

# MIWATJ





La Trobe Art Institute would like to advise visitors that this exhibition contains the names and artwork of deceased Yolŋu people.

It means blood and maggots, sand and worms, itchy red spots and rotten flesh [...] One small dot, too many meanings.<sup>1</sup>

Narritjin Maymuru

The other thing is, we only share things on the surface side of the water, but not beyond the water.<sup>2</sup>

Wukun Wanambi, 2018

Some people can explain what is in the meaning of the painting, but some we don't, and this is where we have some Yolngu interpretation to translate that, in a meaningful way that people can understand... there is a story beyond that painting which is attached to us... but whatever there is, there within the painting, it represents who we are and what we are and gives us the strength and the power for that.<sup>3</sup>

Wukun Wanambi, 2018

Drawn from the collections of La Trobe University, *Miwatj* presents the work of five highly respected senior Yolngu leaders: Birrikijji Gumana (c.1898-1982), Dr Gumana AO (c.1935-2016), Mithinarri Gurruwiwi (c.1929-1976), Narritjin Maymuru (c.1916-1981) and Wandjuk Marika OBE (c.1927-1987).

Miwatj translates to 'morning side' or 'land of the first sunrise' in Yolngu Matha (Yolngu tongue). Geographically, Miwatj refers to 'sunrise country', the furthest north-eastern part of Arnhem Land that receives the first morning sun, as it rises in the east.

Beyond providing a sense of geographic location, the Miwatj region is of immense significance to Yolngu people, Yolngu culture and understandings of place, encompassing both land and sea, freshwater and saltwater country. Place is the locus of all ancestral events and spiritual forces that shape the ongoing period of creation, known as Wanjarr.

Rather than locating this group of Yolngu artists within a particular art-historical point in time, the influence of these men continues to resonate in an ongoing cycle of cultural expression, a cycle that preceded them and one that continues beyond them, just as the sun rises and sets in an ongoing cycle of many sunrises and sunsets.

This small collection of bark paintings and larrakitj (memorial poles) from North-East Arnhem Land were collected by James Davidson in the 1960s and donated to La Trobe University in 1983. The exhibition includes artwork by five of the most senior and significant Yolngu artists and leaders, representing the Dhalwangu and Mangalili clans of the Yirritja moiety and the Galpu and Rirratjingu clans of the Dhuwa moiety. These two moieties hold all things in balance, "everything is either Yirritja or Dhuwa", as identified by Ishmael Marika, "it's like yin and yang. The plants, the sea, the land, the animals, even the people are Dhuwa/Yirritja."

Yolngu representations of place extend beyond simplistic geographic meaning and the physical reality of the landscape to encompass a complex spiritual and cultural worldview unique to Yolngu people, one that is deeply embedded in an ongoing connection to the land and sea country of the Miwatj region.

These five senior leaders and artists were instrumental in paving the way for current directions in contemporary art practice, now flourishing at the internationally renowned Buku-Larrngay Mulka Centre, located approximately 700km east of Darwin in Yirrkala. Each of these artists and leaders were driven to share Yolngu culture with non-Yolngu people, embracing painting as a means of education and encouraging deeper understandings of Yolngu culture.

Beyond the immediate aesthetic beauty of these artworks, the act of painting miny'itji (sacred clan designs) on bark and the depiction of events associated with Wanjarr, provide an assertion of Yolngu sovereignty and custodianship over the land and sea country of North-East Arnhem Land. Miny'itji represented in each painting identifies the clan and moiety of the artist and expresses the connection between clans and homelands and sacred places and their significance in Wanjarr.

The senior men exhibited in *Miwatj* contributed to key documents that lead to establishing Yolngu sovereignty and custodianship of both the land and sea country of the Miwatj region. These include the legendary *Yirrkala Church Panels* (1962-63), a collaborative work of incredible power held in the museum at Buku-Larrngay Mulka, Yirrkala; and the *Yirrkala Bark Petition* (1963), displayed in Parliament House, Canberra and their accompanying *Thumb Print Document* (1963). These collaborative masterworks debunked the European myth of 'Terra Nullius' (the claim that Australia was unoccupied country prior to European colonisation), exerting a major influence on the land rights movement and the subsequent nation-wide drive for constitutional acknowledgement of Aboriginal sovereignty and custodianship.

The collaborative paintings produced by this group of artists assert the undeniable strength of Yolngu culture and a continuous connection to land and sea throughout North-East Arnhem Land. The works of art exhibited in *Miwatj* provide a small insight into the complexity of Yolngu culture and the significant role that painting has played in asserting Yolngu sovereignty and custodianship over the Miwatj region.



## Yolŋu Matha Pronunciation

Many of the sounds found in Yolŋu Matha are not found in English: in pronouncing words in Yolŋu Matha the emphasis is always on the first syllable. The following sounds are represented by letters in Yolŋu Matha.

ŋ = replaces the use of 'ng' and is pronounced as in 'singing'.

Vowel sounds:

a = as in 'mud'

ä = as in 'far'

e = as in 'feet'

i = as in 'tin'

o = as in 'pore'

u = as in 'put'

Consonant sounds:

b = as in 'boy'

d = as in 'dog'

d = retroflexed\*

dh = 'd' with tongue between teeth

dj = as 'j' in 'judge'

g = as in 'ragged'

k = as in 'bucket'

l = as in 'lump'

l = retroflexed\*

m = as in 'man'

n = as in 'net'

n = retroflexed\*

nh = 'n' with tongue between teeth

ny = as in 'unyielding'

p = as in 'rapid'

r = as in American pronunciation of 'car'

rr = as in rolled 'r' common in Scottish

t = as in 'tar'

t = retroflexed\*

th = 't' with tongue between teeth

tj = as in 'church'

w = as in 'way'

y = as in 'yellow'

\* = Retroflexed sounds are pronounced while the tip of the tongue curls back to the roof of the mouth.

Source: Brody, Anne Marie (ed.). *Larrakitj: Kerry Stokes Collection*, Australian Capital Equity, 2011, p.318.



# Sun Cycles and River Flows

It was Mawalan who, in explaining the Djanggawul mythology, told me about Djanggawul’s wife Walu who was also the sun. I pointed to an irregular circular shape in the centre of a bark painting telling the Djanggawul story and asked what it was. He replied ‘It is the sun’. ‘But the sun does not look like that.’ He then led me to a pool of water and tossed a stone in. The sun immediately became an irregular circular shape, and that was my first lesson in the many and varied facets of Aboriginal art and the layers of meaning in a single symbol.<sup>4</sup>

James Davidson

The small group of paintings exhibited in *Miwatj* provide a miniscule manifestation of the knowledge embedded in Yolŋu cycles of representation. In song, painting and ceremony, cycles of representation sustain and give power and meaning to the Yolŋu people. The songs are not static. The paintings are not frozen in time or museological curiosities of the past. These modes of representing and communicating knowledge reverberate with the authority of those from the past, continuing to resonate in the present and will forever continue to do so into the future.

Just as Mawalan describes the sun in his painting, the ability of these songs and ancestral narratives to be painted and represented in a myriad of ways, over and over, across different forms, is a testament to the strength of Yolŋu culture. These works are transformative, full of ancestral and cultural power. As non-Yolŋu, we are incredibly lucky to be invited by generations of Yolŋu artists who have chosen to share their knowledge, art and culture with non-Yolŋu people.

Miwatj translates to ‘morning side’ or ‘land of the first sunrise’ in Yolŋu Matha (Yolŋu tongue). Geographically, Miwatj refers to ‘sunrise country’, the furthest north-eastern part of Arnhem Land that receives the first morning sun, as it rises in the east.

Beyond providing a sense of geographic location, *Miwatj* acknowledges the significance of place, both land and sea country, in the artwork and lives of the five exhibiting master artists. For these Yolŋu artists and revered community leaders, representations of place extend beyond simplistic geographic meaning and the physical reality of the landscape to encompass an extremely complex spiritual and cultural worldview unique to Yolŋu people, one that is inextricably linked to the ancestral events of Wanjarr.

Wanjarr refers to the period of creation, during which ancestral beings bestowed land and waters, ceremony and sacred objects and madayin miny’itji (sacred clan designs) upon the various clans of the Yirritja and Dhuwa moieties. The powerful Wanjarr beings travelled across the landscape during this time of creation. Through their activities the ancestral beings created the features of the landscape and seascape, including rivers, rocks, mangroves, mud flats, sand dunes, trees and islands, leaving these elements of country imbued with their spiritual essence. The ancestral beings ‘sang’ the names of everything they created or interacted with, making certain species sacred to the clan on whose land or in whose waters the naming took place. It was during this period of creation that language, law, paintings, songs, dances, ceremony and creation stories were given to the founding members of each clan, all of which were derived from the ancestral events. Together, the land and waters and this sacred clan property, both tangible and intangible, form a clan member’s djalkiri, his or her ‘foundation’, translating to ‘foot’, ‘footprint’ or ‘the roots of a tree’ in Yolŋu Matha.<sup>5</sup>

Wanjarr is not bound to a linear concept of time, but requires a multilineal way of thinking more akin to the way that many currents ebb and flow in a single river.

Time flows like a river.

Most cultures agree that time is linear and has a direction that cannot be reversed. But Yolŋu cosmology has a different structure, one that grows from the grammar of the language. Events in Wanjarr, or creation tense, simultaneously occur in the distant past; now; and far in the future – three rivers in one that flow in an infinite loop.

The much-degraded English word Dreaming attempts to capture this shape but usually fails because the people who hear the word lack such a geometry in their minds to understand it.<sup>6</sup>

Will Stubbs, Art Co-ordinator, Buku-Larrnggay Mulka

There is also a cyclical motif implied in the title *Miwatj*. Each day the sun rises and falls. Each day is new, the light different, the reflections off the water unique. The next day, the angle has changed and all of this starts over. This cycle is echoed in the way light shimmers and dances on the surface of the bark paintings in the exhibition. Each painting’s unique luminescence reflects the artist’s approach to applying miny’tji, the mythology associated with their clan and moiety, but beyond markers of kinship, miny’itji acts as a title deed to country, as a marker of sovereignty, identifying the custodian who has been bestowed with the authority and responsibility for caring for that country.

The glistening light of sunrise and sunset are in some cases considered the best times of day to connect with the ancestral spirits and this quality is captured in the delicate, shimmering miny’tji applied in these bark paintings. This dazzling quality, referred to in Yolŋu Matha as Bir’yun (shimmering brilliance; sparkle, glitter, shine) is highly important when painting miny’tji on the body in a ceremonial context. As Howard Morphy identifies, “Paintings are used in ritual because they are meaningful objects; they are spiritually powerful ancestral designs which are the property of clans and which store information about ancestral events”.<sup>7</sup>

Miny’tji is as an elaborate system of representation, demarcating one place from another and identifying one clan from another. Miny’tji represented in both ceremonial body painting and bark painting is the sole property of the clan, and custodial responsibility for the design is earned by the artist and clan leaders. Clan designs are owned and used with great care as they have been passed down from ancestral spirits and subsequently from one generation to the next.

Rirratjingu artist and leader Wanyubi Marika identifies miny’tji as a force that binds the spirit, the body and the land with the creation spirits or ancestral beings and creation narratives;

This Madayin Miny’tji, Miny’tji is a pattern that holds inside our soul, that links to the land and they identify every clan, tribes that belong to the country. Without this miny’tji we’re nobody. We’d be changing colour, we’d be talking English. Lucky we have all this Yolŋu law, that is still existing strongly inside us and it can be educated by showing you the patterns, the design of the tribe and they not translated in the book as you usually put it in writing, but ours not, [placing hand against chest] have to keep it here.<sup>8</sup>

Wanyubi Marika

The ‘outside’ or surface of these bark paintings has an immediate visual and visceral impact on the viewer. However, these ‘public’ paintings communicate an ‘inside’ cultural knowledge that can take a lifetime for a Yolŋu person to earn the right to understand. As identified by Wukun Wanambi, renowned artist, Djunggayi (caretaker), Director of The Mulka Project and cultural advisor at Buku-Larrnggay Mulka, Yolŋu paintings can be divided into two main categories: sacred and public.





Sacred paintings contain significant knowledge and access to this knowledge needs to be earned or “built up”<sup>9</sup> over time.

In a formal sense, the public paintings exhibited in *Miwatj* hold strong visual appeal and on the surface present well-balanced compositional elements, most of which are interlaced with figurative subject matter. The viewer is more than capable of identifying the image of a Wititj, the ancestral snake, a thunder or rain bird, a boat or a human form, depicted on top of miny’itji. However, the presence of figurative elements given context by miny’tji, which locate ancestral events in specific places, create the ‘deep meaning’ of a painting.

Wukun Wanambi addresses this layering of meaning directly, in both his approach towards painting and in his attitude towards sharing cultural knowledge, stating;

The other thing is, we only share things on the surface side of the water, but not beyond the water.<sup>10</sup>

As acknowledged, the concept of place plays a pivotal role in all aspects of Yolŋu life, both philosophically and experientially, from the vast ancestral narratives, mythology and songlines that criss-cross the land in the Miwatj region and beyond. Place is the point of origin for the artistic, spiritual, social and cultural worldview of the Yolŋu people.

In the work of Narritjin Maymuru, his application of earth pigment on the surface of the bark manifests a physiological connection between the artist’s body and his country. For Maymuru, “the colours expressed the personal nature of his work. White represented his bones, red his blood, yellow his body fat and black his skin.”<sup>11</sup> The earth pigment applied by Maymuru in his bark paintings, extracted directly from the land and representing the body, thus inextricably connect his body to the land and the land to his body. The two flow together in his painting. Like the human body, the organic materials of his paintings are destined to return to the land from which they were and are a part of.

In this sense, the concept of place extends beyond geographical significance bound to the present, physical reality, to forge a much deeper connection between the body and place – one that is infinite or cyclical. This contrasts greatly with balanda (non-Yolŋu) understandings of place based on physicality and ‘use-value’. Place in the Yolŋu world brings together all things past, present and future. The body, land, ancestral events and places are all bound together in multiple forms of representation, which ‘flow like a river’.

When Yolŋu consider ‘the population’ or ‘the people’, they are thinking of everyone, not just those who are physically ‘alive’, in a body, but those persons dead or unborn who exist in the water. Everyone is always at some stage of an eternal cycle [...] the purpose of many Yolŋu ceremonies is to guide the spirit through the cycle and through the water – to return the spirit back to the reservoir of origin.

There is a sense that the spirit doesn’t want to leave. The body has components: the spirit, the flesh, the bones. The flesh melts away shortly after death; the bones are geologic, and must return to the land through the agency of the larrakitj. That leaves the eternal spirit, which must find its way through the waters, back to the reservoir of the communal soul that resides in sacred springs or rivers, and it must be assisted in that progress, guided by rituals and music, patterns and dancing.<sup>12</sup>

The image of time passing as a cyclical, continuous, endless event in which the past, present and future coalesce, extends to the rising and setting of the sun over Miwatj and is a useful image for considering these paintings by ‘the old men’, for they too emerged from a cycle of representation and cultural expression that preceded them, one that continues beyond them. ‘Time flows like a river’.

Travis Hodgson, Curator



Painting is very important.  
It's the design or symbol, power of the land.  
First I learned to paint when I was a young man  
from my father, Mawalan,  
when he take me through the bush, teaching me  
where to go, where to find, what to hunt  
and the special places.  
Then I learnt Yolngu writing, my own designs,  
drawing on the rock or on the sand  
and then putting in the hatching.  
I start on the bark maybe when I was about 15 years of age.  
But my father was still holding my hand.  
I used to shake my hand, but he was holding it.  
And he always said to me, 'hold your brush straight,  
paint away from your body. Use your wrist with the brush.  
Just put the line there. Most important is the line.  
Most important is the animal you draw', he said to me.

He still talks to me today,  
how to record  
and put the line straight and true.

After two months he let me go by myself,  
he was still watching.  
I sit with bark on my lap, or on the ground,  
and then he's holding my hand, helping me with the brush,  
then rest a bit so the cross-hatching can dry.<sup>13</sup>

Wandjuk Marika



## **Wukun Wanambi and Ishmael Marika in conversation with Travis Hodgson at Buku-Larrngay Mulka, Yirrkala.**

28 February 2018

### **Ishmael, you come from a very important Yolŋu family, can you tell me a bit about your family?**

IM: Yeah my mother's side family is Madarrpa ... father's side is Rirratjingu, my grandmother on my mother's side is Dhudi Djapu and my father's mother's side is Dhalwangu. So it's a really strong family.

### **And within your family you have many generations of artists?**

IM: Yeah, my grandmothers are artists, my mum's mother she's an artist and my father's an artist and my mother's an artist and they do paintings these days. Wanyubi Marika, Gurundul Marika [Yalmakany Marawili], that's mum and dad, and Mulkun Wirrpanda that's my grandmother, mum's mother... and working with Wukun, he's a strong artist in the Marrakulu clan group and also he's a leader for Marrakulu.

[Ishmael Marika is the grandson of Milirrpum Marika, the lead plaintiff in the Gove Land Rights case.]

### **In your family there have also been many generations of strong community leaders, with very strong leadership, how do you feel to be carrying on that leadership?**

IM: I feel proud and strong, because working with you know, learning from two leadership, from Rirratjingu and Marrakulu, and in the past there was a culture that ceremony was lead by Rirratjingu and Marrakulu and they were like a sister clan group... and now in the work place, I take order from him [Wukun], because he's my cultural advisor, and he look after the cultural side if something happen or if anybody invite us to the homelands, we ask him to check if it's ok for us to go there.

### **I am assuming there are fairly complex reasons why it may not be ok to go at certain times?**

IM: Yeah, ceremonies maybe you know there's something happening or if it's still going or if it's got cancelled or something like that. It's good to double check and make sure it's still good for us to go there.

### **I understand there are sensitivities around naming, particularly around people who have passed away, to make sure this is done in the correct way...**

IM: Yeah we have respect through culture and ceremonies, when someone die we have to hide the photos or videos and even their names, we can't even say their names for maybe a couple of years until the family is happy to say their name and then we are good to say their names.

### **So it's ok to refer to Dr Gumana as Dr Gumana?**

IM: Yeah.

### **And for his father, first name is ok?**

IM: Yeah you can say his name, Birrikiti.

### **Dr Gumana was very significant both as an artist and leader...**

IM: Yeah, he was a good leader. Yeah, he was strong in ceremony and strong in our culture.

WW: And painting.

IM: And as a leader.

### **And that extended beyond Dhalwangu clan, to other clans that he was recognised?**

IM: Yeah, yeah.

WW: He also has an OAM [Order of Australia Medal].

IM: The young ones stepping up my uncles, and trying to get the leadership and look after their community and their culture, ceremony, my uncle Yinimala Gumana and Buwatpuy Gumana, are taking the role of the ceremony ways and Birrikiti #2 taking the role of looking after the land, taking the leadership.

### **Yinimala is Dr Gumana's nephew?**

IM: Yes his nephew. Dr Gumana's younger brother's son, but he grew up with Dr Gumana, because his father passed away when he was younger.

### **So the leadership could be passed on?**

IM: Yeah, by Dr Gumana.

### **Dr Gumana was a very strong advocate for sharing Yolŋu culture and educating balanda [non-Yolŋu] about Yolŋu culture, how did Dr Gumana influence art making as a way of communicating Yolŋu culture to the world?**

IM: Yolŋu culture is not written in a book. The songlines are not written in a book... and some people don't believe our culture, so we have to promote ourselves by making artwork and that's how we can approach the other people and teach the other people our law, by paintings or artworks or objects.

### **And has that changed now with new generations of artists? Both of you have introduced innovation in your respective artforms. Whether in painting or carving or making larrakitj [referring to Wukun] or in film making [referring to Ishmael], do you see this as the main medium that young artists want to express themselves through?**

IM: This is the new way of telling stories, you know, by videos and technology, because before the old people they painted stories on the bark or on the larrakitj, and now it's technology, the videos it's a bit easier for us, so we can explain properly through videos and show other stuff, like maybe artwork or the country of the paintings.

### **Do you also paint or do you prefer to stick to film making?**

IM: Sometimes I help my father, just do paintings, but I make spears and do video works and print making.

### **Are you happy to share video of country with balanda [non-Yolŋu]?**

IM: Yeah, some country is sacred, some's not, good to go, it's up to the leaders of the place you are visiting and the leaders up there will decide whether they are going to show you or take you.

### **Has this changed over time? Have things that were not shared before been shared later and opened up or is there continuity in restricting sacred material and places?**

IM: Ah... There's continuity, because strong leadership will make you go further... and give it to the next generation and pass it on and pass it on. We don't want to give all the sacred sites and open it. Because some sacred sites are really important and that's our identity... our power... you know...

WW: And strength.

IM: Strength. Keep us going... and if we show it then you know, show it and put it in public, then we are nothing, our identity is gone.

WW: The other thing is, we only share things on the surface side of the water, but not beyond the water. Because, out there in the world, they never share too, the elders share a little bit. We've got the ability there to hold.

IM: Lots of people here, leaders have different politics. Some politics are strong, some politics are good and some politics are bad. But lots of people are very strong here, especially the artists, because they can sing, they can paint, they can create the sacred objects and pass through the songlines and paintings.

WW: But if a young person has done bad things, even their art, you trespassing the law, and which mean in our law is stronger than the other peoples... and this is where the whitefella doesn't understand. In their background, we have this customary law, they've never lived by it in their world.

IM: So we have to be, you know, be aware and make sure we approach the leaders and you know, talk to them, and what's going on, then they give us authority to do something and then we do it.

### **And you earn that authority?**

IM: It's like professors telling us, to do this: "can you do this? Can you run the ceremony? Can you look after the ceremonies?" You know like that.

### **So, teaching small children...**

WW: Yeah, at an early age.





Larrakitj - Wukun Wanambi, Video Still, 3:10mins. Image reproduction courtesy of Wukun Wanambi and The Mulka Project, Buku-Larrgay Mulka.

**It's so important, making sure they are aware of...**

IM: Yep, what's bad and what's good...

**Ceremony... what they can and can't do, how they do things, who they need to talk to...**

IM: Look and listen...

**That keeps community and clan strong. Keeps that identity.**

WW: Yeah. We have law, I mean rules, that abide by that, not to trespass and we stick with that.

**And the artwork itself is an amazing way to communicate that and it also shows how diverse Yolŋu culture is, the differences between moieties and clans.**

IM: It's another way of telling stories, instead of writing human people who have been through this and that and writing names and subtitles and all that to read... what's this story about? But this is artwork, you know it's... the artists have to tell the story by another way, by making the art piece, like drawing, paintings, carvings and all that.

**One of the things I find amazing about Yolŋu art, is the way it draws the viewer back to the artist, to their clan and their culture, it draws you back into a conversation about the work with the artist.**

WW: Some people can explain what is in the meaning of the painting, but some we don't, and this is where we have some Yolŋu interpretation to translate that, in a meaningful way that people can understand... there is a story beyond that painting which is attached to us... but whatever there is, there within the painting, it represents who we are and what we are and gives us the strength and the power for that.

[pause]

WW: That's why we've got this special room here [Yirrkala Church Panels], every time when the kids come here, they have a meditation area here... That's from the old, old...

I: Early sixties...

W: From the old people. And you know, it's like new here [in the contemporary gallery] and you can accommodate them together.

**You can see the passing of the knowledge, passing of the miny'itji, passing of the stories, and the totems that reappear and different forms they take... how different clan leaders came together to make the two paintings. It's an absolutely astounding collaborative work.**

IM: All of the artworks are Dhuwa and Yirritja. Dhuwa and Yirritja it's like yin and yang.

**And everything, all things are either Dhuwa/Yirritja?**

IM: The plants, the sea, the land, the animals, even the people are Dhuwa/Yirritja.

WW: And so through kinship relationship and also tied to how marriage comes in.

IM: Through the skin names, it's kinship.

WW: What's happening, we give a lot of information to anthropologists and to people like yourself and other people. We don't get back the story. And for us and for this community, to remain somewhere in the library for us... we are always giving out our background, or knowledge, wisdoms, painting and all that stuff, but nothing comes back for us.

IM: For the young ones in school...

WW: It's for the future.

**Which makes the Mulka Project so important, because it's archiving and building knowledge for the community, for all Yolŋu to come in here and learn.**

IM: So we work close to the community, we just help do what the community need like, if they want to document some stories they want to tell us, about the old days, we just go and film them and put that into the archive.

**What is it about Dhalwaŋu miny'itji that makes it unique?**

IM: It's important and they have the Ngärra... Ngärra is like the ceremony...

WW: Parliament.

IM: Parliament ceremony. Ngärra is like the court case. Parliament house. When someone do bad things or do the wrong things, they have to go when the Ngärra start, they have to give them disciplines.

WW: This is when all the young people and women has to participate and respect at that time when someone she sees is gone from the area. Hierarchy person day, they got respect. Any other men's business we shouldn't be telling you but let's get the situation in different way of sense to you to respect that person. Dhalwaŋu people are important, so are Madarrpa these are two people in that hierarchy who can identify...

IM: In the ceremony

WW: Wirrpanda mob...

IM: Dhudi Djapu.

WW: Dhudi Djapu... These three can control the other clan group in the men's ceremony business... and they can learn from that, but they not going to take it away, it still belongs to these three clans.

IM: So it's really important, the paintings are important because, that place, Gängan have significant ceremonies like the Ngärra. The parliament house...

[pause]

WW: Back to Dhalwaŋu miny'itji... Dhalwaŋu name has gone back back back to the trading area before when, Indonesia trade some objects to them like knife, machete, that can be displayed by dancing and shows there is some connection between that... Anyway, I am just identifying that in a simple way...

[Ishmael speaks with Wukun in Yolŋu]

IM: I was just telling him there's paintings that Birikitji made of the Macassan.

WW: They traded in... traded for tobacco, sugar, damper, anything, knife, calico, all these name, say 100% of these names, the dialect that we are taught, half of it belonged to Indonesia...

IM: The Macassans.

**So through the trade of the objects the language came about...**

WW: Yeah.

IM: Rupiya [the currency of Indonesia and also the word for money in Yolŋu matha] or Yiki [meaning] Knife

WW: So we share that.... across the... it was built up across the sea...

IM: In 18th century, the Indonesians, Macassans came here, built a relationship with Yolŋu people.

**How do you see the future and changes in medium for communicating certain things like clan miny'itji and the Waŋarr?**

WW: Well that's all run by schools, and at the moment the project has been successful, in a lot of ways like learning the pathway for art, the landscape, the story and they invite some old people to actually go into that



project and it's good that also the rangers are doing that too, with them, so all Yolŋu clan come together and do that...

**IM:** But in a ceremony side, if you're growing up, it's like kindergarten, preschool and then going to primary school, and then high school, and then college, and then university and then you pass doctor and become a professor and all that, degree. In Yolŋu, in ceremony, it's the same like that, you learn about songlines, you learn about how to dance and making arm bands and looking at the designs, of anything. What's whose design it belongs to and arm bands designs are different, the Yirritja have different, the Dhuwa have different, so you have to identify everything by looking at it, if you want to be you know professor.

#### **So it's built up over time?**

**IM:** It's built up yeah, from generation... the old people give it to young people and keep on going.

**WW:** It's different between the white society world and for us. And also it's different from the other communities and how they are brought up to be who they are and what they are.

**IM:** If the marks are different. If there's four marks, three marks, two.... that's how you identify who the object belongs to.

**WW:** Like in university, if you want to get to a doctorate degree, or professor, it's the same hierarchy, you start from nothing and go up, up, up...

**IM:** And we learn it from when we are kids, little ones.

**WW:** And then how you want to be your future, is like the same way for us. We say, if you want to be a real professional artist and then go on, in the white society it's like, how can I be a doctor or anthropologist, and you aim that strategy to be who you are. You can come down, if you make mistakes, but in our way we don't do that, we climbing up... we can say, if you do that singing and dancing, then you can know the painting. See, so we got that part of support and in a white society in a university, you don't have that. You need to build up that strength to be who you are.

[pause]

**IM:** So we have Dhuwa side Djunguwan and Yirritja side Ngärra... and the Dhuwa also have authority to go and teach their younger ones and be leaders. Like this man here [Wukun], he is a leader of Marrakulu clan group, son of Mithili, have you heard about Mithili's paintings?

#### **Yes, I have... And you are from a very strong family of artists as well Wukun?**

**WW:** Yeah, I come from a strong artist family, because my grandfather Narritjin and my grandmother Bangara have gone through, the artists were strong at that time, in 1976, my father was ah...

**IM:** His grandfather was, made the artworks before other people and sold the artwork to outsiders.

#### **Is that where the art centre model comes from, from Narritjin using art to educate non-Yolŋu on Yolŋu law and culture?**

**WW:** And from a man called Wandjuk, those were the two people working on a grass roots level, stage, um to build up something of the art world.



Artist unknown, *Larrakitj* (detail), c.1968, Earth pigments on stringybark hollow log, 97.2cm x 12.8cm, La Trobe University Ethnographic Collection, Donated by Mr James and Mrs Irene Davidson through the Taxation Incentive for the Arts Scheme, 1983, LTUE020/83. Image reproduction courtesy of Buku-Larrngay Mulka. Photograph by Ian Hill.





## Dhuwa Moiety Artists:

1. Wandjuk Marika, OBE (c.1927 – 1987)  
Moiety: Dhuwa | Clan: Rirratjingu | Homeland: Yirrkala and Yalangbara  
*Title unknown*  
Date unknown  
Earth pigments on stringybark  
94.5cm x 52cm  
La Trobe University Ethnographic Collection  
Donated by Mr James and Mrs Irene Davidson through the Taxation Incentive for the Arts Scheme, 1983  
LTUE718

2. Mithinarri Gurruwiwi (c.1929 - 1976)  
Moiety: Dhuwa | Clan: Galpu | Homeland: Gika  
*Title unknown*  
Date unknown  
Earth pigments on stringybark  
102cm x 47.5cm  
La Trobe University Ethnographic Collection  
Donated by Mr James and Mrs Irene Davidson through the Taxation Incentive for the Arts Scheme, 1983  
LTUE714

3. Mithinarri Gurruwiwi (c.1929 - 1976)  
Moiety: Dhuwa | Clan: Galpu | Homeland: Gika  
*Title unknown*  
Date unknown  
Earth pigments on stringybark  
129cm x 40cm  
La Trobe University Ethnographic Collection  
Donated by Mr James and Mrs Irene Davidson through the Taxation Incentive for the Arts Scheme, 1983  
LTUE014/83

4. Mithinarri Gurruwiwi (c.1929 - 1976)  
Moiety: Dhuwa | Clan: Galpu | Homeland: Gika  
*Title unknown*  
Date unknown  
Earth pigments on stringybark  
110cm x 62.5cm  
La Trobe University Ethnographic Collection  
Donated by Mr James and Mrs Irene Davidson through the Taxation Incentive for the Arts Scheme, 1983  
LTUE710

5. Mithinarri Gurruwiwi (c.1929 - 1976)  
Moiety: Dhuwa | Clan: Galpu | Homeland: Gika  
*Title unknown*  
Date unknown  
Earth pigments on stringybark  
155cm x 57cm  
La Trobe University Ethnographic Collection  
Donated by Mr James and Mrs Irene Davidson through the Taxation Incentive for the Arts Scheme, 1983  
LTUE010/83

## Yirritja Moiety Artists:

6. Dr Gumana AO (c.1935 – 2016)  
Moiety: Yirritja | Clan: Dhalwaṇu | Homeland: Gängan  
*Title unknown*  
Date unknown  
Earth pigments on stringybark  
114cm x 54.8cm  
La Trobe University Ethnographic Collection  
Donated by Mr James and Mrs Irene Davidson through the Taxation Incentive for the Arts Scheme, 1983.  
LTUE712

7. Dr Gumana AO (c.1935 – 2016)  
Moiety: Yirritja | Clan: Dhalwaṇu | Homeland: Gängan  
*Title unknown*  
Date unknown  
Earth pigments on stringybark  
103cm x 69cm  
La Trobe University Ethnographic Collection  
Donated through the Australian Government Cultural Gifts  
Program by Mr Milton Roxanas and Mrs Alma Roxanas, 2001.  
LTUE1645/01

8. Birrikiti Gumana (c.1898 – 1982)  
Moiety: Yirritja | Clan: Dhalwaṇu | Homeland: Gängan  
*Title unknown*  
Date unknown  
Earth pigments on stringybark  
106cm x 69.5cm.  
La Trobe University Ethnographic Collection  
Donated by Mr James and Mrs Irene Davidson through the Taxation Incentive for the Arts Scheme, 1983.  
LTUE005/83

9. Birrikiti Gumana (c.1898 – 1982)  
Moiety: Yirritja | Clan: Dhalwaṇu | Homeland: Gängan  
*Title unknown*  
Date unknown  
Earth pigments on stringybark  
97cm x 50cm  
La Trobe University Ethnographic Collection  
Donated by Mr James and Mrs Irene Davidson through the Taxation Incentive for the Arts Scheme, 1983.  
LTUE007/83

10. Narritjin Maymuru (c.1916 – 1981)  
Moiety: Yirritja | Clan: Mangalili | Homeland: Djarrakpi  
*Title unknown*  
Date unknown  
Earth pigments on stringybark  
111cm x 58.5cm  
La Trobe University Ethnographic Collection  
Donated by Mr James and Mrs Irene Davidson through the Taxation Incentive for the Arts Scheme, 1983.  
LTUE722

11. Narritjin Maymuru (c.1916 – 1981)  
Moiety: Yirritja | Clan: Mangalili | Homeland: Djarrakpi  
*Title unknown*  
Date unknown  
Earth pigments on stringybark  
107.5cm x 75cm  
La Trobe University Ethnographic Collection  
Donated by Mr James and Mrs Irene Davidson through the Taxation Incentive for the Arts Scheme, 1983.  
LTUE708

12. Artist unknown  
Moiety: Yirritja | Clan: Dhalwaṇu  
*Larrakitj*  
c.1968  
Earth pigments on stringybark hollow log  
115cm x 12.5cm  
La Trobe University Ethnographic Collection  
Donated by Mr James and Mrs Irene Davidson through the Taxation Incentive for the Arts Scheme, 1983.  
LTUE016/83

13. Artist unknown  
Moiety: Yirritja | Clan: Dhalwaṇu  
*Larrakitj*  
c.1968  
Earth pigments on stringybark hollow log  
97.2cm x 12.8cm  
La Trobe University Ethnographic Collection  
Donated by Mr James and Mrs Irene Davidson through the Taxation Incentive for the Arts Scheme, 1983.  
LTUE020/83

14. Artist Unknown  
Tourist artwork  
*Larrakitj*  
c.1968  
Earth pigments on stringybark hollow log  
77.2cm x 12cm  
La Trobe University Ethnographic Collection  
Donated by Mr James and Mrs Irene Davidson through the Taxation Incentive for the Arts Scheme, 1983.  
LTUE017/83

15. Artist Unknown  
Tourist artwork  
*Larrakitj*  
c.1968  
Earth pigments on stringybark hollow log  
86.6cm x 12.5cm  
La Trobe University Ethnographic Collection  
Donated by Mr James and Mrs Irene Davidson through the Taxation Incentive for the Arts Scheme, 1983.  
LTUE018/83





## Wandjuk Marika (c.1927 – 1987)

Now today I have so much knowledge about ceremony, song, not just my own. I have two songs – my own songs and my mother's songs – including Marrakulu song, Galpu song; and also Djapu... and then I know Gamatj bottom, Gumatj top... and I also learnt the songs of Nyamil and Djabarrpuyingu and Datiwuy and my father's tribe (Rirratjingu)... So I had Djang'kawu and all these.<sup>14</sup>

Wandjuk Marika

Wandjuk Marika OBE was an esteemed member of the Rirratjingu clan of the Dhuwa moiety, he was the eldest son of Mawalan Marika and his wife Bamatja. Wandjuk was born in c.1927 on Dhambaliya (Bremer Island), a small island north of the coast of Nhulunby (Gove). He began his ceremonial instruction at the age of seven and was a renowned painter, actor, composer and land rights activist.

Wandjuk's father Mawalan was the most senior Rirratjingu leader at the time of his death. As the eldest son of Mawalan, Wandjuk inherited many ceremonial responsibilities and obligations, many of which related to his Rirratjingu country at Yalangbara.

Yalangbara and the Djang'kawu ancestors of the Rirratjingu clan became of central significance in Wandjuk's painting. Wandjuk supervised the re-enactment of the Djang'kawu story in Ian Dunlop's 1983 film, *In Memory of Mawalan*, as a tribute to his father and a method of documenting the ancestral narrative of the Djang'kawu.

Having learnt English from missionary Wilbur Chaseling, Wandjuk became a chief translator and an important figure in negotiations between his father and other senior Yolŋu men and balanda (non-Yolŋu) in Yirrkala. Wandjuk was a master negotiator who sought to reconcile Yolŋu and white Australian culture, working closely with anthropologists and art collectors who visited Yirrkala, including Donald Thomson, Ronald and Catherine Berndt, and Charles Mountford.

Wandjuk was a great Indigenous ambassador who played a critical role in the fight for land rights, contributing to the Dhuwa panel of the monumental collaborative paintings known as the *Yirrkala Church Panels* (1962-63) and helping to prepare the text for the famous *Yirrkala Bark Petition* (1963).

Wandjuk was an extremely talented artist whose work is represented in major institutions in Australia and overseas. In 1973 he co-founded the Australia Council for the Arts, Aboriginal Arts Board, of which he became Chairman in 1976.

Wandjuk was a key advocate for the legislative protection of Indigenous intellectual property rights. He fought for copyright protection for Yolŋu artists and their ownership of clan designs. The copyright licensing Aboriginal Artists Agency was established in 1976, upon his request, after he found that sacred Yalangbara designs were being reproduced without permission.

In 1976 he was awarded the Order of the British Empire (OBE).

Throughout his life, Marika wrote letters to the Federal Government on behalf of the North-East Arnhem Land clan leaders, including his father, protesting mining activities that threatened Yolŋu sovereignty and custodianship over Yolŋu land.

Wandjuk "staged his first solo exhibition in Hogarth Gallery, Sydney, in 1982. The proceeds from the exhibition and from acting in Werner Herzog's film *Where the Green Ants Dream*, allowed him to consolidate his outstation at Yalangbara and spend more time there with his family. Until his death in 1987, he pursued an active life supporting Indigenous artists, teaching others about his Yolŋu culture and, most importantly, instructing his children about their roles and responsibilities in a bicultural world."<sup>15</sup>





## Mithinarri Gurruwiwi (c.1929 – 1976)

Mithinarri Gurruwiwi was a senior member of the Galpu clan of the Dhuwa moiety. His homeland Gika is located adjacent to Matamata, set on a mangrove beach facing north across the Nalawarung Straits.

Today, Galpu live at Yirrkala, Galiwinku, Goulburn Island, Gunyungarra, Gängan and Galupa. Mithinarri painted two main areas of Galpu clan land and their associated ancestral events, a coastal area on Caledon Bay and the inland country of Garrimala. These places are represented in miny'itji (sacred clan designs) painted by Mithinarri, who seamlessly integrates Galpu miny'itji with figurative representations of ancestral events significant to the Galpu clan and Dhuwa moiety. These events often relate to the Wawilak Sisters (Wagilag Sisters) and Wititj the ancestral python. Wititj is strongly associated with the wet season, thunder and lightning. In Galpu territory "a patch of dedicated rainforest generates the cloud which merges with others to form Bol'ngu the Thunderman, the embodiment of the monsoon cloud mass" (Buku-Larrngay Mulka).

When Mithinarri was a young man, he was taught to paint by Mawalan Marika (father of Wandjuk Marika), a renowned leader and artist of the Rirratjingu clan of the Dhuwa moiety. Mithinarri learned to paint at Mawalan's Beach Camp in Yirrkala, along with other members of the Dhuwa moiety who went on to become significant artists, including Larrtjannga Ganambarr and Wandjuk Marika.

Mithinarri is described by Howard Morphy as a "prolific and passionate artist, with a reputation for eccentricity. He usually camped slightly apart from other members of his community, although often surrounded by his children, and painted on the beach under a shade of palm fronds stuck into the sand. Long after other artists began using European paintbrushes, Mithinarri often continued working with brushes made of frayed stringy bark when applying the back-ground colour and drawing the main figurative components of his paintings. He infilled the design with brushes made of human hair or from the midrib of a palm frond. Mithinarri painted with great speed and surety of hand. Scale was never a problem for him, and he adapted his compositions brilliantly to the size of the bark available.

Mithinarri's paintings are characterised by a diversity of forms but also have an overall coherence of stylistic elements. Yolngu art characteristically plays upon the relationship between figuration and abstraction. In Mithinarri's paintings, there is often an almost complete integration of the figurative representations with the geometric clan designs, creating a flowing composition. Many of his paintings of Garrimala appear to be bursting with the vibrant life of the rich inland lake as snakes, birds and fish compete with each other among the waterlilies. In other paintings, he reduces the figurative element almost to the point of abstraction, and the energy of the works abounds in the flash of the design."<sup>16</sup>

Mithinarri contributed to the Dhuwa panel of the *Yirrkala Church Panels* (1962-63). Mithinarri's paintings appear in major public collections throughout Australia and internationally, including Paris and The Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection in the United States of America. His artworks have featured in several major exhibitions, including *The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, which toured North America in 1974-76; *Aboriginal Art: The Continuing Tradition* at the National Gallery of Australia in 1989; *Aratjara – Art of the First Australians* in Düsseldorf, London and Humlebaek, 1993-94; *Yirrkala Artists: Everywhen* at the Art Gallery of Western Australia in 2009; and *Old Masters: Australia's Great Bark Artists* at the National Gallery of Australia 2013-2014.

Today, "Mithinarri's daughter Djul'tjul paints from Gurrumurru and Djalu Gurruwiwi has attained international fame as the best known yidaki maker and player from East Arnhem throughout a period when the instrument has become a global phenomenon. Galpu sing the origin of the Dhuwa yidaki. Other clan members who produce yidaki are Badikupa, Manany and Larrtjanga #2" (Buku-Larrngay Mulka).





## Birikitji Gumana (c.1898 – 1982)

Birikitji Gumana was a ceremonial leader of immense authority, an artist of phenomenal talent, a great warrior and community leader of the Dhalwaṇu clan of the Yirritja moiety. Birikitji's birth date is often contested and is said to be earlier than acknowledged and closer to 1890.

Birikitji was born approximately forty years prior to the establishment of the Yirrkala Mission by the Methodists (1935) and experienced an immense amount of change in North-East Arnhem Land during his lifetime. Birikitji shared early memories of life prior to European contact, including meeting Macassan fisherman who would visit North-East Arnhem Land in search of Trepang (sea cucumber). Yolṇu clans maintained friendly relations with Macassan fisherman who visited annually in Prau (sailing boats), sailing from Sulawesi (now Indonesia) on the south-east trade winds. This occurred from as early as c.1100-1600 and ceased when fishing licenses were no longer renewed in 1907 following the introduction of the White Australia Policy.

Birikitji most frequently painted ancestral events related to his Dhalwaṇu homeland at Gängan, including various manifestations of the ancestral figures Barama and Lany'tjung. He also produced paintings depicting subject matter of lesser sacred significance.

Macassan stories have been painted by both Dhuwa and Yirritja artists including Birikitji, while the Macassan story is not of sacred significance in Waṇarr (ancestral/creation narratives), the Macassan fishermen have had a significant and lasting impact on Yolṇu culture, evidenced in both Yolṇu matha (Yolṇu language) and Yolṇu art. Macassan sailing boats disappearing over the horizon at the end of the wet season often represent the journey of the spirit as it leaves this world and makes its way back to the ancestral realm. Birikitji painted a number of works that depicted this non-sacred subject matter, displaying his willingness to explore contemporary themes in his paintings.

In 1911, Birikitji was the first to arrive at Gängan to discover a group of Yolṇu who had been massacred by Europeans. They had gathered to perform a Ngärra ceremony.

In 1935, the Methodist mission was established in Yirrkala, from this time Birikitji lived between his homeland at Gängan and Yirrkala.

Birikitji embraced painting as a means of persuading balanda (non-Yolṇu) of the value of Yolṇu beliefs and culture, and produced paintings for anthropologists Catherine and Ronald Berndt during the 1940s. He also produced paintings for Melbourne based art collector and dealer James (Jim) Davidson, who visited Yirrkala annually during the 1960s.

Birikitji was an instrumental leader in establishing relations between Yolṇu clans and Europeans, playing a key role in the struggle for land rights.

The Yirrkala Church was constructed in 1962 and two highly significant collaborative paintings, the *Yirrkala Church Panels* (1962-63) were created to be installed on either side of the altar, representing the Yirritja and Dhuwa moieties. Along with his son Dr Gumana AO, Birikitji painted major sections of the Yirritja panel. Today the *Yirrkala Church Panels* are displayed in the museum at Buku-Larrṁgay Mulka in Yirrkala. This masterwork portrays the spiritual and physical landscape of the region, through miny'itji (sacred clan designs) associated with the various clans of the Yirritja and Dhuwa moities, asserting Yolṇu custodianship and sovereignty over the Miwatj region. Birikitji also contributed to the *Yirrkala Bark Petition* (1963) and accompanying *Thumb Print Document* (1963). He lived to see the passage of the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act (NT)* in 1976, spending his last years living at his homeland in Gängan.

"Through his hand and mind, Birikitji allows people in distant places to apprehend the spirit of his country embodied in ancestral designs" (Howard Morphy, Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at the Australian National University, Canberra).





## Dr Gumana AO (c.1935 – 2016)

Dr Gumana AO is the first son of Birrikitti Gumana, a ceremonial and community leader of immense importance, an international advocate for Yolŋu culture and an artist of the highest calibre. Like his father before him, Dr Gumana was a leader of the Dhalwaŋu clan of the Yirritja moiety and was one of the most highly respected Yolŋu leaders of North-East Arnhem Land, who held enormous traditional authority and respect. He was an important spokesperson and ambassador for his people on issues of Indigenous self-determination and rights, and received an Order of Australia (AO) for his services to his community and wider Australia.

Dr Gumana spent his early years at Gängan near powerful sources of traditional lore and culture and alongside the continuing presence of the creative ancestors, significant to the Dhalwaŋu clan. During these early days he also spent time at Yirrkala, Groote Eylandt, Ramingining and Roper River. His early life was steeped in tradition and learning traditional skills, including making canoe voyages across the open sea to Groote Eylandt.

During his late teens, Dr Gumana was sent to Darwin for ten years to receive treatment for leprosy and it was here that he met his wife. Upon his return he travelled by canoe from Yirrkala to Numbulwar to visit his mother and father.

Together with his father Birrikitti, Dr Gumana painted major sections of the *Yirrkala Church Panels* (1962–63), held in the museum at Buku-Larrngay Mulka in Yirrkala. Dr Gumana also contributed to the *Yirrkala Bark Petition* (1963) on display in Parliament House, Canberra and accompanying *Thumb Print Document* (1963).

During the homeland movement of the 1970s Dr Gumana and his father refounded the homeland of Gängan for their Dhalwaŋu people.

Dr Gumana did not attend any of the mission schools throughout North-East Arnhem Land, yet was ordained a Minister of the Uniting Church in November 1991, after studying through Nungalinga College in Darwin. In 1982 and 1988 he travelled overseas with Art & Dance Troupes, visiting London, Paris and Singapore.

Dr Gumana was awarded the prestigious overall Telstra award for Aboriginal art in 2002 and was awarded a Red Ochre Award in 2009, the most prestigious career achievement prize at the Australia Council for the Arts' National Indigenous Arts Awards. The Australia Council's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board Chair at the time, Dr Mark Bin Bakar, paid tribute to Dr Gumana's impressive career, acknowledging him as an artist of immeasurable merit "who has been creating art in non-ceremonial contexts for more than 60 years, longer than any other living artist, as well as through his art, Dr Gumana's contribution to his culture has been substantial and enduring, helping to secure land and sea rights for his people as well as working as a theologian and scholar".





## Narritjin Maymuru (c.1916 – 1981)

For the artist Narritjin Maymuru, the colours expressed the personal nature of his work. White represented his bones, red his blood, yellow his body fat and black his skin." When looking at Narritjin's paintings, in a sense the viewer is looking at the coalescence of the artists body, the land and his culture (represented in the application of Mangalili clan miny'itji), represented in the act of painting on bark. Materials of the earth.<sup>17</sup>

Wally Caruana

Narritjin Maymuru was a senior member of the Mangalili clan of the Yirritja moiety, a great intellectual, ceremonial leader, artist and a strong advocate for educating non-Yolngu people through sharing Yolngu art and culture. Narritjin was considered a Yolngu statesperson, often assuming a role as a mediator within the Yolngu community, having a particular talent for bringing people together to settle disputes.

Narritjin produced his earliest works (paintings and carvings) in 1946 for anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt. He also produced a number of works for Charles Mountford in 1948 and 1952. By the early 1960s Narritjin had become one of the most prolific and renowned Yolngu artists, often working late into the night over a sheet of bark, painting by the light of an unshaded bulb while his family slept.

In 1962 Narritjin was responsible for proposing two large panels be placed on either side of the Yirrkala church altar and was one of the artists who contributed to painting the Yirritja panel of the monumental collaborative *Yirrkala Church Panels* (1962-63). He was also a key contributor to the *Yirrkala Bark Petition* (1963) and accompanying *Thumb Print Document* (1963), the *Yirrkala Film Project* and Homelands Movement of the 1970s.

Narritjin is acknowledged as having a founding influence on the establishment of Buku-Larrngay Mulka in Yirrkala, as during the 1960s he "set up his own beachfront gallery from which he sold art that now graces many major museums and private collections. He is counted among the art centre's main inspirations and founders, and his picture hangs in the museum. His vision of Yolngu owned business to sell Yolngu art that started with a shelter on a beach has now grown into a thriving business that exhibits and sells globally" (Buku-Larrngay Mulka).

Narritjin developed a close relationship with Melbourne based art dealer James (Jim) Davidson, who first visited North-East Arnhem Land in 1960 and returned annually to purchase works of art from a number of Yolngu artists. At this time Narritjin was working from his beachfront shop in Yirrkala and his paintings became well represented in museums and galleries in both Australia and overseas, an opportunity for the promotion of Yolngu culture that Narritjin embraced wholeheartedly.

Narritjin was an innovative artist and his paintings are known for their complex symbolism significant to the Mangalili clan. His paintings focus on ancestral events associated with Djarrakpi (Cape Shield), the Mangalili homeland located north-east of Blue Mud Bay. During the Homelands Movement of the 1970s Narritjin re-established Djarrakpi as the homeland for his Mangalili People.

Many of Narritjin's paintings represent ancestral stories in a narrative form and symbolic connections are often conveyed through subtle visual puns. This is achieved by linking figurative elements to various places of importance depicted in his highly detailed Mangalili miny'itji. Narrative relationships are established both horizontally across his paintings and also vertically, providing portals to multiple narratives, events and places. Narritjin's highly identifiable style of painting is characterised by its intricacy and the artist's great attention to detail.



Narritjin's clan design consisted of diamonds, rows of dashes, anvil shapes and an X pattern that is derived from the breast girdle worn by ancestral women during mourning ceremonies. Narritjin used a brush of human hair, 'a marwat', to intricately cover the entire surface of his barks in geometric designs. The figurative elements of his compositions remained subservient to a seemingly abstracted grid. Human, animal and spirit figures usually appeared in a silhouette black or with limited patterning. The contrast between the stark figurative elements and their intricate background created an optical clarity, but more importantly it highlighted the dominant purpose of Narritjin's compositions, to relay narratives of great significance.

While the nomadic lifestyle of Narritjin's people may seem at odds with the central importance in Manggalili culture of the clan and its associated country, art serves to reconcile the two by providing a medium by which one's clan's connection to country can be transported across the vast distances necessary to maintain a hunter and gatherer existence. Narritjin's work tells of the movements of the ancestral beings, most notably the Guwak (koel cuckoo), who, whilst traveling with the Marrngu (possum), created the lagoon and sand dunes of Narritjin's homelands [Djarakpi]. In order to portray these lengthy narratives he segmented his barks into schematic panels. Though a particular feature of Manggalili painting is that subdivisions are fluid; they meander in harmony with clan designs rather than introducing harsh vertical and horizontal accents.<sup>18</sup>

Judith Ryan



Despite experiencing long intervals of separation from his Manggalili homeland, Narritjin maintained his connection to place through painting and retelling stories associated with Djarrakpi.

Narritjin saw art as a means of communicating ideas and knowledge, as a means of encouraging greater understanding of Yolŋu culture and as a way of maintaining the strength of Yolŋu culture for future generations of Yolŋu people.

During the 1960s Narritjin encouraged his daughters Bumiti and Galuma to paint, teaching them Manggalili clan miny'itji. Narritjin is considered one of the first lawmen and artists to encourage art production by his daughters, along with Mawalan Marika of the Rirratjingu clan (Wandjuk Marika's father).

Narritjin learnt clan mythology from his mother's maternal grandfather Birrikiti at Yirrkala and he in turn taught his children and his brother Nanyin Maymuru's children to paint. They included his sons Manydjilnga and Banapana and Nanyin's son Baluka.

Today, Baluka Maymuru (son of Nanyin) is a leader of great ceremonial responsibility for the Manggalili clan, an award winning artist and like Narritjin and Nanyin before him, a strong advocate for the role of art in the transmission of cultural knowledge.

Narritjin played a key role in establishing harmonious relationships between two cultures, the Yolŋu people and the mission established at Yirrkala in 1935. Narritjin and his brother Nanyin worked for the missionary Wilbur Chaseling at Yirrkala and the sale of their art had the double benefit of securing funds for the church and for the Yolŋu themselves. This mutually beneficial arrangement continued until the mining town at nearby Nhulunbuy was established. With the mining industry came alcohol, which ravaged the community, prompting many elders to establish permanent outstations outside of Yirrkala.

The Maymuru family were struck by tragedy in 1974 when Narritjin's two eldest sons died. When Narritjin died suddenly in 1981, his dream of a homeland outstation for the Manggalili at Djarrakpi lay unfulfilled. Another five of Narritjin's children died over the following decade, yet despite this hardship, the remaining Manggalili clan descendants established a homeland centre on Cape Shield in 1995. Painting has become the primary means by which this settlement has remained viable, a testament to Narritjin's powerful instruction and commitment to Manggalili culture.

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The name ‘Mulka’ means a sacred but public ceremony, and to hold or protect.

The mission is to sustain and protect Yolŋu cultural knowledge in North-East Arnhem Land under the leadership of community elders. The Mulka production house, recording studio, digital learning centre and cultural archive are managed by Yolŋu law and governance.

The Mulka Project strives to employ and train as many Yolŋu of all ages as possible. Currently we have male and female staff spanning three generations. Our facilities are a unique media training ground for future indigenous leaders. We produce and repatriate audio-visual cultural resources and disseminate them throughout the Yolŋu community. We provide industry standard workplace training, create income streams for homeland communities, whilst employing cultural advisors, film makers, translators, camera operators, editors, artists, and scholars.

At the core of The Mulka Project resides a growing, living archive of Yolŋu knowledge, ceremony, and cultural history. The word, dance, song, and law of elders past return to the minds and hearts of our people and repeat on through the generations. In the same way The Mulka Project gives voice to generations past it also has an obligation to let contemporary Yolŋu knowledge and law speak to coming generations. In the hands, and on the shoulders, of Yolŋu, The Mulka Projects cameras and microphones are the Eyes and the Ears of our children’s unborn children.

## Exhibited works:

Gäpu Ga Gunḁa - The Art of Nongirrŋa Marawili	5:25mins
Larrakitj - Wukun Wanambi	3:10mins
Yiki Bunḡul	9:43mins
Sea Rights Bunḡul	12:25mins

Courtesy of The Mulka Project, Buku-Larrngay Mulka.



## Wukun Wanambi

Born:	1962
Clan:	Marrakulu, Dhurili
Moiety:	Dhuwa
Homeland:	Gurka'wuy



Wukun's father, Mithili Wanambi, died before he was able to learn from him to any great degree. He began painting in 1997 as a result of the Saltwater project in which he participated. His arm of the Marrakulu clan is responsible for saltwater imagery which had not been painted intensively since his father's death in 1981. His caretakers, or Djunggayi, principally the late Yanggarriny Wunungmurra (1932-2003), transferred their knowledge of these designs to Wukun so that the title to saltwater could be asserted. Some of these designs were outside even his father's public painting repertoire.

Wukun's sisters Boliny and Ralwurrandji were active artists for a long time before this but not painting oceanic water of Marrakulu. Ralwurrandji was an employee at Buku-Larrnggay through the 1980s. Wukun sought education through Dhupuma College and Nhulunbuy High School and mainstream employment as a Sport and Rec Officer, Probation and Parole Officer and at the local mine. He has five children with his wife Warraynga, who is also an artist, and is now a grandfather. It was not until 2007 that their younger brother Yalanba began to paint.

Wukun's first bark for this Saltwater project won the 1998 NATSIAA Best Bark award. Wukun has gone on to establish a high profile career.

In the 2003 NATSIAA awards, a sculptured larrakitj by Wukun was Highly Commended in the 3D category. Since then he has been included in many prestigious collections. He had his first solo show at Raft Artspace in Darwin in 2004 followed by solo shows at Niagara Galleries, Melbourne in 2005 and 2008.

Wukun has been involved heavily in all the major communal projects of this decade including the Sydney Opera House commission, the opening of the National Museum of Australia, the Wukidi ceremony in the Darwin Supreme Court and the films: *Lonely Boy Richard*, *The Pilot's Funeral* and *Dhakiyarr versus The King*. Wukun is an active community member in recreation and health projects and supports a large family.

In 2008 he was commissioned to provide a design for installation on a seven-storey glass facade in the Darwin Waterfront Development. He became a Director of Buku-Larrnggay's media centre, The Mulka Project in 2007. In this role he facilitates media projects such as the Nhama DVD and mentors young Yolngu in accessing training and employment in the media centre.

## Ishmael Marika

Born:	1990
Clan:	Rirratjingu
Moiety:	Dhuwa
Homeland:	Yalangbara



My name is Ishmael Marika. I am the grandson of Milirrpum Marika the lead plaintiff in the Gove Land Rights case. I am the son of Gary Waninya Marika - who has an Order of Australia for services to Indigenous health. My mother is Yalmakany Marawili, she is a Yirralka Ranger and exhibited artist - a sister to Djambawa Marawili. I was born in Nhulunbuy but spent my youth in Yilpara. I went to Nhulunbuy Primary School before going to Melbourne to finish years 8 and 9. I finished years 10 -12 at a school in Darwin before retuning to Yirrkala in 2009. I worked as a ranger for 6 months before coming to work at the Mulka Project where I have been since 2010.

Ishmael is currently a director, editor, and production officer at The Mulka Project in Yirrkala. He has worked on numerous cultural productions for the Yolngu including documentations of dhapi, bapurru, and other ceremonial events. He is best know for his documentary on Yolngu land rights entitled *Wanga Watangumirri Dharuk* which has screened at many festivals as well as a private screening with the East Timor President Ramos Horta. He has recently released his second film a drama depicting Yolngu sorcery entitled *Galka*. This film was launched to standing ovations at Garma 2014.

He is currently working on a historical documentary about the old Yirrkala Hospital.



# MIWATJ

La Trobe Art Institute

29 May - 7 July 2018

La Trobe Art Institute, 121 View Street, Bendigo, Victoria, Australia 3550

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Curatorial Consultant: Wukun Wanambi  
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Wandjuk Marika OBE, *Title unknown* (detail), Date unknown, Earth pigments on stringybark, 94.5 x 52cm, La Trobe University Ethnographic Collection, Donated by Mr James and Mrs Irene Davidson through, the Taxation Incentive for the Arts Scheme, 1983, LTUE718. Image reproduction courtesy of the Marika family and Buku-Larrngay Mulka. Photograph by Ian Hill.



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Saturday 12:00pm-5:00pm  
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