Rom Watangu

By Dr Yunupingu
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An Indigenous leader reflects on a lifetime following the law of the land

Our song cycles have the greatest importance in the lives of my people. They guide and inform our lives.

A song cycle tells a person's life: it relates to the past, to the present and to the future.

Yolngu balance our lives through the song cycles that are laid out on the ceremony grounds. These are the universities of our people, where we hone and perfect our knowledge.

It is through the song cycles that we acknowledge our allegiance to the land, to our laws, to our life, to our ancestors and to each other. We work from the new moon to the full moon – travelling these song cycles as a guide to life and the essence of our people: keeping it all in balance so that wealth and prosperity might flow. This is the cycle of events that is in us and gives us the energy for life, the full energy that we require. Without this, we are nobody and we can achieve nothing.

As a man reaches the final points in his journey it is then for others to do the singing. Others must take the lead, acknowledge him and guide him. If there is unfinished business it is no longer for that man to carry that business; others who have taken responsibility and who have taken leadership must then bear the burden of creation. The future is theirs, to be taken by them, crafted along the terms set by law as given to us by those that have come before. And failure will be theirs also, to own and bear witness to if they fail.

I have lived my song cycle and I have done what I can to translate the concepts of the Yolngu world into the reality of my life. I have endured much change and seen many different faces – I have watched both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal leaders move in and out. And of course I have mixed feelings when I reflect on my life's work. I feel a deep sadness at times, yet I know that I have done much that is useful. I know that I have secured my family's birthright – we will not drift off with the tide; we will stand and endure, and our names will pass down through the decades and the centuries. Yunupingu means "the rock that stands against time", and so be it. But I think always of what has been lost around me against what endures. It is a form of torture for a Yolngu person to see the loss of our life: every word, every note, every slip in the song is pain; every patch of land taken; every time an outsider takes control from Yolngu; every time we compromise; and every time we lose something or someone. I tell my family to stand strong and endure, stay within the guidelines of our law, stay with the song cycles and be armed with this knowledge so as to secure for our people our lands, our way of life and our place in the world.

My father, Mungurrawuy, understood the difficulties and the complexities of white men, and the threats posed to his people's future by white society. As a young man he had been present when the massacres occurred in the 1920s and 1930s, and as a young man he was shot by a man licensed to do so. These were days not too distant from today – days that every Yolngu person knows of, and remembers. The men who hunted my father were simply tasked to their job by their superiors, and they carried it out as well as they could.

At Gan Gan these men on horseback performed their duties and killed an entire clan group – men, women and children. They shot them out and killed them in any way they could so that they could take the land.

These men on horseback then rode to Birany Birany and killed many of our Yarrwidi Gumatj, the saltwater people who cared for the great ceremonies at Birany Birany. There are few places in our lives as sacred as Gan Gan – from its fresh waters all things come – and Birany Birany.

When Europeans came to East Arnhem Land, this is how they introduced their world to the Yolngu. The old people carried the knowledge of these murders inside them, and when they spoke about it they were loud and clear and we all heard their words. It was a wave of history that broke over us, and that we had to contend with. We heard that my father and other senior men from all the clans unified against the cattle prospectors and land thieves, who hunted and killed Yolngu women and children.

These events and what lies behind them are burned into our minds. They are never forgotten. Such things are remembered. Like the scar that marked the exit of the bullet from my father's body.

Mungurrawuy stood out among the leaders of East Arnhem Land. He was strong. He could present himself. He could fight. He could lead his people and mediate between troublesome clans to make peace. By the time Mungurrawuy brought his families to Yirrkala on the Gove Peninsula, after the earlier days of terror, he was the most senior elder and land-owner, and he had the highest status in Yolngu law. He obtained this status by right – he was born to it by Yolngu law – but he earned it by performance and responsibility, and through his care for the families.

One of the things that gave him the most recognition just before the missionaries arrived occurred when he joined Birrikitji and his younger brother Buwatjpuy from the Dhalwangu clan in a dispute with the Djapu clan, the Madarrpa clan and other clan groups. This came in the middle of a terrible feud among the clans. Mungurrawuy walked side by side with Birrikitji and his brother to a peacemaking event – a *makarrata* – that was held on the beach at Birany Birany.

The dispute was very deep and very serious, and in the event Mungurrawuy made the peace.

It was my father, perhaps for the last time before the missionaries arrived, who had the responsibility to make this happen in a proper way, in a proper Yolngu way – to bring about reconciliation.

After the *makarrata* my father was widely praised by the senior leadership throughout East Arnhem Land.

So the quest for "peace and harmony" in the world wasn't anything new to Yolngu when the missionaries came and spoke of such ideals. They were already our words and our way of life. We had seen it through the actions of my father, who performed these duties in his time.

And we still think in this way when we think about our future. How do we reconcile? What do we need to give, and what must be given to us for our loss, for our grievance? How do we balance the wrongs that have been done with a need to work together in the future?

Mungurrawuy was the pioneer who took the missionaries to the fresh water at Yirrkala and approved their presence there. I grew up with my family on the beach at Yirrkala. We lived in a series of humpies made out of bent iron and a mix of stringybark and paperbark – simple structures designed to keep the rain out. There were five or six different humpies in our camp, which was set up in a traditional way, with my father overseeing the lot.

We slept on sheets with blankets or sheets over us. No mattresses. We slept on the sand bars, close to the beach – a bit softer for us. I have no complaints, really. Looking back, I was safe and with my family.

The fires of the camp burned all night – our grandmothers would tend them, keeping them alive, which was a great gift they gave to the family. Eventually the missionaries built a hut for my father, so he was the first to receive proper accommodation, if you could call it that.

While I was growing up at Yirrkala in the 1950s, my sisters were with me always, watching over me as I made my way to manhood. And my elder sisters, women of the highest degree, the most brilliant people, were married to men from the Djapu clan. These marriages brought the Gumatj and Djapu people closer together. And so it fell to my brother-in-law, a Djapu man, to supervise my initiation and purification. My brother-in-law was a son of the great Wonggu, who had also played a central role at the *makarrata* at Birany Birany.

Like Mungurrawuy with the Gumatj, Wonggu had led the Djapu through many dangers and had given them strength. He was a partner of my father's, and though each man would contest and challenge the other they did this always with the good of their people in mind – not with an eye on personal gain. They were a parliament unto themselves when it came to the affairs of Gumatj and Djapu, two great clans of East Arnhem Land, and the Yolngu people as a whole.

When I was initiated, Yirrkala was a very different world. It was the world of our fathers – men who were of their own time. These men held life and death in their hands: should your life be in their hands, you were safe and all your needs were met; should your death be in their minds, then your future was under grave threat.

My brother-in-law's name was Murtitjpuy. He was the man who painted the sacred stories for Wonggu, and he did this in brilliant and distinctive ways. Murtitjpuy was Wonggu's attendant and worked closely under his direction. So it was Murtitjpuy who supervised the painting of the sacred designs on my body, and when I had been painted he took me to sit on the lap of my father-in-law, Wonggu. Just to be in Wonggu's presence was a great honour; to sit with him was a sign of respect from his people. It indicated his acceptance of me, even before I was initiated.

The great man spoke little. His words were power and he used them carefully. In those days he smoked a pipe made of corkwood. It was about a metre long and on it were the most beautiful carvings done by Murtitjpuy. His cuts were very fine and detailed, carved as if part of a painting. The pipe was empowered with these magnificent designs – a sacred pipe of the Djapu people. Murtitjpuy lit Wonggu's pipe. He drew breath and blew smoke over me, then passed me the pipe and directed me to softly draw, even though I could not smoke. The smoke passed over and around me as I sat with the old man. This recognised me and gave me the greatest honour, and I knew even then that this signalled that trust was to be ever-present between my brother-in-law and me. As I grew to be a man, Murtitjpuy and his family would trust and not question me, allowing me into their world to ensure the safety and security of our laws and ceremonies. It was a special moment, qualifying me for the future – and burdening me for the future.

I left the great man then and completed my initiation into manhood. I remember this like it was yesterday. It is clear in my mind.

It was during my schooling at Yirrkala when, one morning as I moved through the camp to visit my sister, I heard the news that Wonggu had passed away. I went to his camp, where my sister was, and there the body lay on a stretcher covered by a white sheet. Wonggu was peaceful but we were all in shock at the death of the great man. Preparations were made, and I watched quietly as the Djapu men sang to the spirit world. I sat motionless as my brother-in-law, with great love, removed the shirt from his father's body. Murtitjpuy took his delicate human-hair brush and his ochres, and began to paint his father's body. I remember the painting as the most beautiful I have ever seen. Murtitjpuy was so focused. He was in his own world, delicately working with the brush. He said no words to explain, but the painting spoke of power and authority. The work covered all of Wonggu's upper body including his face, which was most carefully done. His hair was decorated with white clay, and his authority and greatness were obvious for all to see.

Four Djapu men then came to the body. With great respect they rewrapped it, making a shroud, and placed it on a stretcher of stringybark. With sacred words they sang a special ceremony, a song cycle of the Djapu people, and raised the great man above their heads, carrying him to his final resting place. The men and women of the Yolngu world came and lined the beach, and Wonggu's sons carried him on high, in a procession of dignified authority. And then the tears broke: men and women, including my father, were crying and lamenting the passing, throwing themselves about and calling out in respect of this man. At the grave we were directed in the shark dance, the sacred totem of the Djapu.

Today when a man dies he is taken by the police or a coroner and he is made cold and sterile. Too often he dies violently or suddenly, surrounded by tokens of the Western world, not the Yolngu world. Tokens that have drawn him to his peril. The family loses the deceased and the deceased loses the family. He goes into a coffin, nailed in, screwed down, without love and without respect. Then he is returned in that way to the family for burial.

It is a different world today from what it was then. It will be a different world tomorrow from what it is today.

I did well at school and I enjoyed learning. There were Yolngu teachers in the classroom with us. They would write the numbers or words in the sand and we would write the numbers or words in the sand underneath. Then they would push the sand over and we would do it again. Later we moved on to blackboards and pens and paper.

For a time my father was pressured to send me to Geelong Grammar. He decided I had not reached a point in my Yolngu learning that he could risk me to the outside world. He held me in Yirrkala, and my training continued under his supervision.

The time came, though, when he decided that I must go and learn the ways of the outside world, and for this I travelled with cousins and brothers to a Methodist Bible college in Brisbane. I spent two and a half years there. With me was my cousin from the Dhalwangu clan, Mr Wunungmurra. He and I formed a partnership that ran for many, many years until his passing. As men we trusted each other and understood the hard road that Yolngu people must tread, and the discipline and determination that is required.

You see, Mr Wunungmurra and I were commissioned by both our fathers – Mangarri and Mungurrawuy – and other elders, and blessed by all of them. Mangarri and my father and other elders gave us and our other brothers and cousins our commission. And this commission was not just to be the interpreters of the future for Yolngu people but to be the future. We were sent to Brisbane for a purpose, and that purpose was to arm ourselves with knowledge and education for the future: not just for ourselves but also for our people. And that was a lifelong commission. Mr Wunungmurra lived it to the end and I will live it to the end also – there is no other way for men like us.

It was an honour to be commissioned by such men as our fathers, and it was important to my life, for when I came back to Yirrkala I was received into two kinds of ceremonies at the same time: the Dhalwangu ceremonies and the Gumatj ceremonies. And it was Mangarri himself who requested I go into the Dhalwangu world, to see that world and to respect that world. Dhalwangu men – Bukumarra, Yumutjin, Waarralka, to name a few – have sat closely with me ever since, mentoring and protecting me, and they have honoured me lately as my days get shorter. These are men who carry the same inheritance as I do, who have been on the same path as I have and who share the same world of ceremony as I do. These men have passed to their children, and to their children's children, the same stories that their fathers and grandfathers gave to them – the same belief system, the same laws and the same ways. Like me, like all Yolngu, they are proud and certain about who they are, and they will not change. Like me, they seek a simple truth. Like me, they seek a simple recognition – the recognition of the truth of who we are.

In the 1970s the federal government gave the Northern Territory the power of self-government with the ability to pass its own legislation.

I thought at that time this decision had just come out of nowhere. It took the people of East Arnhem Land by surprise, as it was made without discussion. At this time in my life I had spent many years negotiating land rights for Aboriginal people with the Whitlam and Fraser governments, acting on my commission. And we had started the homeland movement. In 1974 Murtitjpuy and I had established a homeland at Birany Birany with our families. Birany Birany troubled my father for it brought back old memories, but we made a home there and looked to the future where the younger ones would have what they needed, living and working on their own land, and where the older people were happy on their homelands and could end their days in dignity and comfort, and in the knowledge that their world was in order.

All over the place Yolngu were moving back to their homelands, and there was good support and recognition for this work. I know because I was there. The homeland movement was proving very effective at bringing hope to people on the ground. Homelands were being set up everywhere: the Dhalwangu clan took back Gan Gan for us, as well as the homeland of Gurrumurru further north. These are sacred places to us, and today our most senior people look after them. This task spread like wildfire, and more and more homelands were established. Work was carried out by land-owning groups who saw a way to return to themselves and to become whole again, by living on their country with their ancestors. Plans were drawn up for businesses and we set rules: “no work, no pay” was one of them. This was one time when Yolngu instinct and necessity met the government policy of the day. And it was in people’s minds that the activities and involvement of government and others like the missionaries would simply be transferred from the central areas, like Yirrkala, to the homelands. This was seen as an arrangement to fulfil the needs of the people. Education, health and housing, sewerage and electricity – and economic activity of any kind the clan thought fit for the land – would come out to those homelands. Linked together, this would stand as an achievement of Yolngu land-owners doing their own thing.

Then two things came, halting both our progress and our initiative. The federal government started a process, which is still continuing to this day, of cutting its ties with, and its responsibility for, Yolngu people. It handed over our trust to a new Northern Territory government. And then it gave us a form of welfare, which killed off this whole idea of self-management. And the federal government knew this would happen – it was warned but did it anyway. The arrival of welfare demoralised the willingness of local people in every homeland to do things for themselves. This is because of the way that the government developed the program: you had to be on your homeland to receive the welfare payment but you did not have to work. There was no development agenda and there was no employment. Think about that – the only requirement to get money was that you were on the homeland on a given day. Whether working or not, you still got your payments of $200 or $300 each fortnight. So self-determination and self-management were out the window almost immediately, and later the Community Development and Employment Projects (CDEP) took control of Aboriginal people throughout the Territory – and badly so in East Arnhem Land, where I had a firsthand view of the destructive impact of this government program.

As it grew, the CDEP scheme did something else: it brought with it a new caste, or a new class, of managers. These were mostly people who were at the lowest level of the government public service, or had come for some reason of their own, either well intentioned or not. These people found that with the programs they ran they had power and influence beyond their previous experience. There were good people in the mix, but overall these people either made comfortable nests for themselves or they took what they could while they were there, financially or otherwise. Some simply stayed for a short time until they found another job and moved on, never accountable, never doing or achieving anything, and leaving behind them confused people who wondered what this was all about. And, of course, people being as they are, Yolngu adapted to this system and started using these temporary workers as best they could, taking what they could from them and turning a blind eye to abuses by the *balanda* (white people) if it meant being able to get something on the day for themselves. And this became normal, for soon there were no other choices or outcomes – we were trapped in a welfare world with welfare thinking. This was the system as it was, and

soon people came to know only that system. And government turned its head away, not interested anymore, not concerned about working with us to make these homelands functional.

It was during this period that my father, Mungurrawuy, became very ill, and he requested that I return from Darwin to be at his bedside and bear witness to his passing. I left Darwin, where I was now commissioned as chairman of the Northern Land Council, and came to him. I stayed close by, visiting Dad every day.

Dad had aged greatly in the last few years of his life. The smoke from the Gove refinery had affected his eyes, as he lived close to the smokestacks at Galupa, on a small excision he had won from the government in his battles.

He was very old. He had 11 wives, many, many children, and many grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

I was with my brothers when an urgent message came that I had to be with my father. My brothers, nephews and many other relations and I headed back to Dad's house at Galupa, where all my sisters were gathered. All the families were there – everyone watching over him. All the men gathered in a group, as did the women, with my dying father watching over us all in the centre of our circle.

He was the most senior man in the community – in our world – such that his passing called many, many people of great seniority and experience to his side, to sit with the family while he died.

As we sang to his mind, to his head and to his ears, all the songs he loved and had taught us, we made the way and set up the direction for his spirit. Our song cycle, so important to our lives, is particularly important to individuals at the moment of their dying. It means a lot to their past, present and future. The future is already in the song cycle, and it takes senior ceremonial people, with great knowledge and love, to relate that to the dying person. Ordinary people cannot understand this or comprehend the critical importance of the event. Normally there is no hope in finding a place in the spirit home if there is no song. The songline sends you on a course so that your spirit arrives at its rightful destination.

I was the master of the ceremony that night, when Dad's time had come and he had to leave us.

I held clap sticks, but I noticed that night that he held clap sticks of his own, and as his time came and we sang for him, he still had strength to reach out, clenching his own clap sticks in his right hand. And he directed them to where I was sitting, singing for him.

"Take them," he said, and symbolically he passed to me all his power and authority over the ceremonies, his responsibility for the families. And with that gesture he ordered me to take charge of everything that he was able to do.

I could feel the silence of the crowd, filled with many great senior men of exceptional knowledge and learning, and all my sisters. Soon they started talking among themselves, saying that this was the symbolic moment, the ceremonial event that marked the date of my blessing and anointment to the world of leadership in a real sense. Then, as they spoke, my father died.

I led the ceremony for him for six weeks. People and leaders and simple family members came from all over to farewell him. There were dignitaries from the Yolngu world and elders of the highest degree from every tribe. His burial day marked a special farewell to our leader: a man who had fought for and defended his land, bled for his land and his people, taken the missionaries to water, and mediated the relationship between the outside world and the Yolngu of the Gove Peninsula. A man who had sung into our ears as children since first we could hear. A man who believed in the future and our place in it.

Those of us who had known him missed him greatly because we were suddenly left without seniority and felt fragile and exposed.

Later we took his belongings and buried them at Galupa. A lease had been set aside for him there. It was called Kings Village.

The cleaning and purifying ceremony took place there at Galupa, looking out across to Melville Bay. The ceremony involved water and smoke. The last song I sang was 'Djäpana' (Sunset Dreaming), our final song cycle. I was seated as I sang this famous song cycle, but I felt as if I were standing, elevated. I sang it in a way that Dad would sing it, and I could hear my sisters crying as I brought back Dad's voice, his deepest spirit, in the singing. My sisters were wailing and crying, throwing themselves at the ground as I sang 'Djäpana'. I then actually stood and sang, in my thoughts saying my farewell, my final tribute to Dad's passing. I ceased singing and everyone was silent, wondering what was going to happen next. They were looking for a direction. I gave that direction. It was my first as leader of the clan. I simply said that I, my family, and my Gumatj brothers and sisters would come out of Yirrkala and start a new life and a new community, with a new direction, at Gunyangara, 30 kilometres from Yirrkala and just to the west of Galupa. They were my words. I was trying to achieve then what I am trying to achieve now: a place where my family could live and prosper on their own country, within the modern world.

As time went on we realised that there was actually a Northern Territory government and that it was in power and that it had power over us. This was a new thing to us entirely. The party of power in the early '70s was the Country Liberal Party, which was started in Alice Springs by cattlemen and other newcomers to our lands. It was led for a time by a thin, tall bloke by the name of Dr Letts, who hung around the Batchelor community at that time. Located about 100 kilometres south of Darwin, Batchelor is an old mining town and the entry point to what is now Litchfield National Park. How he became the leader of the Northern Territory I really don't know. But soon enough I realised that things were not the same and that any balance we had achieved – first with the missionaries and then with the government in Canberra – was gone.

Consider the education of my people, a big part of my life's work. It was changed for the worse. With a stroke of a pen the government in Darwin simply closed up Dhupuma College, the hub of education for all of East Arnhem Land and beyond, a place where I worked mentoring young men and women as their sport and recreation officer. Dhupuma College had been opened by my father and Prime Minister William McMahon. It was a school that went to the secondary level, and one that was working. Dhupuma was not just a place but also an idea that inspired Yolngu people. A Yolngu word, *dhupuma* means "look up to the future", reminding us of the leadership of our ancestor Ganbulapula. Students came from all over Arnhem Land to learn, supported by their parents, relatives and communities. It was devastating when the college was closed. It was said that the Northern Territory government could not carry this school anymore. There were only three of these schools in the Northern Territory at the time: Kormilda College in Darwin, Yirara College in Alice Springs, and Dhupuma College that had been going for quite a while and whose graduates were our best and brightest. It was heartbreaking for the communities, the parents and most particularly the students, who were summarily told that they could no longer get their opportunity of an education.

I think that from then on a Mickey Mouse education has been given to Aboriginal communities, and a much higher standard to white communities in towns and cities. I think it bears out that this is the case.

For many years I have looked at the kids who went to Dhupuma College at one time or another, and I have followed their lives. They are involved in their communities: taking leadership, actively participating, delivering services. These individuals still stand out as people whose brains have been trained to take on roles of leadership and service. And I think straight away, when I run into these individuals or I think about them, that these are people who were given a chance of an education but in most cases had the opportunity to complete it taken away for no reason, with no explanation. I realise that these individuals have only what they received in their time at Dhupuma College, and it is with this that they serve their communities and their people. I wonder how high they could have flown if they had been allowed to train themselves to the full.

And then came the attacks on land rights. This is a disgraceful chapter in Australian history, which saw a group of people, made up of all sorts of itinerant workers who came from somewhere else, attack and attack and attack the land rights of people who had been there forever, and who had been given rightful ownership by the federal parliament. It was disgraceful and wrong, but attack us the Northern Territory government did. Year after year they ran legal cases against us, trying to stop the important work we were doing in the land councils. And when we defended ourselves, when we fought back, they punished us in different ways. There were reductions in services to our communities, the taking away or withholding of the services that had been entrusted by the Commonwealth – by the people of Australia – to the new Northern Territory government to rightly deliver to us.

And the Commonwealth parliament stood back and let it happen, occasionally joining in one way or another, but never again taking responsibility as it once had. They never forgot about the wealth of our land, and when the Commonwealth intervened it was to make a track for the mining companies, or the developers, or whoever wanted to use our land. They were very sure of this, and this thinking continues today.

A lot of the suffering we see in the remote places of the Northern Territory can be traced back to the total neglect of governance and responsibility by those charged with that duty. Instead of working with us and accepting us, governments fought us – from both sides of politics. Something gave them the idea that they didn't need to provide the same level of service to us as they did to other people in the Northern Territory. The fact that this behaviour continues in different ways is not lost on Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory. The impact upon us is the same, and that impact can be really bad.

Gulkula is a place chosen by our ancestors. It is a special place made for open discussion and debate, and for the contest of ideas. It is Gumatj land, owned by Gumatj through the line of our ancestor, Ganbulapula. Many songlines run to Gulkula, and it is Ganbulapula who is the master of the ceremony. Gulkula is where the Garma festival is held each year.

It was Ganbulapula, our ancestor, who set our future. He was a hard man, to whom leadership was a challenge and a right. He spoke with a tongue of fire and had great strength for action. He knew the songlines. He was the singing man and the ceremonial manager.

Ganbulapula led a funeral ceremony and an initiation ceremony for the Matjurr people. The Damala people and the Matjurr people were the dancers. As a funeral, the ceremony was a grieving for the past. Decorated log coffins lay in the centre of the ceremony ground, waiting to receive the bodies of the dead that lay in a shelter of stringybark. This was also a ceremony looking to a new future. Young men were initiated into manhood, families were brought together, and there was a healing of the divisions of the past – an affirmation of a collective determination to go on together. There was an agreement to change, and to find peace through that change.

But others came forward and challenged the ceremony – insiders who thought they knew better. There was fighting and disagreement, confusion and conflict. The ceremony began to disintegrate into a hardening of past divisions, disagreements and oppositions. Ganbulapula would not be denied, though, and he did something extraordinary. He picked up one of the painted log coffins waiting there to receive its body, a coffin saturated with cultural meaning, a living object of power. And he flung it eastwards, a little to the south from Gulkula. It landed in the sea at Djalambu. From Djalambu the hollow log was carried by the tides to other parts of East Arnhem Land. The hollow log became one means by which knowledge was sent out to other groups who were then linked through the sharing of this knowledge.

This action was both stunning and brilliant, and it lifted people's eyes from the mire of disorder, disagreement and bitter division. In that unprecedented throwing of the decorated log coffin, that unexpected shift into a new context, a new network of cultural meaning was created – a new future was believed in. The action generated the possibility of a future different from the past. Bitter division was healed by way of bold, confident leadership.

My father believed in this future. He chose to look up to the future as Ganbulapula had. At Gulkula he was the one who had named the school aimed at training our people for the future as Dhupuma, telling us to "look up to the future". And then he took us to Dhanaya, to the place of our ancestors, and he told us to anchor ourselves to our land, to anchor our future.

Our people needed anchors when the mining came and set itself upon us with a full force. We fought the Gove bauxite mine and lost, and our elders were frightened and worried about what the future held for the young men and women of their clans. And rightfully so. The mining sent every leader on the Gove Peninsula to wonderment trying to think of the future and of the white men that would come and how they would bring with them their influences, good and bad. The bad influences were spoken of more than the good.

As I sit here nearly 50 years later, looking back, having settled with the mining company and now building a mine for my people and a mining training centre of our own, I still hear the words of those old men and women worrying about the future of the Gove Peninsula, and they were right – their concerns were right.

The mine came on us too fast. We were unprepared and people were not able to handle the change that it brought. I am sure many elders died from culture shock, and every man and woman of their age group died before their time – a straight culture shock. That's the truth of it.

I have spent all of those 50 years trying to reconcile my people, and my life, to the world that the mining company ushered in – a world that threatened everything for us.

My answer as it came was given to me by our songlines, and I led my family as we set about connecting and securing our songlines so as to ensure our life. First we built Birany Birany, and then we made Gunyangara our base. We then went to Dhanaya and reasserted ourselves near the waters of the stingray, where the anchor from the deep past lies in the rock, remembered by all for its meaning. We connected the sacred string of our songlines: from Birany Birany, to Dhanaya, to Garrathiya, to Gulkula, through Bay Bay Mi and then to our northern bases at Galupa and Gunyangara. We reclaim and hold these places as capitals of our lands and places for our future. Gunyangara is our base and the centre of our administration. At Gulkula we run the Garma festival and have placed the Garma Knowledge Centre. Close by is our training centre. At Garrathiya we have a cattle station and abattoir, and at Dhanaya we have secured a place of rest and ceremony, and a base for our workers – it's our favourite place. Further south, at Birany Birany, we hold close a place of beauty and memory, the site of the last *makarrata*.

Each place is special, with its own patterns, sacred words, song cycles and meaning. Each place is connected and part of a whole. No one must threaten or terrorise these places again.

There is always something wanted by someone who knows nothing of our land or its people. There is always someone who wants us to be like them, to give up our knowledge and our laws, or our land. There is always someone who wants to take something from us. I disapprove of that person, whoever he or she is. There is no other way for us. Our laws tell us how to live and lead in the proper way. Others will always seek to interrupt my thinking, but I will tell the difference between their ways and my laws, which are the only ones to live by. I am mindful of the continuing attempts to change all that is in us, and I know that it is not workable at all. It cannot work. We are covered by a law of another kind and that law is lasting and alive, the law of the land, *rom watangu* – my backbone.

I remember that there was a time when I believed that a government and its departments were there to meet the needs, to understand the needs, and to act on the needs of the people for whom they have taken

responsibility. It took me some time to question why it was in relation to my people that they did not meet the needs, or take the steps, that responsible government demands. Why do they not provide the simple basics in the ways that work for us? Why not? There has never been an honest answer to this.

I still sit here and wait for the day when someone will stand up and say, “Hey, I’m responsible and I will do what is required of my leadership. I am the provider of housing, education, health, law, order and good government, and I will provide as is rightly required and in accordance with people’s needs. I will adjust and act in the way you seek – not as I seek – and I will give up something from my side. And I will make decisions that will not be popular at times with my people, but I will do this so that we may have what we both require.”

I live in the total knowledge that politics is a business that runs hot and cold every time a new office holder comes to Canberra (and Darwin), and they have to find some answers to what they can do in their time. Three years is such a short time, and politicians are under pressure to do something instead of biting their fingernails and having no solutions.

Aboriginal people need to understand that the government of the day will always seek to justify itself, protect itself and get its reputation straight. Its members will worry about their jobs and about saying things that will keep them in the good books with their electors, who are mainly white people. And those people will often have little good to say about Aboriginal people; when the voters do talk to their politicians they may want something from us or have some problem with us, because we are not like them. And this adds to the worry of politicians who are most of all concerned about whether they will be re-elected. That’s their first commitment. That’s the real situation. So the only way through it is for a politician to risk prestige with the voters to make the achievement, and to believe that an outcome can be good for all concerned.

This type of sacrifice from strength is the key to leadership. My father had to sacrifice much, too much, to reconcile his life with the ways of the modern world. But he did so. What Aboriginal people ask is that the modern world now makes the sacrifices necessary to give us a real future. To relax its grip on us. To let us breathe, to let us be free of the determined control exerted on us to make us like you. And you should take that a step further and recognise us for who we are, and not who you want us to be. Let us be who we are – Aboriginal people in a modern world – and be proud of us. Acknowledge that we have survived the worst that the past had thrown at us, and we are here with our songs, our ceremonies, our land, our language and our people – our full identity. What a gift this is that we can give you, if you choose to accept us in a meaningful way.

With my family I have built Gunyangara into a place that we hoped all Yolngu places might be, back when hope powered the homeland movement. Men and women go to work and sweat for their wages, children go to school, old people are safer and happier, and we are making our way. Let me tell you this: Murtitjpuy’s granddaughter Djurrathi runs the Gunyangara coffee shop, and should I drop in of a morning she will make me coffee, at our own coffee shop. Djurrathi’s mother, Yananymul, is Murtitjpuy’s daughter, and she is often there now, at our coffee shop, learning from her daughter these new skills. Yananymul’s husband is Yalpi, who oversees Birany Birany. And Murtitjpuy is buried at Birany Birany with his wife, my elder sister Lamangirra, in the land of our fathers, with our ancestors. Djurrathi’s daughter, Gali Gali, who is Murtitjpuy and my great-granddaughter, is across the road from the coffee shop each morning at our preschool.

And it was Yananymul and Djurrathi and their sisters who, under my instructions, led the painting of the designs for the petition that I gave to Kevin Rudd, as Her Majesty’s representative, as the elected leader of Australians, in 2008. It is their precise and beautiful lines that mark out the designs on that petition – diamonds and fire and the fire-carrier, *djirrikitj* (the quail). Little Gali Gali is learning these song cycles as her mother learned them, who knows them as well as her mother does, who knows them as Murtitjpuy knew them, and as his father and my father knew them. These song cycles are inscribed on that petition and they

are as important as the words. Your children and grandchildren will read the words on the petition but they will be ignorant about the designs and the patterns. Gali Gali will read both and understand everything.

In this story is a key to any Yolngu person's future. To find a part to play, to be dedicated to that work, to feed a child's brain with knowledge, to arm that child with the tools for life, to make a home, to feed your family. To live on our land, to be guided by our ceremonies and to be lifted up by the song cycles of our life. To believe totally in our way of life as the anchor, and to be confident enough to match our ways with the way of the world as it is today. Never let an outsider determine your life for you. Never forget who you are and where you come from. Never forget what is rightfully yours.

Kevin Rudd, like prime ministers before and after him, acknowledged my leadership and made promises to my people. Tony Abbott made the same promises and came and lived on my land at Gulkula, and from there he ran the government for five or six days. Both were decent and respectful men. All the prime ministers I have known have been friendly to me, but I mark them all hard. None of them has done what I asked, or delivered what they promised. I asked each one to be truthful and to honestly recognise the truth of history, and to reconcile that truth in a way that finds unity in the future. But they are who they are and they were not able or not permitted to complete their task. For a prime minister is beholden to his party and to the parliament, which in turn is held by the Australian people. And the Australian people seem to disapprove of my simple truths, or the idea of proper reconciliation. The Australian people do not wish to recognise me for who I am – with all that this brings – and it is the Australian people whom the politicians fear. The Australian people know that their success is built on the taking of the land, in making the country their own, which they did at the expense of so many languages and ceremonies and songlines – and people – now destroyed. They worry about what has been done for them and on their behalf, and they know that reconciliation requires much more than just words.

So the task remains: to reconcile with the truth, to find the unity and achieve the settlement. A prime minister must lead it and complete it. The leader of the nation should accept his or her commission and simply say what he or she thinks is right, and put that forward for the nation to correct, or to accept, or to reject. Let us have an honest answer from the Australian people to an honest question.

My father, Mungurrawuy, walked side by side with clan leaders Birrikitji and Buwatjpuy to a field of settlement. These men walked to an outcome that was uncertain. Behind them lay wrongfulness and death. Ahead, waiting for them, were Wonggu and his sons and clansmen, aggrieved and angry. On the sand at Birany Birany the peace was made, grievances were settled and a better future was created.

Like they did that day, I must dream of a future that is different from the past. A future that has in it everything my people need.

My ancestors and my fathers have dreamed of this future, and I have tried in my life, in my times, to bring it to reality. But I will not see it all, and I will not see the reality, only the dream.

Now when I am at Dhanaya, my most special place, I see the future running above the water, down the blue skyline and through the horizon, as if it were on a projector screen revealing to me a portrait of the future.

At other times I see a beautiful painting, created by the hands of masters, now broken into a thousand pieces. Those pieces are split up and thrown about, and I am seeking always to put them back together, to refit the pieces, to re-create the picture as it should be and then to hang it again on the wall – a beautiful picture for all to see.

In these moments I tune myself up so high that sometimes I can't even hear myself think. I wonder, then, who understands me, who could understand?

Dr Yunupingu

Dr Yunupingu was a leader of the Gumatj clan. He was the 1978 Australian of the Year and lived with his family at Dhanaya in East Arnhem Land.