

CABINET

1. A CUPBOARD WITH DRAWERS OR SHELVES FOR STORING OR DISPLAYING ARTICLES

2. THE COMMITTEE OF SENIOR MINISTERS RESPONSIBLE FOR CONTROLLING GOVERNMENT POLICY

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In a sweltering shed on Milingimbi Island, off the coast of Arnhem Land in Australia's Top End, a small but committed group of craftspeople is slowly capturing the imagination of the country's leading art and design houses.

Manapan, an Indigenous-owned social enterprise producing luxury furniture, is bolstering the local island economy and transforming lives. The team is excited by a recent uptick in orders, but remains focused. Since the start of the enterprise in early 2016, they have had their eyes fixed on a bigger mission than simply making some of the best wooden furniture the country has produced. Their goal is a little loftier: to create sustainable, intergenerational change that will improve the livelihood of Indigenous people in the Milingimbi community. And they have a suitably ambitious plan to get there: by placing a piece of Manapan furniture in every Australian embassy around the world.

To the politicians in Canberra, who have delivered decades of programs, schemes and initiatives to the island, the message from Yolngu craftsperson Josiah Baker and his colleague Rob Chrisfield is simple. "We don't want your money. We want your orders."

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In 1990, the Australian Society for Indigenous Languages published *Whitefella Culture*. The book was intended to introduce Indigenous Australians who didn't regularly interact with white people to the strange customs of white culture. The text takes the approach of a cross-cultural guidebook, and provides instructions to its intended audience, such as:

Sometimes white people ask, 'How are you?' That is a kind of greeting and not a real question, but the other white person will still try to give an answer. The answer might be something like, 'I'm fine' or 'Okay'.

It can be hard to tell how to interpret *Whitefella Culture*. It is written mostly by whitefellas in a tongue-in-cheek, self-

deprecating tone, and provides what seems like solid advice. But the scenarios it chooses as examples paint a grim picture. "Government men" descend on remote communities with clipboards demanding "meetings", and art centre managers interrupt artists' conversations with one another to encourage them to get their work done before the next plane leaves town.

It's difficult to say whether the book is a useful resource for its intended audience or a patronising vanity project for a group of linguists. One thing that can't be denied, though, is that it is based on a solid premise – that "cross-cultural collaboration" is hard, and takes a lot of patience, creativity and respect to work out.

Manapan – which means 'come together' in the Arnhem Land local tongue Yolngu Matha – must surely be one of Australia's most ambitious cross-cultural collaborations. The business model pairs designers from Melbourne and Sydney with woodworkers in Milingimbi, a small island more than 3000 kilometres away from the country's east coast design hubs.

"The hardest part is the location," says one of Manapan's founders Mark White, a white man based in Melbourne. "Everything is barged in, and everything is barged out. For us to go and get our tools sharpened, we have to go and put them on a barge, send them back 500 kilometres to Darwin, and bring them back out."

White, 56, is a towering figure in the furniture industry, having worked with luxury retailers including Gucci and Louis Vuitton. Life in the rarefied world of high-end furniture design was good, but White couldn't shake the feeling that there was more he could be doing. Eventually he found himself advising the Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation (ALPA) on how to teach business and furniture-making skills to people in remote communities. Slowly, the idea of working with Yolngu people to start a company that could eventually be run and owned by Indigenous people took hold. Yolngu people traded wares with Chinese merchants for over 500 years before European settlement. Manapan could help continue that tradition.

When Manapan finally emerged with seed funding from ALPA, the team had a clear vision of how the business could sustain itself. Needless to say, it would not be like other furniture production operations. Building furniture in one of the most remote parts of the country comes with many benefits – the slow pace of life suits the

long, drawn-out furniture making process, and local timbers and materials can be harvested with relative ease. But exorbitant transport costs and extended production times mean keeping costs down is hard. To counter this, the team at Manapan has aimed high. Really high. Early on, the team decided that for the project to become a sustainable enterprise, it needed to connect with the upper echelons of the market.

"We can't compete with imports from overseas," White explains, "so we've had to find a way to produce furniture that is almost like art." He looks down at the modest outdoor table he's sitting at and pauses. "We can't be selling tables like this." How are Manapan's tables different? "It's furniture," he admits. "But with a real story behind it."

However you interpret the Manapan story, you would be hard pressed to find anyone who didn't appreciate the form, precision and sheer aesthetic delight of many of its pieces. This is the type of furniture that demands more than just coasters. In fact, it's hard to imagine placing anything down on the natural timbers, graceful lines and carefully articulated dovetail joinery of a Manapan piece, any more than you would pin a shopping list to a painting.

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Like all good artists, Manapan designers often put themselves into their work. The Fire Sideboard, designed by Melbourne furniture designer Alexandra Pontonio, draws on her memories of driving through the Kimberley Ranges, where she often saw tree trunks blackened from wildfires. Turning her vision into something tangible demands workmanship of the highest standard. Splayed, branch-like legs support an elegant natural timber base, giving the sideboard the appearance of a floating capsule that defies the laws of gravity.

For Rob Crisfield and Josiah Baker up in the workshop on Milingimbi, the challenges of making such an ornate piece of furniture are met with open arms. Manapan uses complicated machinery and finely honed modern techniques to construct much of its furniture, but traditional skills are drawn on, too. To fashion one of its Crocodile Lamps, Manapan sources termite-hollowed logs, similar to those used to fashion didgeridoos.

"It usually takes a couple of weeks to complete a piece, but when we're done it makes you feel on top of the world," says Baker, a Milingimbi local who works alongside Crisfield, a master craftsman who used to run his own furniture business in Melbourne.

Crisfield moved to Milingimbi to help get the workshop off the ground. He recently finished teaching the old craft of cooperage to the less experienced members of staff. "Not many people in the world can do it," Crisfield says. "It's a dying art." When the training is complete, the furniture makers on Milingimbi will be one of only a tiny number of Australians trained in the practice, a fact that is not lost on the many people keen to collaborate with Manapan. "The designers are clambering over each other to get a design that they can give to us," White says.

Manapan has received critical acclaim for the way it merges cutting-edge design with traditional Arnhem Land culture.



*Opposite
Helen Milminydjarrk,
Helen Ganalmirriwuy
and Margaret Rarru
from the Milingimbi
Art and Culture centre,
weaving dilly bags and
baskets from pandanus
tree, bush string and
natural dye*

*This page
Yolngu woodworker
Terrence Baker with
Rob Chrisfield, a
furniture-making
veteran who now lives
on Milingimbi Island*

Despite the accolades, White, who plans on having less to do with the business as it finds its feet, feels that Manapan can do more. Together with his Milingimbi colleagues, he's embarked on an ambitious plan to get the Government to place a piece of Manapan furniture in Australian embassies around the world. Naturally, Manapan would benefit financially from such a move. But it's more than a cunning business strategy.

The Government has spent countless millions on programs aimed at improving the livelihoods of Indigenous people – often to little or no effect. In the eyes of Manapan's leadership, by diverting some of that money into a little furniture operation, the government wouldn't just be exporting Australian art around the world; it'd be taking practical steps to improve employment opportunities in Milingimbi, and highlighting the benefits of creative, cross-cultural enterprises over more traditional, charity-driven ventures.

Yolngu elder and Manapan Chairperson Keith Lapalung agrees that the success of Manapan is bigger than just business. "It's hope. Manapan provides a seed for the Indigenous peoples of Milingimbi to rise up and strengthen. There is demand, there is desire, and there are needs for Manapan furniture."

There are all of these things. But as of writing, Manapan has received no orders from any of the Australian embassies around the world. At this early stage in the campaign, it's unclear whether anyone high up in the Government has even seen one of its pieces, let alone comprehended the opportunity they represent. Still, the folk behind Manapan remain hopeful things might change.

"The Government should share what is made in Milingimbi with the nations and embassies around the world," Lapalung says. "Because we are the real 'closing the gap'. We are the real reconciliation. And we are the real progress." •