

'Just a Woman from the Bush'

A Tribute to
L̄iya-ŋärra'mirri -
Mrs. P. B. Burarrwaŋa,
July 2 1956 – December 19 2018
&
Goŋ-gurtha
Mrs. A. M.M. Burarrwaŋa,
circa 1954-2019

Also see [bäpurru - images from Mata Mata, July-August 2019](#)



Gurrutu¹, for an adopted balanda², is a complex maze. It is a vast algebraic wonder-puzzle requiring great concentration. It involves unexpected obligations, privileges and inevitable mistakes and misunderstandings. For Yolŋu³, gurrutu is like breathing. It is easy, instantaneous and obvious. The Yolŋu mind, that can instantly place an individual so perfectly into their rightful family relationship, is a marvel and I beg forbearance in advance for my rudimentary, balanda, gurrutu, mathematics, I write only to honor my dhuways and their wondrous, ever-lasting family in the best way I can.

Many dignitaries and elders visited Mata Mata¹ over July/August 2019 some will come later over months and years, to pay tribute to our djungayi, my dhuways, Mrs. P.B. Burarrwaŋa and her sister/yapa Mrs. A. M.M. Burarrwaŋa. It is fitting in this context to recognise the pantheon of heroes of this wāŋa⁴ at Mata Mata who I have met directly or who I have learned about. Gatirri Burarrwaŋa was the father of contemporary Mata Mata and was a builder of many buildings and the runway. Dhuway's husband and my wawa, John Mandjuwi Gurruwiwi, built the Gi'kal outstation with dhuway and her children's help. Mukul⁵ Mary Gurruwiwi⁶ was a senior custodian of Mata Mata. Old Man Walking Stick⁷ maintained Mata Mata and all of the Marthakal outstations. Dhuway's faithful wawas and yapas and particularly Terry, Gerry, Andrew, Doris and Daisy lived with her and live here. The eldest of dhuway's brothers John and all her other siblings were always in dhuway's thoughts about the future. The original Warramirri families who lived at the original Mata Mata settlement will never be forgotten. Dhuway's sisters Nancy and Dhambing along with Mowarra Gunambarr O.A.M. founded, amongst many other things, the neighbouring community of Nyinyikay and last but not least Mrs. Burarrwaŋa's nephew and gāthu George Rrurrambu Burarrwaŋa spent seminal time at Mata Mata hunting, thinking and creating the songs that are famous to all Australians now. One of which "My Island Home" is regarded by some as a true national anthem.

Being laid to rest alongside Mrs. B.P Burarrwaŋa is the woman known as Goŋ-gurtha, Mrs. A. M.M. Gurruwiwi nee Burarrwaŋa. Our deepest sympathy to James and Ian and their immediate families who are also here. Goŋ-gurtha was not only a renowned knowledge holder she was a person who is remembered affectionately and missed by all. I did not know her as well as I did Mrs. P.B. Burarrwaŋa –L̄iya-ŋārra'mirri, learned woman from the bush.

In what follows forgive me for reflecting mainly on Mrs. P. B. Burarrwaŋa, but for those who want to read more about Goŋ-gurtha there is now the master work by the Ganambarr sisters and their colleagues Song Spirals⁸ which is a wonderful text for us all. Together these two women L̄iya-ŋārra'mirri and Goŋ-gurtha were truly the knowledge and hand of the fire.

1 Kinship structure, family relationships

2 Person of European and western heritage

3 Aboriginal people of North East Arnhem land.

4 Wāŋa means place, camp house, hut, home(land), nation, country(side), area Ext position, situation ovaries

5 Mukul means in this case my grand-aunt. It also means FMD mother-in-law (of a woman) and aunt(ie) FZ

6 See "Mourning Two Australian Prime Ministers Mary Gurruwiwi and Gough Whitlam <https://www.workingpapers.com.au/papers/mourning-two-australian-prime-ministers-mary-gurruwiwi-1922-2014-gough-whitlam-1916-2014>

7 Memorial Tribute to Old Man Walking Stick, <https://www.workingpapers.com.au/papers/great-man-mata-mata>

8 Lallak Burarrwaŋa, Riŋjilili Ganambarr, Merkiyawuy Ganambarr-Stubbs, Banbapuy Ganambarr, Djawundil Maymuru, Sarah Wright, Sandie Suchet-Pearson, Kate Lloyd, Allen & Unwin, 2019,



You've got all you need
Can't you listen to us?
We know how to share it up
In the bush
You've got all you need
Can't you understand?
We got to have our land
In the bush
Listen to me
I'm talkin' to you
From the bush⁹

II

There are some people who have to go to a large stage, with a very powerful sound system, to make their voice heard. There are others whose whispers are heard by everyone, every where. They don't have to worry about getting the world's attention. It just naturally and powerfully occurs and is meant to be. Dhuway¹⁰ and her brothers and sisters changed the world, and continue to change the world from the verandah of their homes, their wāṅa here at Mata Mata. Their fire and their power will always be heard.

Dhuway was so many things: pioneer, states-woman, land manager, interpreter, teacher, mother, mentor, manager, thinker, artist, master weaver, hunter, entrepreneur, spiritual guide, and most of all, bush woman of renown.

Following the lead of her father, the great Gatiṛri , with her husband, she created the Gi'kal out station. Dhuway became one of Arnhem land's master weavers and artists. She learned her husband's designs and passed these on to her children after he passed away. She became one of Arnhem Land's first fully qualified Yolŋu teachers. She and her sister Doris taught at Shepherdson College and ran the Mata Mata school, named after Gatiṛri, for some years. She was mother to not only her children but to her daughter's children after she tragically passed away early in life. She was a mentor to many who were referred to the homelands by magistrates as an alternative to prison. She did this with no special assistance or funds. She and her family meticulously built and maintained the runway for planes. She created the solar power system here from scratch with the original Bush Lights company. She looked over all of the infrastructure here and was always trying to ensure its betterment for her family. She was a leader and exemplar and supporter, as was her sister Nancy, for all of the homeland out stations throughout Arnhem land. Dhuway has helped numerous academics get degrees, book writers finish their books, song writers write songs, artists paint and linguists write dictionaries. There should be a library at Mata Mata with the books, songs, theses, paintings and articles she has inspired and helped create. She looked after finances, groceries, shopping, schooling, cultural and ceremonial obligations of her community. She told me she greatly favoured the basics card. Without it life would have been very hard. It allowed her to do all the shopping for the community in one go. This is just the tip of the iceberg, if we really come to understand the complexity of her life, we would not only be performing ceremony for weeks, we would be having a major conference and several dozen speakers for many days to honor her day to day work.

9 George Rrurrambu Burarwāṅa, "From the Bush", Warumpi Band

10 I call Mrs. Burarwāṅa , along with her brothers and sisters, dhuway, ie my brothers and sisters in law, dhuway is also a term for husband (real or classificatory), first-cousin (in opposite moiety) FZC "mate". In accordance with customary law I do not refer to her by name nor use direct photographs in this tribute.

Dhuway was a visionary caretaker of the ancestral lands around Mata Mata – from Cape Wilberforce, across the islands to her sisters' country next door and of course to the Burarrwāṅa ancestral home at Bawaka. There are many who talk about homelands. Dhuway was the one who came back and stayed through thick and thin. She was setting an example for the future. She wanted her children, and most of all her grand-children, to know the diverse experiences of the world but she knew her power and the power of her family lay here with the dogs and the fire burning beneath the Mata Mata runway and the sea. All this is expressed in the painting on the frontispiece of this tribute.

Most of all dhuway believed that the people had to live on their ancestral estates across North East Arnhem land. There was no point living the easy sugar life in town or even in one place. The manikay came from the feelings of the land, to feel the land you had to live on the land, walk the land, hunt and feel the wind. The harder, the more mobile the life the better, if need be. Her essential message was don't complain, don't worry about the mainstream world, don't be reliant, live the life. For all of us who identify with a built house as our home this is a subtle message she was giving to us. The whole estate, the whole sea, the whole of the islands, the sky, outer space, the estates of all of the other families, all this is home, and with it comes the responsibilities of custodianship, knowledge, djäma – making art and manikay – ceremony through dance, song and customary law.

There are some of us here who have worked for Chief Secretary's and Chief Ministers, Prime Ministers, Presidents, Sheiks, Kings and Queens and other men and women of high degree. I think we all agree that here was a leader. Here was a leader amongst leaders. Here was a woman who never left her home land, who was always here when the going got tough. Here was a rare woman djungayi of great quality, distinction and power. It is no accident that the rare honour, accorded to dhuway as a woman leader, of a ṅärra' ceremony, is taking place here. I can feel her pleasure at the many new young men who were coming to this ceremony for the first time in honour of her life. But I also feel the pride of her yapas and wawas of her great family.

Dhuway was a power amongst men and women. She broke through in a natural way that was accepted universally and unequivocally by her beloved Yolṅu family and clan groups across the miwatj region and beyond. She liked to describe herself as 'just an old woman from the bush', no doubt she had her waku's song "From the Bush" in her mind. I would not be surprised to hear that she inspired many of his words. In her life she truly embodied the sentiments that Rurrambu sang so passionately about.

What a woman and what a powerful exemplar she was. Dhuway was a woman who knew everything there was to know about the law as much as any man, all learned intuitively, through spiritual communications and direct links to the spirit and ancestral beings of the land at Mata Mata and beyond. Over the next thirty of forty years, and in the generations to come, when the grand children are very old, they and the world will truly understand the legacy and wisdom of dhuway. The foundations of the wāṅa are all important as the world changes for the better and the worse. Through it all the power of the wāṅa prevails and dhuway's wisdom with it.



III

I remember talking to her on the phone from London and she asked me what it was like and added "are there lots of white ants running around like in Sydney?". I said there are even more white ants everywhere and she was silent for a minute "I am feeling lungurrma¹¹ on my face", she said. Dhuway knew why, for 400 years before white settlement, the traders from China, the Middle East and even the Vatican came to North East Arnhem land. It was the capital of the ancient, sacred world - the place where the people and the land were as one and where rupiya accumulated in forgotten piles on the beach. One time I picked her up at Sydney airport and we were driving down to Kangaroo Valley. I asked her:

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm feeling pain", she said.

"Are you sick?"

"No I feel pain for this land, they have cut these roads through the hills like spears".

All of the things that we balanda¹² think of as important for our ease, for our convenience, for speed and use-value suddenly seemed unimportant and the wisdom of another kind of life came to me. I find it very hard now to ride down big freeways and bridges without thinking about her perspective.

"There are so many white ants", she said.

But nothing was ever clear cut or simple. At the beginning of the great walk to her father's grave she addressed "her team". "My skin is black and yours is white. Our flesh and blood is 99 per cent the same". In an instant, strangers were made to feel at home, included and valued.

We have thankfully recordings of some of her speeches that the family will cherish in the years to come. At Redfern she said: "I don't care if you are Prime Minister. I don't care if you are President. I speak to you with the power of my heart and you will hear me speaking to you through the fire". This fire was unleashed with great discretion. It was reserved for scoundrels and thieves and those who came with little respect or knowledge and sometimes for those who got a bit ahead of themselves. Dhuway's fire could scarify and purify and burn.

I always understood that dhuway wanted the best of the balanda world and the best of the yolŋu world. I always understood that we could work together, combine our ideas, walk side by side. I remember being worried about the bridge across djarrimi, like the spears in the roads at Sydney. "No" she said "We have consulted the land. If we can go between Gi'kal and Mata Mata in wet season it will help us".

So it was the way one acted in the world and about this deep feeling for the land. I received a gift from dhuway, yapa and Djalu which was about how you talked and felt with the land. Just thinking this way brings you closer to the land and makes you happier in your own skin. When I came home to my own farm I felt as if a primordial fear and unease about this continent had been lifted. This is the primary gift that all first nations have for Australia as a whole. But, and this was dhuway's power, this gift is very special when it is given one on one,

11 Lungurrma is the north(-east) wind season when seas are calm and new growth starts, "Kingfish Time" (October-December)

12 White person, European

on home country with deep feeling.

I am not sure how all her friends feel but I never had to explain myself to dhuway. It was bala ga' lili¹³ as much as possible an equal exchange of support and good will. Monetary, cultural and technical advice and material goods on the balanda side and wisdom, knowledge and good will from the yolngu side. I always thought and continue to think that there is not enough money or material that can play for the dhuways generosity and love and she always understood when things were stretched as far as they could be. Often she said biangu. This is not about money or goods.

Often I would try to talk and intellectualise but this was one of the first things that dhuway and yapa said when I first came to Mata Mata full of inquiry. "Too many questions". "Too many words". When people came to ask advice of dhuway she would famously point to her head and say "this is a liar", then to her eyes "these are liars", then to her nose "this is a liar", then to her mouth "this is a liar", then she would put her hand on her heart and say "only this, your heart, tells the truth". She wasn't saying "trust love" in a Christian way or "trust your loved ones" or "trust being in love" - I think she was saying learn to identify and listen to your inner most feelings and trust these as your fundamental guides.

Cynics may discount the tendency of balanda men and women to come to Mata Mata to sit at the feet of Aboriginal elders like dhuway and to learn from them. I can also understand the feelings of First Nations from the South or from other colonised parts of Australia but there was something about dhuway's capacity to care for everyone who came to her. I remember her saying to young Vince Barwick "you can ask me anything" and "you are always welcome here". It was the same feeling of heart that guided her relationships with anyone, be they alienated balanda or an Aboriginal person from the South searching for lost traces of their culture.

13 Give and take, a fair exchange.



IV

Dhuway knew the importance of good humor.

Her infectious laugh cut through the most tricky situations and took the edge of grief and pain. It brought things back down to earth. Lynne Walker told me she brought the house down at yapa's¹⁴ memorial service.

She talked of how they had both planned to go to Gracelands one October. When the dates came, they looked at each other, and said "bäyanju rupiya we will go to Gi'kal instead".

There was so much laughter.

One of my friends told dhuway she was going to meditate on a rock.

After about an hour dhuway said not to wait for my friend 'she will be there a long time waiting for that rock to talk'.

It was said in her cheeky way. Because of course dhuway did talk to the land.

She knew all the secrets. The land would talk back to her. But clearly not in English and clearly not even in humanly recognizable tones!

¹⁴ Yapa means sister (of male), elder sister (of female) first cousin FBD,MZD "miss" term sometimes used for non-Yolŋu women when their relationship is not known See on Mrs. S.D. Gurruwiwi "Moody Blue" https://www.workingpapers.com.au/files/papers/yapa_moody_blue.pdf



I first met dhuway through yapa Mrs. S. D. Gurruwiwi. It was a fateful meeting for in the years to come we would work together closely. Mangrove worms and stingray was on the dining table outside the house, mukul, Gerry and Terry were sitting quietly by and there was a ferocious pack of dogs roaming the community. They were of course “her children” and I had to wait in the car for what seemed like an eternity while she introduced me to them. One of them nipped me as has happened here to Emma, Declan and Soraya this week. I think it means the sacred dogs have given you their blessing.

The stingray meal was a revelation in so many ways. The taste was worthy of the finest restaurant and I can remember the way they laughed at me as I took my first mouth full. They absolutely packed up watching my expressions and then of course the thing was to also say how delicious were her märi¹⁵ the mangrove worms. They like the mosquitos and sandflies were guardians and filters of the people who came here. You had to be strong enough to resist them to be truly accepted. You had to compliment those worms or else you were being disrespectful to the hosts. Thankfully as the years have gone on, the mosquitoes, sandflies and midges have troubled me less and less and stingrays have become an important emblem to me from the Kimberley to South Eastern Australia.

These are the right ways to enter the Yolŋu world. These great women were my guides and mentors. How lucky was I? How generous were they? They taught me you have to endure trials and tribulations and these make you stronger and more in tune with the land. The three of us worked together on many projects and ideas. One of the gifts they gave me was the right to write **Wakuwal**¹⁶ – a book of dreams that was inspired by meeting them at Mata Mata. Both were very responsible, but also very daring, who were not afraid to go into challenging territory. They gave me their pass. I can never do them enough justice. All of my mistakes and errors were forgiven before I even had to ask. Listen with your heart and follow your dreams they are the true guides, they would say.

15 [Märi](#) means grandmother--maternal MM , grand-uncle MMB (Yir) grandfather-paternal FF , grand-aunt FFZ
 16 http://valentinepress.com.au/?page_id=2836



I asked dhuway once what gave her strength after she lost her husband and her daughter in one year, dhuway said it was her djäma¹⁷ that allowed her to go on. She worked late into the night, almost every night, weaving. In our superficial way of seeing things, arts and crafts are one of the most important means for homelands communities to generate discretionary income. But it means much more than this.

Weaving is very important and is not well understood or appreciated by the wider world. It recalls the fact that the dhuwa creation beings were women who at one time commanded the ceremonies presided over by men, it also conjures up the sacred string that ties all things together. The sacred dilly bags hold the secret and sacred emblems and ringitj objects. Just as the women dancers form the backbone of the bungul so too weaving holds the sacred, secret ceremonies together in my mind.

I think in the long hours of weaving and collecting materials dhuway gained her knowledge, of, as Gaypalani says, everything of significance. "She knew everything". Weaving does not command the sorts of prices that paintings do. It is full of djäma from the collecting of the pandanus, to the splitting of the fibre, to the digging up of the roots for dyeing, to the drying and then to the long hours of weaving. Dhuway brought something new to even the old patterns of weaving which were not unique to north east Arnhem land. It was the dyeing of the weaves to the colours of the earth and the symbolic links to fire and the morning star which created many things that are innovative and significant.¹⁸

Dhuway and other grand women on Arnhem land have carved out a new and special area of art that I think is only now being appreciated and requires much more scholarship and study.¹⁹

In our world the income from weaving allowed cars to be serviced, groceries to be bought and small discretionary items to be purchased. But it was never enough and I would like to see the prices people pay for dilly bags, mats and weaving quadruple in price but more than this I would like to see more people in the fine arts world pay as much attention to weaving as they do to the cross hatching of the finest paintings. All these things are connected to the spiritually significant, unique and magical spiritual cosmos of North East Arnhem land.

17 [Djäma](#) means work, make, do

18 See The Fire of Mata Mata A Discussion with Batumbil Burarrwaña Peter Botsman 2 October 2014, https://www.workingpapers.com.au/files/papers/the_fire_of_mata_mata_0.pdf

19 See Louise Hamby, Containers of Power Women with Clever Hands, Utber & Patullo Publishing, 2008, also see "In every fibre, stitch and thread: the märr/magic of Batumbil Burarrwaña" https://www.isx.org.au/files/files/projects/in_every_fibre_stitch_and_thread.pdf



Dhuway's traditional name is the island in Yirritja manikay from which the whale and hunters emanate. Yapa's name was the great rock underneath the sea that fish circled and around which great currents flowed. The name Burarrwaṅa means whale. Burarrwaṅa the family of whales. Names say everything. The island was a place that delivers prosperity but with challenges and adventures. The hunters and the whales are inter-locked in a respectful struggle that never ends. Looking out into the mysterious future the hunter does not know what is coming but courage and strength will be needed. The great whale travels on into the mysterious future.

It is little wonder that she and yapa Doris and the children of Gairri School in conjunction with George Rurrambu Burarrwaṅa were so inter-twined in their own words and thoughts? "My Island Home" – my island, her name, home of whales. The documentation of "My Island Home" which she produced with the children is great testimony to dhuway and her family. When her grand-children came down to Kangaroo Valley public school, dhuway brought this down to show the children something from her school and life. I can think of no better reminder of her contribution to her community, to her family and to the nation as a whole.

I remember sitting under the trees near her house talking about mukul's funeral and also at her disappointment that I could not be here to attend old man walking stick's funeral. "That was why his ghost visited you on the verandah of the clinic", she said. "he was a bit annoyed, but he forgave you". On my birthday that same year we went in a plane to Gapuwiyak to attend a funeral so that I could see the real bungul, not the lolly bungul for tourists. It was my introduction to the ceremonial economy and understanding that the art of manikay represented what work was for Protestants, the essence of all that was important in life.²⁰

The long weeks of preparation and the many days of manikay²¹ that go into a funeral are one of the hardest things for our mainstream world to comprehend and accommodate about Yolṅu life. We spend so little time in the mainstream on funerals. It is not because we care any less about our fellow human beings. Staying here at Mata Mata for the weeks of dhuway's funeral helped me to understand my mother's wish for there to be no funeral for my father. For what could possibly be said at a service or even over a day to honour my father's life. These things take many, many years to properly honor and accommodate. But in most cases it is the pace of our modern industrial life that means only a small amount of time is spent honouring people who have passed away.

In the traditional days, from all accounts Yolṅu people were buried quite quickly. But then followed a series of events and ceremonies that varied according to the individual, their moiety and their family. Warner, Morphy, Berndt and others describe a process of exhumation, burial poles and manikay that allowed the soul of the deceased to find their proper resting place. This process, and its many ceremonies, took place over months and years.

The advent of modern techniques like electricity and refrigeration and the influence of Christianity has created changes to bapurru practices. Funerals have become a time and place where many things including manikay can be performed together. They can be planned

20 [Warumpi Band – Wayathul](#) - Dhawal bamanha ngunhi, Ngarra gjalthirri royinyarawu. Ngarrakala yirrakalingunhi wanhangu ngarra yuwalki, Gambudjiki Bawaka Yurru ngambalkthu ngarranha ngamuma, Bala ngarra mawayirrina. Ngalapal mirrinha ngunhi, Wanga gulyunarayngu, Walala Gumatjwalala (It's been a long time and years, When I thought to myself to go to my own country, But the land wouldn't recognise me, So I lay down on the beach, Then I dreamed about the people of that place, But they're Gumatj people)

21 song, music, ceremonial singing

and held over through the dry season.

There are too many Yolŋu people dying young. This means that from the beginning of the dry season the funerals stack up one after the other. When 500 or more people come together there is a chance for initiations and family discussions and performances that could not otherwise take place. This places enormous pressure on homelands infrastructure and even ordinary housing and infrastructure in regional towns.

But in essence something magnificent takes place. The manikay that is performed here are not only the greatest performances on earth, they have a meaning and a resonance that is unparalleled. We have young and old, the best dancers, song cycles emerging from the collective memory of the song men, music and rhythms, art and weaving all fused together by a spiritual purpose. The equivalent of high mass, the Iliad, the Odyssey, Wagners Ring Cycle and all of the works of great Western civilization performed and discussed in a Brechtian dialogue involving song men, musicians and women. But more than this the cycle of water from clouds to fresh water to salt water and the original stories of the creation beings and their journeys are performed. And more than this each performance belong to the person who has passed away in an individual way that allows their spirit to find its way to its proper home in the universe. More than this every individual is re-connected with the old people of past eras and generations.

There is nothing in the mainstream spiritual or secular world that is so involving of the whole of a community. Every morning and afternoon every community member is implored to be part of the day's bungul and manikay. The youngest learn, the oldest teach and on some days the ceremonies and dance begin in the early morning and end in the late evening. As we get closer to the burial time, the songmen sing all night, into the morning and then on through the day.

I mention all this because I think it is time for the mainstream to recognise the formation of what is in effect a ceremonial economy. It requires great discipline, a great work ethic and a commitment that is all encompassing. This is not some ancillary event or something that can be done on a weekend or a holiday. It is the main economy of North Eastern Arnhem land for much of the dry season. It is not a one-way street. The mainstream and ceremonial economy through schools, Centrelink, work, transport, the health system, shopping hours are in continual negotiation. The ceremonial economy is more important to the people themselves than anything else. But too often the mainstream cannot and does not recognise the ceremonial economy. It is as if it does not exist. So people lose jobs, go hungry, get sick, get depressed and stressed, are breached from Centrelink or are marked as truant from school etc. Alternatively community members simply revert to a subsistence economy and do not rely on rupa or the mainstream economy for weeks and months.

Infrastructure breaks, people break, stress and friction is often part and parcel of the ceremonial economy. There must be better ways for us to work together in advance of each years events. I can hear dhuway saying: "I am the land and the land is me" and the ceremonial economy is intrinsic to the health of the land and the people. Embrace it, go with it, and learn from it. What is taking place is like the formation of a giant performative tree of endless variation that stretches out across time, and out across geography involving all of the generations that have ever existed and connecting everything together in a meaningful and harmonious way. This more than anything else gives strength, health, vitality, hope and meaning to the community. It is something that Australia as a whole needs to embrace and applaud.

There's trouble up ahead
You wanna live tomorrow?
You gotta be strong
Everyone of us
You gotta be strong
To take care of this country
We gotta be strong
All the people, all around
We gotta be strong
We got to be strong²²

VIII

It is an enormous and impossible job to live at the Mata Mata home land, out-station between worlds. How can the infrastructure be sustained? How can it be managed better? There is no doubt, and this was one of dhuway's mantras, the responsibility needs to fall more to the people themselves.

But Commonwealth and Territory funding bodies have a predominantly assimilationist world view. The basic infrastructure of Aboriginal communities is funded but only if it fits conventional models of population and responsibility. Otherwise they are ignored. During this funeral all of the community infrastructure has failed. The contradictions of rupiya and non-rupiya based worlds hit against each other all the time. To those involved in manikay, nothing matters except the song cycles. Hunting provides subsistence food. But reminders of the problems dhuway had to solve were in evidence all the time. Water, toilets, power, paying for planes and maintenance of grounds and runways, dogs, cars breaking down, food, environment based infectious disease, a myriad of family issues to resolve as well as maintaining the traditional estates, waterways, sea shores and bush.

More than anything the generation before dhuway – the amazing flying missionary Sheppie and Gatirri – dhuway's father - were incredible characters who spent a lifetime of hard work creating the buildings and infrastructure here. Is this infrastructure right? With no equivalent of farm or wages income or rates, the job of sustaining the infrastructure is onerous and certainly impossible in contemporary circumstances where an award wage or Centrelink is an expectation, and most of the government incentive is to live in town and assimilate into the balanda²³ work world. Sheppie's rule was 'no work no food' but he also had a vision of working hard for the future. He was known to say 'yindi djama, nyurukiny rupiya yalala', 'yindi rupiya, djama nyurukiny yalala'. In other words 'big work no pay to start with, then big pay and little work in the future'. This kind of ethic or vision is just not possible to sustain with the changing welfare economy offering benefits of all kinds for no work.²⁴ In the words of

It was very much this older work ethic that defined dhuway in many ways. Dhuway was from the generation between the old missionary economy and the new welfare economy and she had to make Mata Mata work. In **Remaking the Pathway** she says she had a dream in which her father picked her out because she had the powerful voice, the feeling to look after the land and the tenacity to sustain the community through changing times. She also saw danger as indeed Sheppie and Gatirri had from the changing contemporary world. In this new environment the whole impetus was to move to town and sell out to the balanda miners, pearl farmers or fishing companies or to modern day government assimilationists

22 Warumpi Band, "Gotta be Strong"

23 Balanda means white person, European

24 Gwenda Baker, A Legendary Partnership: Yolŋu, [Bäpa](#) Sheppy and [näñdi](#) Ella, Historical Society of the Northern Territory, Darwin, 2018, p.76



or interventionists. Dhuway held strong. There is the time that Mal Brough and others came offering “sugar money” and there was the time miners came seeking exploration rights. Dhuways famous response was “yes you can mine here but first you better get a shot gun and blow my brains out first”.

The walk to her father’s grave at Elizabeth Bay was a very symbolic and important legacy for dhuway’s family, children and grand children. In **Remaking the Pathway**, Dhuway, Doris and Daisy were showing the estates that need to be occupied and cared for in the future that run all the way along the shores of the Arafura sea and throughout the English Company and Wessel Islands. She is saying this is your challenge children and grand children there is no room for complacency.

We cannot forget dhuway’s power it is still here with us. We also cannot forget her unselfishness. Dhuway never ever took rupiya or resources for herself. Everything was for her immediate and extended family. Everything was shared.

Dhuway’s vision of people coming to Mata Mata and Gi’kal was unique. She did not want a Yolŋu Disney land. She did not appreciate the idea of people coming to do a cultural immersion over night or paying for it then departing on a bus. Dhuway wanted a relationship with the people who came here. The name Mata Mata means sea weed or sea food. SheBut dhuway did not want the sea weed coming in and out with the tide. She wanted a relationship over time and I think she envisioned a school or a university more than anything else. Of course There may be some who are cynical about the way balanda are adopted by Yolŋu clans and there is no doubt that some Yolŋu and some balanda are very superficial in their family relations. But there was never any and is never any doubt about the sincerity of dhuway and her family. It was not an easy superficial thing dhuway offered us. If we wanted to get the best from the Yolŋu world we had to do our djäma²⁵ and that included helping acquaint and support her children and grand children to understand our world. It was a true equal partnership and that is the way I have always understood it.

My friendship with dhuway has been one of the most important in my life. I have taken it very seriously, especially because I have seen something of the world of academia, politics and Aboriginal politics as well. Dhuway taught us that the importance of personal relationships counts more than anything else in this world. Dhuway was also there when tough things happened in my own personal life.

This is dhuways lesson to us. The best change comes from the personal, the heart, the verandah – from understanding the power of the wäŋa and the direct connection that provides to the wider world and universe.

At Mukuls funeral dhuway told me that funerals are a time for bringing the past and the present together. As we think about the future dhuway will be with us as strongly as she ever was. I am sure everyone here can feel her presence and her vision.

Dhuway and I talked a lot and thought a lot about what could happen here at Mata Mata. The great work done at Maypuru was a model for reviving the Gairri school. I know she wanted Doris and Daisy to come back and revive her work as teacher here. She also wanted a truly independent Aboriginal social, cultural, economic business foundation that would provide a life combining the best of Yolŋu life and culture as a light house for the world.

25 Work, make do.

This cannot be an easy Centre link, coca cola road, it has to be hard djama because unless it is quite hard and complex then it will not satisfy her or the ancestors. Brains and hearts will not develop.

When dhuway passed away part of the immense grief that came to me was that she was irreplaceable. Of course she is irreplaceable. But this feeling soon passed because I heard her talking to me. There was her faithful wawas, yapas, her children and her grand children. She was so proud of all of you.. Now you have to do your djäma. We must remember her example even in the darkest moments when nothing seems right, there is consolation and comfort, not from just working for workings sake, but in the deep cultural djäma in the irrw²⁶ of the ancestors making new fires and new life in their spirit. So this is now our task Yolŋu and balanda working together.

I want to thank the Burarrwaja and Gurruwiwi families on behalf of all of the balanda here today for taking us into your hearts and minds. Thank you for being patient with us, thank you for understanding when we make mistakes with language and culture. Thank you for your generosity when it is so hard to negotiate our sometimes crazy modern world. We will do our best to support you as you have supported us. Nothing is easy but when we work together in partnership with equal respect and care, anything is possible. We are so lucky to have had dhuway in our lives to guide us and to remain with us.

As the bāpurru for Mrs. Burarrwaṅa and Mrs Gurruwiwi came to an end on the 5th August over 500 people had visited Mata Mata over the course of a month. On some days the planes kept coming endlessly bringing families and visitors to pay tribute and to take part in the ceremonies. Many who wanted to be there could not afford to make the journey because of work or the cost of flying in or driving in. The annual Garma festival took place just before the end of the funeral and there was much discussion about the Canberra centric comprehension of Aboriginal infrastructure. If only the politicians and bureaucrats could have made the four hour journey down the road to Mata Mata to see what it is like to live in homelands and to comprehend the way the “ceremonial economy” stretched a community’s infrastructure to breaking point.

As the water failed, the electricity and power failed and was then saved by a donation of 1000 litres of diesel and a generator by Gallarrwuy Yunupingu, as the toilets clogged up and people got sick and as the food ran thin, as cars broke down and the cravings for tobacco came over the community, the leadership of Mrs. Burarrwaṅa was even more appreciated. For she had managed situations like this regularly. Without her it was difficult. But it made us all wonder: how could things still be this bad and difficult? Should they be?

Why does homelands infrastructure fail? Its been 33 years since Paul Pholeros and others created the Housing for Health manual that clearly charts all of the problems that need to be addressed in community housing in remote Aboriginal communities with its regular intensive population changes.²⁷ And yet here at Mata Mata in 2019 were all of the problems Pholeros warned about: inadequate water supply, faulty, leaking taps with no spring valves, broken pipes, over-flowing toilets and basic electricity demand problems. These were not expensive fixes but their failure meant potentially serious health problems. Here were the camp dogs and here was a clear indication that 90 per cent of health problems in remote Aboriginal Australia are caused by infectious diseases to do with an unhealthy environment.

In the aftermath of the bāpurru many parts of the housing infrastructure at Mata Mata was breaking up or broken. If you ask the homelands organisation why these problems continue to occur they point to the changing formulas for funding from Federal and Territory government. Mata Mata, for much of the year, has a small population and is therefore not eligible for the ongoing infrastructure maintenance that is needed. Funding goes to towns and regional centres. There are some grants available that fix some infrastructure and not others. Last year the verandahs were covered to shield wet season rain. The year before flushing toilets were installed and the funeral exposed their weaknesses when the water stopped. The best option for hundreds of people each day was to take a walk into the bush.

How short sighted is this neglect of home land, out stations? How bad is this funding model? For several weeks dozens of young men and women were gathered at Mata Mata to learn from their elders. Mrs. Burarrwaṅa would have been proud of the senior men bringing young people into the ṅarra’ system of laws and discipline that keep communities in check and is the heart of Yolnu culture.

Amongst the senior men and young boys going through the ṅarra’ were the following:

²⁷ See <http://www.housingforhealth.com/> and <https://www.domain.com.au/news/architectural-world-mourns-death-of-indigenous-housing-advocate-paul-pholeros-20160202-gmjvz8/>



Wanganeen Dhurrkay, Tyra Dhurrkay, Bradley Ganambarr, Chris Garawarra, Peter Munungurr, Scott Dhurrkay, Tobia Garawirrtja, Cliff Wunungmurra, Richard Williams, Andrew Ganambarr, Simon Damarindji, Lionel Wunungmurra, Lachlan Ganambarr, Kieran Ganambarr, Kieran Burarrwaṅa, Jesse Burarrwaṅa, Lionel Wunungmurra, Ron Wunungmurra, Cameron Gunambarr, Marcus Gurruwiwi, Stephen Ganambarr, Tarryn Ganambarr, Wayne Ganambarr, Tarryn Dhurrkay, Simon Damariindji, Braydon Damaraindji, Murphy Wanambi, Newie Burarrwaṅa, Josh Burarrwaṅa, Terence Wunungmurra, Lionel Burarrwaṅa, Antonio Gurrawurra, Solio Burarrwaṅa, Mikey Burarrwaṅa, Isiah Gurruwiwi, Jethro Lacy, Jerome Lacy, Michael Lindsay, Jericho Lacey, Michael Lindsay, Jason Ganambarr, Robert Burarrwaṅa, Justin Burarrwaṅa, Jeremy Gunani, Ian Gurruwiwi, James Gurruwiwi, Terence Gurruwiwi, Peter Gurruwiwi, Tony Gurruwiwi, David Gurruwiwi, Mike Gurruwiwi, Peter Burarrwaṅa, Jeffrey Burarrwaṅa, Kevin Burarrwaṅa, Gerry Burarrwaṅa, Terry Burarrwaṅa to name a few. An equal number of women and girls were also at the community.

What an opportunity this could have been for education? health? cultural two way learning?

At the very least there needs to be a review of the aggregate annual number of people that boosts the basic maintenance budget for infrastructure at a homeland like Mata Mata. From a preventive and pro-active point of view the different population pressures need to be built into the infrastructure funding over both the dry and wet seasons. Surely in 2019 these issues can be addressed with the central funds available at Federal level for promoting Aboriginal health and well being. But government's will never ever get these things completely right.

Independent Aboriginal corporations are needed. The Gumatj corporation came to the rescue when things broke down here. But more independent Aboriginal enterprises and corporations are needed. Dhuway always wanted her own independent businesses and support to form the core of Mata Mata self sufficiency and guardianship. This has to be the long term goal and this was the reason the Mata Mata Homelands page²⁸ was created. There is a list of past and potential projects there. We need to create a Mata Mata Homelands trust that allows private individuals to support the community with financial support and, most importantly, volunteer work. Mrs. B.P. Burarrwaṅa wanted the direct support of people she viewed as family. Let us continue to work on all of these areas in the future.

28 See <https://www.matamatahomelands.com/about> please note the page is under constant construction and amendment in collaboration with family and community members.

"I had not been back in civilisation very long and faced at last with the cold and formal air of Canberra, so remote from the problems of the people of Arnhem Land, I felt embarrassed and bewildered"
Donald Thomson

X

The most difficult part of writing this tribute concerns the short life span of Ms. B.P. and A.M.M. Burarrwaja. I hesitate to write about this troubling issue. Their premature deaths follow several other Yolŋu women leaders who have passed way before their time. Another great one now lingers on a thread in Darwin as I write these words.

On the face of it, if there were an inquiry, it would show that if you are an Aboriginal person living in a remote community then you not only live a shorter life than non-Aboriginal people, you probably live a shorter life than your Aboriginal peers living in regional towns and urban areas. Yet this is misleading and I suspect it is driving much policy from Canberra and Darwin. The quality of life and the independence of life oh homelands confound the raw health statistics. One day in the homeland in so many dimensions is worth weeks in the town and city. The homelands are the links to proud traditions and to the very essence of the land itself.

This does not make it any easier to lose such great people so early. Every statistic has its own personal story. My two dhuways passed away 12 years before the average life expectancy of their Aboriginal woman peers and 20 years before their non-Indigenous counterparts.

Mrs. B.P. Burarrwaja purposefully chose to live 'in the bush', in the homeland, despite the many , many stresses and health issues. She would not have it any other way. Her short life of only 63 years tells us that the long and healthy life of previous Yolŋu generations has given way to a life that is in a sort of twilight place between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal society. These are complex matters and there are no simple explanations. But, disappointingly, it seems there are no advantages of living a more traditional life in a remote area if one uses life expectancy as a guage. That is a real shock to understand. It is not getting easier, it is getting harder. Those who are knowledgeable about Aboriginal policy and affairs might not be surprised. The balance of policy, life and economic and social pressure is to shut down this kind of world. If the homelands cannot be shut down administratively then they can be made prohibitively difficult places to live. But it is not as simple as simply turning Canberra policy around.

Some afflictions of living in the bush are not new. When Donald Thomson came across Arnhem land in a stumbling, bumbling, miraculous expedition, what won him the greatest respect was his almost instant cure for yaws. Benzathine Penicillin like so many other modern medicines made an immediate impact. In this respect the weekly fly in and out visits to Mata Mata from health professionals has a sometimes life saving effect on the community.

It is the continuity of care and the way in which we address longer term health problems and environmental diseases that is inadequate in 2019. That is why it was most interesting to bring some guests to Mata Mata who are at the cutting edge of technology looking for ways to constantly monitor the vital signs of individuals, to talk with dhuway as the leader of the



community. She was convinced and so am I that we can ensure that there is a continuity of care and a real transparency in treatment for old and young living on remote homelands. We continue to explore these possibilities.

But it is not care or treatment it is prevention that is the best way of ensuring a better quality and longevity of life.

Tobacco, indirectly and directly, is the greatest contributor to the poor health of the Yolngu - women and men alike. North East Arnhem land has the highest rate of smoking in the world. Tobacco is a terrible scourge that is part of the 400 year old Macassan legacy and is part of the ceremonial dances that feature at every bapurrū. Tobacco is also one of the major economic stresses of life in the remote communities. With an average income of less than \$15,000 per annum it is often the case that half of weekly income is spent on tobacco. Through tobacco Yolngu people pay the highest, most regressive taxes in Australia. It is a dreadful situation and something must be done to change things. Paying high prices for tobacco in NE Arnhem land is having no impact on the rate of smoking and is arguably leading to greater poverty and lack of choices. We must think about this whole problem more creatively.

Tobacco is just one part of a larger challenge of providing a better quality of life for Yolngu elders. To my mind Australia, in its largest dimension, has failed and is failing some of its most valuable and treasured citizens. The homelands organisations, whose job it is to provide health care for elders living on homelands, are only a scape goat for the larger failures of our whole society. We should place a higher priority on the health and longevity of the leaders and elders who are the link to the oldest living culture on the planet. The fact is we do not.

Words and rhetoric are one thing. Actions are another. If Dhuway was reading this she would shrug her shoulders and say 'don't worry about it', these are my problems, my choices, my life. The trouble is, an outstanding leader, who has done so much to ensure her family and her culture survives and thrives, cannot be allowed to die so young. Her death is our death. Her passing is a warning to us all and the greatest warning to our society about what is important.

We need to look through the bureaucratic, governmental and private sector clutter and go directly to the heart of the reasons why things are so imbalanced and wrong and ensure that the new generation of leaders succeed and live long lives in the homelands. The easiest path is to say that it is healthier and safer to live in a regional town. This is missing the point. A very small fraction of tax would help improve homelands infrastructure and a small part of our creativity in social and economic policy would go a long way to addressing many problems that are contributing to the short lifespan of our beloved leaders.

The future that dhuway was working for is very clear to all who knew her. It is a *clear complexity* of the spiritual and material world. We balanda have to understand the importance of deep spirituality. 'Spirituality', for the Yolnu, over-rides the values of our society that are most important: money, work, possessions, ownership, technology and comfort. In so many ways we bombard the Yolnu with our values and think of ourselves as superior because we have money, possessions and material power. We also think of money and possessions as the answer to the challenges facing the homelands and Yolnu culture..

Maybe the first thing we need to realise is that the homelands are not a problem, not in crisis, not in need of our help. It is our world that is more the problem, in crisis and in need of help. .This may seem a contradiction given what has been written in the past few pages, but maybe it is our world view, that is in error much more than any broken tap or pipe or toilet. In this respect the homelands are in fact western constructions as well. Maybe there are better models for living across the traditional estates.

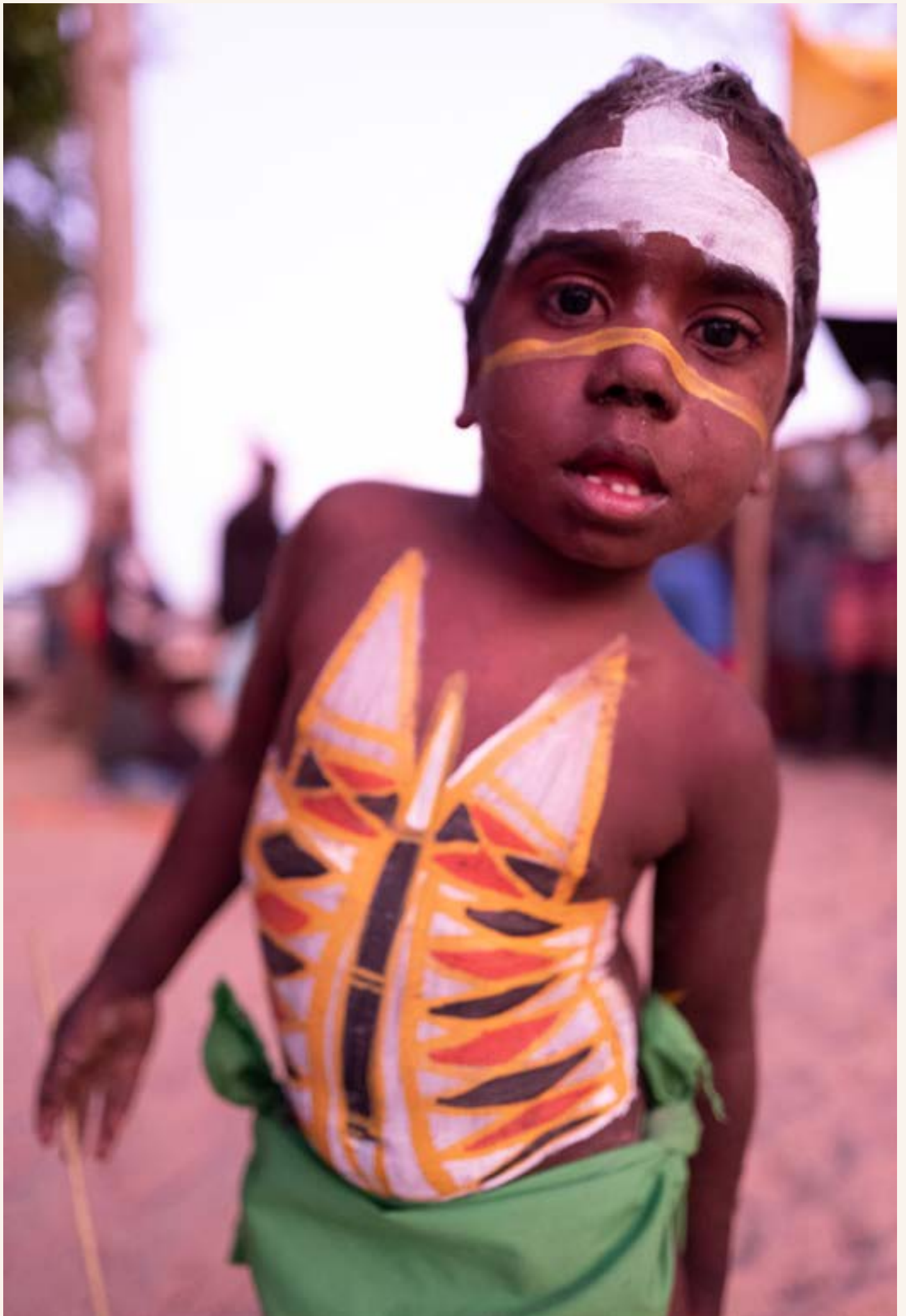
Dhuway wanted us to be partners. In this she was willing to share her deep knowledge with us so that we could enrich our lives and understand the land we live in and the fragile, temporary dimensions of life which define our global existence. North East Arnhem land for me is as precious as the Amazon. Its ceremonies of life have existed for millenia and connect us to beings and creatures and seasons and energy that change our whole epistemology and ontology..

How do we go forward? It is not a matter of sitting at the altar of the noble savage nor is a matter of assuming that all that we have in the modern world is superior and/or needed and essential. I think our experience is to walk forward together in short projects and steps. Sometimes the learning is all one way. Before we can be equal partners we in the modern world need to understand the language and culture of Yolnu peoples.. We are, as the prominent anthropologist Nancy Williams has suggested, just dipping our toes into the waters. In this respect perhaps one assumption that is useful is that Yolnu culture is sophisticated beyond our customary imagination and we need to work harder to understand and appreciate its many forms and dimensions. The instant world of wanting to know and do things right away is alien to this older and wiser cultural form of thinking and learning.

What kind of form could there be that supports the ongoing health and sustainability of Yolnu culture at Mata Mata? There is so much more thinking to be done on this area. It is here we do need the expertise of other family members and balanda experts alike. I was working with dhuway until the day she passed away on these matters. I have published a dratt at [this link](#) but I suspect there are others who may be able to take the work we have done to higher levels.

If the estates of North East Arnhem land are as precious and important and fragile as the Amazon then the Yolngu also have an enormous incentive in working with us and teaching us and in coming up with solutions together. Dhuway always understood this and was always patient. She was trying to create a place of balance where the best of all worlds could come together for mutual benefits. After the appropriate time passes we must go back to her speeches and her guidance to continue to make our way along the path together.

I feel very privileged to have been a friend of Mrs. B.P. Burarrwaŋa.. This tribute is never going to be finished. Her work and art will continue to shine. This is just the start. Her balanda friends, extended family and new friends will carry her legacy into the future. Most of all I see her grand children and great grand children and great great grand children moving ahead with great promise because of the example she set in life.



Endnotes

1 Burarrwaṅa dhuways: Gerry, Terry, Andrew (Galitju), John, Johnny, Kevin and Doris, Nancy and our esteemed oldest family member Daisy and the whole Burarrwaṅa family, dhuway's children, Terence, Tony, David and to her grandchildren Mitchell, Mervyn, Michael, Mark, Marcus, Isiah, Catie, Catonia, Grace, Trina and Kevinia also Ian and James and their children and the entire extended gurrutu family including George Rrurrambu's wawa, his son GG, the Dhurrkay, Yunupingu, Marika, Munungurr, Gurruwiwi, Garrawirtja, Ganambarr, Dhamarandji, Wunungmurra, Wanambi, Williams, Lacey and Garrawarra families. Gallarrwuy Yunupingu and his family enabled many flights and much of the infrastructure for dhuway's funeral and supplied food for many families here. Not only this he and his wife and children have spent many days here leading the manikay and supporting my dhuways and Gaypalani and his family. I also want to acknowledge the Member for Nhulunbuy Mark Yiniya Guyala. The former member for Nhulunbuy Lynne Walker, who was such a great friend for dhuway in thick and thin, Lynne was there for dhuway when she was really needed. I know everyone is so grateful to you Lynne. Galiwinku Shire President Kay Thurlow, Marthakal CEO and Deputy CEO, Marthakal and Yiralka Rangers, MAF, Aviation Frontier, Aviation Services representatives, Northern Land Council, Yolngu Aboriginal Nations representatives, Miwatj Health services representatives. I also want to make special mention of Graham Dhamala Jacob, dhuways colleague from Batchelor College who will be here later in the week and who has paid for many infrastructure services out of his own pocket here over many years. I want to acknowledge my hard-working friends from the South East Mike and Cathy Gorman and their families who have labored long and hard here over many weeks. Djilawurr Brigitte Ross has been the greatest supporter and friend of dhuway and Mata Mata that could ever be expected of anyone. Dhuway was deeply grateful for all her support and deeply loved her. She has been a rock behind all of us and her brother Danny Ross has also been a devoted and dedicated supporter of dhuway and the manikay here, Byron Ross also took great care of dhuway and her family in Sydney as did Emma Hudson. I want to also mention George Rrurrambu's wife Georgina who dhuway stayed with often in Darwin and who has enabled her son GG to be here today. These friends have done so much to support dhuway, Mata Mata and Gi'kal over the years. I also want to acknowledge the beloved members of the Djapu, Warramirri, Naymil, Mynyuka, Dhalwaṅu, Galpu and Gumatj clans and other clan nations from beyond the Miwatj region who are here to throw their life energy into the manikay which will take our beloved djungayi to her sacred waters and homeland.

