

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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