

A collection of twenty-two  
films made with the Yolngu  
of northeast Arnhem Land

THE  
YIRRKALA  
FILM PROJECT



FILM AUSTRALIA

NATIONAL INTEREST PROGRAM

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**Y**irrkala is an Aboriginal township on the Gove Peninsula in northeast Arnhem Land, at the top end of the Northern Territory. It was established as a Methodist mission in 1935 and over the years Yolngu, or Aboriginal people, from many different clans moved there. Yirrkala's isolation was shattered in the late 60s and early 70s when a huge open-cut bauxite mine was developed on the Gove Peninsula. With the mine came an alumina treatment plant and the mining town of Nhulunbuy. In 1970/71 Aboriginal land owners took the mining company and the Commonwealth to court in the first land rights case in Australian history. The Yolngu lost their case.

In 1970 Ian Dunlop started a long-term film project with the Yolngu of Yirrkala for Film Australia. Eight major filming trips were made between 1970 and 1982. Initially eleven films were produced. In 1994-96, in a joint venture between Film Australia and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Ian Dunlop and Philippa Deveson edited an additional eleven films from previously unused and historically important material. In July 1996 the last of these were taken to Yirrkala for Yolngu approval.

These twenty two films (all on video) document many aspects of Yolngu life. Each stands on its own but each is also part of a rich interconnecting mosaic of people and themes. The impact of the mine and mining town on the Yolngu is a major theme. Despite enormous disruption to their lives the resilience of the Yolngu and their culture shines through. During this time people began moving back to build small settlements at important sites on their own clan lands. The birth and early development of this clan homeland movement is shown. The complex relationship between people and their clans, ritual, art and land is an inter-twining theme through many films. Several major ceremonies are documented. The importance of land is ever present.

Notes to go with the films are being prepared. In the meantime, for prospective viewers wanting a general introduction, we suggest that you first view the following videos in the order set out here: *Pain for this Land*; *One Man's Response*; *This is my Thinking*; *Conversations with Dundiwuy Wanambi*; *Singing in the Rain*; and *We believe in it... we know it's true*.

The above selection deals with the struggle of the Yolngu to come to terms with the mining project. Other videos document, more specifically, the richness of Yolngu ritual and life at the clan homelands. A list of all the films, together with brief descriptions, is set out below.

These films are for Yolngu and Balanda alike. As Dundiwuy Wanambi says at the end of *Djungguwan at Gurka'wuy* – "This is a history for new generation and for new generation..."

The films in the Yirrkala Film Project were shot between 1970 and 1982. They are listed in order of completion, not shooting. Year of completion is given in brackets after title. Durations are given to the nearest minute.

**CAUTION** -Many Yolngu who appear in these films have now passed away. Leaders should be consulted before public screenings in Yolngu communities.

**MADARRPA FUNERAL AT GURKA'WUY** (88 minutes – 1979) A Madarrpa clan child unexpectedly died at the Marrakulu clan homeland centre of Gurka'wuy, Trial Bay, in 1976, a few days after filming for *Djungguwan at Gurka'wuy* had started. Made at the invitation of Dundiwuy Wanambi and the child's father, this film is a detailed study of the funeral ceremony. Howard Morphy's *Journey to the Crocodile's Nest* ( Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1984) is an accompanying book to this film.

**NARRITJIN AT DJARRAKPI Part One** (50 minutes – 1981) **NARRITJIN AT DJARRAKPI Part Two** (39 minutes – 1981) Two films on Narritjin Maymuru and his family at their small Manggalili clan homeland in 1974. The films include daily life, fishing and food gathering, painting and other art and craft work.

**MY COUNTRY, DJARRAKPI** (16 minutes – 1981) Narritjin Maymuru shows how one of his bark paintings relates to his land.

**NARRITJIN IN CANBERRA** (40 minutes – 1981) Narritjin Maymuru, with his family, is artist-in-residence at the Australian National University in Canberra in 1978. He paints, instructs anthropology students, and holds a major art exhibition.

**AT THE CANOE CAMP** (41 minutes – 1981) Narritjin and other senior men make two dug-out canoes. Clan leaders gather to discuss rights over land.

**IN MEMORY OF MAWALAN** (92 minutes – 1983) Mawalan, respected head of the Rirratjingu clan, died at Yirrkala in 1967. In 1971 his son Wandjuk Marika organises a Djangkawu ceremony, both as a memorial to his father and as a re-affirmation of the Djangkawu Law that his father taught. This film, made at Wandjuk's invitation, is a detailed study of this important event.

**WE ARE THE LANDOWNER... THAT'S WHY WE'RE HERE** (48 minutes – 1985) The work of the Homeland Resource Centre at Yirrkala in 1982 and the running of one clan settlement at Bäniyala.

**WE BELIEVE IN IT... WE KNOW IT'S TRUE** (48 minutes – 1986) A study of cultural continuity at Yirrkala in 1982, forty years after the Yirrkala mission started, twelve years after the Gove bauxite mine was established.

**ONE MAN'S RESPONSE** (54 minutes – 1986) This film shows how, in 1971, one clan leader, Narritjin Maymuru, responds to the coming of the Gove bauxite mine. He invites the mining community to a clan ceremony. An implicit theme is that of communication, and non-communication.

**DJUNGGUWAN AT GURKA'WUY** (3 hours 53 minutes – 1989) In 1976 Dundiwuy Wanambi organises a Djungguwan ceremony at his Marrakulu clan homeland of Gurka'wuy, on Trial Bay. This film, made at Dundiwuy's invitation, is a study of this Marrakulu/Rirratjingu clan event. It shows the relationships between the Yolngu and their art, song, dance and land. (On five video cassettes, accompanied by script/notes.)

**PAIN FOR THIS LAND** (43 minutes – 1995) A general introduction to the whole Yirrkala Film Project. At a village council meeting in 1970 clan elders discuss the coming of the mine, alcohol, and their fears for the future. The impact of the mine on the lives of the Aboriginal population in 1970/71 is shown. The struggle of Roy Dadaynga Marika for his people is highlighted. Most of the clan elders who appear in the film are now dead, but their words have proved to be prophetic.

**THIS IS MY THINKING** (52 minutes – 1995) Daymbalipu Munungurr was one of the most respected leaders of the Yirrkala community. This film deals with his concerns during the early years of the mine. It shows the quiet but strong way he communicates with and educates the newcomers – be they tourists or mining officials.

**CONVERSATIONS WITH DUNDIWUY WANAMBI** (50 minutes – 1995) A personal film about Dundiwy Wanambi, made mainly from interviews filmed with Dundiwy between 1970 and 1982. It reveals the struggles of one man in the face of the huge changes brought about by the coming of a mine and mining town.

**DUNDIWUY'S HOUSE OPENING** (35 minutes – 1995) The dramatic first part of a house opening ceremony after a death.

**PURIFICATION CEREMONY – Caledon Bay 1971** (15 minutes – 1995) A woman is ritually cleansed after an injury. Fine singing by old Djapu leaders.

**FROM A LONG TIME AGO – Hollow log painting** (20 minutes – 1996) In 1974 Mungurrawuy Yunupingu and other clan leaders painted a traditional hollow log coffin at Yirrkala. Now, as Mungurrawuy sings over the log, he asks Daymbalipu Munungurr to explain the paintings for the film. Through song and painting the importance to the Yolngu of past visits by Macassan trepangers is shown.

**MARRAKULU FUNERAL – Yirrkala 1974** (53 minutes – 1996) The body of a clan leader is taken from the hospital at the mining town of Nhulunbuy to a final burial at the cemetery at Yirrkala. But at another level, through ritual song and dance, the leader is taken on a spiritual journey to his far away clan lands.

**SINGING IN THE RAIN – Yirrkala in 1974** (53 minutes – 1996) This is a troubled time for the Yirrkala community. The mine, on its doorstep, has been operating for four years. The effects of alcohol, from the mining town, are causing grave concern to the leaders. This film shows the Yolngu's attempts to come to terms with, and solve, these problems. Despite the gathering storm clouds Yolngu culture is still vibrant. Government policies of assimilation are giving way to those of self-determination. It is now that the movement by clans back to their own lands really takes off.

**HARD TIME NOW... FOR THE CHILDREN** (54 minutes – 1996) A personal film about Narritjin Maymuru, artist, thinker, and passionate interpreter of the world through his Yolngu beliefs. In 1974 he talks about the troubles at Yirrkala, his eldest son's drinking and his plans to move to his own clan land at Djarrakpi. In 1976 Narritjin has returned to Yirrkala following the death of his eldest son. Ian Dunlop has brought back the film shot at Djarrakpi. For Narritjin the film embodies the spiritual power of Djarrakpi itself. Before it can be screened Narritjin must sing over it and make it safe.

**DHÄPI CEREMONY AT YIRRKALA – 1972** (91 minutes – 1996) An archival record (no translation or documentation on film) of a circumcision ceremony. During the three weeks prior to the main ceremony the boys are sung over and beautifully painted.

**BÄNIYALA – 1974** (58 minutes – 1996) An archival record of life at the Madarrpa clan settlement of Bäniyala on Blue Mud Bay. Part One covers everyday events at Bäniyala, including the building of the settlement's first corrugated iron house. In Part Two clan head Wakuthi Marawili takes the Bäniyala men and the film unit on a ceremonial walk and delivers, in Yolngu, a lecture about his clan history. No documentation or translation but Part One is self explanatory.

**PRODUCER/DIRECTOR: Ian Dunlop EDITOR/CO-WRITER: Philippa Deveson EXECUTIVE PRODUCER: Chris Oliver**

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