



## Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre

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### Djalul Gurruwiwi

**Date of Birth:** 01/01/1940  
**Clan:** Gälpu  
**Homeland:** Njapinya  
**Moiety:** Dhuwa

## Biography

Djalul Gurruwiwi is a senior Gälpu man who currently lives at Birri'tjimi 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. Djalul is both a highly respected senior Yolŋu lawman and a Christian leader, having completed studies in theology at Nungalinga College in 1994 in Darwin.

He was born at Milingimbi mission on Wirriku 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. Djalul 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 Djalul, his age remains a mystery.

Djalul's father was Monyu, an important Yolŋu leader and feared warrior. Monyu instilled in Djalul the importance of Yolŋu law and gave Djalul 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 Djalul 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.

Djalul 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, Djalul would play yiḏaki and his brothers would sing. Through this process Djalul 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. Djalul holds such knowledge and is likewise held in high status amongst the Yolŋu. In addition to being a master yiḏaki maker, Djalul is also a painter of sacred miny'tji and a maker of *rannga*; objects that are sacred to the Yolŋu and are rarely seen.

To date, Djalul 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 Djalul is still playing yiḏaki is testimony to his stamina, dedication and resilience. He has no desire to ever cease doing so.

Djalul 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 (dug out canoe). On the days when they had a successful hunt, Djalul 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 Djalul lived on Galiwinku 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 Djalul 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.

Djalul's source of spiritual power is centred within Witiḏj, the huge ancestral rainbow serpent. In Gälpu clan legends, the all powerful Witiḏj was said to thunder as it moved through the land, it's tongue striking lightning. Conversely, Witiḏj 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 Witiŋ and within the freshwater itself. Djalul 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 *Djungarriny*, being long and deep sounding instruments with a gentle, soothing sound that is also powerful, the vibrations said to stir Witiŋ itself. These stories are part of the "mystery" that Djalul often speaks of and an aspect that attracts many yidaki players and enthusiasts to the instrument and to Djalul himself.

In 1986, Djalul'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 Djalul 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, Djalul'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.

Djalul 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, Djalul 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

- 1996** 13th National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award - Museum & Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT), Darwin NT
- 1995** 12th National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award - Museum & Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT), Darwin NT
- 1995** Miny'tji Buku-Larrnggay, Paintings from the East - National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne VIC
- 1994** The 11th National Aboriginal Art Awards Exhibition - Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin NT
- 1994** The Power of the Land - Masterpieces of Aboriginal Art, National Gallery of Victoria.
- 1990** Spirit in Land, Bark Paintings from Arnhem Land - National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne VIC

#### **Collections**

Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide SA

JW Kluge Collection, Virginia USA

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne VIC

South Australian Museum. Adelaide SA

Yidaki in numerous private collections world-wide

#### **Awards**

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