

Wukun Wanambi & Ishmael Marika

In conversation, Buku-Larrnggay Mulka, Yirrkala N.T.

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Wukun Wanambi – Curatorial Consultant

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TH: Ishmael, you come from a very important Yolngu family, can you tell me a bit about your family?

IM: Yeah my mother's side family is Madarrpa ... Father's side is Rirratjingu, my grandmother on my mother's side is Dhudi Djapu and my father's mother's side is Dhalwangu. So it's a really strong family.

TH: And within your family you have many generations of artists?

IM: Yeah, my grandmother's are artists, my mum's mother she's an artist and my father's an artist and my mother's an artist and they do paintings these days. Wanyubi Marika, Gurundul Marika [Marawili], mum and dad, and Mulkun Wirrpanda that's my grandmother, mum's mother... and working with Wukun, he's a strong artist in the Marrakulu clan group and also he's a leader for Marrakulu.

TH: In your family there have also been many generations of strong community leaders, with very strong leadership, how do you feel to be carrying on that leadership?

IM: I feel proud and strong, because working with you know, learning from two leadership, from Rirratjingu and Marrakulu and in the past there was a culture that ceremony was lead by Rirratjingu and Marrakulu and they were like a sister clan group... and now in the work place, I take order from him [Wukun], because he's my cultural advisor, and he look after the cultural side if something happen or if anybody invite us to the homelands, we ask him to check if it's ok for us to go there.

TH: I am assuming there are fairly complex reasons why it may not be ok to go at certain times?

IM: Yeah, ceremonies maybe you know there's something happening or if it's still going or if it's got cancelled or something like that. It's good to double check and make sure it's still good for us to go there.

TH: I understand there are sensitivities around naming, particularly around people who have passed away, to make sure this is done in the correct way

IM: Yeah we have respect through culture and ceremonies, when someone die we have to hide the photos or videos and even their names, we can't even say their names for maybe a couple of years until the family is happy to say their name and then we are good to say their names.

TH: So it's ok to refer to Dr Gumana as Dr Gumana?

IM: Yeah

TH: And for his father, first name is ok?

IM: Yeah you can say his name, Birrikitji.

TH: Dr Gumana was very significant both as an artist and leader

IM: Yeah, he was a good leader. Yeah, he was strong in ceremony and strong in our culture and painting.

And as a leader

TH: And that extended beyond Dhalwangu clan, to other clans that he was recognised.

IM: Yeah, yeah.

WW: He also has an OAM [Order of Australia Medal]

IM: The young one's stepping up my uncles, and trying to get the leadership and look after their community and their culture, ceremony, my uncle Yinimala Gumana and Buwatpuy Gumana, are taking the role of the ceremony ways and Birrikitji #2 taking the role of looking after the land, taking the leadership.

TH: Yinimala is Dr Gumana's nephew?

IM: Yes his nephew. Dr Gumana's younger brother's son, but he grew up with Dr Gumana, because his father past away when he was younger...

TH: So the leadership could be passed on?

IM: Yeah, by Dr Gumana.

TH: Dr Gumana was a very strong advocate for sharing Yolngu culture and educating balanda [non-Yolngu] about Yolngu culture, how did Dr Gumana influence artmaking as a way of communicating Yolngu culture to the world?

IM: Yolngu culture is not written in a book. The songlines are not written in a book... and some people don't believe our culture, so we have to promote ourselves by making artwork and that's how we can approach the other people and teach the other people our law, by paintings or artworks or objects.

TH: And has that changed now with new generations of artists? Both of you have introduced innovation in your respective artforms. Whether in painting or carving or making Larrakitj [referring to Wukun] or in film making [referring to Ishmael], do you see this as the main medium that young artists want to express themselves through?

IM: This is the new way of telling stories, you know, by videos and technology, because before the old people they painted stories on the bark or on the Larrakitj, and now it's technology, the videos it's a bit easier for us, so we can explain properly through videos and show other stuff, like maybe artwork or the country of the paintings.

TH: Do you also paint or do you prefer to stick to film making?

IM: Sometimes I help my father, just do paintings, but I make spears and do video works and print making.

TH: Are you happy to share video of country with balanda [non-Yolngu]?

IM: Yeah, some country is sacred, some's not, good to go, it's up to the leaders of the place you are visiting and the leaders up there will decide whether they are going to show you or take you.

TH: Has this changed over time? Have things that were not shared before been shared later and opened up or is there continuity in restricting sacred material and places?

IM: Ah... There's continuity, because strong leadership will make you go further... and give it to the next generation and pass it on and pass it on. We don't want to give all the sacred sites and open it. Because some sacred sites are really important and that's our identity... our power... you know

WW: and strength.

IM: Strength. Keep us going... and if we show it then you know, show it and put it in public, then we are nothing, our identity is gone.

WW: The other thing is, we only share things on the surface side of the water, but not beyond the water. Because, out there in the world, they never share too (much), the elders share a little bit. We've got the ability there to hold.

IM: Lots of people here, leaders have different politics. Some politics are strong, some politics are good and some politics are bad. But lots of people are very strong here, especially the artists, because they can sing, they can paint, they can create the sacred objects and pass through the songlines and paintings.

WW: But if a young person has done bad things, even their art, you trespassing the law, and which mean in our law is stronger than the other peoples... and this is where the whitefella doesn't understand. In their background, we have this customary law, they've never lived by it in their world.

IM: So we have to be, you know, be aware and make sure we approach the leaders and you know, talk to them, and what's going on, then they give us authority to do something and then we do it.

TH: And you earn that authority?

IM: It's like professors telling us, to do this, can you do this. Can you run the ceremony, can you look after the ceremonies, you know like that.

TH: So, teaching small children...

WW: Yeah at an early age.

TH: Is so important, making sure they are aware of...

IM: Yep, what's bad and what's good...

TH: Ceremony... What they can and can't do, how they do things, who they need to talk to...

IM: Look and listen...

TH: That keeps community and clan strong. Keeps that identity.

WW: Yeah. We have law, I mean rules, that abide by that, not to trespass and we stick with that.

TH: And the artwork itself is an amazing way to communicate that and it also shows how diverse Yolngu culture is, the differences between moieties and clans...

IM: It's another way of telling stories, instead of writing human people who have been through this and that and writing names and subtitles and all that to read... What's this story about? But this is artwork, you know it's, the artists have to tell the story by another way, by making the art piece, like drawing, paintings, carvings and all that.

TH: One of the things I find amazing about Yolngu art, is the way it draws the viewer back to the artist, to their clan and their culture, it draws you back into a conversation about the work with the artist...

WW: Some people can explain what is in the meaning of the painting, but some we don't, and this is where we have some Yolngu interpretation to translate that, in a meaningful way that people can understand and what is difficult there, is that there is a story beyond that painting which is attached to us as a young person also and how when that person in that mob passed away and his spirit draws down back to his own country, but whatever there is, there within the painting, it represents who we are and what we are and gives us the strength and the power for that.

[pause]

WW: That's why we've got this special room here [Yirrkala Church Panels], every time when the kids come here, they have a meditation area here... That's from the old, old...

IM: early sixties...

WW: from the old people. And you know, it's like new here [in the contemporary gallery] and you can accommodate them together.

TH: You can see the passing of the knowledge, passing of the miny'itji, passing of the stories, and the totems that reappear and different forms they take... How different clan leaders came together to make the two paintings. It's an absolutely astounding collaborative work.

IM: All of the artworks are Dhuwa and Yirritja. Dhuwa and Yirritja it's like ying and yang.

TH: And everything, all things are either Dhuwa/Yirritja?

IM: The plants, the sea, the land, the animals, even the people are Dhuwa/Yirritja.

WW: And so through kinship relationship and also tied to how marriage comes in

IM: through the skin names, it's kinship.

WW: What's happening, we give a lot of information to anthropologists and to people like yourself and other people. We don't get back the story. And for us and for this community, to remain somewhere in the library for us... We are always giving out our background, or knowledge, wisdoms, painting and all that stuff, but nothing comes back for us.

IM: for the young ones in school...

WW: It's for the future.

TH: Which makes the Mulka Project so important, because it's archiving and building knowledge for the community, for all Yolngu to come in here and learn...

IM: So we work close to the community, we just help do what the community need like, if they want to document some stories they want to tell us, about the old days, we just go and film them and put that into the archive.

TH: What is it about Dhalwangu miny'itji that makes it unique?

IM: It's important and they have the Ngarra... Ngarra is like the ceremony...

WW: Parliament.

IM: Parliament ceremony. Ngarra is like the court case. Parliament house. When someone do bad things or do the wrong things, they have to go when the Ngarra start, they have to give them disciplines.

WW: This is when all the young people and women has to participate and respect at that time when someone she sees is gone from the area. Hierarchy person day, they got respect. Any other men's business we shouldn't be telling you but lets get the situation in different way of sense to you to respect that person.

Dhalwangu people are important, so are Madarrpa these are two people in that hierarchy who can identify...

IM: in the ceremony

WW: Wirrpanda mob...

IM: Dhudi Djapu.

WW: Dhudi Djapu... These three can control the other clan group in the men's ceremony business.

And they can learn from that, but they not going to take it away, it still belongs to these three clans.

IM: So it's really important, the paintings are important because, that place, Gangan have significant ceremonies like the Ngarra. The parliament house...

IM: So we have Dhuwa side Djungguwan and Yirritja side Ngarra... and the Dhuwa also have authority to go and teach their younger ones and be leaders. Like this man here [Wukun], he is a leader of Marrakulu clan group, son of Mithili, have you heard about Mithili's paintings?

TH: Yes, I do... And you are from a very strong family of artists as well Wukun...

WW: Yeah, I come from a strong artist family, because my grandfather Narritjin and my grandmother Bangara have gone through, the artists were strong at that time, in 1976 [in Dunwuk [Djarrakpi]], my father was ah...

IM: his grandfather was, made the artworks before other people and sold the artwork to outsiders.

TH: Is that where the art centre model comes from, from Narritjin using art to educate non-Yolngu on Yolngu law and culture?

WW: And from a man called Wandjuk, those were the two people working on a grass roots level, stage, um to build up something of the art world.

[pause]

WW: Back to Dhalwangu miny'itji... Dhalwangu name has gone back back back to the trading area before when, Indonesia trade some objects to them like knife, machete, um that can be displayed by dancing and shows there is some connection between that... Anyway, I am just identifying that in a simple way...

[Ishmael speaks with Wukun in Yolngu]

IM: I was just telling him there's paintings that Birrikitji made of the Macassan.

WW: They traded in... traded for tobacco, sugar, damper, anything, knife, calico, all these name, say 100% of these names, the dialect that we are taught, half of it belonged to Indonesia...

IM: the Macassan's.

TH: So through the trade of the objects the language came about...

WW: Yeah,

IM: Rrupiya [the currency of Indonesia and also the word for money in Yolngu matha] or Yiki [meaning] Knife

WW: So we share that.... Across the... It was built up across the sea...

IM: In 18th century, the Indonesians, Macassan's came here, built a relationship with Yolngu people.

TH: How do you see the future and changes in medium for communicating certain things like clan miny'itji and the Wangarr.

WW: Well that's all run by schools, and at the moment the project has been successful, in a lot of ways like learning the pathway for art, the landscape, the story and they invite some old people to actually go into that project and it's good that also the rangers are doing that too, with them, so all Yolngu clan come together and do that...

IM: But in a ceremony side, if you're growing up, it's like kindergarten, preschool and then going to primary school, and then high school, and then college, and then university and then you pass doctor and become a professor and all that, degree... In Yolngu, in ceremony, it's the same like that, you learn about songlines, you learn about how to dance and making arm bands and looking at the designs, of anything, What's whose design it belongs to and arm bands designs are different, the Yirritja have different, the Dhuwa have different, so you have to identify everything by looking at it, if you want to be you know professor...

TH: So it's built up over time

IM: It's built up yeah, from generation... the old people give it to young people and keep on going.

WW: It's different between the white society world and for us. And also it's different from the other communities and how they are brought up to be who they are and what they are.

IM: If the marks are different. If there's four marks, three marks, two.... That's how you identify who the object belongs to.

WW: Like in university, if you want to get to a doctorate degree, or professor, it's the same hierarchy, you start from nothing and go up, up, up...

IM: and we learn it from when we are kids, little ones.

WW: And then how you want to be your future, is like the same way for us. We say, if you want to be a real professional artist and then go on, in the white society it's like, how can I be a dr or anthropologist, and you aim that strategy to be who you are. You can come down, if you make mistakes, but in our way we don't do that, we climbing up...

We can say, if you do that singing and dancing, then you can know the painting. See, so we got that part of support and in a white society in a university, you don't have that. You need to build up that strength to be who you are.

[pause]

IM: So we have Dhuwa side Djungguwan and Yirritja side Ngarra... and the Dhuwa also have authority to go and teach their younger ones and be leaders. Like this man here [Wukun], he is a leader of Marrakulu clan group, son of Mithili, have you heard about Mithili's paintings?

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