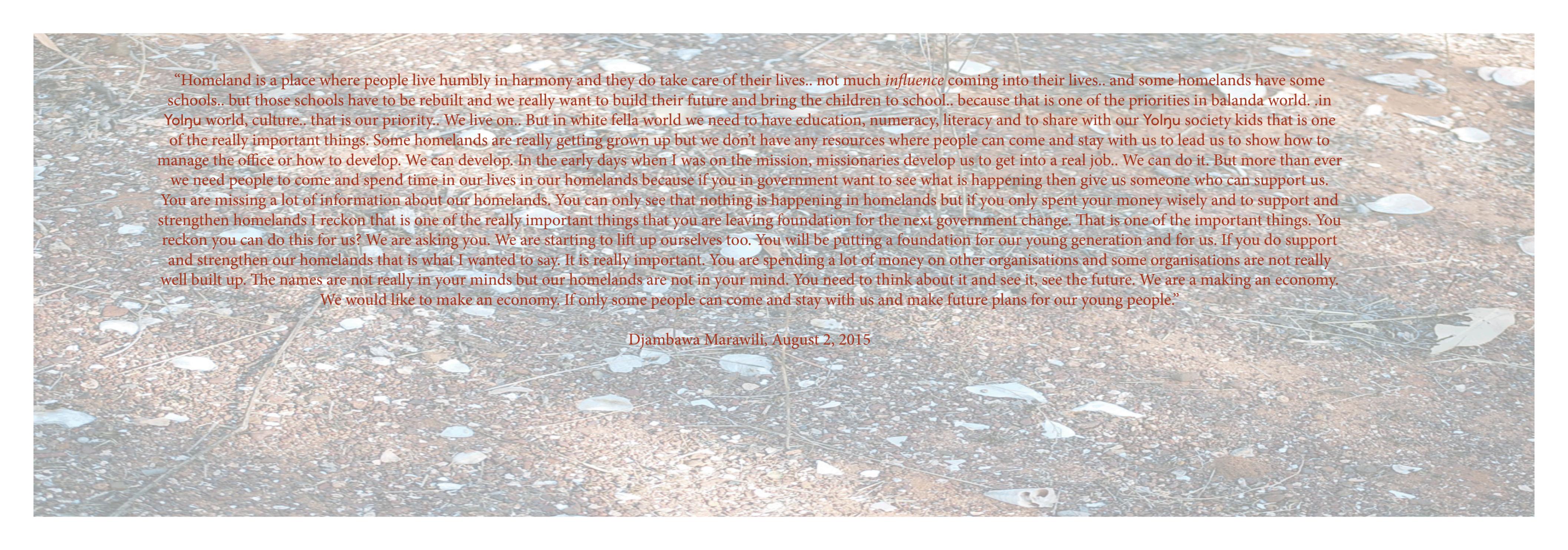


# Ceremonial Economy

An Interview with  
Djambawa Marawili, AM

Recorded 2/8/2015 at Bäniyala.



“Homeland is a place where people live humbly in harmony and they do take care of their lives.. not much *influence* coming into their lives.. and some homelands have some schools.. but those schools have to be rebuilt and we really want to build their future and bring the children to school.. because that is one of the priorities in balanda world. .in Yolŋu world, culture.. that is our priority.. We live on.. But in white fella world we need to have education, numeracy, literacy and to share with our Yolŋu society kids that is one of the really important things. Some homelands are really getting grown up but we don’t have any resources where people can come and stay with us to lead us to show how to manage the office or how to develop. We can develop. In the early days when I was on the mission, missionaries develop us to get into a real job.. We can do it. But more than ever we need people to come and spend time in our lives in our homelands because if you in government want to see what is happening then give us someone who can support us. You are missing a lot of information about our homelands. You can only see that nothing is happening in homelands but if you only spent your money wisely and to support and strengthen homelands I reckon that is one of the really important things that you are leaving foundation for the next government change. That is one of the important things. You reckon you can do this for us? We are asking you. We are starting to lift up ourselves too. You will be putting a foundation for our young generation and for us. If you do support and strengthen our homelands that is what I wanted to say. It is really important. You are spending a lot of money on other organisations and some organisations are not really well built up. The names are not really in your minds but our homelands are not in your mind. You need to think about it and see it, see the future. We are a making an economy. We would like to make an economy. If only some people can come and stay with us and make future plans for our young people.”

Djambawa Marawili, August 2, 2015

**PB: Djumbawa its Garma time. Thank you for allowing me to come to your wänja to talk to you. Many balanda people are coming to Arnhem Land and they are seeing the dancing and the ceremonial songs for the first time. Do you think that Australians understand the importance of ceremonial life for the Yolngu people?**

DM: Well I think its Garma time too. Garma, when everybody comes together, when every clan group, every family, they have to drag their families along to Garma so they can see what is going on. To me its really important ..thats where the government people or who ever wanted to tell or name the place so people can get together there. But we do have our own culture and ceremonial thing right in our tribal land where we always remain on our country. We do have funeral ceremony, the significance of funeral ceremony a lot of clan groups come around and obeys the ceremony they do very certain significant culture to say good bye to that person from their country and no-one has recognised that.

No-one recognises, Australia doesn't know about it. But we have been giving a lot of influence.. just a little message to them. Just to tell about our cultural economy I can call it economy because I think its really important people are living in Arnhem Land with a richness of culture. Two or three names I will lay on it. One is funeral thing. One is initiation thing. One is *ñärra*, *ñärra* it is not happening today, these days..but they are using those ones at Garma. *Matter of fact people wanted to show their garma in the Garma* - their ceremony, but it is only showing.

But often we don't invite people to come and see our ceremony. We only do it for our clan group thing and for our young generation. For children who are in school we never been doing this, we all go to Garma but when the funerals are held here in the homelands the ceremonies all come out. It is really very important that the kinship structures are laid on, the patterns and designs are all there, we always use them, the stories beyond this country we always share to the children and also to tell the other groups that are coming to join with us, our neighbours, *yothu yindi* or *märi gutharra* they are "title-y" connected. That's why



Djambawa Marawili AM at Bäniyala with the homelands school in the background.

they always learn when we have *nj̄arra* thing or when we have death, that's when we get together. And it goes along, its telling us that we are really "title-y" connected like in a *m̄ari/gutharra yothu/yindi*.

Its been there for a long time. But in these days now someone is dragging us away to show at *garma* and it doesn't *mean* to me. Because you have to show to the other Australia and they don't know about it. They say that's really great dancing or that's really great *buṅul*, how strong those people are - *doesn't mean strong*. It is just the culture could have been really recognised by Australian governments and I can call it.

From my point of view that I always - I am a person who has strong culture and I am a leader on the homelands - we always want to describe from our homelands. We want to tell this is where the songs are coming from. This is where the patterns are coming from. This is where the kinships are - not like when we were all in the mission - brought us into unity and just stop us. But we rather be strong in our tribal country where all the patterns and designs are laid and it seems to me *it is economy* because we do it day by day and over weeks we share a lot of *buṅul* from different countries. We never visit that country. We never visit that country but sometimes we have to make our own road to visit that country.

We always do this but for young generation, but for young children who are stuck in the school or stuck in mission or community or town, they don't have the opportunity to go and visit those countries.

Of course I can see something there right in front of me now this is what I was really "title-y" connected on art thing and so the art I was lodging of this country so that the people can know - the white fellow and the black fellow can know about our patterns and designs its already in *Yirrkala* and its there and in the last couple of weeks I went to open the *Buku Larrṅay Mulka* centre stage.

We do want to have a place here too, to strengthen homelands. But in the *balanda* way we have to always - there all of Australia wanted to see the significance of those ceremonies and to art centres so they can see it. But they don't know which is the real document of this country and which is the play message. This has been laid from our ancestors to our younger generation, the stories about that country but other people don't know even our young people don't know. Young generation don't know about it. Those mes-



Sacred trees and mortuary area *Bāniyala*

sages that have been given to that art centre always want to move away from our heart and our soul but it doesn't really take it away. We always keep it in our mind and we always keep it in our heart those messages. It's about how those patterns and designs came from our ancestral beings to our grandfathers to our father. But other message now it's just a play message. But you know it goes out to the world strengthen but it's just a message.

**PB: So one basic thing is I don't think most people understand, even people who come to Garma, the amount of work, djäma, that goes into a ceremony and how every single person in the homeland when its going on is involved. It's an extraordinary thing that most people don't recognise.**

DM: Exactly. No-one really recognise. Every person when I have been in the community or in town and when they see the ceremonies or funerals happening in Yirrkala in the funeral area they extremely wanted to go and join. They extremely wanted to go because they are "title-y" connected on those ceremonies. I think balanda - white fellas should know about this. Australian white fella. It is not just because we are all even. They need to really see it is coming from a resource where other clan groups like Maḍarrpa - this is me - when I bring or share the message to the death and to the clan group of the death, they know that I am titley connected with them. They always come and join with me because they want to learn and they want to know and they want to say thank you very much and they want to come and join with us.

Let me explain more about people where we are not living in communities, some of them are really on homelands. Sometimes they go with their families and while we are striking all those ceremonies and the death clan groups that is too much because they don't know us and we don't know them too. But in the ceremony side through the ceremony thing we need to get together very tightly and strongly and bring those people to solve the problem or complete the .. feeling to settle them up.



Sacred ceremonial area at Bäniyala

**PB:** Djumbawa the *ceremonial economy* seems to occur in Arnhem land every single day, every single day of the month.. some people I know who are song men they told me that they have been doing these ceremonies for 20 days in the month since the year 2000.. fifteen years of ceremonial life that most people wouldn't even know that they are doing it.. they would just recognise some things.. that they weren't always at one place or that they weren't at their house or they weren't with their family.. So how can we recognise this better? And shouldn't the governments be providing equal amounts of support to all of the clan groups so that they can do this ceremonial work better and equally without the stress on family, on schools, on transport these sorts of issues..

**DM:** Well if governments really recognise and some of them see for themselves, if they could see what was happening, they should recognise because this is the life that Yolŋu have lived for so many long ... and so long.. since we walked away to communities.. People were living on culture thing. Culture is more important to us. No-one will ever change us. **My spirituality and my lifestyle no-one will ever change.** But if government think they can really support and allocated some funding for us so we could run our ceremonial things in proper manner and people can feel confident and happy so they can come back and see their families and see their countries. These days for example we are stuck at Garma and we cannot come back.. We have to hitch-hike back..

**PB** So the Maḡarrpa clan and families often get stuck because they don't have the funds to get the taxi or the aeroplane..

**DM:** Exactly. Not only Maḡarrpa but there are other clan groups along the coast and inland and they do want to go back to their tribal place too.. because we are making a home in these lands these days. Before we would just pass through .. living.. gathering food and passing on.. to go and find a place where there are



*Sacred ground: Part of the area now registered as a sacred site which Mr Marawili wants to be preserved as a world heritage site in order to show the depth of Aboriginal culture through the extraordinary sand sculptures which have been preserved for decades by local custodians*

a lot of foods.. and good water.. But these days now we are living in our country now and if government only can see and seriously support  
Okay some mission some people are “title-y” connected on jobs . ..they got into jobs.. real jobs.. but we do have a real job here in community I mean homelands.. and that is the culture thing

**PB These are real jobs..**

DM: This is a big area where people have to follow.. people have to share their knowledge and wisdom.. Like for example garma thing or other organisations they should be like art.. I can say more about art because I have been there for quite a long time.. the art thing .. must really support our people to bring them back.. because that is the Yolŋu resource.. and I believe if this garma is the resource of Yolŋu people they should do the same thing too - bring our people back to their tribal homelands.. if they feel.. but we are not earning any money..

**PB: Yes.. I mean they are real jobs aren't they? That's the big issue that people don't recognise these are real jobs..**

DM: These are real jobs

**PB: And it is a hard job.. serious work.. every day**

DM: Exactly. I believe some of our education mob are earning money teaching our children about learning on country.. I can see and some of our children wanting to learn about our country.. they are living on our country.. why not letting or supporting the leader and the community back there because they are the ones



Mädarrpa led bunjul to celebrate Blue Mud Bay High Court Native Title Decision, Garma, 2012

who know about the learning on country.. We never understand this. We never know what is going on. I can see .. the children learning on country .. the ranger thing.. the name is ranger but they are not here.. the rangers are back there in the communities.. where

**PB: In the main communities not on the homelands.. So there should be rangers here?**

DM: Here, yes here.

**PB: There's no rangers here because there is no funding sitting on the homelands..**

DM: That's true. This is just about culture thing. Sand sculpture. Its really "title-y" on the land. Stories of significance, stories about our country. It lays on that country. Patterns and the designs are lay on that country and the languages are "title-y" connected on that country. Thirteen clan groups at Yirrkala. We all talk different dialects and right across to Galiwinku and there maybe sixteen or fourteen or seventeen clan groups back that way.. and we all do exercise on our language and we all do ceremonial things.. to make the ceremony look really solid and strong and well organized.. We do have people that look after us like Njadayun people, our nephews. They do want to strengthen our culture but its only just a feeling in their lives that they want to support their mother's clan group, they want to support märi clan group..to make it look solid *ga* strong but both clan groups don't get any support for it.. but only just reconciliation or through the culture.. But when you look at it as an economy thing.. I am talking about a cultural economy people do want to come all the way from other countries and join with those yothu yindi garma or yothu yindi activities.. Even band group mob they have to go all the way to show their culture.. by using two way by using English by using Yolŋu language.. and also dance.. they have to make it look really solid but that is really good enough its bringing a lot of people together so they can see it. But what about those people in the



"I dream of an open air environmental sacred place behind the sacred dunes on my homeland at Bäniyala that shows balanda and the world the depth of our culture."  
Djambawa Marawili 2/8/2015

homelands... ? They have to leave their homelands and follow what is going on up there.. Do we have to have a resource? Because it is a resource for us out there too. This is about initiation. This is about ngärra. Dilak<sup>1</sup> should be involved. Dilak has been passed on from our ancestral beings to our grandfathers to our fathers.. to us we still tie down to this.. Can we be strengthened by funding? By government. They should be always strengthening us or do we have to live like this?

**PB: I was going to ask you Djambawa.. a lot of individual people not governments**

DM: Individual people across Australia..

**PB: ..they recognise and respect, often more than governments, what you are calling the ceremonial or cultural economy.. They'd like to be able to help by setting up trust funds and supporting the sixteen clan groups not just the ones on whose land there is a mine.. and governments are always slow on these things.. So is that a potential way forward? If there was a Mädarra trust to support ceremonial and clan activities and song men to move efficiently back and forward from ceremonies would it be useful?**

DM: Yes . If governments can only see this and they can be wise and support what is happening in Mädarra clan group or other clan groups they can see it. There should be something to support us to strengthen our culture instead of just talking and saying like this. We respect your culture and we respect your law and we respect your leadership. Instead the should be providing something that we can achieve and share with our communities and our clan groups. And I reckon that can be a really good thing for our future plans and our young generation and that is what I can feel it.

<sup>1</sup> A dilak of senior clan leaders was put forward in 2014 and continues to be advocated by senior Yolŋu men like Djambawa Marawili See <https://www.unua.com.au/arnhem-land-indigenous-clans-look-for-dilak-council/>



**PB: You can see how this would even improve school attendance. If people weren't stranded after ceremonies they could get back to school faster...**

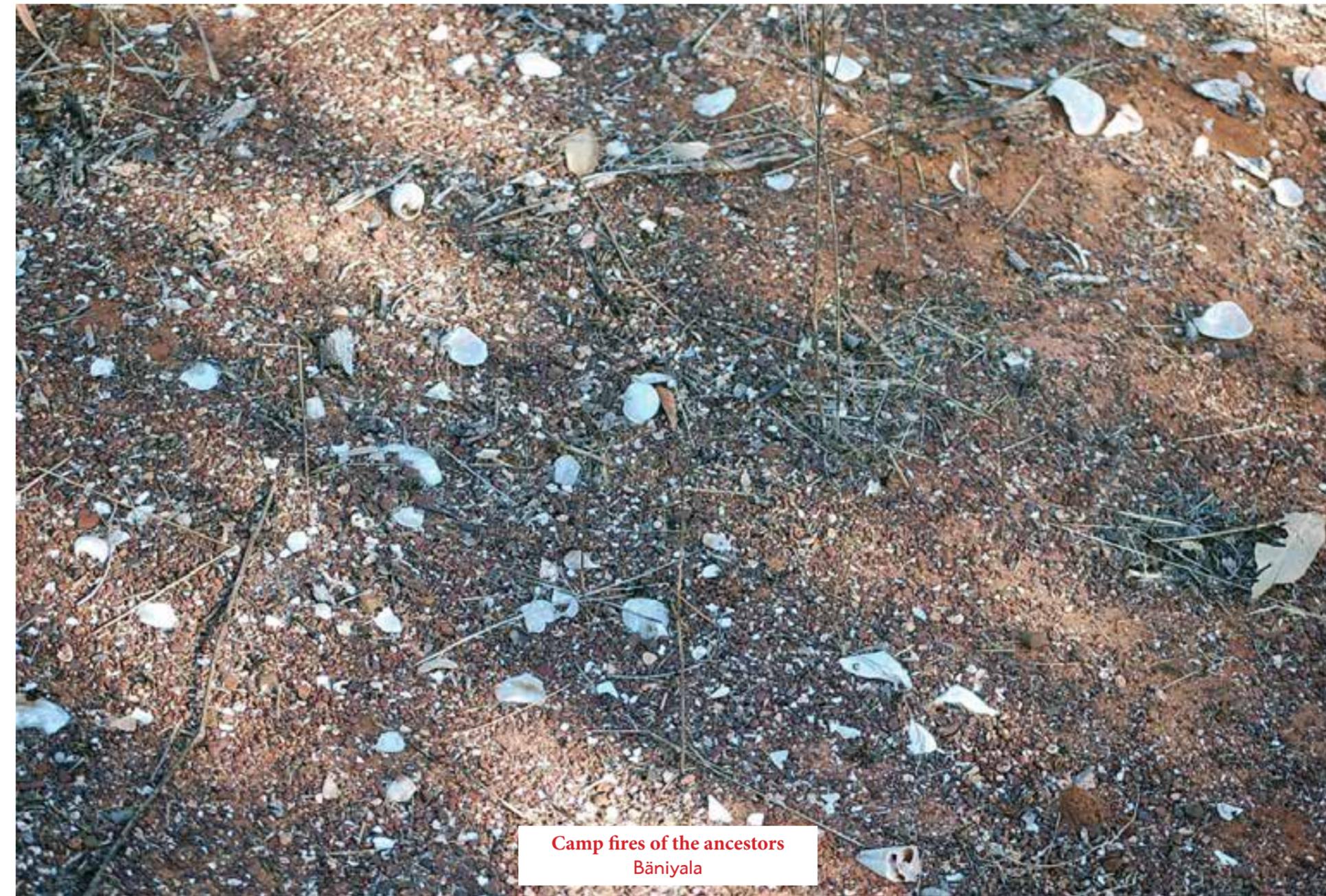
DM: Yes they could go back to school and they could go back to see their wives because some of the young husbands they do want to go.. and participate.

**PB: It creates stress doesn't it. It creates stress because the people want to go including the women want to go and they get left behind and they get stressed..**

DM: Look two days ago a lot of people went to Garma and I thought well I am going to go back to my homeland.. to Bāniyala and this is where you met me.. and there are only two or three people here.. but I felt I really wanted to get away from humbuging.. people getting, digging my mind.. my brain.. rather to be really clear.. and so I can take more further. I want to be really living on the homeland.. because I like homeland.. this is a place where I don't get into a lot of situations.. and I can do what I like.. and this is what I feel.

**PB: What do you think about the proposal to build a 20 million boarding school in Nhulunbuy.. ?**

DM: \$20 million to spend on a boarding school. *Well!* if they can only stop *the influence* coming into Nhulunbuy and *influence* means a lot of things.. drugs, alcohol and other things. It is already spoilt.. Why do you want to build a boarding school which is right in the middle of the town where a lot of *influences* will be there? How will those children be managing? Do you want to put a big fence around their area or what you want to do? You should be really looking at our future. I think we should be having boarding schools



Camp fires of the ancestors  
Bāniyala

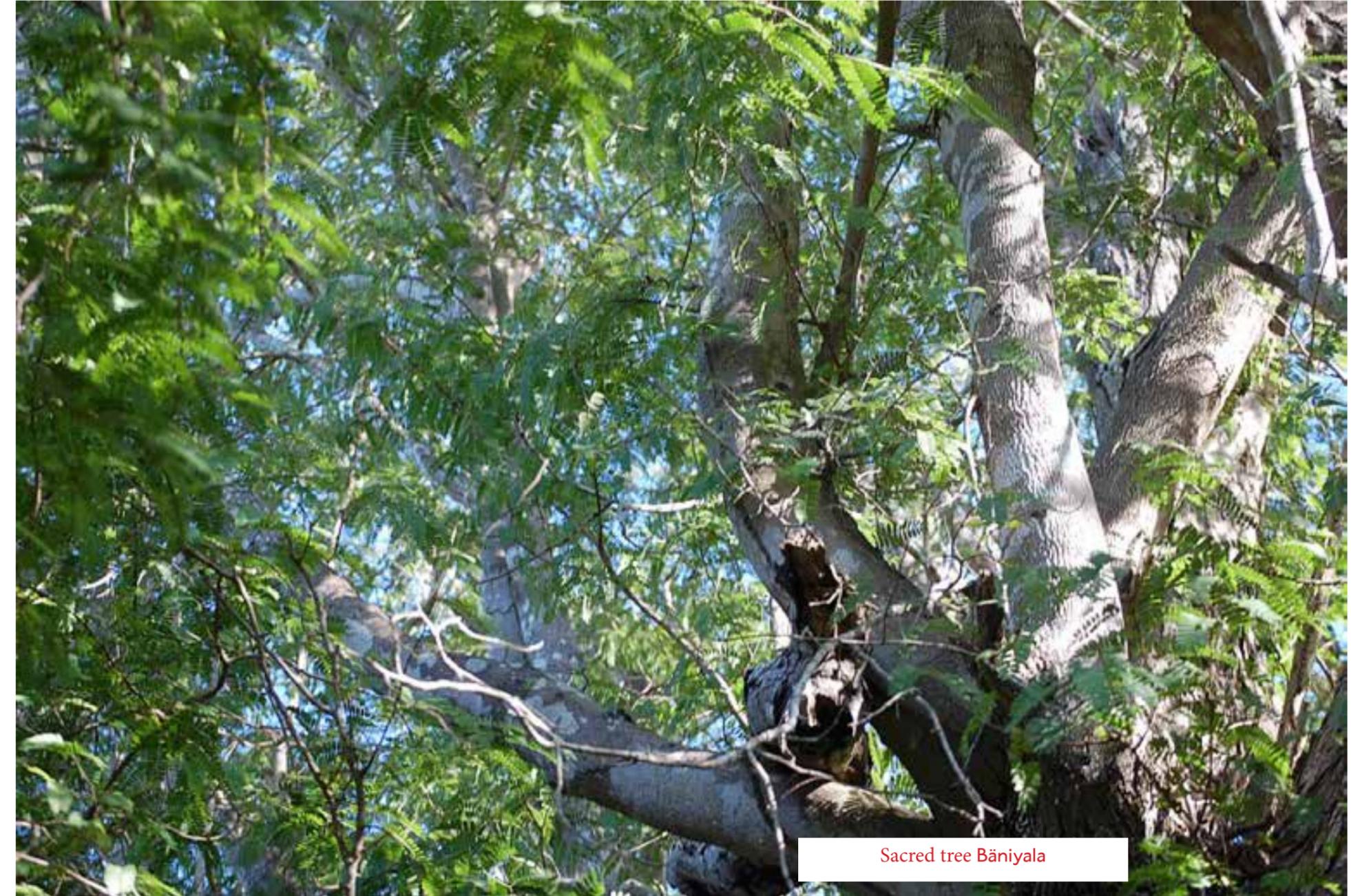
somewhere else where it really quiet and they can concentrate their minds on reading and writing

**PB: I understand they have closed or are going to close the senior high school year teaching at Gäpuwi-yak in order for the children to go to Nhulunbuy?**

DM: That is a crazy thing that one. I can say crazy because what have we got all these homelands for. Choose one of the homelands and put the boarding school there for us! That way we can manage and we can look after those schools. School is more important. We are here to express ourselves. For the future of our young generations they should be at a really quiet, humble school so that they can concentrate their minds and they can think.. where they are going. To Yolŋu its going to be really hard because we do have our own culture too. Yolŋu can only go as far as we can go but remember we have culture. That is part of our economy too. That is part of our education too.

### **Additional Remarks**

DM: I want the Australian government to recognise the cultural economy I think it is really important for you and me. You need to know more about our culture. You need to know about our patterns and designs because it wasn't really written about in the early days.. You need to understand that it is almost from the land.. When before Captain Cook came our message was already laid on this country.. and you need to know its been for centuries .. our language, our message, our stories, our patterns, our culture was laid here before.. honouring our ancestral beings and creators and the mighty names of these people before the missionaries came. We had to change our identity of worshiping and honouring our ancestral beings **Bärama** and **Lany'tjung**



Sacred tree Bäniyala

DM: I just wanted to say a bit further about homelands.. Homeland is a place where people live humbly in harmony and they do take care of their lives.. not much influence coming into their lives.. and some homelands have some schools.. but those schools have to be rebuilt and we really want to build their future and bring the children to school.. because that is one of the priorities in balanda world. .in Yolngu world culture.. that is our priority.. we live on.. But in white fella world we need to have education, numeracy, literacy and to share with our Yolngu society kids that is one of the really important things. Some homelands are really getting grown up but we don't have any resources where people can come and stay with us to lead us to show how to manage the office or how to develop. We can develop. In the early days when I was on the mission, missionaries develop us to get into a real job.. We can do it. But more than ever we need people to come and spend time in our lives in our homelands because if you in government want to see what is happening then give us someone who can support us. You are missing a lot of information about our homelands. You can only see that nothing is happening in homelands but if you only spent your money wisely and to support and strengthen homelands I reckon that is one of the really important things that you are leaving foundation for the next government change. That is one of the important things. You reckon you can do this for us? We are asking you. We are starting to lift up ourselves too. You will be putting a foundation for our young generation and for us. If you do support and strengthen our homelands that is what I wanted to say. It is really important. You are spending a lot of money on other organisations and some organisations are not really well built up. The names are not really in your minds but our homelands are not in your mind. You need to think about it and see it, see the future. We are a making an economy. We would like to make an economy. If only some people can come and stay with us and make future plans for our young people.

(Interview, transcription, photographs Peter Botsman 3578 words)



Preparations begin for ceremony, Bäniyala, August 2015 as it has been since time immemorial

## Djambawa Marawili, AM

Mr Djambawa Marawili is Djirrikay or senior ceremonial leader, for the Blue Mud Bay region of North East Arnhem Land. He is the leader of the Yolngu Maḡarrpa clan and the Bāniyala/Yil'para homeland. Mr Marawili has been Chairman of the Association of Northern Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal Artists (ANKAAA) for over a decade and he currently sits on boards of Lirwi Yolḡu Tourism and Buku Larrḡay Mulka Centre. He has served on boards of the Northern Land Council, Layhnapuy Homelands and the Australia Council's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board.

Mr Marawili is a senior artist, painter and sculptor. His art work is collected in all the major galleries in Australia and he has represented Australia internationally in major exhibitions in Moscow, London, France and the United States.

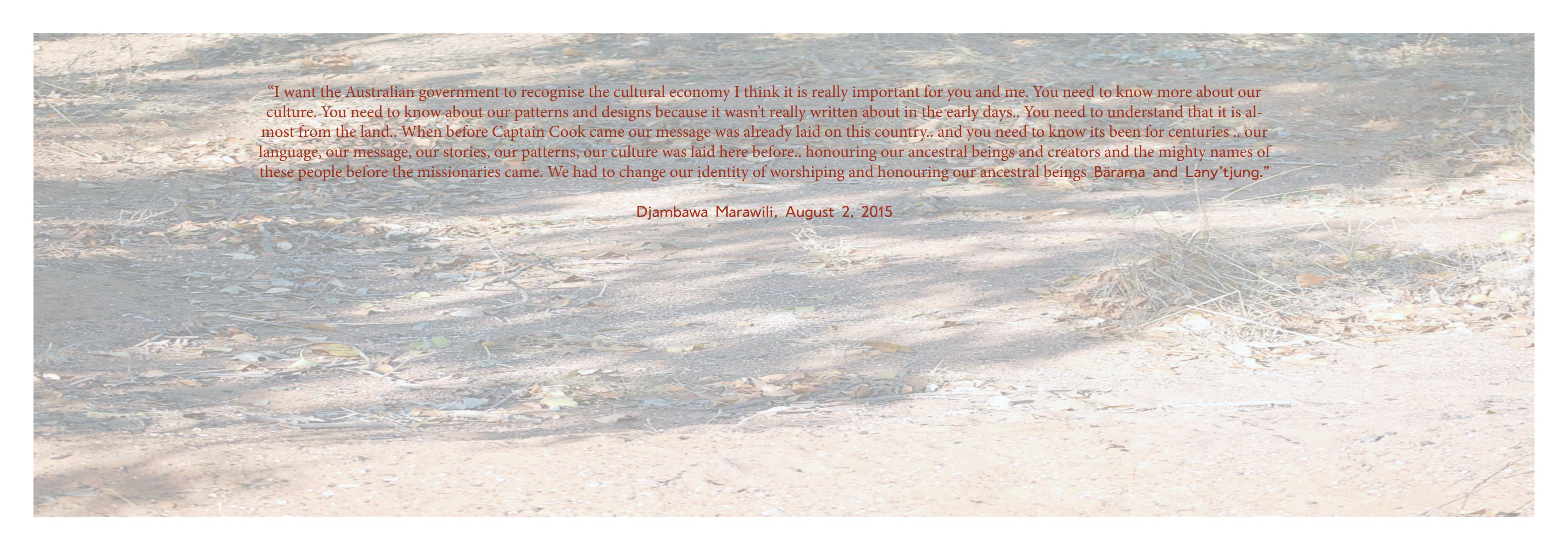
Mr Marawili was an artist participant in the Barunga Statement (1988). He coordinated the sea rights claim in 2002 which eventuated in the High Court's determination in the 2008 Blue Mud Bay Case that Yolngu own the sea between the high and low water mark.

Mr Marawili received an Order of Australia (AM) in 2010 for services to arts administration.

In addition to English Mr Marawili speaks Indigenous languages of Dhuwaya, Dhuwala, Djambarrpuy\u, Gumatj, Andiliyakwa and Kriol.

Mr. Marawili sits on the Prime Minister's Indigenous Advisory Council.





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Djambawa Marawili, August 2, 2015