

# Submission to Territory 2030

## by Rev Dr Djiniyini Gondarra OAM

My name is Rev Dr Djiniyini Gondarra OAM. I was born in Milingimbi in West Arnhem Land in 1945. I am a Yolŋu man and I am a senior elder and well respected by my people in West and East Arnhem Land. I have some ideas for our future. To understand these ideas, you first need to understand about Yolŋu.

Yolŋu have always lived with this land. In recent times an invasion took place in this country. There was no negotiation, no asking or following of the proper protocols. These people did not respect my people or our law. My forefathers fought to survive and defend our lands. This time of war led to many Yolŋu deaths.

Since that time many foreigners have come to north-east Arnhem Land; with the missions and welfare, with the police, with the mines. Each time we have lost more of our spirit and our identity.

**“Historical trauma is trauma that is multigenerational and cumulative over time; it extends beyond the life span. ... Mourning that has not been completed and the ensuing depression are absorbed by children from birth on (Shoshan, 1989). Unresolved trauma also has been found to be intergenerationally cumulative, thus compounding the subsequent health problems of the community.”**

**E Duran et al 1998 ‘Healing the American Indian Soul Wound’, p 342**

Yolŋu are strong people though and even after all these new things and changes, we worked hard and rebuilt our communities in the Balanda way so that in the 1970s we were:

- building all our own housing
- doing all our own road works
- carrying out most of the office work required to run the community
- involved to a high level in essential services contracts for the community
- involved in the provision of health and education

This work was sometimes done with the help of outsiders, who were involved in supporting Yolŋu through training and resourcing.

Today, almost all this work is done by outside people and contractors.

There are a number of reasons why this happened. Here’s one story about housing. We were building our houses on a contract basis until it was decided by the then Aboriginal Development Commission (ADC) that we were not building enough houses each year. ADC was concerned about their construction statistics, so the ADC started letting contracts to outside builders.

People in the community saw that the outsiders were building pre - cut houses much faster than our own people so they began to question the skills and speed of our own people.

Within a year, our Yolngu builders and tradesmen had put down their tools and said, "Well if the Government wants to shame us in front of our people, then they can build all the houses".

These men walked away in shame even though the cost of their completed houses was under that of the Balanda contractors. The Balanda had won again.

When we look around our communities today, we see all the work being done by dominant culture people. There does not seem to be a role for us. Our children want to know why they need to go to school when there is no role for them in the community. Our parents wonder what role or future our children have ... This is very sad.

Our dead and dying are not statistics or headlines ... they are our families.

We have some ideas about how to make our communities strong and healthy again. We have ideas about how to help our people understand Balanda law and money. But first we need to overcome some barriers. There are many barriers facing our people today. To overcome these barriers, and regain control over our health and other aspects of our lives, we first need hope and pride again!

If we can see a place for our language in the Balanda world, we have hope.

If we can see a place for our culture in the Balanda world, we have pride. With hope and pride, we have something to live for ... we have a future.

### ***2030 in Arnhem Land***

If you want to have a prosperous, healthy Territory with opportunities for all people, then as decision makers shaping the Territory's future, you can help by doing the following:

- **Recognise the validity of Indigenous languages.**

*'The difficulty is that because of the language and cultural barriers many people never get an opportunity to express their knowledge or their ideas. The impression is given to them that they are idiots and that people outside of their community are more qualified to deal with their problems. As a result of this general attitude people become apathetic and take no interest in dealing with the problems.'*

*(Alyawerre Elder quoted in 'Little Children are Sacred')*

- **Support and encourage Indigenous people to use, practice and teach our languages.**

*'When languages fade, so does the world's rich tapestry of cultural diversity. Opportunities, traditions, memory, unique modes of thinking and expression;- valuable resources for ensuring a better future are also lost.'*

*(UNESCO)*

- **Recognise and support Indigenous Law.** Indigenous Law fundamentally complements and supports Balanda Law and gives the young people discipline and respect. It also gives back an important role and meaning to elders of each clan nation.
- **Recognise Indigenous education systems and use them in the education of our children.**
- **Recognise Indigenous health knowledge and use it in the care of Yolŋu patients where appropriate.**
- **Document, value and teach Yolŋu medicine, environmental knowledge, law and economic history in schools and communities throughout north-east Arnhem Land (and the wider Northern Territory school community).**  
*“... there needs to be a willingness and effort to understand the Aboriginal world-view and Aboriginal perspectives”  
 (Little Children are Sacred)*

I can see the confidence, affirmation and pride that a generation of our Yolŋu would achieve.

I can see the social, health and economic improvements to the Yolŋu people.

I can see the money government could save into the future.

I can see the expanded opportunities for our people and Territorians.

This is all possible. Please listen to our ideas and make them happen. Your decisions today will decide our fate.



Rev Dr Djiniyini Gondarra OAM  
 Political leader of the Golumala clan  
 Chairman of Aboriginal Resource and Development Services

I have included some text from the ARDS 2006-2007 Annual Report to help you to understand why our past is so important to our future and to what you may hope to achieve for 2030:

“History tells us that the people who now display a very high level of dependency were once proud self-sufficient people.

When we institutionalise aboriginal development, it costs more. It costs more in financial and social terms. Yolŋu and others like them, have suffered greatly because of the institutionalisation of their lives. We must find a way where they can break out from the control of government departments.

There are many examples of how historical events continue to shape and influence the lives of the dominant culture Australian population today including the impact of:

- World War One on the legend and spirit of the ANZAC which is honoured and commemorated to this day – ‘Lest we Forget’
- the Great Depression on habits, behaviours and practices of following generations reflecting the values of thrift and ‘saving for a rainy day’
- World War Two on population dynamics with baby boomers forcing policy priorities as they age and retire, dominating the shape of Australia’s social, economic and health landscape
- the Vietnam War on mental health awareness with the increased incidence of mental health issues coming to light based on research into alcoholism, depression and other mental illnesses on children and grandchildren of Vietnam veterans

Significant trauma takes generations to heal and is not exclusive to any specific culture. It is common to all humans in all societies.

Major events in Yolŋu history are still impacting on the Yolŋu people of today. These events include:

- the Pastoral Wars (including massacres in north-east Arnhem Land)
- cessation of trade with the Maccassans in 1907
- the 30 Year Boat Wars which continued up until the 1940s
- institutionalisation through the mission and welfare era

These historical experiences continue to have an effect on Yolŋu people today in one way or another. So how can we overcome this barrier of history? Acknowledging these historical factors and allowing Yolŋu to heal is a healthy first step. Other positive strategies include teaching Yolŋu history throughout north-east Arnhem Land to engender pride in a strong past, or sharing Yolŋu history with dominant culture to create better understanding amongst dominant culture of Yolŋu people, history, culture and world-view.

### **Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma**

“Culture shock<sup>1</sup> and future shock<sup>2</sup> together are enough to render life almost impossible for Yolŋu in a Balanda world, but there is another debilitating phenomenon that compounds them. Psychologists call it the multigenerational legacy of trauma’.

A growing body of research and much anecdotal evidence suggests that long-term victimisation and trauma can lead to heightened levels of complex stress. This is usually termed ‘Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder’, or PTSD. Despite this research, many dominant culture people fail to acknowledge the destructive relationship between the dominant culture and Yolŋu, preferring to blame the people’s problems on some inherent weakness in them or their culture. This makes it very difficult for

Yolŋu. When they try to talk about the wars and trauma they have experienced at the hands of Balanda, their stories of deep hurt and grief are usually met with comments such as 'We have to forget the past and get on with the future' or 'Do we always have to talk about the past? Can't we just live for tomorrow?' Strangely, many dominant culture people get agitated hearing about these past events, even though the dominant culture immortalises its own past defeats and tragedies with words like 'Lest we forget'. Research shows that unless people can grieve and speak about the hurts of the past, it is very difficult to live for the future.

### ***Just Get On With Things***

When Australian and American soldiers returned from Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 1970s, they were often told to forget the past and get on with their lives. It is now widely accepted that many of these Vietnam veterans experienced deep traumatic events that affected them so profoundly they could not just 'get on with their lives'. They needed help to deal with their past trauma, and the fact they did not get it caused many of them great hardship.

Large numbers of people in years gone by have experienced this type of trauma in circumstances such as war, torture, rape, the Holocaust, the atomic bombing of Japan, natural disasters, and community disasters such as factory explosions, aeroplane crashes, vehicle accidents and riot. It is this type of trauma that has the capacity to create PTSD in its victims.

When Vietnam veterans suffering the psychological impact of trauma were diagnosed with PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), the opportunity occurred for appropriate intervention in their troubled lives. Many were also suffering from high levels of alcohol and drug abuse, dysfunctional family life and domestic violence, and self-abuse and suicide. The clinical recognition of the veterans' condition allowed them and their families to rise above the negative stigma that had been applied to them by others. The identification of PTSD, writes researcher Matthew Friedman, filled an important gap in psychiatric theory and practice:

From an historical perspective, the significant change ushered in by the PTSD concept was the stipulation that the etiological agent was outside the individual him or herself – i.e., the traumatic event – rather than an inherent individual weakness – i.e., a traumatic neurosis. *The key to understanding the scientific basis and clinical expression of PTSD is the concept of 'trauma'*.<sup>3</sup>  
(My emphasis)

The question needs to be asked: Is what Yolŋu have experienced trauma in its true clinical form?"

(Why Warriors Lie Down and Die)

1 "Culture shock is the loss of emotional balance, disorientation, or confusion that a person feels when moving from a familiar environment to an unfamiliar one." International Student Handbook 1995-96, College of Wooster, [www.wooster.edu/oisa/handbook/culture.html](http://www.wooster.edu/oisa/handbook/culture.html), USA.

2 "Future shock is a time phenomenon, a product of the greatly accelerated rate of change in society. It arises from the superimposition of a new culture on an old one. It is culture shock in one's own society ..."  
Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock*, Pan Books, London and Sydney, 1970, p 20.

3 Friedman, September 30, 1998

## **References**

'Healing the American Indian Soul Wound', E Duran, B Duran, M Yellow Horse, Brave Heart, S Yellow Horse-Davis. 1998, Danieli, p 342.

'Why Warriors Lie Down and Die', R Trudgen. 2000, ARDS, pp 187 – 188.