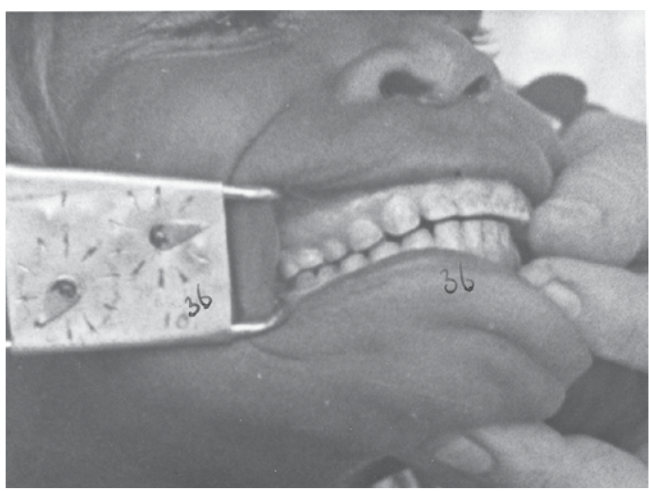


# Whose ethics?



*Above: Unidentified child having biting pressure measured at Haasts Bluff in 1947. There is a similar photograph for each cast in the collection with a corresponding number. In May 2009, digital copies of these photos (below) were shown to people at Ipolera, Haasts Bluff and Hermannsburg*



*Above: Joe Neparrnga Gumbula, Aaron Corn, Margo Neale and Troy Pickwick*

*Right: Joe Gumbula's relative holding Joes face mask*



*Photo: Katherine Aigner*

Joe Gumbula, a Gupapuyngu man from Galiwinku (formerly Elcho), stood transfixed before a photo wall in my office, alive with archival images from the 1948 Arnhem Land Exhibition, which is the subject of an international symposium at the National Museum of Australia entitled Barks, Birds & Billabong, from 16 to 20 November 2009. Gumbula's focus was firmly on an image of two Yolngu men proudly holding aloft plaster casts of their own faces. Most of us are made to squirm with discomfort by these images, evocative of death masks, however not so Joe. He pointed out with great excitement that they were his relatives. One of the men was his great-grandmother's uncle and Joe proceeded to tell me about his feelings on discovering the mask in recent years. He cupped his hands in a re-enactment of cradling the mask in his hands. His overpowering sense of ownership and connection to this ancestor was not diminished by its resting place so far away. He had no issue with either its production or its current place of residence at the Smithsonian, in Washington, DC., and encouraged its use in images. He was just pleased it existed so he and his family can reconnect with ancestors.

If we had gone with our gut reaction these images may have never been seen and others like Joe from communities could be denied access to images and objects that culturally belong to them. Today, many who condemn most of what was done with 'native' subjects in the past as unethical often resort to unauthorised censorship. So as not to repeat the practices of the past one need only to consult with the relevant people and allow Aboriginal communities the opportunity to make such decisions on how their cultural material should be represented

**Margo Neale, Principal Advisor (Indigenous) to the Director, and Senior Curator**



*The collection of Central Australian dental casts held by the Museum*



*Anmanari and Marinka viewing photographs of the casts with Peter Thorley at Haasts Bluff, May 2009*