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# A Legacy of Hope: Mandawuy Yunupinju on Meaning and Yolŋu Agency in the Music of Yothu Yindi

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Over the past two decades, Yothu Yindi has become one of Australia's most celebrated bands. Its innovative blend of popular music with performance traditions from northeast Arnhem Land (Figure 1) is familiar worldwide, and has spawned six original albums, thirteen music-videos, six albums of traditional song series and *yidaki* (didjeridu) accompaniments, one motion picture and an international festival.<sup>1</sup> Yothu Yindi was founded in 1986 by three Yolŋu men from Yirrkala: singer-guitarist Mandawuy Yunupinju, traditional singer-dancer Wiŋiyana Marika, and the late Milkayŋu Munuŋgurr on *yidaki*.<sup>2</sup> Bassist Stu Kellaway, guitarist Cal Williams and drummer Andy Beletty, who had been in a touring band from Darwin called the Swamp Jockeys, completed the initial ensemble.

At its peak in the early 1990s, Yothu Yindi's chart success was unprecedented by any other band with Indigenous Australian roots. In 1991, the Filthy Lucre remix of Yothu Yindi's 'Treaty' became the first song with lyrics in any Indigenous Australian language to chart anywhere, and encouraged worldwide multi-platinum sales for the band's second album, *Tribal Voice*.<sup>3</sup> A swathe of awards from MTV, the Australian Record Industry Association, the Australasian Performing Right Association and the Australian Government followed. So too did chart success for a second song with lyrics in Yolŋu-Matha, 'Djāpana: Sunset Dreaming.'<sup>4</sup> The announcement of Mandawuy Yunupinju as Australian of the Year for 1992 sealed the band's place in Australian history.

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<sup>1</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Homeland Movement* (Mushroom: D19520, 1989), *Tribal Voice* (Mushroom: D30602, 1991), *Diŋimurru* (Mushroom: V81305, 1992), *Freedom* (Mushroom: TVD93380, 1993), *Birrkudja* (Mushroom: TVD93461, 1996), *One Blood* (Mushroom: MUSH332292, 1999), *Garma* (Mushroom: MUSH332822, 2000), 'Video Clip Compilation' (Darwin: Yothu Yindi, 2000); Yothu Yindi Foundation (YYF), Contemporary Masters Series (YYF: YYF 1–6, 2001–2003); Stephen Johnson, dir., *Yolŋu Boy* (Palace Films: 22054SDW, 2000); YYF, *Garma Festival 2006*, <www.garma.telstra.com> (accessed 28 April 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Conventions for Yolŋu-Matha spellings follow R. David Zorc, *Yolŋu-Matha Dictionary* (Batchelor: Batchelor College, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Tribal Voice* track 2.

<sup>4</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Tribal Voice* track 3.

**Figure 1.** Locations within the Yolŋu homelands, greater Arnhem Land and Australia



Mandawuy Yunupinju was born at Yirrkala in 1956. As a child, he learnt traditional Yolŋu law under his elders and attended the Methodist mission school at Yirrkala. He later went to Dhupuma College, a high school at nearby Gulkula for gifted youths from throughout Arnhem Land, and eventually trained as a teacher. In 1982, he became Assistant Principal of Shepherdson College at Galiwin'ku where he composed his very first song, 'Djapana: Sunset Dreaming,' in the following year.<sup>5</sup> Mandawuy graduated from Deakin University with a Bachelor of Arts in Education in 1987, and became Assistant Principal of the Yirrkala Community School (YCS) where he championed bi-cultural curricula in both Yolŋu-Matha and English.<sup>6</sup> In 1990, he became the school's first Yolŋu Principal, but resigned in the following year to meet Yothu Yindi's growing commitments. He shared his experiences as both a student and an educator in the Boyer Lecture of 1993.<sup>7</sup> The Yothu Yindi Foundation (YYF) was established with Mandawuy as its Secretary in 1990 to promote Yolŋu socio-economic development. Its premier annual event, the Garma Festival, was launched at Gulkula on the former site of Dhupuma College

<sup>5</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Tribal Voice* track 3.

<sup>6</sup> YSC Action Group, *Towards a Ganma Curriculum in Yolŋu Schools* (Yirrkala: YSC, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Mandawuy Yunupinju, 'Yothu Yindi,' *Race and Class* 35.4 (1994) 114–20.

in 1999. Mandawuy was further recognised with an honorary doctorate in Education from the Queensland University of Technology in 1998, and the Jimmy Little Deadly Award for Lifetime Achievement in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Music in 2004.

I first met Mandawuy Yunupinju at Gunyajarra in 1996 while researching my doctoral thesis on popular bands from Arnhem Land.<sup>8</sup> We have since collaborated in the Symposium on Indigenous Music and Dance, and the National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia (NRP).<sup>9</sup> In 2005, I interviewed Mandawuy Yunupinju in a keynote address to the National Conference of the Musicological Society of Australia on Music and Social Justice.<sup>10</sup> It traced his life, from his origins at Yirrkala, to his career as an educator and lead singer of Yothu Yindi. It also explored two major influences in his creation of repertoire for this band: themes and concepts drawn from Yolŋu tradition, and the four-decade legacy of Yolŋu struggle against the mining on Gove Peninsula around Yirrkala. This article is largely based on this interview, but also draws on my other work in chronicling and analysing the band's influences and repertoire.<sup>11</sup> It presents new insights to the many classical expressions of Yolŋu culture found in Yothu Yindi's repertoire, the Yolŋu models for social balance found in its music, and Mandawuy's personal history in the intergenerational struggle over Yolŋu sovereignty in the wake of mining on the Gove Peninsula.

In the 1990s, initial scholarship on Yothu Yindi by Hayward, Mitchell and Nicol<sup>12</sup> debated the socio-political impact of the original 'Treaty' over its remix,<sup>13</sup> yet barely mentioned the three decades of Yolŋu struggle over their sovereignty that had led to its composition. Neuenfeldt, Stubington and Dunbar-Hall, and Magowan<sup>14</sup> nonetheless identified the band's musical roots in the *manikay* (song) tradition of northeast Arnhem Land and the *djatpanjarri* style which had been popular at Yirrkala between 1934 and 1970. They also located the band's ideological roots in

<sup>8</sup> Aaron Corn, *Dreamtime Wisdom*, Modern Time Vision, PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> NRP, NRP 2007, <www.aboriginalartists.com.au/NRP.htm> (accessed 11 September 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Mandawuy Yunupinju with Aaron Corn, 'Yothu Yindi,' 28th National Conference of the Musicological Society of Australia (Sydney, 28 September 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Aaron Corn, recorded interviews with Mandawuy Yunupinju (Melbourne: 2001) 8 March, 26 May; Aaron Corn and Mandawuy Yunupinju, 'Yothu Yindi,' Garma Festival (Guŋkuŋa: 2001) 24 August; Corn, *Dreamtime Wisdom*; Aaron Corn and Neparrŋa Gumbula, 'Now Balanda Say We Lost Our Land in 1788,' *Honour among Nations? Treaties and Agreements with Indigenous People*, ed. Marcia Langton, Lisa Palmer, Kathryn Shain and Maureen Tehan (Melbourne: MUP, 2004) 103–7, 111–14; Aaron Corn, ratification meetings with Mandawuy Yunupinju, Wiŋiyana Marika and Stu Kellaway (Dhanaya: 2005) 30 April to 2 May; Aaron Corn, ratification meetings with Mandawuy Yunupinju and Wiŋiyana Marika (Nyinyikay: 2005) 25–30 April, (Sydney–Melbourne: 2005) 13–15, 27–29 September; Aaron Corn, 'When the Waters Will Be One,' *Journal of Australian Studies* 84 (2005): 23, 27–31; Aaron Corn and Neparrŋa Gumbula, 'Rom and the Academy Repositioned,' *Boundary Writing*, ed. Lynette Russell (Honolulu: U of Hawai'i Press, 2006): 187–9; Aaron Corn, 'To See Their Fathers' Eyes,' *Oh Boy!* ed. Freya Jarman-Ivens (NY: Routledge, 2007) 86–8, 90–1.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Hayward, ed., *From Pop to Punk to Postmodernism* (Sydney: Allen, 1992) 169–70; Tony Mitchell, 'World Music, Indigenous Music and Music Television in Australia,' *Perfect Beat* 1.1 (1992): 11–13; Philip Hayward, 'Safe, Exotic and Somewhere Else,' *Perfect Beat* 1.2 (1993): 33–41; Tony Mitchell, 'World Music and the Popular Music Industry,' *Ethnomusicology* 37 (1993): 328–32; Tony Mitchell, 'Reply to "Culture, Custom and Collaboration" by Lisa Nicol,' *Perfect Beat* 1.2 (1993): 31–2; Lisa Nicol, 'Culture, Custom and Collaboration,' *Perfect Beat* 1.2 (1993): 23–31.

<sup>13</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Tribal Voice*, extended edition (Mushroom: TVD91017, 1992) 2, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Neuenfeldt, 'Yothu Yindi and *Garma*,' *Journal of Australian Studies* 38 (1993): 1–11; Jill Stubington and Peter Dunbar-Hall, 'Yothu Yindi's "Treaty",' *Popular Music* 13.3 (1994): 243–59; Fiona Magowan, 'The Land is Our *Mārr* (Essence), It Stays Forever,' *Ethnicity, Identity and Music*, ed. Martin Stokes (Oxford: Berg, 1994) 135–55; Fiona Magowan, 'Traditions of the Mind or the Music–Video,' *Arena Journal* 7 (1996): 99–110.

two classical Yolŋu models for social balance, *yothu-yindi* (child–mother) and *gama* (mingling currents), which had influenced the development of bi-cultural curricula at the Yirrkala school. Their valuable work referred me to ethnographic writings by Williams, Morphy and Keen<sup>15</sup> which have shaped contemporary scholarship into Yolŋu culture. However, my early understanding of my own research in this field as a fundamentally intercultural endeavour was largely influenced by the very models for social balance and cooperation promoted through Yothu Yindi's repertoire.

### Land, Song, Constitution

She walked with the law in her hands singing children of the earth.  
Praise the journey of the song lines, find the sign and follow the sun.

Verse 1, 'Baywara'<sup>16</sup>

The Yolŋu (literally 'person' or 'human') are the Indigenous inhabitants and hereditary owners of northeast Arnhem Land in Australia's Northern Territory. There are approximately 7000 Yolŋu Australians whose homelands extend from the Gove Peninsula in the far northeast, west to Cape Stuart and southwest to Walker River, and who populate six major towns: Milinjibi, Yirrkala, Galiwin'ku, and Ramanginj which were established as Methodist Missions in 1923, 1934, 1942 and 1973 respectively; and Gapuwiyak and Gunyarara which were founded as satellite outstations of Galiwin'ku and Yirrkala respectively in the 1980s.

Yolŋu society is an expansive network of more than sixty patrilineal groups, known as *mala* (literally 'group'), whose agnatic members share hereditary ownership in discrete physical estates known as *wäŋa* (country, homeland). Mandawuy Yunupingu was born into the Gumatj *mala*, while Wiŋiyana Marika and Milkayŋu Munuŋgurr are respective members of the Rirratjingu and Djapu' *mala*. Between them, the Yolŋu speak seven Australian languages known collectively as Yolŋu-Matha (People's Tongues). However, that each *mala* speaks its own patrillect or *matha* (tongue) with its own discrete lexicon of hereditary sacred *yäku* (names), is a crucial component of patrilineal identity among Yolŋu with legally binding ramifications for claims over *wäŋa* and other hereditary property.<sup>17</sup>

The Yolŋu have inhabited northeast Arnhem Land for countless millennia and maintain intimate knowledge of maritime sites known to have been above sea level some 10,000 years ago.<sup>18</sup> Prior to their erosion by the South Australian Government in 1906, the Yolŋu held centuries-long trading relations with Asian seafarers from the seaport of Makassar on Sulawesi. Their annual voyages to Australia's northern coast are recorded in hereditary canons of Yolŋu song, dance and design that survive to this day.<sup>19</sup> There is also evidence suggesting that the

<sup>15</sup> Nancy Williams, *The Yolŋu and Their Land* (Canberra: AIAS, 1986); Howard Morphy, *Ancestral Connections* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1991); Ian Keen, *Knowledge and Secrecy an Aboriginal Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Freedom* track 4.

<sup>17</sup> Williams, *The Yolŋu* 42.

<sup>18</sup> Yumbulul Yunupingu and Djiniyini Dhamarrandji, 'My Island Home,' *Our Land is Our Life*, ed. Galarwuy Yunupingu (St Lucia: U of Queensland Press, 1997) 181–7; Buku-Larrngay Mulka Centre, *Saltwater: Yirrkala Bark Paintings of Sea Country* (Neutral Bay, NSW: Jennifer Isaacs, 1999); David Horton, ed., *The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1994) 201.

<sup>19</sup> C.C. Macknight, *The Voyage to Maree* (Melbourne: MUP, 1976).

Bayini, of whom Yolŋu also sing, were Chinese seafarers who landed in Arnhem Land while circumnavigating the globe between 1421 and 1423.<sup>20</sup> Before the establishment of the Milinjibi Mission in 1923, Yolŋu had already held an extensive knowledge of their Asian neighbours for some 500 years and knew of Dutch colonisation in Indonesia.<sup>21</sup> This information had been absorbed into Yolŋu canons of hereditary knowledge without displacing the intrinsic and durable logic of Yolŋu intellectual discourses,<sup>22</sup> and served as a model for how Yolŋu communities would later endeavour to manage relationships with Euro-Australian or 'Balanda' missionaries and governments. Mandawuy Yunupinju explains how knowledge of these visitors is recorded in Yolŋu performance traditions.

It's part of our knowledge now; part of our library in our minds and our paintings to include those who came without indoctrinating us or claiming our land. We show our respect for them by making them part of our culture and our knowledge: our songs that we sing and our dances that we dance. Gurrumuru was the place where, at Buckingham Bay, Balanda came. Matthew Flinders came and anchored, and therefore the anchor is very significant there. The rope and the chain are significant. Therefore, when we sing of Gurrumuru, we sing about the Balanda, white people, coming to that land. On the other side is a bay called Garrthalala and, here, Dutch people came but, before them, the Bayini came, who were of course Chinese, so we sing about the sword, the anchor, the chain and the rope, and the mast of their ship.<sup>23</sup>

As the struggle over their sovereignty took shape in the 1960s, the Yolŋu remained observant of their continuing rights and responsibilities as the direct descendants of *waŋarr* (ancestral progenitors). These metaphysical entities are thought to have originally shaped, named and populated the Yolŋu homelands, and to remain sentient and ever-present therein.<sup>24</sup> It is through this birthright that all Yolŋu are *wäŋa-waŋaŋu* (land-owners, country-holders) in the homelands of their *mala*, and *rom-waŋaŋu* (law-holders) in incumbent hereditary canons of *yäku* (names), *manikay* (songs), *bunŋgul* (dances) and *miny'tji* (designs). Collectively known as *maḍayin* (sacra), these hereditary canons describe the beauty of all creation and the nature of all things in it. As bodies of esoteric knowledge and religious practice, they also evidence ownership in country by virtue of ancestral bestowal, and provide a ceremonial framework for all provisions under Yolŋu *rom* (law, culture, correct practice, the way).<sup>25</sup>

The inseparable ancestral relationships between *wäŋa*, *maḍayin* and *rom* are captured in 'Baywara' on Yothu Yindi's third album, *Freedom*.<sup>26</sup> The verses and bridge of this song describe

<sup>20</sup> Charles Mountford, *Art, Myth and Symbolism* (Melbourne: MUP, 1956) 333; Gavin Menzies, *1421* (London: Bantam, 2002) 197–214.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Cooke, ed., *Aboriginal Languages in Contemporary Contexts* (Batchelor: Batchelor College, 1996) 1–20.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Worsley, 'Early Asian Contacts with Australia,' *Past and Present* 7 (1955): 3–4; Donald Thomson, 'Early Makassar Visitors to Arnhem Land and Their Influence on Its People,' *Walkabout* 23 (1957): 29–31; Ian McIntosh, 'The Dog and the Myth Maker,' *Australian Folklore* 9 (1994): 77–81, 'Islam and Australia's Aborigines?,' *Journal of Religious History* 20.1 (1996): 53–77; and Peter Toner, 'Ideology, Influence and Innovation,' *Perfect Beat* 5.1 (2000): 22–41.

<sup>23</sup> Yunupinju with Corn, 'Yothu Yindi.'

<sup>24</sup> Williams, *The Yolŋu*; Yunupinju, ed., *Our Land* 1–17, 210–27; Djiniyini Gondarra, 'Customary Law,' *Garma Festival* (Darwin: YYF, 2001) 15–20; Corn and Gumbula, 'Now Balanda Say' 101–16.

<sup>25</sup> Williams, *The Yolŋu* 29; Keen, *Knowledge and Secrecy* 2, 137; Gondarra 'Customary Law' 19.

<sup>26</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Freedom* track 4.

the ancestral arrival of Baywara, the *wajarr* Olive Python, at the Gälpu homeland of Njappinya, Mandawuy's mother's country. She embeds herself and her *rom* deep into the country there, and sings her human children of the Gälpu *mala* into being before creating other *mala* on other homelands further west. The chorus identifies Baywara as 'Maker of the Land, Maker of the Song, Maker of the Constitution.' Mandawuy explains the centrality of this precept to the Yolŋu worldview and their continuing sovereignty in northeast Arnhem Land.

Land, song and constitution are all integral; all one. You can't isolate one from the other. It's all interwoven very tightly and you can't separate them. That is written in the bark paintings; in the scrolls of the log coffins; in the songs. No matter what their language in Arnhem Land, everyone practices that. Even down in central Australia where they practice the boomerang, they talk about the same thing. It's the constitution. It's the law. It's the basis of where we come from ... If you've ever been exposed to those big ceremonies, you see people dancing whether they're shark people or stingray people; whether they're *bäru* [saltwater crocodile], the Maralitja [Saltwater Crocodile] man. Maralitja discovered fire in the beginning so, when you're dancing *bäru*, you become transformed into Maralitja and that's when you say 'I'm the Maralitja. I own the land. I own that philosophy. I own that knowledge. I have a right to that land and you can't take that away from me.' Other groups are the same. When people dance shark, they're transformed into the shark ancestor, or the stingray or whatever it may be. That's how one becomes transformed into something they want to show; they want to tell in that most classical way. The classical way of making their point known is by doing it in unity and strength with one's own *mala* and, of course, the *yothu-yindi* [child-mother] balance between *mala* is always there in that strength and unity ... We are still doing this regardless of our laws having been rejected and trivialised ... We don't care. We keep going because it's important to pass on this law to the next generation so it strengthens our identity as a first-nations people of this country.<sup>27</sup>

The music-video for 'Tribal Voice'<sup>28</sup> from Yothu Yindi's second album exemplifies the intensity with which Yolŋu perform the ancestral in *manikay* and *bunŋgul*. It features a genuine *dhapi* (male initiation by circumcision) ceremony in which Mandawuy dances *gapirri* (stingray), while his older brother, Galarrwuy Yunupinju, sings *manikay* over the three initiates and paints elaborate *miny'tji* on their bodies. As he dances, Mandawuy clutches a Gumatj *bathi* (basket), with brightly-feathered *wajna* (arm) chords trailing from it, in his mouth. *Bathi* are the most sacred emblems of *wajarr* authority that can be displayed in any public context and, when clutched in the mouth in ceremony, evoke the ferocity of the ancestral entity being danced.

### One Blood

The beating of our hearts waking up the land  
The beating of our hearts, one blood

Verse 1, 'One Blood'<sup>29</sup>

Yolŋu society is systemically di-constitutional. All people, the *mala* into which they are born, the hereditary property that they own, the ceremonial protocols that they observe, and the

<sup>27</sup> Yunupinju with Corn, 'Yothu Yindi.'

<sup>28</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Diŋimurru* clip 6.

<sup>29</sup> Yothu Yindi, *One Blood* track 2.



eternal *wañarr* from they are descended are constituted as either Dhuwa or Yirritja.<sup>30</sup> Yolŋu *rom* prescribes strict exogamy between Dhuwa and Yirritja. Children are born into their father's *mala* and constitution, and inherit full ownership rights in *wāŋa* and other hereditary property through this lineage. Their mothers will always be members of a different *mala* under the other constitution. Through this lineage, children instead inherit complementary rights in the *wāŋa* and other hereditary property of their *ñāndipulu* (mother-group) and *māripulu* (mother's mother-group).<sup>31</sup>

Although the Dhuwa or Yirritja constitutions are each understood to be whole and complete in themselves, Yolŋu society is founded on their cooperation and interdependence under a di-constitutional legal system. Yolŋu marriages produce heirs who are directly descended from their *ñāndipulu* but, as members of their own *mala* under another constitution, can never claim ownership over any of its property. These *waku* (children of women) nonetheless learn to perform their mothers' *maḍayin*, and serve as *djuŋgayarr* (workers, managers, scrutineers) to their *ñāndipulu* throughout their lives. Once sufficiently senior, they are legally required to ensure the correctness and legality of all ceremonial and political actions taken by their *ñāndipulu*, and to arbitrate disputes that may arise among its members.<sup>32</sup>

Therefore, though differently constituted, neither Dhuwa nor Yirritja can perform ceremonies, pass laws, make political undertakings or even produce heirs without each other's approval and cooperation. Mandawuy suggests that, 'Since day one, Yolŋu have had this very acute way of seeing the world and how things should be shared equally in society.'<sup>33</sup> The Golumala leader Djiniyini Gondarra further explains that this systemic separation of constitutional powers promotes equity and harmony between *mala* as enshrined in the prolific bond between *yothu* (child) and *yindi* (mother). It is from this very bond that Yothu Yindi takes its name.<sup>34</sup> Though similar in age, close *yothu–yindi* (child–mother) relationships exist between Mandawuy Yunupinju, Wiṭiyana Marika and Milkayŋu Munuŋgurr. Both Wiṭiyana and Milkayŋu are Dhuwa sons of Mandawuy's sisters. They both call him *ŋapipi* (mother's brother) and identify the Gumatj *mala* as their Yirritja *ñāndipulu*. Mandawuy's own *ñāndi* (mother) was born into the Gälpu *mala* which is also constituted as Dhuwa.

Yothu Yindi's six albums consists almost entirely of original songs and traditional *manikay* items grounded in Rirratjŋu, Gumatj and Gälpu *maḍayin*. More than half of the band's repertoire of fifty-five original songs, twenty-three traditional *manikay* items, and three *djatpaŋarri* items is Gumatj. Traditional Gumatj *manikay* items that feature on Yothu Yindi's albums are typically sung by Mandawuy's older brother, Galarrwuy, and include 'Gany'tjurr (White-Faced Heron),' 'Bäpaŋ (Driftwood),' 'Lorrpu (Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo),' 'Laykarrambu (Male Red Kangaroo)' and 'Bäru (Saltwater Crocodile).'<sup>35</sup> Original songs such as 'Maralitja: Crocodile Man,' 'Tears for Law: Garrathiya Run,' 'Yirmala (Hull),' 'One Blood,' 'Our Land' and 'Fire'<sup>36</sup> also feature musical and lyrical materials drawn directly from Gumatj *manikay–buŋgul*

<sup>30</sup> Corn and Gumbula, 'Rom and the Academy' 176–8.

<sup>31</sup> Morphy, *Ancestral Connections* 66–7.

<sup>32</sup> Morphy, *Ancestral Connections* 66–7.

<sup>33</sup> Yunupinju with Corn, 'Yothu Yindi.'

<sup>34</sup> Gondarra, 'Customary Law' 19.

<sup>35</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Freedom* track 15; *Birrkuda* tracks 5, 10; *One Blood* tracks 1, 14.

<sup>36</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Tribal Voice* track 5; *Birrkuda* tracks 1, 12; *One Blood* tracks 2, 17; *Garma* track 2.

(song–dance) series. Mandawuy pioneered this approach when composing of his first song, ‘Djāpana: Sunset Dreaming.’<sup>37</sup>

*Djāpana* (coral sunset) is the coral-hued haze that spreads across the clouds and horizon at sunset. It is a subject in the *manikay–bungul* series for the Gumatj country of Bawaka which recounts an ancestral visitation by Bayini marauders who had chained a woman named Djotarra in the *yirrmala* (hull) of their boat. The Bayini set sail from Bawaka into the *djāpana* sunset, but their boat struck a rock and sank drowning all aboard. Its wreckage remains there eternally as a rocky island called Binhanhaṅay, while splintered flotsam from the hull in which Djotarra was imprisoned became *bāpaṅ* or *mätjala* (driftwood). Lyrics of the song’s introduction and chorus are drawn directly from Gumatj *manikay* on the subject of *Djāpana*, and expressing sorrow for the loss of Djotarra and her Bayini captors. ‘Djāpana: Sunset Dreaming’ was a ground-breaking achievement. It demonstrated how the rock idiom could incorporate themes and materials drawn directly from *maḍayin* to extend durable ideas grounded in Yolṅu tradition. Mandawuy explains his inspiration for the song’s composition.

One evening after work, I was sitting with a friend of mine. I had a guitar and I was feeling sad for my family. My family didn’t come with me at that time. They came afterwards; maybe two months after I was there on my own. I was sitting. I was thinking. I was worrying about my family and it was sundown. I was thinking about the lines in *djāpana*. I was thinking ‘*warwu* [sorrow].’ I was thinking ‘*djāpana rrāma rrāmani dhurulaṅala galaṅgarri* [coral sunset, coral sunset clouds, coral sunset clouds, fading, coral sunset].’ I was thinking about all those names that make one sad and thinking about the family, because *djāpana* is about thinking back to your family, so I grabbed the guitar. Also at that time, there was a big movement in that most of the Yolṅu in the bands were into gospel songs. There was a big gospel movement happening and my objective was to say, ‘Now listen guys, there are other avenues to think about your culture.’ My struggle was to preserve my culture and the way that I wanted to do that was to write a song with all those Western elements so I came up with the lines and the lyrics as a modern way of describing what I thought about in the traditional way. On the day after composing it, I went to the band Soft Sands<sup>38</sup> and asked them if they could play this song using their equipment. I was able to feel it with the drums as well as the bass guitar, the lead guitar and rhythm guitar. I then worked out the chorus lines for it as time went on. We gave it a contemporary rock ‘n’ roll feel but still maintained that Yolṅu side to it ... *Djāpana* ends a song series. It might take all day and, then at the end of the day, *djāpana* basically says goodbye: goodbye to the day, to the people, and to friends, relatives and visitors from wherever they come.<sup>39</sup>

Traditional Rirratjīnu *manikay* items sung by Wiṭiyana Marika also feature on Yothu Yindi’s first three albums, and include ‘Guḍurrku (Brolga),’ ‘Dhum’thum (Agile Wallaby),’ ‘Yinydjapana (Dolphin)’ and ‘Milika (Diamond Fish).’<sup>40</sup> *Dhum’thum* or *mulpiya*’ (agile wallaby) is heard again in the first two *manikay* sections of ‘Timeless Land,’<sup>41</sup> the only original song by

<sup>37</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Tribal Voice* track 3.

<sup>38</sup> Aaron Corn and Neparrṅa Gumbula, ‘Ancestral Precedent as Creative Inspiration,’ *The Power of Knowledge, The Resonance of Tradition*, ed. Graeme Ward and Adrian Muckle (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2005) 31–68.

<sup>39</sup> Yunupinju with Corn, ‘Yothu Yindi.’

<sup>40</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Homeland Movement* track 8; *Tribal Voice* tracks 6, 10; *Freedom* track 9.

<sup>41</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Freedom* track 1.



Yothu Yindi to quote Rirratjinu *manikay*. It is also significant that 'Timeless Land' concludes, not with *mulpiya*,<sup>42</sup> but with Witiyana leading an entire *manikay* item, in its traditional setting, on the Gumatj subject of *mambulmambul* (red kangaroo). *Mambulmambul* celebrates the shared humanity of all Yolŋu, Dhuwa and Yirritja, who partake in its flesh. Its juxtaposition against *mulpiya* in 'Timeless Land' emphasises the *yothu-yindi* bond between Rirratjinu and Gumatj. This bond is also the theme of the original song, 'Mätjala (Driftwood)',<sup>42</sup> in which flotsam from the Bayini hull in which Djotarra was held at Bawaka is cited as a metaphor for all *waku* of Gumatj women.

While no traditional Gälpu *manikay* items feature on Yothu Yindi's albums, 'Dots on the Shells'<sup>43</sup> was composed in memory of Mandawuy's mother, while his late parents' continuing agency in his life is described in 'Gapirri (Stingray).'<sup>44</sup> In this second song, Mandawuy personifies his mother as the Gälpu *wanarr*, Baywara (Olive Python), and his father as Gumatj *wanarr*, Gapirri (Stingray). The lightening spoken by Baywara as she founded Naypinya is evoked in 'Baywara'<sup>45</sup> through direct quotation of a Gälpu *manikay* item on the subject of *bonbarr* (lightening). However, Mandawuy composed 'Baywara,' not in memory of his mother, but for the late Daḍayŋa Marika. This Rirratjinu uncle of Mandawuy and father of Witiyana, had spent a decade lobbying against mining on the Gove Peninsula alongside Mandawuy's father, Mangurrawuy Yunupinju. Mandawuy recounts the events surrounding its composition.

This is a special song because, in 1991, my uncle, who is considered to be the father of land rights, passed away. We were recording our second album, *Tribal Voice*, at that time and, when he passed away, we were at a mobile studio at Gunyaŋara. We were sitting outside that evening, and there was lightening in the sea and in the fresh water talking. Two snakes were talking to each other in the fresh water and the salt water. That inspired me to write this song about Baywara as my uncle was a master of that philosophy. He taught much of how Yolŋu are initiated with the Baywara philosophy so this song was specially written when he passed away.<sup>46</sup>

As Mandawuy suggests, Daḍayŋa had also been a venerated leader of the Djunguwan ceremony under Baywara's *rom*. Yothu Yindi sings of this ceremony in 'Back to Culture.'<sup>47</sup> His country was the Rirratjinu *wäŋa* of Yalanbara and it was here, on 'the sand dune of love' mentioned in 'Gunitpirr Man,'<sup>48</sup> that the *wanarr* Djaŋ'kawu Sisters gave birth to the first Yolŋu.<sup>49</sup>

### Reflections in the Water

Reflections in the water I see  
Black and white living together

Verse 1, 'Mainstream'<sup>50</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Tribal Voice* track 11.

<sup>43</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Freedom* track 13.

<sup>44</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Tribal Voice* track 13.

<sup>45</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Freedom* track 4.

<sup>46</sup> Yunupinju with Corn, 'Yothu Yindi.'

<sup>47</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Freedom* track 6.

<sup>48</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Freedom* track 11.

<sup>49</sup> Yunupinju with Corn, 'Yothu Yindi.'

<sup>50</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Tribal Voice* track 8.

The *yothu–yindi* balance between Rirratjinu and Gumatj is also referenced in ‘Mainstream.’<sup>51</sup> This was Mandawuy’s third original song. It was composed in 1986, just before Yothu Yindi’s formation, while Mandawuy was completing his degree in Education. In his role as Assistant Principal at Shepherdson College, Mandawuy had often been confronted by Balanda assumptions that *mainstream* schooling in English alone could cater for the educational needs of Yolŋu children. He explains how, in his tertiary studies, he challenged this notion through the song’s composition.

‘Mainstream’ was my first challenge to *mainstream* education. Here I was, for the first time, sitting equally with third year students in the university system. So for me, as I was one of only five Indigenous students there, this was my way of saying, ‘Listen, I can come in. I can sit. I can learn but, still, I have my own traditions which are equal to yours,’ so this song is not about assimilation. It’s about my law being as equal as yours ... I was going to Deakin University when I wrote this and it was part of an assignment. I got an A Plus. The six pretty girls in the first verse are my daughters. While you’re studying, you miss your family so I was thinking about them. Suddenly, two of them are following my footsteps now. They’ve both written songs and are in the band at Yirrkala School so I’m really proud of them.<sup>52</sup>

‘Mainstream’ essentially contends that the knowledge codified in *maḍayin* and the imperative to follow ancestral precedent constitutes the mainstream intellectual discourse through which Yolŋu have been raised and educated for countless generations. It challenges still-prevalent notions in Australia that only Balanda academic traditions are factually and pedagogically valid and, at the time, posited Mandawuy’s vision for redressing this imbalance through the introduction of bi-cultural schooling to Yolŋu communities.<sup>53</sup> The first verse of ‘Mainstream’ refers to *djinkunguu* (yellow foam) which is produced at *ganma* (mingling currents) sites in the Yirritja *yapa* (sister) countries of Biranybirany, which is Gumatj, and Dhälinybuy, which is Wangurri. The meeting of currents, both fresh and salt, at these *ganma* sites represents fruitful non-assimilative interaction between equal powers. The *djinkunguu* that it creates represents the generation of entirely new knowledge through their cooperation.<sup>54</sup> Mandawuy adds that:

*Ganma* is a place where, when the water runs out, it’s empty. There’s no water and that *ganma* point is where fire is represented by the seaweed growing. It’s considered a symbol of fire where the dugong eats and rolls on it. *Ganma* also connects us with the Wangurri *mala*, my *yapapulu* [sister-group] ... Our father’s father, Yunupinju, ... had responsibilities for Gumatj and responsibilities for Wangurri. The *ganma* concept is drawn from the very depth of our knowledge and practices that we consider as ritual between *mala*.<sup>55</sup>

In the first verse of ‘Mainstream,’ Mandawuy also describes looking into the water, the medium that classically carries Yolŋu *birrimbirr* (souls),<sup>56</sup> and being reminded of his six

<sup>51</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Tribal Voice* track 8.

<sup>52</sup> Yunupinju with Corn, ‘Yothu Yindi.’

<sup>53</sup> Corn, interviews with Yunupinju.

<sup>54</sup> Corn, interviews with Yunupinju.

<sup>55</sup> Yunupinju with Corn, ‘Yothu Yindi.’

<sup>56</sup> Corn, ‘To See Their Fathers’ 90.

Gumatj daughters. The second verse then refers to the Rirratjinu *madayin* of their mother. This reference to their *yothu–yindi* bond models a different kind of balance from that of *ganyma*, one in which interdependent cooperation between Yirritja and Dhuwa drives the whole of Yolŋu existence. The song's third and final verse transposes these two Yolŋu paradigms for social balance, *ganyma* and *yothu–yindi*, onto the broader arena of race relations in Australia to propose a more equitable model for cooperation between Indigenous peoples and others.<sup>57</sup> The ideals posited by Mandawuy in 'Mainstream' set forth a vision for bi-cultural schooling in northeast Arnhem Land that quickly became standard curricula for Yolŋu children.<sup>58</sup> His theorisation of *ganyma* as a collaborative conceptual space in which new intercultural dialogues could legitimately exist and generate new understanding also underpinned Yothu Yindi's approach to repertoire development, and YYF's vision of the Garma Festival as a forum for learning and exchange for all.<sup>59</sup>

### Written on a Bark

Someone in the city gets a piece of paper  
Someone in the bush holds the law in their hands

Verse 1, 'Our Generation'<sup>60</sup>

Perhaps the most profound historical episode preceding Yothu Yindi's formation was the decade-long Yolŋu struggle between 1962 and 1971 to halt mining on the Gove Peninsula. Original songs by Yothu Yindi such as 'Homeland Movement,' 'Luku-Wänjawuy Manikay 1788,' 'Treaty,' 'My Kind of Life,' 'World of Innocence,' 'Freedom,' 'Mabo,' 'Our Generation,' 'Written on a Bark,' 'Belief in the Future,' 'Lonely Tree' and 'Gone Is the Land'<sup>61</sup> reflect the gravity of this struggle and its aftermath for Yolŋu communities. Yolŋu elders at Yirrkala including Mandawuy's father, Mangurrawuy, and Wiŋiyana's father, Daḍayŋa, first heard of this threat indirectly through the mission authority in 1962. Their initial response was to demonstrate their solidarity under *rom* by presenting the mission authority with the 'Yirrkala Church Panels.'<sup>62</sup> This extraordinary document comprised two enormous bark panels, Dhuwa on the left and Yirritja on the right, painted with the restricted *miny'tji* of ten *mala* owning homelands on the Gove Peninsula.<sup>63</sup> Mandawuy describes his father's role in their creation.

He was kind in accepting the non-Aboriginal people came to him. He also wanted to bring into the church his law, and I think I inherit that sense of balance from him. He wanted to give non-Aboriginal people, even the missionaries, a sense of 'Hey listen, we've been here a long time and this is what we know. This is our way of telling you that

<sup>57</sup> Corn, 'Dreamtime Wisdom' 77–82.

<sup>58</sup> YCS Action Group, *Towards a Ganyma Curriculum*; Michael Christie, 'Literacy, Genocide and the Media,' *Aboriginal Child at School* 17.5 (1989): 27–32; Raymattja Marika, Dayŋawa Njurruwutthun and Leon White, 'Always Together, Yaka Gäna,' *Convergence* 25.1 (1989): 23–39; Stephen Harris, *Two Way Aboriginal Schooling* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1990).

<sup>59</sup> Corn, 'When the Waters' 21.

<sup>60</sup> Yothu Yindi, *One Blood* track 9.

<sup>61</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Homeland Movement* tracks 3, 15; *Tribal Voice* tracks 2, 4; *Freedom* tracks 2–3, 8, 14; *One Blood* tracks 9, 15; *Garma* tracks 11–12.

<sup>62</sup> Wadjuk Marika et al., 'Yirrkala Church Panels' (Yirrkala: Yirrkala Mission, 1962).

<sup>63</sup> Djon Mundine, 'Saltwater,' in Buku-Larrŋgay Mulka Centre, *Saltwater: Yirrkala Bark Paintings of Sea Country* (Neutral Bay, NSW: Jennifer Isaacs, 1999) 24–25.

we go deeper and our layers of knowledge go deeper than you thought.’ His painting on the right panel is of the saltwater crocodile, the Maralitja man, and the yellow ochre man [Wirrili] from the same land where the saltwater crocodile discovered fire. He used my hair for that painting so it’s very significant and historic for me.<sup>64</sup>

In 1963, twelve elders from Yirrkala communicated their grievances to the Australian Parliament through the ‘Yirrkala Petition to the House of Representatives.’<sup>65</sup> This second document comprised duplicate typescripts on two bark panels bordered with Dhuwa *miny’tji* on the left and Yirritja *miny’tji* on the right. Preparations for the mine forged ahead nonetheless and, in 1967, the mining company NABALCO knowingly desecrated sacred sites to construct staff accommodations on the Rirratjinu country of Nhulunbuy. Heartbroken, the Yirrkala elders issued a writ in 1968 seeking to restrain NABALCO and the Commonwealth of Australia in the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory.<sup>66</sup>

The case that ensued probed the *ñärra’* (restricted) depths of Yolŋu law and its proprietary provisions.<sup>67</sup> Mandawuy’s older brother, Galarrwuy, interpreted for the plaintiffs throughout the proceedings and witnessed their eventual defeat when, in 1971, Justice Blackburn ruled that Yolŋu proprietary interests were not in any way recognised under Commonwealth law.<sup>68</sup> Further insult to Yolŋu dignity came when Blackburn found that the plaintiffs had failed to prove their descent from the owners the Gove Peninsula on 26 January 1788 when Captain Arthur Phillip took possession of the entire Australian continent in the name of the British Crown.<sup>69</sup> Yothu Yindi laments this loss, and the permanent display of the ‘Yirrkala Petition to the House of Representatives’<sup>70</sup> in the Australian Parliament House in ‘Written on a Bark.’<sup>71</sup> Mandawuy recalls his father’s feelings at this time.

I remember that time when my father gathered all the elders and they went out bush. They prepared for weeks before flying to Darwin all the things one would want to think about in terms of law. These elders were there. They were serious about talking to the judge because they knew that they had to convince the Australian High Courts so they spent maybe two weeks in the bush doing what elders would do to initiate young men. In this case, they were preparing things to show Blackburn. They took those things to court and what did Blackburn do? That was the biggest disappointment. Further down the line, they did the same thing at the beginning of the Mabo Case. My father was devastated when we lost that court case and I saw most of the elders, along with my father, saddened. We’ll never forget that those aspects of our law, our strength and our unity were not seen as part of Australian culture and the Australian way of life in the Yolŋu way.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Yunupinju with Corn, ‘Yothu Yindi.’

<sup>65</sup> Milirrpum Marika et al., ‘Yirrkala Petition to the House of Representatives’ (Yirrkala: Yirrkala Mission, 1963).

<sup>66</sup> Djon Mundine, ‘Saltwater’ 23.

<sup>67</sup> *Milirrpum and Others v Nabalco Pty Ltd and the Commonwealth of Australia* (1971) 17 FLR 141–294 (‘*Milirrpum v Nabalco*’).

<sup>68</sup> *Milirrpum v Nabalco* (Blackburn J).

<sup>69</sup> *Milirrpum v Nabalco* 198 (Blackburn J).

<sup>70</sup> Marika et al., ‘Yirrkala Petition.’

<sup>71</sup> Yothu Yindi, *One Blood* track 9.

<sup>72</sup> Yunupinju with Corn, ‘Yothu Yindi.’

The absurdity of Blackburn's ruling to Yolŋu sensibilities is scathingly satirised in 'Luku-Wāṅawuy Manikay [Sovereignty Song] 1788'<sup>73</sup> which was composed by Galarrwuy, who was then Chair of the Northern Land Council, to mark the bicentenary of Balanda occupation in Australia. The song parodies a sitting of Parliament in which a very strange tale is related: Balanda were claiming that Yolŋu had lost their land with the planting of a Union Jack at Sydney Cove in 1788. It further quips that Captain Phillip's First Fleet would have been hastily repelled had they not landed some 2500 kilometres away from Yirrkala, or had it not taken more than 130 years for Yolŋu to hear of their arrival. That the song is set in a revivalist folk style, which historically celebrated Balanda pastoral expansion, lends it all the more humour.

In 1988, Galarrwuy attempted to right the wrongs of Blackburn's ruling with the 'Barunga Statement'.<sup>74</sup> He and the Chair of the Central Land Council, Wenten Rubuntja, presented this new document to Prime Minister Bob Hawke at the Barunga Festival. It comprised a typescript on a single bark panel which called on the Commonwealth to negotiate a Treaty with Indigenous Australians in recognition of their prior ownership, continuing occupation and sovereignty in Australia, and their human rights and freedom.<sup>75</sup> This was bordered with Yolŋu *miny'tji* from four Yirritja *mala* on the left and, on the right, a Two Sisters design common throughout central Australia. Hawke's immediate response to the 'Barunga Statement' was a promise a Treaty within the life of his Parliament, but by 1990, it was apparent that he had failed to deliver.<sup>76</sup> Yothu Yindi's counter-response was 'Treaty'.<sup>77</sup> As Mandawuy explains:

1988 was when Prime Minister Hawke came to Barunga and, at that Barunga Festival, he made a statement. He said, 'There shall be a Treaty between Aboriginal Australia and White Australia.' Everyone was really excited about it: 'Ah yeah, finally there'll be a Treaty.' Further down the track, 1988, 1989, 1990; that's when I started to get suspicious about this Treaty. There was no action being taken so I teamed up with Paul Kelly, Peter Garrett and Bart Willoughby, a few Australian musicians, and we wrote the song 'Treaty.' It's a reflection on the Australian Government at that time and the Australian people for that matter. When is the Treaty, what is the Treaty, how is it going to take form, and in what shape will a Treaty come into being in Australia? We wrote that song 'Treaty' as a reminder to us all.<sup>78</sup>

The song's first verse recounts Hawke's promise of a Treaty in 1988 and his failure to deliver. Echoing Galarrwuy's declaration of Yolŋu sovereignty in 'Luku-Wāṅawuy Manikay 1788',<sup>79</sup> its second verse proclaims, 'This land was never given up; this land was never bought and sold. The planting of the Union Jack never changed our law at all.' The lines that follow, 'Now two rivers run their course separated for so long. I'm dreaming of a brighter day when the waters will be one,' allude to the *gaṁma* (mingling currents) metaphor initially used by

<sup>73</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Homeland Movement* track 15.

<sup>74</sup> Galarrwuy Yunupingu et al., 'Barunga Statement' (Barunga: Northern Land Council, 1988).

<sup>75</sup> Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998) 258; Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, eds, *The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights* (Sydney: Allen, 1999) 316–17.

<sup>76</sup> ATSIC, 'Everybody's Talking,' *ATSIC News* February (2001) 37.

<sup>77</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Tribal Voice* track 2.

<sup>78</sup> Yunupingu with Corn, 'Yothu Yindi.'

<sup>79</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Homeland Movement* track 15.

Mandawuy in 'Mainstream.'<sup>80</sup> 'Treaty' also quotes an historical *djatpanjarri* item recorded by Richard Waterman in the early 1950s. It was originally composed by Rrikin Burarrwaŋa, one of three late Gumatj masters of this semi-improvisatory style to whom *Tribal Voice* is dedicated. For Yolŋu audiences, its quotation in 'Treaty' evokes nostalgia for the time before mining on the Gove Peninsula.<sup>81</sup>

### Forever and Ever, Day by Day

And we will sing and dance under the Honey Sun  
Forever and ever, day by day

Chorus, 'Hope'<sup>82</sup>

This article has shown the many classical expressions of Yolŋu culture found in Yothu Yindi's repertoire, and the Yolŋu models for social balance found in its music, and Mandawuy Yunupiŋu's personal history in the struggle over Yolŋu sovereignty on the Gove Peninsula. Mandawuy's words have offered new insights to his creative intentions, the influence of his work as an educator, and his political outlook in his composition of original music for Yothu Yindi. It has demonstrated how, through this music, Yothu Yindi has deployed traditional materials to affirm Yolŋu sovereignty under ancestral law, and Mandawuy has extended traditional models for social balance to posit better cooperation between Indigenous Australians and others. Finally, this article explains how Yothu Yindi's music has immortalised the struggle for Yolŋu sovereignty in northeast Arnhem Land to honour the memories of the Yolŋu leaders it consumed, and to remind us all of the unmet need for a Treaty between Indigenous Australians and the Commonwealth.

The 'Yirrkala Church Panels,' the 'Yirrkala Petition to the House of Representatives,' the 'Barunga Statement,'<sup>83</sup> Yothu Yindi and the Garma Festival are each deliberate steps in an intergenerational continuum of outreach aimed at finding common ground in an Australia where Yolŋu struggle, not only for external recognition of their sovereignty, but for their very cultural survival. Galarrwuy Yunupiŋu once stated that there is now no hope of a Treaty within his lifetime.<sup>84</sup> The music and achievements of Yothu Yindi nonetheless stand to remind us that, where there is hope, there are always possibilities for better intercultural understandings and more equitable futures.

<sup>80</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Tribal Voice* track 8.

<sup>81</sup> Corn, interviews with Yunupiŋu.

<sup>82</sup> Yothu Yindi, *Tribal Voice* track 12.

<sup>83</sup> Marika et al., 'Yirrkala Church Panels'; Marika et al., 'Yirrkala Petition'; Yunupiŋu et al., 'Barunga Statement.'

<sup>84</sup> Galarrwuy Yunupiŋu, Opening Address to the Mawul Rom Cross-Cultural Mediation Training Workshop 21 June 2004, Dhuḍuḍu, Elcho Island.