

**The Fire of Mata Mata  
A Discussion with Batumbil Burarrwanga**

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Please follow this link to hear the discussion about the fire of mata mata which is portayed in this weaving and in the colours above: <https://soundcloud.com/kangarooova/the-fire-of-mata-mata>

I have participated in the tutorials of great Professors and I have had the greatest of yarns with the greatest of people ... but none compares with the conversations I have with traditional owner, leader and master artist, Batumbil Burarrwanga, sitting on the sand at Mata Mata in North East Arnhem land.

I feel like I am a baby asking questions in English as she patiently explains her world to me, etching in my mind, Yolngu mata words and correct pronounciations. But beyond this, the combination of intellectual and spiritual feeling that she tries to impart is something that is rare in my experience.

There are many things in my mind as we talk. How can this Aboriginal land be made safe in this modern world with its focus on money and property and narrow commercial development? How can ceremony and sacred art be truly appreciated? How can the families here become prosperous through their knowledge and the way they live their lives? How can Butambil's work be better valued? And of course how can the necessary rupiah (money) flow in such a way that keeps this way of life intact for the families here? Will we be able to withstand the crazy world of politicians and bureaucrats and mining magnates and populations and the modern world? Something makes me feel optimistic because of the power of what I am learning.

There are different things going through Butambil's mind I know. She tells me "Galay my message through you is if someone wants to come here and learn with their heart open I will accept them". Already two Ph.d theses have been completed thanks to Butambil's generosity. As it stands, without even trying, Butambil is renowned as a painter and weaver. Her works are sold through Matikal on Elcho Island and through the renowned Buku Larrngay Mulka in Yirrkala. My friend Will Stubbs tells me Butambil is one of the great ones. He should know. Many of her works are in the nation's galleries and some are held in international collections.



I understand why. Butambil's power and her art comes from the fire underneath the soil at Mata Mata. Listen to the conversation and you will learn more.

We know too little of Yolngu philosophy. As I sit there I realize that the great intellectual exercises of Yolngu elders through the bark petition and renowned church panels are but the superficial dimensions of things fashioned to help us understand. There is so much more to learn.

Butambil asks something more than to sell her art works or promote her homeland as a place to visit. "When people buy my artworks I want them to come to me here. I want them to put the rupiah in my hands. The hands that made these mats. I want them to understand and see that these things come from the land and have the power of the land in them. Yaka transfer the funds into my account. No they must understand the stories and the meanings. Sit with me, talk here and understand about the power of the land".

I read as much as I can about weaving. Howard Morphy the distinguished historian of Yolngu art is an important guide. I found this in one of his articles:

"The story is told of a distinguished collector who walked many a weary mile to the shelter of a celebrated old weaver. He spent the day admiring her work, but still asking for something better. He knew she had made finer pieces. At last flattery and gold won. She tore out the back of her hut and there, hid from mortal eyes, was the basket that was to be burned at her death. Nothing could be more beautiful and it will be her monument". Mason 1904 cited by Howard Morphy in "The Art of Basketry: Aesthetics in a Cross-Cultural Perspective, p. 160

Something twigs. Butambil is asking for us to not break down her house but to appreciate the basket for what it is in its purest sense. Something has to change in our way of thinking about, viewing and interacting with master weavers of first nations' cultures. The practice captured so vividly in the quote from Howard Morphy has the art collector able to destroy the whole essence of weaving in a traditional society with gold and flattery. Have we not been doing this throughout the colonial era? do we not continue to do this?

Let us not get too carried away. Many things have been done to stop this cultural myopia. The work of Morphy and also Buku Larrngay Mulka and Matikal in protecting culture and in representing painters and supporting communities has allowed some shelter from the storm. The insatiable demand for art has been used against itself.

But we need to do something more in our own heads and in our own practices. We need to find ways to place power back into the hands of the weaver.

Morphy calls for an anthropology of perception: trying to get as close as possible to the weavers mind. This is not about having a conversation. It is not about acquiring and appreciating the beauty of an art work or the skill involved in its production. It is not possible to get close the new wave anthropological thinking tells us .. our worlds are simply incommensurate! Appreciate the difference! It is true that no-one can see through the eyes of another; however, to get closer to the weaver and to have an understanding of the knowledge and feelings that are inscribed in the weaving is a voyage that never ends. It is a learning process that is as deep as the ocean or as shallow as bath water. But at some point I think we can connect with the weaver in her own thoughts and spirituality and we can come to a state of mind beyond words and meanings - in some space of mutual learning and travelling that is useful for Batambil and her family as well as for us. I like to think so. This becomes the basis for a good and fair exchange of intellectual property where payment for an art work and learning

can be properly measured. A mat is not valued by how long it takes, by the labour involved, by the stitches. It is measured by its spirit and connection to place and its elaborate dimensions. If you listen to Butambil and my discussion below you will hear me, baby like, grappling with just the surface meanings of the mat pictured above.

Why is she telling me this? And through me you? Because she wants this land, this power to be protected by our mutual knowledge, care and love. "If I get sick galay you will feel my spirit here and know this story, this land"

Learning to see artefacts and art works outside our own anthropomorphical images and perceptions is a great joy. It is not possible to do this from an article or a website or a conversation.

What is the message here? We need to create a new economy based on a new aesthetics. To truly understand the fabric of the work we need to make the trek to visit master weavers like Butambil Burarrwanga in her traditional lands at Mata Mata on the Arafura Sea in North East Arnhem Land.

We need to sit with Butambil on her waanga. We need to feel the breeze and listen to her words as she splits the pandanus leaves. We need to study hard and long. When we do this we find out something about ourselves, this land we live in and this world. We have moved beyond art and collections to philosophies of place and land, to questions of being. The weaver's mystical and spiritual purpose in its original form opens to us. This contributes to our own world view and philosophy. We become wiser through understanding weaving. We belong more to this land Australia – the word comes from the north and it helps us appreciate what we must re-build and support in the south.

This is just the surface of what is there to be learnt. Let me give you some hints at what is more to learn. The airport and runway at Mata Mata is more than just a runway. There is a fire burning under the soil that has great power and its effect is to cleanse us and make us feel peaceful. This place is a parliament for the Yolngu people. It is where hearts and souls can connect.

So if you want to truly possess this mat pictured above, this art work, you have to come with your heart open to Mata Mata. You have to sit with Butambil as she works. She will connect you to this mat. You have to pay homage to the hands that weaved the mat. You have to give those hands the power to continue to work. You have to learn and contribute to the community. When you have done these things something will change in the world, something will change in the art world.

But how much will all this cost you ask me? It will cost you your precious time. It will cost you up to \$1600 to fly to Gove from the capital cities and then on to Mata Mata. You will need to ask to come. You need a permit to travel to the traditional lands at Mata Mata. You will need to pay for a camp site and bring your own food, tent and camping provisions. Then you will

have to pay for the art work by putting your money into the hands of the master. If you want to truly understand the work that goes into the art work you will have to pay the master to spend time with you as she works, showing you each step of the thought and effort that goes into the production of the mat. These things can all be arranged through Lirriwi Tourism in consultation with Butambil: “If you come wanting to learn I will accept you”.

Alternatively yes you could buy one of Butambil’s mats or art works through Matikal and Buku Larrngay Mulka and not do any of the above and you would be making a great contribution to the Yolngu economy. But if you want to learn about the fire of Mata Mata, if you want to experience something that you will never forget and have something precious to be handed on to children and grand children. If you want to truly feel connected to this land then you must sit down on the sand at Mata Mata and talk to the master and in the end your appreciation must be placed in her hands. When you do this I think the world will change and something will shift beneath the soil. The price you will have paid will seem a pittance.



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