer layer of bark. The process of removing the outer bark from the inner wood is usually completed in about three sections. The removed strips are not ready for use until the outer layer of bark is split away from the inner layer. The internal bark or cambium is the portion used for string production. Inserting one's fingernails between the two layers separates them. This makes it easier to pull the layers apart, discarding the outer gray burnt bark. The inner reddish brown bark is rough and tough. The folded inner bark is pounded on a big stone with the back of an axe. At intervals this mass is placed in a tin of water. The water helps to make the fiber soft. There are variations in the pounding. Sometimes the inner bark is dyed then pounded. This activity can take place on a rock in the river, keeping the fiber moist.

Spinning is the next stage in the production of string, whether it is for bags or ceremonial feathered string. A thin strip of the prepared fiber is folded in half; or two pieces are taken. The spinning and plying of the fiber occurs in one step. Both pieces are rolled forward on the thigh near the knee with the palm of the hand, twisting the fibers together. When the hand moves back more pressure is placed on the area beneath the thumb. The hand slides at an angle and the two pieces are plied together. To add in more fiber a new strip is rolled onto the existing end.

Two-ply rope was made by a single man with the aid of a stake driven into the ground that served as a tensioning device and the receptacle for the plied length of rope. Three-ply rope, of which there are two examples in the collection, was mainly used for turtle hunting in the sea or sometimes for anchor rope. The identification numbers for the ropes are DT1650 and DT165. As evidenced by Donald Thomson's photographs this type of rope was made by a group of four men. One man tensioned the rope and the other three plied the lengths. This technique is said to have come from the Macassans during their visits to the shores of Arnhem Land in search of trepang (Hugo 1983; Thomson 1935–37). *Hibiscus tiliaceus* and *Brachychiton megaphyllus* were the fibers used for these ropes.

In Figure 1, Barratjuna, a Gumatj man, Mawalan, a Rirratngu man, Wonggu, a Djapu man and Baldarrpingu, a Galpu man are making three-stranded rope on the beach at Yirrkala Mission in August 1936. It should be noted that that Mawalan and Baldarrpingu are wearing pieces of string around their waists. Also Baldarrpingu is wearing around his neck a piece of rope that Richard Gundawuy from Galiwin'ku said he "wore that rope around his neck always."

The making of three-ply rope is associated with an ancestral story. John Rudder, an anthropologist who worked at Elcho Island, documented the story told to him by Narritjin Maymuru of the Manggalili clan and others (Rudder 1980: 37–47). On one level, this story is about Mukarr, ancestors, making this specialized three-ply

**Figure 1**

Barratjuna, a Gumatj man, Mawalan, a Rirratingu man, Wonggu, a Djapu man and Baldarrpingu, a Galpu man making three-stranded rope on the beach at Yirrkala Mission in August 1936. TPH1675. Photograph by D.F. Thomson, courtesy of Mrs. D.M. Thomson and Museum Victoria.



rope. On another level, it is about the life force of an individual viewed through fiber production. The following sections depict conception, pregnancy and birth:

*B. Those mukarr were sitting facing each other with the first strands of the fibers tied to an upright forked stick. They sit facing each other with the three strands, passing them from hand to hand, twisting each strand they pass it, causing each to bind close to the others, twisting into a single strong rope. They twist and pass, adding new strands as the rope grows. It grows and grows, forming a coil on the other side of the forked stick.*

*C. Twisting and turning, it grows, twisting and turning as the fiber is being used in its making and the rope growing. They worked together peeling, peeling, laying the fibers out to*

*dry, throwing the wood to one side. (Rudder 1980: 39)*

In the song, the Mukarr place the first fibers for spinning on an upright forked stick. The stick represents the woman's body and the action of tying the fibers to the stick, represents conception. The stick supporting the growing rope represents pregnancy. Birth occurs when the rope touches the ground (Rudder 1980: 41). This is a documented accounting of the meaning of the rope in this circumstance but it is not a common occurrence for Yolngu to make reference to these events.

### ***Fur, Hair and Feathers***

Plant fiber string is most common but there are also other strings produced today. Possum fur string is one of these, known as *burrkun*. The Northern Brushtail Possum, *Trichosurus arnhemensis*, is the particular species used by people in Arnhem Land, although another

species, *Trichosurus vulpecula arnhemensis*, has also been used. This possum is smaller than the common brushtail possum. Possums belong to the Yirritja moiety and their fur is used in ceremonial objects. Once quite common in woodland and open forest, possums are quite scarce these days partly due to the invasion of poisonous cane toads, *Bufo marinus*. These toads were introduced into the Queensland cane fields to control beetles and have since traveled west leaving a path of destruction killing native animals. Jimmy Burinyila, a Mildjingi man from Raminginging, the son of Rraywala, the main consultant for Donald Thomson. Burinyila said, "Used to be a big mob of possums but not now. We can't see 'im, poor fellow" (Burinyila 2004). He spoke of the invasion of the cane toads, "They were coming more and more, from Katherine and Wilton River and some swam to Milingimbi."

People still want the fur from the possums they can no longer obtain for important ceremonial items. On occasion, I have been asked by Aboriginal people to obtain possum fur for them to use in the making of ceremonial objects. This request is difficult because the possum is a protected animal and it is illegal to trade in possum fur in Australia.

According to John Rudder, in the past men would hunt possums, scrape the fur off the skin and give it to women to spin (Rudder 1975: 8). In 1937, however, men were making possum fur string. Donald Thomson photographed the Mildjingi man, Mick Magani making fur string. The fur was placed in a basket and stirred by a stick with prongs on the end. A piece of human hair string was used to start the spinning process. However the division between men's and women's labour in the production of ceremonial objects is a flexible one; some women today make possum fur string. Mavis Ganambarr is a *Dätiwuy* woman from Elcho Island who is skilled at making string and has made possum fur armbands for ceremony. She was taught this skill from her now deceased father Muwarra Ganambarr.

One group of ancestral figures from Djarrakpi, associated with the Manggalili clan in eastern Arnhem Land, provides a glimpse into the ancestral realm of transformations and use of the fur string. A koel cuckoo, known as Guwak, and two female figures known as Nyapililngu are linked most directly with possum fur string. The Nyapililngu are hiding on one side of a lake because they have no

clothes, while Guwak is resting in a cashew tree at night on the other side. He asked the possums to spin their fur into string. The next day he gave lengths of the string to Aboriginal people to make into ceremonial objects. Guwak carried pieces of the string in his beak and dropped them on the ground where they were transformed into features of the landscape. The Nyapililngu did not have body adornment items and had no string to use for making these and other items but they watched the possums spin their fur.

*They learnt how to spin fur into lengths of string and saw that it would solve their problems: they would be able to make string bags to collect yams and wild plums; they could use the string to bind together the ends of spears and spearthrowers; and they would be able to make pubic coverings. They were so pleased with the discovery that they spun mountains of string which became the great sand-dunes that separate the lake from the sea shore. (Morphy 1998: 32)*

In this ancestral story it is the women who are the makers of the possum fur string.

Donald Thomson collected the Ritharrngu possum fur pubic cover (known as *walpundjar*) shown in Figure 2 on January 5, 1937 and recorded that it was worn by women. This would be the type made by the Nyapililngu ancestors. It should be noted that the ties for this pubic cover are made from human hair string.

Figure 2

Ritharrngu possum fur pubic cover (*walpundjar*) collected on January 5, 1937 by Donald Thomson, who recorded that it was worn by women. DT1120. Photograph by Louise Hamby. The Donald Thomson Collection, on loan to Museum Victoria from the University of Melbourne.



Human hair string is made in a similar fashion to possum fur string. The string is owned by four clans of the Dhuwa moiety: *Dätiwuy*, *Djambarrpuyngu*, *Gunbalkunbal* and *Liyagawumirr* (Rudder 1975: 5). The hair for the string can come from anyone: man, woman or child of any moiety. Hair string is not as common as plant fiber string. It is the men who make this type of string. In Thomson's time in Arnhem Land many items worn on the body might contain hair string but it has not been seen very often in recent times. Figure 3 shows a spindle containing human hair string, spun in a similar fashion to possum fur.

Feathered string is mainly reserved for ceremonial items but is used in some material culture items for everyday use. The red-orange feathers from the breast of the Red-collared Lorikeet, *Trichoglossus*

*haematodus rubritorquis*, are used in Dhuwa moiety ceremonial items, particularly for armbands. The feathers and pendants made from them are associated with the Dhuwa moiety creator ancestors, the *Djang'kawu* sisters. Yirritja moiety people can use some of these feathers in their objects but not in the massive amounts that are seen in Dhuwa ceremonial objects. Some Dhuwa people also use white feathers from water birds. Men obtain the downy feathers and split them down the mid-rib. Small fluffy feathers of any kind are spun into bark-fiber string as it is spun to be used on various objects. Feathered ropes and pendants are also made but by wrapping individual feathers onto an existing bark-fiber string.

Some symbolism of ceremonial feathered string originates with the *Djang'kawu* sisters, creator ancestors who journeyed from the

east bringing many ceremonial items with them. They transformed feathered string made from the feathers of lorikeets many times on the journey in much the same manner as the *Nyapililngu* do with possum fur string.

*That is a yam plant, waridj Djanggawul. Shall we put it here? It can see the water, hear the roar of the sea! We spread out the feathered strings, waridj Bralbral, the creepers, to make them strong. Creepers and leaves of the yam grow from those feathered strings, for we spread them on the ground. Yam creepers and leaves, like feathered parakeet string, stretching out its "arms"! (Berndt 1952)*

According to Berndt's informants the feathered strings are not only the yam plants but also human



**Figure 3**

A spindle containing human hair string, spun in a similar fashion to possum fur. DT1599. Photograph by Ben Healley. The Donald Thomson Collection, on loan to Museum Victoria from the University of Melbourne.



umbilical cords. The Djang’kawu discuss the yam plants using terms to describe humans; they have arms. The strings are equivalent to umbilical cords; when the sisters give birth to the people they go to their country with their cords or strings still attached.

The Djang’kawu sisters carried ceremonial baskets with them that had feathered string pendants hanging from them. Nancy Williams documented the associations of the pendants from a Rirratjingu basket.

*It is the kind of dilly bag that Djang’awu carried on the journey from Burralku to Yalangbara; the green feathers that protrude at intervals from the red feathers represent the casuarina trees along the beach at Yalangbara. Tufts of white feathers at the ends of the*

*pendants represent sea foam along the shore at Yalangbara. (Williams 1986: Fig.11)*

Long, feathered strings or ceremonial ropes called *malka* are used in circumcision ceremonies for young boys. Areas of different coloured feathers within a plain group of white are markers of particular places in the country linked to the clan group performing the ceremony.

Another type of string is one made by adding in additional material to a bark-fiber string. In the past, wool from manufactured items has been unravelled and spun into string. The plastic from net bags has also been respun into string and usually made into “string bags.” The strings made from all of the following: bark fiber, fur, hair and other items are made into a variety of items.

## Use of String

Items made for the body are the focus of this article but a brief look at some other uses of string, particularly from the past, highlight the importance that string has played in the lives of Arnhem Land people. One fourth of the collection of material culture items in the Thomson Collection consists of spears and various weapons, with 11 percent consisting of tools. For the spears, plant fiber string was used in binding the shaft of the spear and head together. The string was wrapped close together from a continuous length, not overlapping. For example, all of the multi-pronged fish spears, whether they were made from wire or barbed wood, were wound with string.<sup>5</sup> Metal shovel-nosed spears, and turtle and dugong harpoon heads are wrapped with differing dimensions of string. Of the tools, the axes have string incorporated to bind or hold the strips of wood which hold the stone or metal blades. The axes (DT2853 and DT2854) from Groote Eylandt are wrapped in the same manner as the spears. Many of the remaining axes are held together by a ring formed by wrapping string around a strip of cane. These days in Arnhem Land handcrafted axes have been replaced with manufactured ones obtainable from hardware stores. Some spears however are still being made by men for practical and ceremonial purposes.

Fishing was and still is practiced by most people. Thirteen hinged fishing nets from the collection, known as butterfly nets, triangular in shape, were made from knotted bark-fiber string. This fishing

activity was a communal effort with several people dipping their nets as they moved along the stream in a line. Although people do not use these for fishing today there are a few being made and sold through Arnhem Land art centers. Lightweight fishing lines attached to rods, some with sinkers, were also made from hand-spun string like DT1630. Pam Ganambarr is a Dätiwuy woman from Elcho Island. She explained that lines in the Thomson Collection were used for big fish living on the river bottom, and for barramundi. Today most people use nylon hand lines wound around plastic spools.

Container forms of various types also utilize string in their construction. Some like the ephemeral paperbark containers only use string to bind the ends of the paperbark together. The binding may even be completed with the bark fiber before it is spun into string. Conical twined baskets made from *Pandanus spiralis* or sedge grass, *Cyperus javanicus*, have multiple string handles made from one continuous length of string that is woven into the twining on one side and then into the other. This continues until several loops of the string are completed and form the handle. The same type of bark-fiber string is used to finish the rim of the basket with a buttonhole stitch.

String bags continue to be a major item made by women today in Arnhem Land (see Figures 4 and 5). String made from the bark fiber is used most often to make bags. Several techniques are employed in the making of bags but the most common one is simple looping and knotting, which is also employed

in the fishing nets. A continuous length of string is used to loop the bags; more fiber is spun into the end of the string as needed. In the past, color in the form of ochre was painted on the surface of the bags. Now the unspun fiber is dyed with natural dyes before it is spun into string.

## String in Bodywear

The previous examples have examined some of the uses of string in binding various objects, included as parts of the construction of objects or in the case of the string bag, a complete object made of string. The remainder of the paper will focus on items made for the body, sometimes as body adornment and for other purposes. I use the term bodywear to describe these objects (Hamby 2006). Over a thousand items in the Donald Thomson Collection are bodywear. Many of these are either entirely string or incorporate string in their construction. They were worn for a variety of reasons including health and well-being, looking good, marking life stages, and identity.

## Plain String

Examination of individuals in the Thomson photographs identified a number of people wearing plain, unadorned pieces of string on their bodies. However, in the collection there were not individual pieces of string like the ones in the images, but there are bundles or hanks of string. The pieces of string could be around the head, arm, waist, or leg. What purpose did these pieces of string serve? In my research in Arnhem Land no one seemed particularly interested

**Figure 4**

Detail of a string bag being looped by a Djinang woman at Cape Stewart in March 1937. TPH1704. Photograph by D.F. Thomson, courtesy of Mrs. D.M. Thomson and Museum Victoria.

**Figure 5**

Detail of a string bag being looped by Margaret Djogiba, a Kunwinjku woman from Gunbalanya, in October 2004. Djogiba's bag is composed of string from *Brachychiton megaphyllus* (dark string) and *Ficus virens* (light string). Photograph by John Broomfield. Courtesy of Injalak Arts and Crafts, and Museum Victoria.

in the string, everyone was more interested in the identity of the person in the photograph, their clan affiliation, their relations and where they lived. The string worn on the person did not provoke any discussion.

One of the more obvious purposes of the string in some cases was for holding other items. When Jimmy Burinyila looked at

the photographs he gave much supporting collaboration and ideas about the place of string. For example, in a photograph of his father returning from a hunt, he is carrying a big kangaroo over his shoulders and holding the legs with his hands. He has a plain piece of string around his waist. Tucked underneath it is his stone axe. One of its purposes was to

hold or carry items for Raywala while he was otherwise occupied. Another function of the waist abdomen string was for attaching pubic covers. Sometimes the pubic covers were pieces of paper bark folded over the string. There were also more elaborate covers with loops for the string to pass through and then tie at the back.

Aboriginal people request copies of Thomson photographs for many purposes, one of which is to show the healthy state of people in the 1930s. Aboriginal people are concerned that people today are not as healthy for a variety of reasons. There is a comparison being made by people today with their previous lifestyle. The photographs bring this past state of well-being to mind. After looking at photographs with Ruth Nalmakarra Garrawurra, a Liyagawumirr woman from Milingimbi, she pointed out that a plain piece of string tied around the waist was “to make themselves stand straight” (Garrawurra 2004). Good posture is closely associated with good health.

Having spent much time working with Jimmy Burinyila, I persevered in my search for string knowledge. There is a photograph of Wilandjango, the brother of Raywala and uncle for Burinyila. Wilandjango was an important medicine man and in this photograph he is wearing a string around his thigh. When I asked why Wilandjango was wearing this piece of string, Burinyila’s answer was, “That’s nothing.” I wanted to know more and asked in a different way. Either because Burinyila and I now know each other well enough to discuss matters, or for

some other reason, I got a different answer which pleasantly surprised me. “When you have a cramp on leg, tie a string around it. Couple of days make better again. Maybe [like] a walking stick” (Burinyila 2004). Burinyila is very good at making analogies that outsiders can understand. The string was a walking aid and helped to cure the pain in Wilandjango’s leg. Later, when reading Thomson’s field notes, I found a reference to Wilandjango’s pain. Thomson writes: “When I arrived off this camp yesterday, Tuesday, 23.3.1937, Wilandjango was well and strong but when I enquired for him today, 24.3.1937, Raiwälla [Raywala] told me that he was sick, that his mārnggit yoto [spirit familiar] had twisted his mākär [thigh] and dislocated his kändä (hip joint) again and that he was unable to walk about” (Thomson 1935–1937a) (words in square brackets inserted by author). When Thomson took the photograph of Wilandjango he did have a sore leg regardless of whether his spirit familiar had caused it or not.

The reasoning behind the string on Wilandjango’s thigh can be extended to other photographs. One that brought more to the public view lately is of Gupurrbakarr, a Ganalbingu man (see Figure 6, where it can be noted that the string is tied round his forehead and around his upper thigh). The recent Rolf de Heer film, *Ten Canoes*, is filmed in the Ramingining area which is the home of the majority of the actors. The character of the sorcerer is played by Philip Gudthaykudthay and is based loosely on Gupurrbakarr. The photograph

was part of an exhibition, “13 Canoes,” associated with the film. In Gupurrbakarr’s portrait he is wearing a string around his forehead and one around his upper leg. These are most likely associated with stopping the pain from a headache or cramp in his leg.

As part of our ARC project Lindy Allen, from Museum Victoria, and myself were working with a group of women on the Thomson Collection near Gapuwiyak in July 2005. This site near the town is called Dhayarrmirri, or place of the string (see Figure 7). The place obtained its name from ancestral times when a spirit came through the country. There is a good supply of kurrajong trees growing there. The ancestor stopped there to make string from the bark fiber. The finely prepared fiber from the kurrajong is known as *dhayarrk*. It was an appropriate place for a string discussion. In a conversation with Minawala Bidingal, a senior Ritharrngu woman, Walawun Guyula, a Djambarrpuyungu woman and Lucy Armstrong, a Wagilag woman, important information about the healing power of string was brought to light. Being bound or wrapped in string was an essential component to the process. Lucy was saying “long time ago our grandparents used to tie themselves with raki.” She continued with agreement from Minawala, “Minawala used to tie herself, on tummy, to stop the pain” (Armstrong: 2005). The word to bind or tie up is *garrpiyun*. The women referred to *ngoy-garrpin*, “tie something around one’s waist,” for stopping pain. More reference was made to tying string

**Figure 6**  
Gupurrbakarr, a Ganalbingu man,  
taken January 1937. TPH1436.  
Photograph by D.F. Thomson,  
courtesy of Mrs D.M. Thomson and  
Museum Victoria.



**Figure 7**  
Dhayarrmirri, the place of string,  
near Gapuwiyak Community. The  
small trees in the foreground are  
*Brachychiton megaphylus*. August 26,  
2006. Photograph by Louise Hamby.



on different parts of the body. String and women's business of stopping pain is associated with what they call *wundangarr*.

For the purposes of healing, my Aboriginal consultants emphasized that the string was plain or plant fiber, but not of which type. When bark fiber is used the different fibers produce string of different physical properties. For example kurrajong string is rougher and scratchy in comparison to string made from the banyan tree, *djan'pa*. I have been told that string from *djan'pa* is used for ceremonial purposes more often than kurrajong.

### String for Threading

String was used exclusively for threading objects of bodywear worn mainly around the neck. There were several types of necklaces made from threading. Shells, such as tusk shells, were strung in single rows while other neckpieces would contain one

shell as a pendant. Grass stem necklaces were worn choker style but were actually made from one long piece of string looped around several times. The pieces of string tied to either side of the bundle were used to hold the necklace around the neck.

Threading materials and techniques have changed in Arnhem Land, with many women preferring nylon fishing line to their own hand-spun string (Hamby and Young: 2001). However some women, after seeing older pieces of bodywear in the Thomson Collection, have begun to think differently about the use of hand-spun string. Rose Mamuniny, a Galpu woman from Elcho Island, is one of these. The strength of her own hand-spun string has become increasingly important for her. She said in a film about her work: "I am not using anymore balanda [white man or outsider] string, if I make my own string then the money I get paid will grow" (Hamby 2003).

Figure 8 shows a shark vertebrae necklace that she made. Note the two-ply, two-color, hand-spun string that Mamuniny made and used for threading.

### Mitjurrkula

The string discussed so far has been single lengths of string. When a long length of string is curled around and around into a circle and then bound in one or more places, a new item of bodywear is created. It is called *mitjurrkula*, a type of headband (see Figure 9). In the past these were worn at the onset of menses. Another function of the *mitjurrkula* by some women was to demonstrate to others the condition of widowhood. Donald Thomson supplies another name for the headdress, *bämbal*, a Ritharrngu word. There are also feathered string *mitjurrkula* in the collection like DT439 and DT433. Thomson notes that ones like these feathered *mitjurrkula* were worn for ceremonial occasions.

**Figure 8**  
Shark vertebrae necklace made by Rose Mamuniny. July 2005.  
Photograph by Alice Whish.





**Figure 9**

Mara string headband collected on June 5, 1935. DT1614. Photograph by Louise Hamby. The Donald Thomson Collection, on loan to Museum Victoria from the University of Melbourne.



In April 2006, Mercy Djungmali Lankin, from Roper River, came to Museum Victoria with a group of women from Milingimbi and Elcho Island. She identified several bundles of string bound in one place as being *mitjpurrkula*, including DT1614. When these were worn by women from her area, they were worn around the neck. In this instance the group of strings would have a piece of string attached at opposite ends of the circle in order to tie the piece around the neck. Generally this is not a common practice in Arnhem Land today—until July 2006 I had never seen the *mitjpurrkula* being worn by anyone. An older group of women from Wuyagiba, a small outstation on the Limmen Bight in the Gulf of Carpentaria, were visiting relatives in Nhumbulwar on the Rose River. One of the women, Molly Nundilabala, was

wearing a *mitjpurrkula* of fine dark-brown strings (see Figure 10)]. Joyce Huddlestone, an artist from Ngukurr, explained that Molly's husband had died recently and she was wearing the strings.

### ***Matjka***

An item of bodywear made in a similar fashion to the *mitjpurrkula* but with a longer circle of string bound in a much longer length is a chest ornament known as *matjka* (Figure 11). These are known as chest harnesses or breast girdles. The item is formed in two equal loops of strings which are then bound together for about 8 inches (20 cm). Sometimes each loop is wrapped separately from the join at both ends. The wrapped section, sometimes then painted with ochre (Figure 12), is worn at the back and the arms go through the loops such that

Figure 10

Molly Nundilabala wearing a *mitjpurruḷa*. July 2006. Photograph by Louise Hamby.



the strings cross over the breasts.

The women with whom I have worked say that they remember *matjka* being worn, particularly by young women. They explained that the *matjka* were supposed to make their breasts grow strong. According to Thomson the *matjka* was a commonly worn item for any occasion. One of the people with whom he worked made the comment about one *matjka* (DT503) on September 2, 1935, “make

himself look nice, that girl.”<sup>6</sup> Even in 1935 in Arnhem Land people were concerned with looking good. Although the *matjka* is generally worn by women it is sometimes worn by young men. Thomson noted on October 16, 1935 that a Wagilag *matjka* (DT496) was worn by a young man to “make himself flash” (Thomson 1935–1937b). *Matjka* were worn on ceremonial occasions by women, especially in the final stages of Ngulmark ceremony. Young boys often wore

feathered *matjka* during one stage of their *dhapi* or initiation ceremony reversing the roles of the boys with women.

In ancestral times one of the items made by the Nyapililngu were *matjka*. These are often depicted in painting and sculpture as a cross. The *matjka* worn by the Nyapililngu were made from possum fur string. “The cross therefore signifies the places where Nyapililngu camped on the other side of the lake from the



**Figure 11**  
A Burarra *matjka* collected from  
Milingimbi on October 7, 1935.  
DT7950. Photograph by Rodney Start.  
The Donald Thomson Collection, on  
loan to Museum Victoria from the  
University of Melbourne.



**Figure 12**  
Detail of the ochered wrapped section  
of the Burarra *matjka*. DT7950.  
Photograph by Rodney Start. The  
Donald Thomson Collection, on  
loan to Museum Victoria from the  
University of Melbourne.

guwak at Djarrakpi and where she spun string that was later transformed into the sandhills that run parallel to the beach” (Morphy 1991: 231).

A recent significant use of a *matjka* was for the film *Ten Canoes*. Frances Djulibing who plays Nowalingu, the second wife of Ridjimiril, wore a *matjka* that she made to wear for several scenes in the film. She

was inspired by seeing a Donald Thomson photograph (TPH131) of her grandmother, Yilpa, a *Liyagalawumirr* woman from Milingimbi, who was wearing a feathered *matjka* (Figure 13). She decided to wear the *matjka* for the film, making a link between herself and her grandmother and also establishing her identity as a woman with knowledge of past practices.

### ***Messenger Strings***

*Marradjiri* strings, also known as messenger strings, were sent or worn on the head, to announce ceremonies to other Aboriginal groups. The design of the pieces was clan and moiety specific as were the types of string used in their manufacture. A Mildjingi string (see Figures 14 and 15) is an example of a complex design. The section that goes around

**Figure 13**

Yilpa, a *Liyagalawumirr* woman, from Milingimbi wearing a feathered *matjka*. Yilpa is the grandmother of Frances Djulibing. TPH1315. Photograph by D.F. Thomson, courtesy of Mrs D.M. Thomson and Museum Victoria.



the head is feathered string. The pendants that emerge from this are of two types of string, one plain and the other feathered. According to Thomson's notes from his informant, the whole string is about clouds, "not wind, really clouds come from that. The two arms are said to represent two small clouds that travel in a different direction [at a distance] is from the big one, 'him go that way' [pointing to the two sides], 'leader one him go this way—ahead.'"

This work was brought to Ramingining in October 2004 and shown to the Mildjingi family, Jimmy Burinyila, and his sister Margaret Myall, at Burinyila's outstation, Garinygirr. There was excitement in seeing this *marradjiri* string as they were starting to prepare for the initiation ceremony for the grandson of

Burinyila. Burinyila called this piece *lunggurrma gongal*, with its arms going everywhere. It relates to the manner in which the *dalkarramirri* or song man sends the message on his travels. The beginning of the trip is the plain string and when he arrives there is the feathered string. The feathered string is the fine clouds, "same like fog," that come early to the middle of the wet season when the sky is red at sunset. Burinyila wanted his sister to take careful note of the construction of the piece so she could make one for their grandson's ceremony.

### ***Pubic Covers***

Pubic covers worn in the past in Arnhem Land were made of many materials, some as simple as a piece of paperbark folded over a piece of string. In north-west

**Figure 14**

A Mildjingi messenger string collected at the Glyde River on September 29, 1936 composed of two types of string. DT673. Photograph by Ben Healley. The Donald Thomson Collection, on loan to Museum Victoria from the University of Melbourne.





**Figure 15**

Detail of the joining of the arms of the messenger string. DT673. Photograph by Ben Healley. The Donald Thomson Collection, on loan to Museum Victoria from the University of Melbourne.

Arnhem Land they are sometimes known as *dhirrithirri*. Some were made from bark fiber and feathers but a large group were made from heavy string or possum fur string. The covers that were longer in length were worn by men and the shorter ones by women. For some language groups the women's version is known as *walpundjar* and the men's version as *ngattjin*. They were not worn all the time as Nalmakarra Garrawurra says "long time people do wear them and some not." She points out that these items serve to remind people of old times, for young people to see. There is variation in the tones of the fur that some Aboriginal people attribute to the age of the possum.

The pubic covers are associated with ceremony for some of the older women. Groups from Ngukurr and country around Numbulwar would make dancing motions and sing when they saw the string covers. They called the pubic covers *madamada*. Some of the women wore these when they were young girls. Maureen Thompson recalled, "I wore this one as well as Judy (Doctor Wilfred). For dancing I wore this one. I made two of them but I can't find them." Maureen is a well-known painter, renowned for painting her country and things important to her. After seeing the items of bodywear from the Thomson Collection she said, "I was thinking today, what women

wear, I should put in painting" (Thompson 2006).

### **Armbands**

The armband is the last item of bodywear from string examined for this article. The largest group of these are constructed using the wrapping technique. This category is divided into three groups: plain, feathers, and combinations of materials. The core material of these armbands is normally a thin strip of cane, *Flagellaria indica*, wrapped around itself a couple of times to the appropriate diameter and then wrapped with a base of plant fiber string. Wrapping materials can also be string with other materials spun into the fiber like possum fur or feather down. In

the past the string was sometimes wrapped around the cane from a shuttle (Figure 16). This type of armband is the most common one found in the Thomson Collection; they are known by a number of names: *djali*, *nganybak*, *yirritpal* and *wurrwa*.

The plain string armbands would be worn for everyday. For ceremonial occasions, these armbands were placed on the arm first and feathered ones would go over the top of them (Burinyla 2004). This type of armband has continued to be made, although very few are actually being made and worn. The ARC Donald Thomson project has rekindled

interest in the making of these and other objects. Lucy Armstrong and her relatives made these during a visit to Gapuwiyak in 2003 (Figure 17). Most recently a group of Gupapuyngu people made them to wear in a dance performance for the Garma Festival. For this event the plain string armbands were ochered.

### Conclusion

It is difficult to think about Arnhem Land in the 1930s without string. It was an integral part of both everyday and ceremonial life for people of all ages. Arnhem Landers may not have used the expression “wrap” to describe their feeling



Figure 16

A shuttle with string being used to wrap an armband with a cane interior. DT1609. Photograph by Ben Healley. The Donald Thomson Collection, on loan to Museum Victoria from the University of Melbourne.

**Figure 17**

An armband made by Lucy Armstrong using the same method as DT1609. 2003. Photograph by Louise Hamby.



about string, but they have and still do sense its importance and links to the ancestral past. String in its many guises has been used to ease pain, carry objects, mark stages of life and to look flash. Although people now may not use hand-made string for many reasons there has been a resurgence in its use. Some artists are using string in unusual ways. For example, Mavis Ganambarr gives string a special place in design and meaning in some of her pandanus baskets. “If I make only the plain colours and *dhumumu* (black) and there is no red, yellow or brown, I make the colour with fiber string” (Ganambarr 2006). String will continue to be made and valued by people but perhaps not always in the same manner as in the time when Donald Thomson lived and worked in Arnhem Land.

## Notes

1. Much of the research for this article was completed during the Australian Research

Council Linkage Project, *Anthropological and Aboriginal perspectives on the Donald Thomson Collection: material culture, collecting and identity*, between the Australian National University and Museum Victoria.

2. For a detailed description of his Arnhem Land work see Thomson (2005, revised edition).
3. The people with whom I work tend to use the word “raki” for string, not “yarrata.” An extension of the word “raki” is “tape.”
4. See Nyapililngu in the section on Fur, Hair and Feathers.
5. See David Hugo’s thesis for fish spears and other fishing implements involving string.
6. Languages in north-eastern Arnhem Land do not have separate words for he, she and it. Therefore in Aboriginal English these pronouns are not always what is expected. In this case, “himself” would be read as “herself.”

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