Djalu' Gurruwiwi
Date of Birth: 01/01/1940
Clan: Gälpu
Homeland: Njyinyinia
Moiety: Dhuwa

Biography

Djalu’ Gurruwiwi is a senior Gälpu man who currently lives at Birri’jimi community, just out of Nhulunbuy township. He balances his time between family, community, ceremonial and public duties. He occasionally travels to Galiwin’ku for ceremony and sometimes stays at the Gälpu clan homeland of Gikal with his family. Djalu is both a highly respected senior Yolŋu lawman and a Christian leader, having completed studies in theology at Nungalinya College in 1994 in Darwin.

He was born at Milingimbi mission on Wirrikul island, part of the Wessel island group. Although his date of birth is officially recorded as the 1st of January, 1930, this is most likely inaccurate. At the time, the Christian missionaries had no way of knowing the exact date of birth, therefore inaccuracies were inevitable. Djalu’ shared the exact same recorded date of birth with two of his brothers. It is likely that he was born sometime during the 1940’s, possibly a little later, although he often has the energy and strength of a man half that age. Like many other aspects of Djalu’, his age remains a mystery.

Djalu’s father was Monyu, an important Yolŋu leader and feared warrior. Monyu instilled in Djalu’ the importance of Yolŋu law and gave Djalu’ the specific role as the primary custodian of the yiḏaki for his clan, the Gälpu. This role is significant not only for his own clan, but also for the wider Yolŋu communities because many other clans throughout Arnhem land look to the Gälpu clan as one of the primary custodians of the instrument. This should not however be misinterpreted as meaning Djalu’ is the custodian for the yiḏaki. There are many other Yolŋu people with the same role within their own clan and their own particular type of yiḏaki.

Djalu’ had several immediate brothers (ie. by blood, not kinship) from the same father as Monyu, some of whom were given the roles of manikaymi; those who have the right and authority to sing sacred song cycles. In ceremony, Djalu’ would play yiḏaki and his brothers would sing. Through this process Djalu’ learned the detailed history, kinship and law not only that of his clan the Gälpu, but also that belonging to other Yolŋu clans. His skills as a yiḏaki player and maker became well known amongst the Yolŋu and he attended many ceremonies, becoming well versed in Yolŋu law.

There are many aspects of knowledge and cultural practice that are sacred in the context of the yiḏaki and Yolŋu ceremony. Djalu holds such knowledge and is likewise held in high status amongst the Yolŋu. In addition to being a master yiḏaki maker, Djalu’ is also a painter of sacred miny’tji and a maker of rangga; objects that are sacred to the Yolŋu and are rarely seen.

To date, Djalu’ still plays yiḏaki in ceremony, which is entirely unique in the Yolŋu world. He cites this as the main reason for his longevity and vigor, which is supported by the simple fact that playing yiḏaki is beneficial for cardiovascular health. Playing yiḏaki is physically and mentally demanding, with the vast majority of yiḏaki players usually retiring from ceremonial playing before their mid 30’s. The fact that Djalu’ is still playing yiḏaki is testimony to his stamina, dedication and resilience. He has no desire to ever cease doing so.

Djalu’ sometimes tells stories of times prior to mainstream contact with non-Aboriginals, when as a young boy he would accompany his father turtle hunting on a lipalipa (dig out canoe). On the days when they had a successful hunt, Djalu’ recalls his father Monyu signalling with a horn tone through a yiḏaki which was kept on the canoe. The signal told the Yolŋu on the beach to prepare a large fire to heat stones that would be used to cook the turtle.

As a young man Djalu’ lived on Galiwiniku where for a period of time he worked as a lumberjack, cutting large trees for use in construction. This work was done by hand and Djalu’ became physically strong as a result. Back then he was one of the men responsible for carrying out punishment for tribal law, which he carried out on one known occasion. Because of his physical stature and this role within his clan, to some Yolŋu his presence was intimidating.

Djalu’ source of spiritual power is centred within Wittj, the huge ancestral rainbow serpent. In Gälpu clan legends, the all powerful Wittj was said to thunder as it moved through the land, it’s tongue striking lightning. Conversely, Wittj is also associated with the calm freshwater systems where Gälpu spirits reside. In these waters, water lilies and palm trees grow, with
rainbows forming and metaphorically shining from the ribs of Wititj and within the freshwater itself. Djalu' embodies both of these aspects; being a powerful man who has created a larger than life persona, whilst sharing his culture with warmth, gentleness and charisma.

Sometimes yidaki that he has made are said to contain these qualities. Some have intense and powerful acoustics that are referred to as baywara yidaki, imbued with the power of lightning and thunder. Other yidaki are sometimes referred to as Djugarriny, being long and deep sounding instruments with a gentle, soothing sound that is also powerful, the vibrations said to stir Wititj itself. These stories are part of the “mystery” that Djalu often speaks of and an aspect that attracts many yidaki players and enthusiasts to the instrument and to Djalu' himself.

In 1986, Djalu’s reputation as an expert yidaki maker was given a major boost with the establishment of the Yothu Yindi band. The Aboriginal members of the band chose Djalu' to make instruments for them. These instruments toured with the band and were used in studio recordings that were played on mainstream radio all over the world.

In the 1990's, Djalu’s status as the yidaki master was popularized through internet forums and chat sites. His instruments became highly sought after by dealers, collectors and musicians. Non-Indigenous didjeridu makers sought out his knowledge and specialized skills so they could improve their own work.

His reputation as a master yidaki craftsman and player has seen him rise to cult status internationally. Every year there are many yidaki enthusiasts who travel long distances to visit and learn from him. Most of these enthusiasts come from Europe, Japan and sometimes the USA; testament to his international reputation.

Djalu' has delivered seven of the Garma festival yidaki master classes in Arnhem land and has performed and taught in other Australian cities. His first international trip was in 2002 to Germany and then the following year to the USA and Taiwan. He has also visited Dubai, Japan, England, France, Holland and Italy to provide yidaki exhibitions, performances and tuition. He has been involved in numerous other exhibitions, performances, audio recordings, documentaries, newspaper articles and television news.

Despite physical health concerns, Djalu' continues to openly share the love for his culture with the wider world and does so with the charisma and warmth that he is well known for.

**Mediums**

Print Making

Earth pigments on Stringybark

Earth pigments on Stringybark hollow pole

**Solo Exhibitions**

2009  Yidaki workshops, performance and exhibition - UK and Europe - England, France, Belgium, Holland and Italy
2005  Yidaki workshops, performance and exhibition - Yidaki Festa - Okuhida and Tokyo, Japan
2005  World Expo 2005 - Australian representative - Aichi Prefecture, Japan
2003  Yidaki workshops, performance and exhibition - Joshua Tree Festival - Joshua Tree, USA
2002  Yidaki workshops, performance and exhibition - Rripangu Yidaki Festival - Eisenbach, Germany

**Group Exhibitions**

2009  After Berndt - Etchings from the Drawings - Indigenart, Mossenson Gallery, Subiaco. WA
2008  Galuku Gallery (Nomad Art Productions) - Darwin Festival, Darwin Botanical Gardens, NT
2008  Gapan Gallery, Bernt Prints - Garma Festival Site, Gulkula, NT
2006  Ngann Girra Festival - Albury Regional Museum, NSW
2004  Dubai Sister Cities Forum - Dubai, United Arab Emirates
2003  Indigenous Peoples Commission - cultural visit - Taipei, Taiwan
1999  ‘Saltwater Country - Bark Paintings from Yirrkala’ - A National Tour - Drill Hall Gallery, ANU, Canberra; John Curtin Gallery, Curtin University, Perth; Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney; Museum of Modern Art at Heide, Melbourne; The Araluen Cultural Centre, Alice Springs; Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane
1998  The Meeting of the Waters, an exhibition of prints and works by artists from the Australasian Print Project - 24 Hour Art, Darwin NT
1998  Hollow Logs from Yirrkala - Annandale Gallery, Sydney, NSW
1997  Native Title - Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
1997  The Painters of the Wagilag Sisters Story 1937 - 1997 - National Gallery of Australia, Canberra ACT
Collections

Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide SA
JW Kluge Collection, Virginia USA
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne VIC
South Australian Museum, Adelaide SA
Yiḏaki in numerous private collections world-wide

Awards

2015 2015 National Indigenous Music Award Winner, Djalu Gurruwiwi and East Journey for Mokuy & Bonba
2003 Accepted first prize at the 2003 NT export awards (art and entertainment category) in Darwin on behalf of Buku-Larrngay Mulka and all Yolŋu yiḏaki craftsmen in recognition of yiḏaki export growth.