



AIATSIS

Gamilaraay Return Information Pack

The return of the dhulu/thulu (tree) from the Museum der Kulturen Basel to the Gamilaraay community.

Embargoed until

Australia: 6:00pm AEDT Tuesday 26 November

Switzerland: 8:00am CEST Tuesday 26 November



**Museum der
Kulturen Basel**



**MONASH
University**



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Return event

At 5:00pm on Thursday 28th of November 2024, the Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) will formally hand over a dhulu (tree) to representatives of the Gamilaraay community whose ancestors made the dhulu and are its present-day custodians.

Key points

- The Gamilaraay community has been negotiating the return of the dhulu since 2022.
- This return project builds upon the exhibition 'Alive – more than human worlds' which included a collaboration between Bundjalung, Gamilaraay and Muruwari creative practitioner, Professor Brian Martin (Monash University) and the MKB. The dhulu originates from Boggabri, NSW and was taken from Country over 100 years ago. It was temporarily held in Sydney and sold to Lucas Staehelin, a Swiss national and researcher, who then gifted it to the MKB in 1940.
- The MKB has cared for the dhulu for 84 years and now AIATSIS is assisting in its return to its custodians.
- AIATSIS was approached by the Gamilaraay community in August of 2023 for support on the return of the dhulu and has been working closely with community members in organising the return.

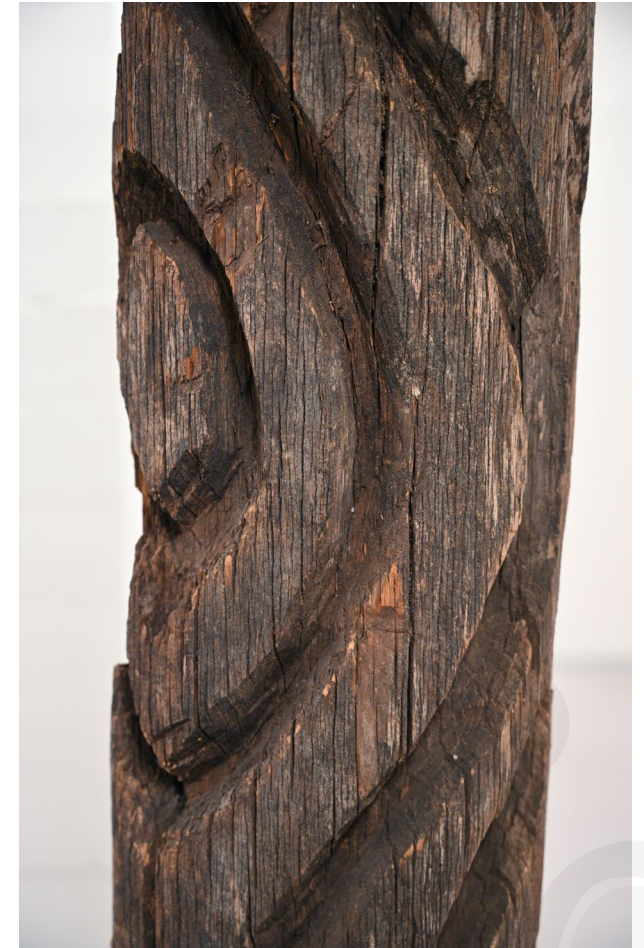
- Returning material to custodians revitalises and maintains cultural practices. As part of this return, Gamilaraay custodians are carving a new tree as a gift for the MKB.

The Dhulu (tree)

History of the Dhulu (Thulu)

- Dhulu (or Thulu) is a Gamilaraay word that translates to tree. Dhulu hold incredible significance to Indigenous communities, and particularly in South-East regions of Australia, play a specific role in ceremonies. The dhulu being returned is described as a teleteglyph, an incised or carved tree located at a ceremonial ground. The dhulu plays a vital part of ceremony for the initiation of Gamilaraay boys and is associated with sacred aspects of the ceremony. This dhulu belongs to a group of other carved trees from Brigalow Creek associated with the ceremonial ground near Boggabri, NSW. For the Gamilaraay community, the dhulu is more than a tree; it is an ancestor and a family member, it embodies knowledge and has agency. The markings are associated with specific families, tell their story, and lend them a voice.
- The dhulu was chopped down and taken from Country over 100 years ago, in the early 20th Century. It was temporarily held in Sydney and sold to Lucas Staehelin, a Swiss national

and researcher, who then gifted it to the MKB in 1940. The dhulu has been cared for by the MKB for 84 years and has recently been displayed in an exhibition, in consultation with Gamilaraay Elders.



Dhulu detail. Photo: Brian Martin.

Gamilaraay Aboriginal Community Advocacy

In May of 2022, Bundjalung, Gamilaraay and Muruwari man, Brian Martin came across the Gamilaraay dhulu whilst on a research trip as part of *More than a Guulany (tree): Aboriginal Knowledge Systems* a Australian Research Council project, led by both Brian Martin and Professor Brook Andrew. Whilst at the MKB, the museum asked if they could present the dhulu in an MKB exhibition, *Alive: More than Human Worlds*. The discussion about its display prompted consideration of whether the dhulu could be returned home. Brian Martin and Bradley Webb, a Bundjalung and Dunghutti man working at Monash University, went to Gunnedah to meet with Greg Bulingha Griffiths, Guyinbaraay Clan of the Gamilaraay, Traditional Owner of where the dhulu is from (Boggabri, NSW). They also met with Alfred Priestley, a Gamilaraay knowledge holder. They discussed the possibility for the dhulu to be exhibited in Basel and Greg agreed and gave permission. The relationship between the Gamilaraay community and the MKB developed into a close partnership that fostered a mutual respect and understanding about the significance of the dhulu and the importance of bringing the dhulu home.

Brian Martin, Bradley Webb and Alfred Priestley visited the MKB and held a ceremony with the dhulu. This was filmed in Basel and subsequently produced the film *Dhulu Ugal (Tree Song)*. In August of 2023,

the community contacted AIATSIS informing them that MKB have agreed to return the dhulu and asked for support with the return. Brian met with the Museum commission of MKB, seeking their support for the return, where they agreed. Soon after, the University associated with MKB supported the return. In January of 2024, the custodians received notice that the government in Basel (Switzerland) approved the return of the dhulu. A delegation of community representatives and AIATSIS staff will be travelling to Basel, Switzerland for an official handover of the dhulu to the community.

Key participants

Yawiriawiri Murri Ganuur Descendants Aboriginal Corporation – Gamilaraay Custodians

Gamilaraay Country extends over a large area of land from the Queensland and New South Wales border region to Tamworth, Aberdeen/Muswellbrook, Coonabarabran and Walgett. The Traditional Owners of the Gunnedah and Boggabri region are the Guyinbaraay Clan. Guyinbaraay representatives have founded the Yawiriawiri Murri Ganuur Descendants Aboriginal Corporation. The corporation is

made up of Gamilaraay people descended from Tribal Leader Yawiriawiri Murri Ganuur, who was known as a community leader in the Gunnedah region throughout the 1800s. Community representatives have been involved with a number of repatriation projects throughout the years and continue to share culture in both a local and national setting through education, publishing and cultural experiences.

AIATSIS

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) is Australia's only national institution focused exclusively on the diverse history, cultures and heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Institute's partnerships span the globe, including government, academic, corporate, cultural and community sectors. AIATSIS' unique and dynamic convergence of knowledge, resources and expertise enable us to tell the story of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and share these stories with Australia and the world.

AIATSIS leads the Australian Government's Return of Cultural Heritage (RoCH) program to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and overseas collecting institutions. The RoCH program facilitates the return of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' cultural heritage material from overseas collecting institutions and private collectors.

Museum der Kulturen Basel

A new chapter in the history of the dhulu is being written. After 84 years in MKB storage the dhulu is going home. Not only was the dhulu given back its agency, but going through the process has created a sustainable relationship between institutional and Gamilaraay cultural custodians. This relationship was further reinforced by Gamilaraay representatives carving a new tree for MKB. This generous gesture creates a base for mutual exchange and understanding, the museum is extremely grateful for.

The Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) is the largest anthropological museum in Switzerland and one of the most eminent of its kind in Europe. The MKB collections are renowned throughout the world and include over 340,000 objects, around 300,000 photos, 400 films and sound recordings. MKB exhibitions cover contemporary and everyday subjects. They convey cultural commonalities as well as differences and thereby contribute to the understanding of one's own as well as other cultures. Hence its motto "seeing the world with different eyes". Exhibiting and preserving the collections is just as much of the museum's task as doing research on them. Findings are imparted by means of exhibitions, events, and publications.

Wominjeka Djeembana Indigenous Research Lab Monash University

Wominjeka Djeembana is a research lab within the Faculty of Art Design and Architecture at Monash University. Wominjeka Djeembana are Boon Wurrung words translated as 'come here to learn, listen at a place of knowledge and sharing'. Our vision is simple yet multiple: we aim to articulate the synergies between Indigenous ways of knowing with practice-led research specifically in the areas of art, design and architecture (and beyond). The research program at Wominjeka Djeembana articulates the importance of Indigenous knowledge for contemporary society through methodologies premised on the agency of Country and relationality. The significant advancement that Wominjeka Djeembana offers in this area of Indigenous knowledge production is how knowledge pertaining to art, design, curation, architecture and beyond can be reconfigured and improved through an Indigenous lens.

Monash University is a modern, global, research-intensive university, delivering education and research excellence in Australia and across the Indo-Pacific. Monash is making a positive impact on today's global challenges – whether that's by mitigating climate change, easing geopolitical insecurity or fostering healthy communities.



The RoCH program

For over 300 years, Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage material has been removed and placed in overseas collections (museums, universities, and private collections).

The Return of Cultural Heritage (RoCH) program facilitates the return of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage material held overseas to Australia. AIATSIS facilitates the return of objects, photographs, audio-visual records, artwork, and archival items to their custodians. The RoCH program:

- Facilitates and secures the return of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage material from overseas to Australia.
- Enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to understand where their cultural heritage material is held overseas.
- Influences the development of changes to institutional repatriation practices, policy, and guidelines.
- Fosters relationships between overseas collecting institutions and Indigenous communities.

After six years of partnering with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and overseas museums on return projects, AIATSIS has developed a successful methodology. Key to our method is the partnership between AIATSIS, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander custodians and overseas collecting institutions, where custodians make decisions about how and where their cultural heritage can be best cared for.



Top: Contemporary Dhulu. Bottom: Gamilaraay Representatives Michael Griffiths and Wayne Griffiths carving Dhulu. Photos: Simon Rose.

For all media enquiries please contact:

**Australian Institute of Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS),
Australia**

M +61 476 843 522

E commsmedia@aiatsis.gov.au

Museum der Kulturen Basel, Switzerland

Andrea Mašek, Public Relations MKB

T +41 61 266 56 34

E andrea.masek@bs.ch

Monash University, Australia

Deniz Uzgun, Media Communications Officer

M +61 418 544 927

E deniz.uzgun@monash.edu

**To find out more about the Return of Cultural Heritage
(RoCH) Program please contact:**

roch@aiatsis.gov.au

aiatsis.gov.au/roch

aiatsis.gov.au



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