

## A Keynote Speaker: Human Rights and Social Justice Award

Yalmay Yunupingu 24 June 2014

Nhämirri bukmaḱ? I am very delighted to be here for this Human Rights and Social Justice Award and thank you for having me here as a keynote speaker today.

I am very honoured to be here on your beautiful land of the Eora Nation, a land Captain Cook first landed when he placed a British flag and claimed the area of Sydney, and called it a “crown land”, Terra Nullius meaning the empty land which is a false lie.

I’d like to introduce myself first “**Yol ḡarra? Who am I?**” and where I’m from. My name is Gurruwuḡ Yunupingu also known as Yalmay which means special sand on a Dhuwa land and Gurruwuḡ means a special walking stick that two ancestral beings used when they started their journey from East to West. Marika is my maiden name before I was married into the Yunupingu family. Marika means ‘thunder and lightning’. My skin-name is Gamanydjan.

My clan and Bāpurru is Rirratjingu which is the language I speak, my father’s language. I am Dhuwa moiety which I inherited through my father’s side. My ḡikan is Gunitjpirr Guḡuwaḡa these are the special names identifying who I am just like your identification card on your driver’s licence. But we don’t carry our identification like a card, we live who we are.

My hometown is Yirrkala in the far tip of the Northern Territory North-East Arnhem land. I was born and raised there. I went to the local school and I finished year 12 there. When I left school I became a teacher. My position at the school is Senior Teacher Primary. I have been working for the education Department for 36 years.

My mother Boḡu Waḡambi and her sister Bumiti Waḡambi were the two Warramiri clan, ‘Birruḱa Mala-wuḡgay Gurrirriwiya Yamba-yamba Mala-Maḡatja Ḷalaḡaḱalḡa this is their identity who they were. They came from honey tribes, the inland people of Gāḡgaḡ, where the massacre took place in the 1940s. A horseman called Bill Harney which yolḡu people pronounced him as, “Bilani.” He led the massacre. My two mothers were the two last survivors of the Gāḡgaḡ massacre. My mother Boḡu Waḡambi who was the eldest in the family and her younger sister, who lived a long life and only passed away on 13<sup>th</sup> January this year. The language that they spoke was Warramiri. This language is now extinct, finished, gone; it will never be used again.

My mother’s people and other clan leaders after they were shot were thrown into the river of Gāḡgaḡ; and some were buried all in one hole. Bilani and his horsemen came back a year later for the remains and sold them to museums and for scientific reasons. This type of massacre occurred throughout Australia. This horrible massacre happened to some of my mother’s clan. I call that Genocide, genocide of human race, the quickest way to wipe out a Yolḡu nation.

My Father’s name was Mathaman Marika. He is a senior family member a younger brother of Mawalan Marika. He assisted with painting the dhuwa “church Panel”, that now hangs in Buku-Larrḡgay Mulka Centre Museum in Yirrkala. He was one of the leaders who led a protest against the destruction of Yolḡu sacred sites at Mt Saunders “pain of my country” where the town of

Nhulunbuy is situated. He is a well-known artist; in 1996 the Sothebys auction in New York saw one of his artworks sell for the highest price then paid for Australian Indigenous art.

## **Human Rights**

Politics, politics, politics. Policy, policy, policy. Changes, changes, and more changes. What's next? Are we going to keep living like this and keep being used as a Trojan horse? As new Government gets voted, in comes new policy, "bang", and then follows by the new changes "bang". New jobs are created, people are put into positions and they often don't have any idea how to do their job. Bush schools are criticized, and they say that Indigenous team teachers are inexperienced and unskilled to run bilingual and education programs in our own communities. For example in many bush schools, including mine, teachers are sent to us often with no experience working in Indigenous communities. They have a formal teaching degree but it takes a long time for them to understand the context they are working in and the turnover is high.

Northern Territory Government is considering a partnership with Noel Pearson's Cape York Institute to develop an explicit literacy and numeracy model for remote schools. Our community has not been consulted. This recommendation came from Bruce Wilson's Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory. Again, we were not properly consulted. We want to see the evidence that this approach is successful. Research into Indigenous children learning English as a second or third language is ignored. The Government is not looking for an evidence base approach. We want to see the evidence that this works before we become the target of yet another policy change. We want to put our energy into improving the programs we know work, like Bilingual education. Instead we are forced to defend them and tired from this constant battle.

We also object to the recommendation that all of our secondary students should be sent away to boarding school. Boarding school should be choice that families make, as some already do. However if this recommendation is implemented, and we have been told it will, our communities will not have a choice. What happens to the students that choose not to go or drop out because they are homesick or cannot cope being away from families? What pathways will they be offered? Why should our children be sent away?

Last week on the 19<sup>th</sup> June at our staff meeting our Arnhem Regional Director said that if we try to fight it, we will lose. We have been fighting for 30 years to keep our Yolngu voice in the school, for the knowledge that the students bring to school to be valued within our school system. We are not disadvantaged because of this. Our children are sacred and bring a depth of knowledge with them to school. This knowledge is often not recognized and valued by the education system. We need to work out ways to support and inspire them to access meaningful education. It's up to governments to take the situation as they find it and develop a plan, with us, not for us. Building on what works and supporting us to improve what we do.

We are exhausted by the routine attacks that undermine and destabilize the community, educators and systems in place. We are frustrated with naïve people coming into our communities, unfamiliar with cultural differences, making decisions and recommendations for us.

It is a constant struggle for us. At Yirrkala Community we have high expectations of our children's education; it is always in our blood. Yes, Yirrkala is a bilingual school we are one of the successful

schools in our region. We always fight for our Yolŋu children's education. Education is the key for our Yolŋu children. We are developing lots of new ideas and resources to help engage our children's learning, but still resources are not adequate. There are still a number of issues that we face such as low attendance, substance abuse and behavioural issues. Teachers, parents, communities, principals and Governments need to work together to work through these issues and stop blaming each other. Maybe consultation is not being delivered in a proper manner and talking face to face with right people.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 29 (C) states Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:

*The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values , for the national values of the country in which the child is living, , the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own.*

There should be fundamental human rights and freedom given to every human race or communities related to education in Australia. It is about self-determination, we are not brainless or cripple we can manage our own communities.

In the documentary, Utopia, in Roeburne in the mineral-rich Pilbara 80 percent of children suffer from an ear infection called otitis media that causes partial deafness and they are going blind from trachoma. What is Government going to do about this? Wait until they are all dead one by one and then rush for emergency response?

My late husband Dr Yunupingu called on the nation to "come together for a better tomorrow" by recognising aboriginal people in the Constitution.

The way I see Human Rights through my perspective, is that people need to have faith in fundamental Human Rights, it is very important and a serious word, a word that gets used often. But the words don't get used fairly and equally because there is a force of friction with the word and sometimes it takes a lot of struggle and pain to fight for and maintain these rights. It all depends on the situation people are in because every human being has a constructive role too, nationally and internationally in all societies in this sophisticated world today. Sometimes it is very exhausting to keep fighting but still we have the right to get our human and social justice back.

We are still living in pain and trauma. We are in pain already and more and more pain is falling on top of us. It makes us feel weaker and weaker. People are getting sick, tired and stressed.

We want our Governments and politicians to believe in us and develop mutual understanding and mutual respect. Please don't treat us as though we walking around invisible or even we don't exist or make decisions on our behalf.

Sometimes we feel that we are being punished, undermined, manipulated and assimilated in our own country called Australia. Why do we sing advance Australia fair?

I'm so proud of my mother and my father for bringing me to this beautiful Yolŋu world. I come from a multi-lingual, multi-cultural background where there was harmony, peace; mutual understanding and mutual respect in the past and still is. To this day I am experiencing lots of horrible and very sad

things that are effecting standards of living spiritually, physically mentally, socially. Into the world of violence, torture and war, genocide of a human race, a world of racism, a world of politics, a world of hatred, a world of misery, a world of sexual abuse, a world of bureaucrats and world of disrespect which we are **all now** suffering from.

When Governments attempt to manipulate and dictate our lives such as threatening to send all our teenagers away from our communities or telling us that we can't teach our children how to read and write in their own language, we feel like a knife has gone through our body and the knife keeps going deeper and deeper. When these political statements are put out in the media it becomes like a Tsunami that sweeps through our village. They don't turn around and look behind us. They don't see that there are people in pain calling for help, reconciliation and for human rights.

I feel **reconciliation** is an empty word, **consultation** and **negotiation** are empty words, **freedom** is an empty word, and **promise** is also an empty word. These words are often being used in speeches, newspapers and TV. This Government today needs to be realistic using these words. People should read about "The Universal Declaration of the Human Rights. It's failed again in its promises to deliver

I hope we, all Australians, work together to bring spirit of peace, spirit of freedom, dignity, tolerance, quality and solidarity. A world that will bring people together as one human race. We are the First Australians, the first sovereignty.

We all are "**ONE BLOOD**" even though our race colours are different. My late husband Dr Yunupingu sings about 'One Blood'. In his song line he sings "mit'ttji maypa, wangany gulku; meaning many races make one people and we are one but we are many. Remembering that even though we may have a different race, gender, language, colour, and religions we share many similarities.

I come from a balanced world, Yirritja and Dhuwa. It is like the yin and yang philosophy. Everything that exists in our Yolngu world are either Dhuwa or Yirritja, every land, song and dance, people, language, wind, trees, plants, birds, sky, animals, snakes, sea creatures, native foods and fruit and everything in our environment are either Yirritja or Dhuwa where balance is in place by nature.

Metaphors have a significant place in Yolngu culture and life. They provide a foundation to work from, offering a way to work together effectively. We talk about the ngathu metaphor for education. Ngathu is the cycad palm nut that contains cyanide. The cycad nut can be made into a sacred bread but must go through the correct process otherwise it is poisonous and if consumed can lead to death. However if the correct process is followed, it can sustain life.

I am using the metaphor of the cycad nut here in an attempt to illustrate the importance of following the correct process. For genuine partnerships between governments and communities to be established, the correct process must be followed including authentic and transparent dialogue. Don't expect us to work with governments towards approaches that we believe won't work and may not lead to greater outcomes. The history of those experiments doesn't lead to great social outcomes. We are disheartened and frustrated by the social challenges we face daily in our communities. Let's all commit to working hand in hand to address these issues. Let's work towards a shared vision for the future and walk together on this sophisticated journey.