

Bunguldjama (Ceremonial Work)

One of A Series of Three Articles

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Keypoints

- If the Australian Nation paid a living wage to Yolngu participants in bunguldjama it would avert a catastrophe in the North. It would create new possibilities for work and culture and end a terrible cycle of poverty and cultural inconsistency.
- Djungiars (mala or clan leaders) for bunguldujama need support to provide proper facilities for Aboriginal bunguls (ceremonies), particularly funeral ceremonies, in the form of grants in aid for non-permanent support and infrastructure such as shower and toilet blocks, and special dispensation from local municipal authorities for sanitation and rubbish collection
- There must be 'food security' for all bunguldjama participants as a basic right.

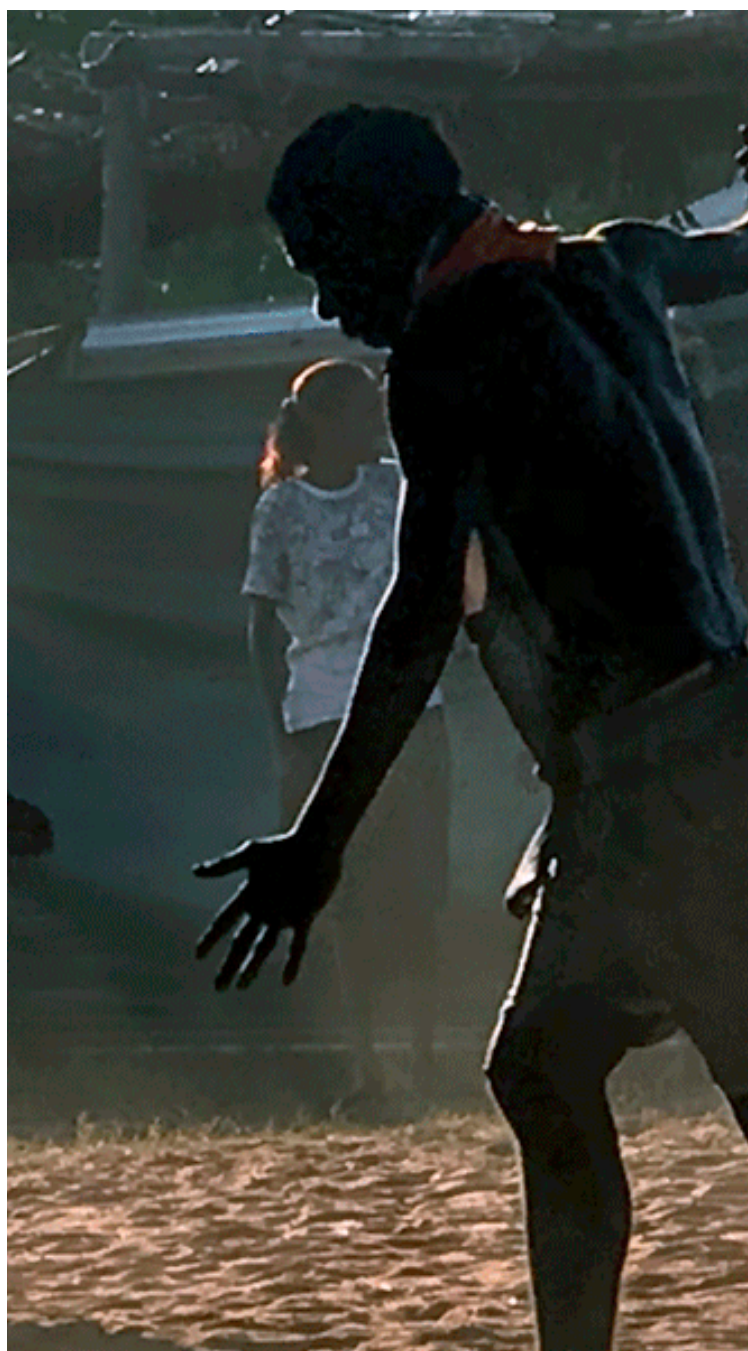


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Sitting in the dust listening to the great choirs of Westminster in the evening I remembered that it was Mr. D. Gurruwiwi that played the yidaki into the now, King Charles', heart in 2016. "I feel better already", Charles said gratefully. I can remember thinking at the time, 'yes Charles this old man's blessing may be the making of you'. There are thousands of people across the world who have felt Mr. Gurruwiwi's yidaki healing. Mr. Gurruwiwi passed away on 12 May and now here in Yirrkala, coincidence has it that his funeral is coinciding with the Queen's funeral and the AFL Grand Final in which his beloved cats are the predominant champions.

Djungiars from Gan Gan to Baniyala, from Galiwinku to Wandiwuy have gathered their families to pay homage to this Aboriginal 'king' - the great yidaki master, the man who took the didgeridoo from misunderstood artefact to increasingly studied instrument at the heart of Aboriginal ceremonies from Cairns to Broome in northern Australia; to the iconic instrument in the famous Yothu Yindi band to orchestral instrument and now cult instrument across the world.

Some called him “Australia’s only guru”.(Daley) He has been mourned and celebrated every day and every night over two, now coming up to, three weeks. No-one will stop until they are totally satisfied that his life has been properly celebrated. How much longer will it go? nobody can really say. Bungul djama (ceremonial work) takes place over 24 hours from early morning to late night for weeks and is the hardest and most intense work that you can do. It is joyfully done. The ceremony creates a profound sense of calm and good will. There is nothing really like it in our world.

But there are several things you need to realise to appreciate what is happening before you. Most of the participants have very little money. Every night the dancers and song men are all likely to be starving. There are no showers. There are no toilets. This is not a camping expedition most people will live in tents for weeks at a time. You are probably not likely to really understand these things, because in many ways none of these things really matter to the people involved in bunguldjama. In many ways everything that is occurring is happening “in another dimension that only Yolngu can see” as Dr. M. Yunupingu famously





sang. But I do not think that gets us off the hook as a country. For on the face of things the divine performances are occurring in a rubbish dump and they are worthy of Westminster Abbey. How can we let this occur? The song men who are performing in front of me have all wowed adoring audiences at the Sydney Opera House –and Mr Gurruwiwi has healed a king.. but here on the bungul ground, if we turn our eyes to the left or right we will see a rubbish dump and heaven help you if nature calls. Perhaps you would like to drive to a toilet rather than make an expedition with toilet paper into the bush. This is the reality at every sacred bungul I have attended. As a country we just seem to turn our heads and look in the other direction.

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Mr Gurruwiwi's funeral is a great contrast to Westminster. Stan Grant's uneasiness during the burial of QEII struck me. Senator Pat Dodson's recollection that Elizabeth had treated the Aboriginal delegation to Buckingham Palace in 1988 with a respect that made him highly emotional also struck

me. The monarchy for all its faults came to recognise Aboriginality. Sometimes 'Tory socialists' have an instinct for something more about life. Perhaps they could relate to a continuous law and culture thousands of times older than their own. The British monarchy's patronage, since Prince Albert, of the British Library and Museums and gardens all around the British Isles, is something that republicans like me have to think about. This same sense of continuously caring for land over life times is here at the heart of the ceremonies which commemorate each lost life. Governments come and go like the sea-weed coming in and out with the tide, all promising greatness but often never delivering anything but rhetoric, and there stands the permanency of the British monarchy and there stands beyond it, Australian Aboriginal culture.

Day after day I have watched the greater Yolngu families tell their stories in homage to the old man in performance after performance. This is dance and song that is the real business of Aboriginal life, the rom (law) of 100,000 years duration has never changed. It makes the longest serving British monarch look like a tiny speck in the ocean.



The ceremonies are even more impressive than that of the Westminster performances. This I think is something that Elizabeth came to understand. Here big story after big story are danced and sung: following the morning star, Macassans stumbling on the shores drunk, red ants devouring food scraps, cyclones, storms, birds crying in the driving rain, native cats, wild honey. The more you understand the codes of the enactment the more deep and fascinating the bungul (ceremony) becomes. It literally is the greatest show on earth once you come to learn and understand.

Grant and Dodson's reactions, and even the protests in Melbourne and other places, make me think of the cultural inconsistency of Australia. Everything Aboriginal must be delivered in a tupper ware container labelled A in a cupboard called "multiculturalism". Are we really progressing?

Aborigines are "ok" but they must fit into our schools, our work, our training institutions, our football teams and our welfare system as if it was they, not we, who were the new comers to these shores. As if it was they, not we, that had something to learn about this place we call Australia. What a joke?

Of course Aboriginal young people must and can master our world, and yes there is continuing recognition of Aboriginal life in Australian society but how deep is it?

Our unconscious and conscious colonial mentality really only permits models of Aboriginality that epitomise our societal values and aspirations. Isn't this why Dodson was moved at Buckingham Palace: 'we were treated with respect.. as human beings for the first time'.

III

There are a thousand invisible ways, despite all the hoop-la about our country finally recognising First Nations, the miserable status quo is maintained. In remote communities unless paid directly into their own hands for an art work or a cultural activity, it is a miracle that 1c in the dollar of "Aboriginal funding" goes to an Aboriginal person living freely on their own country or homeland. There are a thousand gate keepers, checks and balances and impossible requirements to meet. There are a thousand doctors, architects, builders, welfare workers, bureaucrats salaries that have to be paid before 1c finally dribbles through to

an Aboriginal person's hands. There are a thousand government contracts whose requirements need to be met by a thousand bureaucrats and checkers so that good governance can be assured. Even royalties have their long lines of lawyers and consultants taking their piece of the cake. Hundreds of homelands across the north have excellent sewerage systems but no people can afford to live there on a Job Seeker allowance. Plumbers, electricians, builders are paid a kings ransom to fly in and fly out fixing the infrastructure that serves no-one except those that service it.

Here in this inflated mining economy where the cost of living is five times that of Sydney or Melbourne or Brisbane or Adelaide or Perth most Aboriginal people live far below the poverty line. Few local Yolngu have ever had jobs at the bauxite refinery or mining operations despite the fact that now Gumatj corporation runs its own bauxite mining operation. It too struggles to provide a majority of Yolngu with jobs and income.

The reality is that to be supported in the mainstream world you have to live like a European, talk like a European, live in a European way, in a European town or regional centre.



Violence and unrest is increasing as the gap between the European haves and the Aboriginal have nots grows wider and wider. The overt racism is still here too: 'don't ever think that Aborigines are your friends' is a refrain that is frequently aired. It as if there is a recognition that the good times all carved out on Aboriginal land are coming to an end, the game is up and the luxury lifestyles in the beautiful north will no longer be possible.

As a boy I remember when Papua New Guinea turned towards violence. "Wan toks" came into the regional cities away from the village subsistence economy. With no prospects of earning money, gangs of youths tore down the walls that separated the rich and the poor. This steady decline and ferment is happening across Northern Australia now. The old Territorians respond with tougher law and order and mandatory sentencing and the now famous penalisation of young Aboriginal youth. It just makes the divide even greater and it is really something to realise that three square meals a day in prison is a welcome respite for many. Many non-Aboriginal Australians just cannot see the problems. They respond with hurt and anger when

their homes are invaded or their goods are stolen. They cannot see how far the divide has grown.

IV

An epicentre and good example of our inability to see is the way we tune into Westminster Abbey but cannot recognise either the hardship or the majesty of Aboriginal funerals.

In North East Arnhem land, Yolngu funerals can last a month, and sometimes more, and involve hundreds of Aboriginal people. Even the Queen's funeral lasted only a couple of days, so the idea of a funeral lasting a month and stopping work and life for that long is regarded as an extravagant annoyance or at best an exotic event.

Nevertheless, workplaces, schools, governments have come to grudgingly realise that there is no getting around them. You can sulk or cajole or penalise but the bungul/ceremony will go ahead, and now because of population growth, they are more and more frequent.

Sometimes it is only the need to rest that allows any time on the calendar between funerals.

To understand you have to shed

all your preconceptions and realise these ceremonies are more than funerals. There is nothing more important to the Yolngu. Death is the most important time to affirm life. Yet our world does everything we can to discourage this 'adisruption to our European working world'. Yolngu funeral culture has actually become more 'efficient' and has come to fit into modern life. In the past a person's body was immediately buried with ceremony and then some months later the ceremony was continued for an extended period with the cleaned bones of the deceased and then further ceremonies continued. All in all the final rites of the dead took place over a duration of years.

Now much of the traditional ceremony is concentrated into a weeks' long bungul. A cycle of hundreds of dance, song sequences occurs that leads up to burial and this is in turn followed by cleansing and healing ceremonies. It is up to the creativity of the song men how every thing unfolds and what songs and dance are included. These final rites of passage transfer a person from the profane life to the world of the soul and the sacred. But funerals are so much more too.. they are the school, the hospital, the university, the his-

tory, the law, the church, the stories of life as it is known. Even after the funeral here ends at Yirrkala, the family will stay on, living near the grave until the wet season forces them from their tents.

Depending on how you calculate the costs, Aboriginal funerals cost between \$70,000 and \$300,000 and possibly even more. (The minimum cost of \$70k I calculate as 100 people doing bungul djama for a fortnight at a cost of \$60 a day with \$10,000 in incidentals including such things as generator/power, fuel, coffin and mortuary, food, decorations, tents, chairs etc.)

Funerals are financed by a collective whose average yearly income is \$15k a year, namely Job Seeker payments. For larger and more elaborate, longer running funerals then other organisations contribute. For example at the current Yirrkala funeral the tomb has been financed by the Gumatj corporation, with headstone and coffin financed by other supporters.

V

We are burying a king here in Yirrkala, but for the duration of their funeral any yolngu person is

a king or a queen with variations in duration, intensity and participation depending on many variables.

Unlike Westminster these extraordinary ceremonies occur in the dust and literally the excrement and rubbish of our world. Yet these ceremonies are where the words and music of Yothu Yindi, Geoffrey Gurrumul, the performances of David Gulpilil and so much more emerge from and are nurtured. They are more important than any national institution or art gallery or performance academy. They are as important as all the institutions that have been patronised by the Royal Family in the UK.

The stark reality here is that frequently there are no toilets or showers despite the fact that the majority of those involved are living at the site of the funeral for weeks. There is no food security. Shelter is make-shift. People get sick. Every morning and every night when ceremonial activities are over, men, women and children go hungry and go hunting for the necessities of life, then remarkably revive themselves for another day.

If you are lucky a sympathetic street vendor that is not a rip off will turn up offering reasonable prices for food and drink, but cigarettes will cost you more than a day's Job Seeker allowance and unfortunately tobacco is in very high



demand. Tobacco is part of the ceremony and it will take a huge spiritual and intellectual exercise to ensure that the Yolngu, which have the highest smoking statistics in the world, are ever freed from its clutches.

The architects of the funeral have the highest organisational skills that would be the envy of any human resources company in the country. They perform minor miracles of organisation and logistics day after day. Planes, taxis, cars, buses all have to be coordinated. They coach and finesse every detail of the ceremony itself. In addition to the traditional bungul, “items” of performance are encouraged as are speeches and presentations from outside friends including work colleagues etc. But it is a never ending and dismal balance to achieve. Europeans are welcome to attend but few have the capacity to be a part of the whole bungul. It now costs thousands to come to this part of the world via plane and even comparatively rich working Australians do not have the capacity to be off work for this significant period of time. Those that do, also have to absorb all of the effects of the ignorance and lack of support from the larger society.

To take part will cost you minimum

\$70 a day in support for the bungul just meeting the every day requests of food, water, tobacco of those that are close to you and then there is the daily ignomy and unpleasantness of having to ignore so many other deserving requests for food and money from your larger family. The incredible thing is everyone understands because bunguls are not meant to be easy.

VI

The truth is that these bunguls that are so discouraged and indirectly shunned by Australia's mainstream society, make the world go round. The sacred rituals are up there with thousands of nuns praying for world peace in convents around the world, with the ngayben ceremonies of Bali or the ceremonies of the Dalai Lama or any significant cultural event in the world including those of Westminster. Not only is a soul being delivered to its rightful place, the world, every animal, insect, wind, cloud, water source, star, tree, sea coast and even under sea rocks are sung and danced and so cared for in the ceremony. The living interconnected non-human world is afforded the ability to

Speak, dance and express itself in a way that would make any performing theatre or dance company famous beyond measure.

As with many aspects of first nations civic life our community needs to adopt a complete revision and reversal of our ideas. Our whole mind-set needs to be upended.

Instead of discouraging Aboriginal funerals and bunguldjama, we need to invest in them as a society.

It is not a big deal. Toilets and showers could be erected in significant ceremonial areas. Portable toilets and showers could be used in areas where funerals are frequent. Daily cleaning and rubbish collection need to be automatically provided and organised by local government authorities. As in Bali, the whole community needs to recognise with reverence the cultural importance of funerals for Yolngu people and others with similar ceremonial traditions. Mobile food kitchens need to be subsidised for performers **and lastly song men and women, and those who dance and sing every day need to be properly paid for their bunguldjama.**

To give you an idea of how hard people work. Yesterday Mark Gurruwiwi began his day at 10am he played yidaki for about fifty dance

cycles until about 2pm. Then there was a short break. He played for another four hours until 6pm. Then after an hour the bungul continued for another few hours. One of the Galpu djungiars bought Mark a pie and a sausage roll at 9pm that was the only food he had for the day. Mark was one of many others making a similar effort. Showering means opening a fire hydrant valve, if you're lucky you may have had a swim at the local beach going to the toilet means a trepidatious journey into the bush where many others have preceded you, you sleep on a blanket on the ground covered from the early morning dew by a bough shade or tent.

Many mainstream citizens of the north think that Jobseeker payments should be ceased for people who are involved in bunguldjama they think this would permit a further contraction of the ceremonies which so disrupt conventional life. They think that it would create an incentive for people to ignore the culture and work like a regular worker. The truth is it has been tried before and failed. John Howard's disastrous Northern Territory intervention has single handedly taken us to the brink of PNG in 1975 when something just shifted and

there was no going back. If we are to avoid a PNG like catastrophe in the North we need to invest in Aboriginal cultural difference and leadership. We need to recognise the extraordinary contradiction of the situation where museums from all around the world buy art works a kilometre away for palaces and museums and yet in this ceremony the squalor matches the poorest situation in the world. Indigenous participants in bunguldjama need to be paid the minimum wage, not \$60 a day but \$160 a day in recognition of their knowledge, work, and cultural commitment. In North East Arnhem land that would involve an annual budget of maybe \$100 million per annum, 10,000 people taking part in ceremonies for 100 days of the year about 0.1 per cent of the Commonwealth Aboriginal budget.

VII

Perhaps it seems like a lot, but the day to day worsening divide does not bear thinking about. Not only would a proper cultural payment be a major contribution to our national civic and cultural life and probably lead to a renaissance in Yolngu art

and culture, it would be the single greatest thing we could do to end Aboriginal poverty in the North. No middle men, no bureaucrats just pay those funds directly into the pockets of the bungul participants as a cultural payment for so long as they dance and sing and follow their law and develop their culture.

Bunguldjama needs to be hard. It is an ascetic experience of sacrifice. There needs to be a balance between the civic, moral economy and the general economy so that life does not just become one long and endless funeral. But it should not lead to illness, harm and poverty.

Dr M. Yunupingu once implored our mainstream leaders to entrust Yolngu leadership with responsibility and opportunity. The Yirrkala Community school he made famous is just a few hundred metres away from the bungul ground. It fills many here with anguish that the bush around the school is the only place to go to the toilet. It would not be tolerated in any other part of Australia but it is just ignored here. The djunglars of the malas of North East Arnhem land are more than capable of solving these problems and working out this balance if they were afforded the opportunity and capacity.

It should be noted that some of the leading ceremonial figures do nothing but funerals every day of the year. Would paying these leaders and cultural participants a just wage, threaten the whole fabric of European work and life? Perhaps it would for some. Maybe it will take some time to achieve the right equilibrium of social and cultural ascetism and monetary reward, but anything is better than the current situation of ignorance and disincen-tive that leaves Aboriginal funerals as a quagmire of increasing intoler-ance, hardship and misunderstand-ing and a blight on our national character and reputation. The way we think about them symbolises our underlying unconscious, colonial racist mind set and our inability to recognise cultural treasures within our midst.

References

Daley, P. (2014, Sept 8). The Old Man and the Sea (and Goyte): the story of 'Australia's only guru'. *The Guardian*.

Further articles are currently be-
ing written on Mr. Gurruwiwi and
homelands.

