

A tribute to Mr Lamilami by Professor Paul Tacon



Djulirri rock paintings

THE late Mr Lamilami had a rich and remarkable life, engaging in many activities and career paths to benefit his community.

He also had a passion for his traditional lands, cultural heritage and history. But although he wanted them protected from any sort of natural or human-made threat he also was keen to share his culture and heritage with the outside world. He believed that, through education and raising awareness about the importance of his cultural heritage, other people would help him look after it for future generations.

This led him to work with a number of archaeologists, historians, linguists, film-makers and other Balanda (non-Aboriginal) experts.

But he was not simply a Traditional Owner giving permission for research as he enjoyed fully engaging with it directly by participating in fieldwork, making decisions on how research would proceed, contributing to and co-authoring academic publications, and participating in a number of films, including two episodes of the 2013 four-part award-winning documentary *First Footprints* about the 60,000-year history of Aboriginal Australia.

He gave lectures, occasionally at universities

but more often to visitors to his traditional clan estate, Namunidjbuk, in northwest Arnhem Land and mentored a new generation of rock art researchers.

Mr Lamilami was particularly passionate about rock art, especially the hundreds of sites and many thousands of images scattered across Namunidjbuk. This led to him becoming a key player in two major Australian Research Council funded research projects that commenced in 2008, *Picturing Change* that focused on rock art made after the arrival of Macassans and Europeans, and *Baijini*, Macassans, Balanda and Bininj, that looked at the history of encounter between his ancestors and outsiders from across seas and oceans. Rock art was recorded and some rock shelters excavated.

Through the course of this research time and again Mr Lamilami would say that rock art sites were like books full of stories and really big sites were libraries with records of everyone who had passed through the region.

Mr Lamilami was particularly passionate about Djulirri, a rock art complex with over 3,000 paintings, stencils and figures made of native beeswax and one of Australia's most spectacular rock art sites.

He was interested in how old some of the ships depicted at Djulirri were, particularly two Macassan wooden sailing vessels known as perahus. His ancestors had interacted with Macassan visitors in search of trepang and other resources for hundreds of years and there were many family stories about this as well as evidence of trepang processing camps on the shore near Mr Lamilami's outstation.

He was instrumental in research that dated a painting of a Macassan perahu at Djulirri to the late 1500s or early 1600s, helping to rewrite the history of contact between Aboriginal people and southeast Asia. This research, of which he was co-author, made world headlines with hundreds of news reports and special features in magazines, including a prestigious American publication, *Archaeology*.

In 2011, Djulirri was included on the NT Heritage Register. Mr Lamilami said at the time: "One of the most extraordinary rock art complexes in the Territory – in terms of pigment rock art, it is the largest, most varied and historically significant across Australia".

Djulirri was then nominated for National Heritage listing in 2011 by the NT government, and

again in 2016. It is in the final stages of assessment and Mr Lamilami was hoping for an announcement of its success later this year.

Another major contribution by Mr Lamilami, in terms of teaching the world about rock art, is the inclusion of rock art in the then Google Art Project, launched in early 2012. He worked closely with myself to include over 70 photographs of Djulirri. By persuading Google to add a rock art gallery to the over 150 built art galleries and museums profiling their works a huge global audience was reached in a totally innovative way.

At the Canberra launch Mr Lamilami told ABC News: "Having those rock arts, you know, being displayed in a sort of a modern technology I think it's a good educational tool".

Photographs of rock art from Djulirri and other Namunidjbuk sites later featured in an exhibition at the Sarawak Museum, Kuching in 2013 and Mr Lamilami's son Patrick helped by contributing a didgeridoo, painting in the gallery and participating in a special celebration at the museum in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia.

In 2014, Mr Lamilami was a participant in a rock art workshop sponsored by the Getty Conservation Institute (USA) in Kakadu National Park. During the 10-day meeting, 28 rock art conservation, management and tourism specialists from across Australia and overseas met with Aboriginal people from NSW, north Queensland, central Australia, the Pilbara and various parts of the Top End to share their perspectives, concerns and ideas about the future of rock art conservation and management.

The workshop included a special visit to another significant Namunidjbuk rock art site, Malarrak, led by Mr Lamilami. A strategy to assist in the ongoing protection and preservation

of rock art sites as part of a holistic program within living cultural landscapes was then developed and in 2015 made available as a free downloadable publication. Once again, Lamilami was leading the way in the protection of rock art, not only for his country, but for Australia and the world.

In 2016, a new Australian Research Council project called *History Places* began, with a focus on Namunidjbuk rock art over 5,000 years of age, with related archaeological excavation. This project involved many of Mr Lamilami's children and grandchildren in the field research and culminated in a major paper Mr Lamilami co-authored, published in 2020. It focuses on a previously undescribed rock art style found in northwest Arnhem Land called *Maliwawa Figures*, a name given to the style by Mr Lamilami. This too made world headlines and another feature in the magazine *Archaeology*.

Mr Lamilami was keen to share his rock art heritage with children. A major project throughout 2020 was a community-focused book with lots of photographs of rock art of Namunidjbuk.

The whole Namunidjbuk rock art sequence is presented in the form of a story told by Mr Lamilami and myself. This was completed late in 2020 and copies were distributed to schools, family and friends.

His passion for his country and for educating others about its importance continued throughout his life.

Mr Lamilami has left his family, community, Territorians, Australians and the larger world a great heritage legacy and no doubt stories of this will be told for many years to come.

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