



Biography of Djalu Gurruwiwi

by Guan Lim

“

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I have known Djalu' Gurruwiwi for a few years now, and am continuing to discover deeper layers to this man's life and thought.

Similar patterns can be detected in the lives of other Yolngu who lived through the tumultuous years - especially in the 1950s - when missionary influence, and then government interference, caused a realignment of Yolngu cultural practice, social organisation and philosophical thought.

For some Yolngu, personal life stories are not a pleasant reminder of the impacts of Western society on indigenous lives. For Djalu' Gurruwiwi, however, it would appear that, as it is, some success has been achieved in negotiating a new existence that brings together traditional culture and Western offerings. It has not always been like that though.

This biography will focus on aspects of Djalu's life that he himself is eager to share with the rest of the world, in order that a fuller appreciation can be gained of Yolngu struggles, hardships, and also strategies for forging a new way of life.

Certainly Monyu, one of Djalu's fathers, was influential in shaping his son's life. Monyu's leadership qualities and quest to adjust to a new way of life is reflected in Djalu's current efforts to find a new path.

In the late 1950s, Monyu, a Galpu clan leader, together with other clan elders, erected a memorial on Elcho Island that publicly displayed secret/sacred ceremonial objects that in the past were never seen by women and the uninitiated. This was part of an Adjustment Movement in that part of Arnhem Land that was a product of a number of factors in combination.

It should be known by now that Djalu' Gurruwiwi is a Messianic figure in more ways than one.

Whilst to Westerners his name is synonymous with exquisite yirdaki craftsmanship, there are, in this man, dimensions - known more intimately in Arnhem Land - that transcend the mundane.

Djalu is a ritual expert, a Christian leader and a spiritual guide for his clanspeople. In a way, these roles and attributes overshadow his yirdaki stardom, but they also helped shape it.

This Galpu man is perhaps the finest of all yirdaki craftsmen ever. The evidence is everywhere.

On continents apart, yirdaki aficionados communicate on the Internet, the topic of discussion - Djalu' Gurruwiwi instruments.

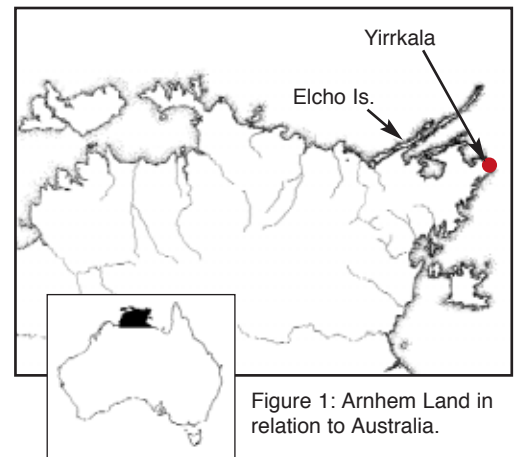


Figure 1: Arnhem Land in relation to Australia.

That Yothu Yindi, the band hailing from Yirrkala, north-east Arnhem Land, prefer instruments crafted by Djalu' speaks volumes of his brilliance.

If that is not enough evidence, his wares regularly sell for extraordinary amounts to avid collectors, and it may be a matter of time before sums presently inconceivable are commanded for his 'good wood',



especially as suitable trees become depleted by over-zealous and unskilled yirdaki makers.

Only a handful of didgeridu artisans have achieved the distinction approximating that of Djalu's. They are virtuoso yirdaki musicians Milkayngu Mununggurr (of Yothu Yindi fame), David Blanas, Alan Dargin, and David Hudson. Of these musicians, only Blanas is noted for his output of fine instruments.

To understand Djalu' Gurruwiwi more fully as a person, father, leader and elder, however, and to gain an insight into the forces that have guided him to international repute, requires us to delve into history and into the lives of the Yolngu people of north-east Arnhem Land...

Djalu' Gurruwiwi was born at Milingimbi before World War 2. His spirit conception origins, however, is traced to Wirriku Island, a small island in the Wessel Island complex. Djalu' often paints the ancestral story associated with Wirriku: the sacred rock named Dhaangarl (incidentally, this is the name of Djalu's sister), created by the Thunder Man, Bol'ngu, and Marrparn, the sacred turtle at the site.

Although his registered year of birth is 1931, his mental vigour, physical vitality, and quiet intensity today suggest a man ten or fifteen years younger.

The bombing in those early years of Milingimbi and Wessel Island, on the north coast of central Arnhem Land, by the Japanese remains clear in Djalu's mind. It was to be the start of a transformation in the lives of the Yolngu people, as an ancient and ancestral way of life was exchanged for contemporary settlement at the mission centres, to become wards of the state.

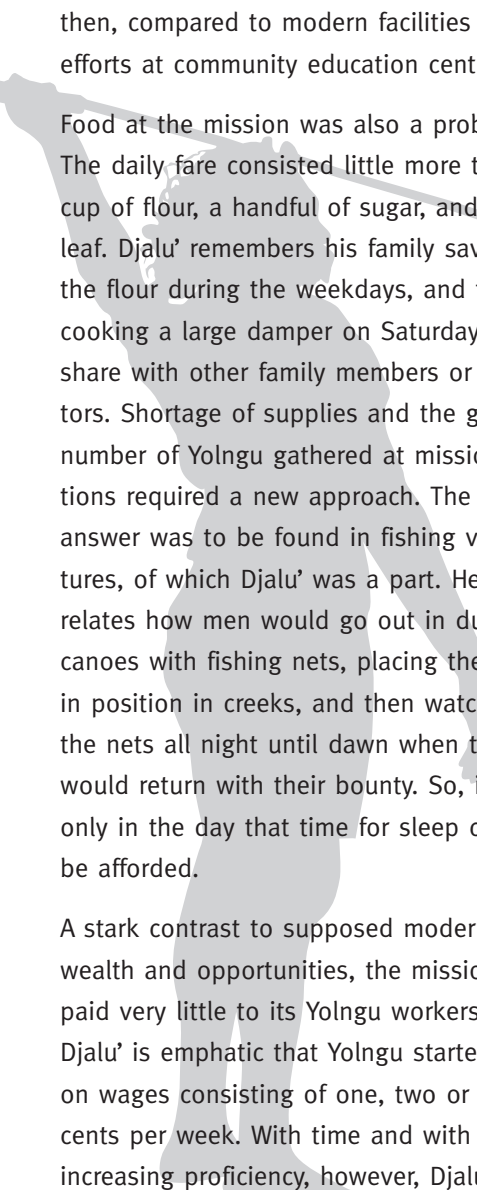
Despite this new intrusion, Yolngu retained control of their lives. Many decided to maintain associations with ancestral homelands, to exert their independence from the missions, and to continue winning their living from the bush. Djalu' followed his parents and family group on hunting trips, and he remembers his father, a noted yirdaki player, carrying an instrument on these journeys.

Later, as a young man, he joined a team of Yolngu in building the mission station at Galiwin'ku, Elcho Island. He is proud of those days when construction was manual, before mechanical devices afforded easier work. A local timber mill provided material for housing. Wood was harvested in the nearby bush. Young men would carry milled timber on their shoulders, in comparison to current transport provision by barge, of timber sourced from foreign localities.

Djalu's evolving carpentry skills saw him building houses in Darwin, the 'Gordon Symon' being one he helped construct. That building is still standing today, as are a few houses he assisted in building at Galiwin'ku. The relish in which he describes the carpentry work he engaged in is a sure sign of his natural affinity for working with wood and yirdaki:

"I build houses, good houses, manyak like good carpenter... boys are cutting wood, good wood, forest tree, and cutting manyak...six by six, eight by eight, two by two, three by two, something like that, six foot long, nine foot long, something like that..."

The early mission days are remembered by Djalu' with mixed feelings. He talks of the strict discipline of the mission staff, who banned traditional ceremonies, sending outlaws away into the bush. He also



remembers the paltry education provided then, compared to modern facilities and efforts at community education centres.

Food at the mission was also a problem. The daily fare consisted little more than a cup of flour, a handful of sugar, and tea leaf. Djalul' remembers his family saving up the flour during the weekdays, and then cooking a large damper on Saturday to share with other family members or visitors. Shortage of supplies and the growing number of Yolngu gathered at mission stations required a new approach. The answer was to be found in fishing ventures, of which Djalul' was a part. He relates how men would go out in dugout canoes with fishing nets, placing the nets in position in creeks, and then watching the nets all night until dawn when they would return with their bounty. So, it was only in the day that time for sleep could be afforded.

A stark contrast to supposed modern wealth and opportunities, the mission paid very little to its Yolngu workers. Djalul' is emphatic that Yolngu started out on wages consisting of one, two or three cents per week. With time and with increasing proficiency, however, Djalul' started earning up to \$10 for one or two weeks work.

A spell of gardening work and crocodile hunting preceded his entry into what would later become his domain of expertise - yirdaki. In the mission school, he would teach bunggul - traditional dancing, singing and yirdaki playing. Later, initiatives by the mission to generate more income saw the beginnings of an arts and craft industry; Djalul', with aboriginal people from other mission centres, were encouraged to produce a range of items including bark paintings, yirdaki, and

carvings, to be sold by the church in southern cities. By this stage, Djalul' had married and his children 'grown up' or beyond infancy.

In his description of his fathers as yirdaki masters Djalul' is most fervent:

“Yolthu gan ngarrany marnggikungal? Marlu, marrnda rraku, nhaangal diltjingur gulkthurr way, yirdaki balanya yirdaki, gulk... Marlu'mirringu marnggi. Yirdaki huntinglil ngayi dhu gaama; ngayi dhu miyapunu djardal'yun ngayi dhu yirdaki-wanga... Ngunha yirdakiny djaama because ngarraku baapa'mirringu nhaawi yirdakiw ngayi marnggi, Monyu... balanya rrakun baapa rraku marnggikungal dhangu dhangu yirdaki dhuwal nhe dhu gulkthun...”

[Who taught me? My two fathers, I watched them cutting yirdaki in the bush like this...My father knows. When he goes hunting he brings yirdaki with him; when he is hunting for turtle he plays the yirdaki...I make yirdaki because my father, Monyu, knew about yirdaki...he taught me like this, here's a yirdaki, here and here, you cut this one...]

Djalul's father, Monyu, had one yirdaki that was kept for a long time, perhaps ten or twenty years. Made of bardawil', it was kept in water whenever it was not being used to prevent cracking. In those days, yirdaki were not well made in that they were rough, but their sound was sometimes good. Knives were used to fashion the instrument, whereas a variety of tools such as sanders are available today .

Djalul' speaks of his fathers passing on responsibilities, culture, the law, before they passed away. In a similar vein, Djalul' hopes his sons will accept the roles required of them in maintaining their cul-

tural heritage. Other youngsters appear to take this lightly, as though culture is fun and games. But Djalul stresses that even birlma and yirdaki are important, that they are rooted in law and that they are powerful.

“Romngur ngayi yindi yaaku, baaydhi ngayi nyumukurniny ...”.

[It doesn't matter the yirdaki is a small object physically, but in culture and tradition, the yirdaki is very important...]

Yirdaki is not like a trumpet he says.

Today, Djalul's enthusiasm for the yirdaki does not stem solely from his endeavour to keeping culture alive, a response to the early days when missionaries frowned upon 'pagan religion'. A number of other factors conspired to lead this man to prominence, of which biblical intervention plays a leading role:

“Baapay Godthu rraku gurrupar djaama yirdaki. Djaama rrakun, yaka wiripuny djaama...yaka djaama wiripunha...”

[God gave me the job to make yirdaki. That is my job now, not anything else...]

Djalul describes such a job as salvation as well as a means of making a living. The yirdaki touches the soul, it changes people. But it also provides for him and his family, as opposed to the meagre pay he received at the mission settlements. And with an ever growing number of dependents under his wing, Djalul is keen to continue with his yirdaki enterprise, and indeed, to expand it. The more people touched by the yirdaki, the greater is his fulfilment to the Lord.

Fulfilment also comes from his negotiatory role in community matters, from his preaching at Christian gatherings, and his conciliation of traditional cultural beliefs

with modern Christian ideology. That he is a respected elder and ceremonial specialist suggests that his synthesis and integration of the two has been seamless.

His former prowess for playing the yirdaki is also noteworthy:

“When I playing didjeridu like life and lung like young fella, [but I am] very old. I got more power you see. Very strong tongue, more power for yirdaki...I got more power not enough for everybody that time, eh?”

Djalul suggests he was even better than current star, Milkayngu Mununggurr, or anyone else. He attributes his power to his abstinence from alcohol and tobacco:

“Nhaa ngatha ngarali' wu nhaa; ngarrany dhu buny'tjun ngarrany dhu dhinggaman”.

[Is this tobacco food or what? If I smoke it I will die].

In a mysterious and tragic affliction, however, Djalul was struck by a condition that crippled either one of his vocal cords or damaged part of his voice box, robbing him of his full power to play the yirdaki. He cites the misfortune as being the result of his refusal to pay a clansman who had placed a ceremonial malediction upon him; bad luck ensued and he is now left with a feeble, gruff voice that one has to strain to hear. Djalul demonstrates 'gurdurku' or broлга to me, indicating that he simply cannot perform that piece any more:

“The sound, power from here , inside...see, he dead”.

The arena of Yolngu politics is a complex one, and Djalul is quick to disclose to me that he has been taken advantage of by other community members. Often he is not compensated fairly when he produces



an instrument for them. “Yaka manymak, yaatjkurru Yolngu”, he says. Even from other corners of Arnhem Land, he still gets requests for instruments, from as far as Milingimbi, several hundred kilometres away from his base at Gunyangara.

The future is best express by Djalul’s own words:

“Ngarra dhu yakan stop. Manyamak eh?”

[I will not stop now [being involved in yir-daki]. That’s good isn’t it?]

Today, Djalul’ is attempting to reclaim control of his name, his reputation and his market potential within an industry that is increasingly moving away from the roots of the instrument. He hopes that through this web site, he will be able to combine, as his father did, two very different worlds: one belonging to Western society and the other that he knows Yolngu must never lose. As such, the internet as a tool to generate income is a choice symbol for reconciling modern living with an ancient and ancestral way of life.

Djalul’ hopes that support will be given to this enterprise that is not envisaged to be the only outlet for his instruments, but one that will allow him greater control and pride in an art of which he is it’s most famous son. As keeper of the secrets and guardian of the knowledge of Wititj, Djalul’ is anxious that his power is not eroded by exploitation or plain ignorance by those outside of the Yolngu world.

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