

***The Circle of Learning: Educating for Life***  
**Garma Festival 2010**  
**Professor Janice Reid**

When I arrived in eastern Arnhem Land in 1974 it was a time of far-reaching change. Some of the changes were for the good, but most were not. Federal and Territory politics, mining interests and legal conflicts had created a maze which Yolngu, government, the mission and the mining industry were all trying to find their way through. They all had different interests and opinions about what mattered, different hopes and fears about the future, and different ideas about who had the right to make the important decisions.

This wasn't just any remote part of Australia and Yirrkala wasn't just any town. By 1974 it had already come to stand for several things: the courage of people without money or influence to stand up to international mining interests; their determination to confront a Government that wasn't listening and didn't recognise their rights; and their decision to take their struggles to the courts. The men and women elders of the community then living had *all* been born and grown up before missionaries arrived in 1935. They were known and are remembered today for their wisdom, dignity and fighting spirit. They were determined to defend and preserve their traditions and languages. Their patient explanation of these to visitors and supporters never waned.

In the decades since that time visitors from all over this country and overseas have continued to be drawn to north-east Arnhem Land. The numbers of people who come to Garma are just one example. Yirrkala was and still is a magnet for people from all over Australia and beyond – politicians, bureaucrats, academics, dignitaries, cultural tourists and students. The music of Yothu Yindi took the world by storm. The bark paintings are held in major museums and galleries and sold through dealers in cities such as Sydney, London and New York (to name a few). The art of the region has been adapted for great civic projects like the musée du quai Branly in Paris where Gulumbu Yunupingu's mural is there for all to see. And then there is the music of Gurrumul Yunupingu which also now has an international following, not to mention the Chooky Dancers from Galiwin'ku on YouTube. These and many other accomplishments all

speak to the magnetism of Yolngu culture.

Many outsiders, like me, have come here over the decades - - and some have stayed. Just like foreigners who fall in love with the rich cultures of Europe, or with the spirituality and traditions of Asia, they find their own lives enriched by Yolngu history and culture. Others have come feeling they can help to change things for the better. In every case we are welcomed with a generosity of spirit, and if we stay are adopted into a mosaic of family relationships which we do our best to learn, usually with about the understanding of a 5 year old!

When I was invited to speak today the request from Galarrwuy and Gulumbu Yunupingu asked me to talk about the history of the Yolngu. I thought, which history? The last 50 years? Or the last 200 years? Or perhaps the last 50,000 years? And *whose* history? The Yolngu nation's? The scientists' who write about the discovery and settlement of this continent in antiquity by intrepid Aboriginal explorers from south-east Asia? The missionaries who came and established coastal villages in the last century? The lawyers, churches and anthropologists, some of whom threw themselves behind Yolngu efforts? The documents generated by governments, with their shifting policies, that have come and gone? History through women's eyes or through men's eyes? Secret or public knowledge?

I thought about the great journey of the Djangka'wu sisters who landed during the Dreamtime at Yalangbara down the coast. As they travelled through the land they gave form to people and places, and are celebrated in the poetry, song and dance of the Yolngu families and clans of the Dhuwa moiety. And about the journey of Barama, who emerged to travel from Gangan, and other Yirritja creator beings. But my knowledge is superficial and here, in the heart of Yolngu country, creation epics are best told by their owners.

After I turned all these possibilities over in my head I decided I could only talk about what I learned and was taught when I lived here and what is written and recorded in books, artworks and films. And there is a lot, spread through university libraries and government archives in Australia and across the world.

So let me say a few words about the relatively recent history of this region, based on what is remembered or written. I know that this leaves out a lot and only starts a few hundred years ago, not tens of thousands of years ago when the human history of this land really began.

Although it's quite possible that Chinese, Indian or Dutch seafarers made their way to these shores many centuries ago, we do know that from at least the 1600s large fleets of boats from what is now Indonesia (Macassar in the Sulawesi) came to collect trepang or sea slugs to dry and sell. They camped for a season and then sailed home on favourable winds laden down with their harvest. No doubt there were conflicts and tensions, but they were not colonisers. They were traders and brought metal tools, cloth, tobacco, alcohol and other trade goods. Some Yolngu actually sailed back with them to Macassar. Their campsites, bits of pottery and the tamarind trees they planted pepper the coast of Arnhem Land. Trade Malay words like 'rupiah' and 'Balanda' were incorporated into the Yolngu languages.

So before Captain Cook landed at Botany Bay this was quite a cosmopolitan part of the world. Indeed when Mathew Flinders circumnavigated Australia and landed just down the coast from here in 1803, he met a fleet of Macassan boats at anchor and chatted to the captain of the fleet who told him that about 60 praus were operating along the coast. Of course, compared with the Indigenous history of ownership of the continent these visitors were **all** latecomers.

But by the early 1900s (1907) the government of the day effectively put a stop to these voyages and the era of co-existence ended. However Japanese and European pearl divers and trepangers began illegally fishing the waters. A few European adventurers had also started to move into the area looking for land and hoping to make their fortunes. By all accounts, at least some were rapacious and violent. Things came to a head in 1932 when several predatory Japanese were speared at Caledon Bay. This was followed by a fatal attack on a police party sent out to arrest the perpetrators and on a couple of drifters who came along the coast by boat. Of the four men

who were eventually captured, tried and gaoled in Darwin, one, Dhakiyarr, when released in 1934 after an uproar about their sentences, was never seen again. He is still believed by many to have received summary justice. In 2003 in a widely televised ceremony at the High Court in Darwin he was remembered, honoured and symbolically brought home.

All this was in the context of defensive Yolngu attacks on intruders and trespassers, and raids and murders by white frontiersmen probably starting in the late 1800s. These included a massacre, probably in the 1920s, at Gangan - not far to the southwest of here. The leader of the Dhalwangu clan Birrikitji Gumana described it in detail to me and others in the 70s. They were not good times. The spirit of reciprocity between Macassans and Yolngu was replaced by a state of hostility between the Indigenous landowners and opportunistic invaders.

Some called for a punitive expedition to kill the Yolngu perpetrators, but other voices prevailed, and in 1935 the Methodist church was allowed to set up a small settlement at Yirrkala. In addition to Galiwin'ku (or Elcho Island) and Milingimbi they were meant to encourage settlement, to provide rudimentary schooling, health care, cultivation of crops and animals and Christian teaching.

Through the War years many left their ancestral lands and settled at Yirrkala. They continued their traditions but incorporated the new ideas and practical knowledge that the new-comers brought, as they had with the Macassans.

Yirrkala was meant to be what one missionary called a "sanctuary". But in this quiet corner of the globe geologists found in the early 1950s that bauxite blanketed the landscape. As the prospect of a mine, port and mining town loomed, the community became very worried. Under the threat of permanent excision of nearly 400 square kilometres of Gumatj and Rirratjingu land for the mine the leaders wrote a bark petition and sent it to the Australian Parliament. The 1963 petition is a very important historic document and is on permanent display in the central court in Parliament House in Canberra. Everyone should go and see it. It was written in English

and Gumatj. It read in part:

*The Humble Petition of the Undersigned aboriginal people of Yirrkala ... respectfully showeth*

1. *That nearly 500 people... are residents of the land excised from the Aboriginal Reserve in Arnhem Land....*
2. *That the procedures ...and the fate of the people on it ... were kept secret from them....*
4. *That the land in question has been hunting and food gathering land for the Yirrkala tribes from time immemorial (and) we were all born here.*
5. *That places sacred to the Yirrkala people... are in the excised land.*
6. *That the people ... fear that the fate that has overtaken the Larrakeah tribe will overtake them (and)*
8. *They humbly pray that no arrangements will be entered into ...which will destroy the livelihood and independence of the Yirrkala people.*

*And your petitioners as in duty bound will ever pray God to help you and us.*

This masterful action, grounded in Yolngu law and diplomacy, had very little traction in Canberra, so the people decided to take their fight to the courts. The 1971 Yirrkala land rights case that followed is described in legal textbooks and taught to university law students under its title, *Milirrpum and Others v. Nabalco and the Commonwealth of Australia*. The plaintiffs clearly impressed the judge with the detail and depth of their evidence for land ownership passed through hundreds of generations. It was integral to the religious and economic lives of the people and described in Yolngu stories, songs and dances. However under British-Australian common law about property, the Judge said he could not find in their favour.

This rejection of Yolngu tenure was a devastating decision for all who had fought so hard. But it was not the end. The case became central to the 1972 Woodward Royal Commission into land rights in the

Northern Territory that was commissioned in by the Whitlam government in 1972 (and reported in 1974), the development of the *Northern Territory Land Rights Act* of 1976, to subsequent successful land claims all over Australia and, of course, the overturning of the concept of *terra nullius* in the Mabo case in 1992.

At about this time in the early '70s with the election in 1972 of the reforming and sympathetic Whitlam government and thus the end to the policy of assimilation, families started to move back to their homelands. The "outstation movement" as it became known, was described to me then by Dr Gawirrin Gumana AO as "going home". In spirit they had never really left, but wanted to reclaim and take care of their land and also to get away from some of the problems in town, like alcohol and violence. It must have been galling for the elders to see the impact of the pub in Nhulunbuy on young and not-so-young drinkers when they had protested about a take-away license being granted to the Walkabout when it was being built. They knew what it would bring.

In the years since, of course, the Yolngu nation has become even more prominent with its famous singers and public figures, two Australians of the Year (Galarrwuy and Mandawuy Yunupingu), several of its leaders decorated with Australian and university honours, and others known as cultural ambassadors throughout the world.

There were, of course, and remain the tragedies of suicides, sickness, alcoholism, and people dying at a much younger age than most other Australians. My own education here was actually all about illness, healing and the causes of deaths and serious sickness and injury. So what did I learn that's relevant to this weekend's theme of education and training?

First of all, I want to pay a tribute, because I had the best organiser, adviser, teacher, research coordinator and community mediator you could hope for all in one person. Her name was Nangaypa Dhamarrandji, my sister and the mother of Milminyina Dhamarrandji, who's here at Garma. They looked after me, fed me, were tactful when I was slow to learn, tolerant when I made social blunders, took

me everywhere and thought my fear of big spiders was ridiculous (“bawamirri”). As one of the daughters of Munggurawuy the distinguished elder who was a signatory of the bark petition (and also of course the father of Gulumbu, Galarrwuy and Mandawuy, among his other children) she and her equally learned sisters, their daughters and senior men and many others, shared a wealth of knowledge with me. Most of us are used to classroom teaching where there is one teacher and a roomful of students. In my case, I was one student with a community-ful of teachers. They explained to me the causes of illness, the ceremonies, the medical and the spiritual treatments.

One project which we tackled, with a botanist and a biologist to help, was to record the Yolngu names, preparation, use and Latin botanic names of one hundred bush and sea medicines and treatments. (I recently met a scientist from the CSIRO who was so excited when I told her this that she begged me for a copy.) And of course the healing centre, Dilthan Yolngunha here and the project inspired and led by Gulumbu to pass on this knowledge to the young and bring it into the public eye is what Garma is all about. The passing on of thousands of years of wisdom to future generations and sharing Yolngu knowledge with visitors and students.

We all understand things in our own ways. Ever since I was a school science teacher in Papua New Guinea I'd been drawn to age-old traditions - perhaps because white Australian history is so shallow by comparison! I was especially fascinated by traditional medicine in different cultures and the way we all respond to sickness and understand health. Here I learned that at the meeting point between western medicine and Yolngu medicine, everyone was quite practical about what treatments and medicines they used. However they still explained causes and cures in Yolngu cultural terms. When I wrote about this I called it a “socio-medical theory”, to emphasise the very logical links between serious illnesses and deaths, and social conflicts and personal relationships.

We all ask “why me?” and “why now?” when we or our loved ones get very sick. Western medicine doesn't really have an answer to such questions. Yolngu explanations do. But what stood out then, and what I feel the women's healing centre is all about today, is the “two

way” use of knowledge, from both the western and Yolngu traditions. Whether you called on the services of a doctor, nurse, health worker or *marrnggitj* (the Yolngu spiritual healer), or took antibiotics or prepared an infusion of, say, *nhambarra* (*Melaleuca Viridiflora*), or all of these, depended on what people had found from experiment and experience worked best.

However, it seemed to me that those who were most comfortable with, and took the best from, *both* traditions were those who’d had a solid school education and could read and write good Yolngumatha and English when they needed to, who could negotiate for themselves and their families when someone was sick, who understood health hazards and healthy lifestyles. They were those who, as well as their own parents and grandparents, had had teachers and family friends who could encourage and support them in their education. They didn’t stand on one side of the cultural fence looking across; for them the gates were open and they could walk back and forth as they chose.

This leads me to the last part of what I wanted to say. There has been so much debate over the years about the provision of education in remote Australia. But there are some things that public health studies across the world have consistently shown: that is that overall those with a good education have better health, more personal choices and opportunities, a higher income, lower crime rates and lower rates of drug and alcohol abuse than those without. Well educated mothers also have healthier children. It doesn’t matter where or how education is delivered; only that it is accessible and of good quality. We also know that a strong and proud family and a proud cultural identity are the foundations of good emotional and mental health.

When I first came here the primary school was mainly staffed by mission teachers and early high school education was offered by the secondary boarding colleges Yirara in Alice Springs, Kormilda in Darwin and Dhupuma here. Dhupuma’s catchment was all of northeast Arnhem Land. Students boarders came from several Yolngu towns and homeland centres.

These colleges were set up by the Northern Territory government as pathways or bridges to mainstream high schools. The purpose was to offer locally a good introduction to secondary education and prepare students to go to mainstream high schools. They weren't perfect. In fact some people were critical of the way the policy of assimilation shaped their purpose and curriculum.

There are bad memories around Australia for other Aboriginal communities about the residential schools of the 50s and 60s. Teachers forbade students to speak their language and tried to suppress Aboriginal culture. As a native Canadian man of the Alert Bay community said of similar schools there, "They tried to make us them".<sup>1</sup> These early dormitory schools really were the vanguard of assimilation, where age-old cultures and languages had no place. But these days are fortunately long gone.

Ten years ago the Nambara Schools Council here sent a submission to a federal government enquiry into remote and rural education calling for bilingual education programs, proper educational services in the homelands, much better teacher training, school facilities and real community participation. In the submission Dr Gawirrin Gumana also raised the idea of a school in the homelands that was accessible to all, likening it to Dhupuma College. He said the leaders had been talking about this ever since it closed. He said (HREOC 1999:23),

*I feel strongly about education in Yolŋu (sic) culture and also in the Western ways, so that the two will be side-by-side and our children will be in the middle with an understanding of both.*

Some of the visitors here will have noticed an overgrown ruin of a building just up the road from here. That was Dhupuma College. I've never found out why the College, which was opened in 1972 on the site of an old tracking station, closed in 1981. If you read some questions and answers in the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly records of the time the buildings were very run down and the costs were high. The teachers' union at the time said it was a political decision. One speaker said you could send every student to Geelong

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<sup>1</sup> ABC RN, 360 Documentary, "My Life So Far" 10 July 2010

Grammar for the same amount of money, but of course he missed the point. The point was that Dhupuma was here, not there.

When I read all this I began thinking about all those public and low-cost private high schools we have around our university in western Sydney which share the mission of bringing the best possible education to students regardless of their backgrounds or means. And I reflected on Noel Pearson's powerful vision of young Indigenous people enrolled on scholarships in private boarding schools in towns and cities, and in residential colleges in universities, where the educational experience and extracurricular opportunities are second to none.

If there can be Greek schools, Arabic schools, Christian schools, Jewish schools, international schools, day schools, boarding schools and correspondence schools across Australia, why not Indigenous schools of all kinds too that teach a standard Australian curriculum in the context of Yolngu history, culture and values? The Homeland School based at Garrthalala to the south of here is one locally meaningful and successful model of a bicultural secondary program for outstation communities.

There shouldn't be one path but many. As well as scholarships to go to schools down south, there should be a mosaic of public and private girls' and boys' secondary boarding schools for remote area Aboriginal students, in the homelands or closer to towns (but far enough away to avoid their distractions). There could be boards of trustees made up of elders, community members and other experienced and knowledgeable individuals who can contribute educational, financial, cultural and pastoral knowledge. They would work closely with parents and their communities and attract dedicated teachers from anywhere in the world. The teachers in turn would provide training and professional development for Yolngu staff as well as the students.

There could be a "new Dhupuma" that is a truly bi-cultural secondary school. It could have partnerships with similar schools across the Northern Territory and in other parts of the country, providing student exchanges that enable visiting students to learn about Yolngu culture

and Yolngu students to broaden their horizons. Their education would be both culturally and nationally connected. At our University we always talk about this kind of education as having “*roots in the region and branches to the world*”. I understand the current Government in the last few years has made a promise to build a new boarding school for east Arnhem, which is good news, but 30 years is a long time to wait. And while Dhupuma is being re-established, the first wave could go to Djarragun College in Cairns, or Nundah College in Brisbane or perhaps board with caring families down south and go to the local school. And some in time could become teachers at the new Dhupuma. There are many promising models and paths, and the more the better.

Two-way education is not about a diminished or diluted education, but a strong and relevant education that starts early, opens eyes and opportunities, provides a bridge between cultures, strengthens families and honours their wishes and responsibility for their children, and unlocks the gate to healthy lives.

At the University of Western Sydney we host the Whitlam Institute which honours the former Prime Minister’s legacy as an advocate and campaigner for social justice. Gough Whitlam is now 94. During the War in 1944 he was stationed here at Gove airstrip with the Air Force, where he met several of the Yolngu elders. Most of us know about the 1967 referendum, but who has heard of the 1944 “14 powers” referendum? This referendum, entitled *Post-War Reconstruction and Democratic Rights*, would have given the Commonwealth the power to legislate for Indigenous Australians 23 years earlier. It was however defeated. Mr Whitlam recalls was active advocating a ‘yes’ vote with his men and most of his squadron supported it. “Thus” he wrote in the second Vincent Lingiari Memorial lecture, “my first political campaign had been conducted on Aboriginal lands”. In short, the political career of our former Prime Minister started here, on Yolngu land.

When I visited Mr Whitlam recently he wanted to send a message to those who belong to these lands and to all the visitors at Garma. It is written and signed by him and reads,

*I am very pleased to send my salutations and greetings to the 2010 Garma Festival. I urge each of you to be bold in exploring how all children can grow up proud and secure in their Aboriginal identity and, therefore, able to make choices in life that a good education brings.*

*With all good wishes to my Yolngu friends.*

*Gough Whitlam*

I have it here with me to present to Gulumbu for the safekeeping of the Yolngu families and community.<sup>2</sup>



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<sup>2</sup> E.G. Whitlam's greetings were conserved and framed for a tropical environment. The image of the presentation to Gulumbu Yunupingu is attached.