

Doris Yethun Burarrwaja

## Keeping YSL Alive

### A Yolŋu Woman's Story

This is the story of my struggle to teach children their languages, Yolŋu Sign Language (lakaram goŋdhu) and links to kin and Country.

Dhuwanydja dhäwu ŋarrakuŋu nhäwiku marŋgithinyaraw djamarrkuŋiw, dhiyak dhäruk ga lakaram goŋdhu djäkaw limurrukalanaw wänjaw ga gurruŋuw.

My name is Doris Yethun Burarrwaja.

Yäkuny ŋarra dhuwala Doris Yethun Burarrwaja.

I am a Yolŋu woman who has spent many years working to save the many languages of my people including our remarkable Yolŋu Sign Language (YSL). I will describe what YSL is and some of its fascinating linkages to kin and Country through a little something of my life. I hope you enjoy this story and want to learn more about my world and Yolŋu languages and people. It is so very important to understand the deep bonds in Yolŋu experience to connections of place and each other as kin through language. Our deep connections to place, sites, songs and kinship form a network of relations that join us to Country and our languages, languages like YSL. Yolŋu language is a vital part of the story and why it is so important to pass on.

YSL is the sign language of our Yolŋu community. YSL is an alternate language of sign for hearing Yolŋu people, and a primary language for our non-hearing people. YSL helps us communicate and respond to the beautiful Yolŋu ritual and religious life, reflecting our intimate relationship with the ancestral presences in us and our places. YSL is used during periods of mourning when speech is culturally forbidden, around things sacred, sacred objects and sacred sites, during ceremony and around avoidance relationships with kin. We use it for communication over distance, secrecy or for silent hunting practice. In the past, we learned it from birth along with spoken language, but its intergenerational transmission has been undermined by a quickly changing world and settler colonialism. I learnt YSL from my father and mother and my brothers and sisters when I was young. At this point in time, many years later, I have been working for nearly thirty years with my classificatory brother Bentley, and sister, Marie Carla, to create books to record YSL for the children. Times have changed and I remember how I came to learn the precious gifts of my language. I will tell you this story in language.<sup>1</sup>

When I was young up until about the age of seven years old, I would travel around with my parents to different places in the Country. I would help my father make fire and do things. I really like stories. I would sit on my father's

1 Some parts of this story have appeared in works that Bentley, Marie Carla and I have done before, for example: Bentley James, M. C. Dany Adone, Elaine L. Maypilama: *The Illustrated Handbook of Yolŋu Sign Language of North East Arnhem Land*.

knee, and he would tell me stories about his life, our family and the Country. At different times of the year, we would travel to different places and there we would learn the names of the Country and the stories of the places.

Ga yan bili ŋunhi ŋarra marrtjin ŋuthar ga goŋ-märrma' ŋarrany gan malthurra Yan ŋarrakalaŋaw ŋändimirrijuw ga bapamirrijuw ga marrtjinay napurr gan liw'maraŋal wiripuŋuli ga wiripuŋulil wäŋalil ga ŋarra ŋuli guŋgayun ŋarraku bapamirrijuw, yurr gurtha djäma ga wiripu mala ŋarra ŋuli ga guŋgayun, yurr mirithirnydja ŋarra ŋuli gan djälthin dhäwuw ŋänharaw. Darra ŋuli mulkurr ŋalyun moriwal bala ŋayi ŋuli dhäwun lakaram ŋarraku ŋunhi nhältjarr ŋayi gan marrathin, ga gurruđu mala ŋarraku ga wäŋa mala ga nhä ŋayi ŋarraku yuwalk ŋunhi wäŋa, ga bitjarri bili yan marrtjin wiripuŋulil ga marŋgithin yan marrtjin.

I heard the story of where I was born from my father. He told me I was born 20 October 1958 in the mangrove near Doltji at a place called Larthaŋaŋur near where the big pearl farm on Cape Wilberforce is now situated. When I was born, I was wrapped in paperbark to keep warm.

Dunhi ŋarra yothu yan ŋarra ŋäkul dhäwu ŋayi gan bapamirrijuw lakaraŋal ŋarrakal. Gaŋirri Burarrwaŋa ga ŋändimirrijuw Wapulkuma Gurrwiwi. Dayi lakaram ŋarrakal ŋunhi ŋarra dhawal-guyaŋirr 20.10.58 gathuljuw galki Doltji wäŋaŋur yäkuynjuw Lathaŋaŋur ŋunhi dharrwa mala ga ŋorra Gulawu Cape Wilburforce-ŋur. Dunhi ŋarra dhawal-guyaŋinany dhurrthurryurra ŋarrany raŋandhun gurrmurkuŋala. Darra gurrutumirr mala gan nhinan Lathaŋaŋur ga ŋunhal Beyalŋaŋur.

My mother and father and family stayed at Larthaŋaŋur yurr räŋinjuw munatha wiyin'ŋur on the long beach called walit. It was there that my father gave me the names Lathaŋa and Beyalŋa. My family put me into the canoe my father had made and paddled back down the coast to the homelands at Maŋamaŋa. We had two canoes, one called Djulpan and the other called Bamaŋuka. We travelled altogether. Here is a picture of us at Maŋamaŋa when I was a little girl (Fig. 1).

Darraku gurrutumirr rulaŋthurr ŋakulil ŋarrakal bapamirrijuw djäma marrwala bala yarrupthurra Peninsular-kurra balan roŋiyirra balan Maŋamaŋalil napurr ga ŋayatham märrma' ŋaku yäku djulpan ga wiripuny yäku Bamaŋuka bukmak napurr ga rrambaŋi marrtji, dhuwal mayali' wunjili napurr ŋunhal Maŋamaŋaŋur dhuwal napurr mali' ŋunhi ŋarra yothu.

What is most important are the stories of the Country. All of the different Countries have stories and languages and colours and dances and ceremonies. These dances and ceremonies and colours are the linkages that tie all the people of this place together and to the land. It is a network of links to our ancestors and their stories and their creations that make us all one people. It is these understandings about the importance of our myths, about our languages, that are so critical at this time when the Balanda (non-Indigenous people) are taking over our Country. This is the work that I do, that I love because I understand how important it is to be related to Country, and to know and pass on the stories and language of my Country.

Nhä dhuwal mirithirnydja manymak limurr dhu ga marŋgikum ga dhäwu märram' dhiyak wäŋaw, bukmak dhuwal mala dhäruk, minytji', buŋgul ga ŋula-nha mala ga ŋayadham. Ga dhiyaŋ mala buŋgulyu ga manikayu ga dhäruk dhu ga wäŋay ga waŋgany manapan yoljuw malany. Dhuwandja nhäkun balanya rulwaŋdhunawaynha walalaŋguŋ ŋaläpalmirriwun ŋäthilyunawuy bitjarr walal gan wäŋan ga dhiŋgaŋal walal. Dhuwandja nhäkun dharaŋanaraw nha yuwalk, dhiyak napurruŋ yoljuw mala dharaŋanharaw bäpurruw malaŋuw bala ga balandany buna bala ga gulmaraman ga yakayuna dhiyak malaw bala ga Djawyuna ga



Fig. 1: Me (baby in arms) and my dad and family at Matamata 1959

djäma mala ga gurrupan ga wiripun djäma mala Balanya mala njarra nuli ga djäma dhiyal wukirrinjur dharanjan ga manapan balayi wänjalil.

We are sharing the language of YSL for kin and Country, for culture, language and for the future of our Country. This is the language necessary to follow in the footsteps of the ancestors and care for each other and our languages and our Country.

Dhuwandja nünhi marngikunharaw dhuwandja dharuk gonḁdhu marngikunharaw nhaltjan limurr dhu marngikum limurruḁ djamarrkuḁiny' walal dhu nhäma nhä ga njarra nünhi nhe ga bäyḁu nhäma nhokal mel-yu ga njäma dhiyanḁ dhukarryu nhe marrtji dhu nuthanmaram nḁuḁuwuy walḁa ga dhiyak matha ga wänjaw nhinanharaw ga djämaw.

I am working with a team of Yolḁu and non-Yolḁu people committed to record, retain and pass on YSL. We are brothers and sisters in our commitment to passing on this language to the children and for the future of Yolḁu society. The following is an expression of the aims of our shared project to save YSL because "Yolḁu have always told stories by hand sign" (Yolḁu'-Yulḁuy nuli ga lakaram dhäwu gonḁdhu).

We are working hard to keep the precious knowledge about our world fresh and pass it on to a new generation following in the footsteps of our ancestors. Many great people have come in front to show us how to live and pass on this important knowledge. We must continue to show the way for those who come behind. We are the people who are the guardians of the land and the knowledge

for the new generations and so we have created a resource for the children called ‘The Illustrated Handbook of Yolŋu Sign Language of North East Arnhem Land’.<sup>2</sup>

Rumbal-yu dhäruk, dhuwandja djorra’ Yolŋuw ga Yolŋu yan, yuṭaw djämarrkuliw’yalalanjimirriw. Djämany napurr balandawal mala dhunḡarra nupan ga märryü ḡapmaram Djalkiri Rom, ga nhämunha wäŋa limurruŋ riŋgitjkurr. Duruŋi yolŋuy wala gan nhäŋal ga ŋäkul nhaltjarr gan ŋalapaḡmirr limurruŋ nhinan baman’. Limurr dhu dhärra ga mel-gurruapan limurruŋguwuy djäma märr walal dhu yuṭay Yolŋuy nhäma ga marŋgithirr limurruŋgal. Ga balanyamirriy napurr ŋunhi dhäwuny lakaram nhaltjarr gan limurruŋ ŋalapaḡmirr nhinan baman’birr, napurr yuṭakum dhuwal dhäwumirr djorra’marŋgikunharaw yuṭaw Yolŋuny. Napurr Yolŋuy dhu marŋgikum yuṭany Yolŋuny ga dhärray walalanḡ ga marŋgikum yan yuwalkkum Djalkirriw Romgu walalany, ga dhu marŋgikum yuṭany Yolŋuny dhiyakukurr ‘Illustrated Handbook of Yolŋu Sign Language of North East Arnhem Land’ kurr. Nhä dhäwu ga lakaram dhiyal djorra’ŋur ga nhäpuy?

What this book is for and about? This book is about the language we Yolŋu use to communicate with each other when we don’t want to speak. Before, every Yolŋu child would grow up learning sign language as they learn to speak their language. We learn to speak and sign. People who can’t hear and people who can all use this language. We have a number of names for this alternate language of signs. We call it lakaram goŋdhu.

Dhiyal djorra’ŋur ga lakaram dhärukpuŋy ga nhatha ŋuli limurr bäki. Yuṭa Yolŋu dhu marrtji ŋathan ga marŋgithirr nhaltjan dhu dhäruk bäki rumbal-yu yan ga balanyakurr marŋgithirr waŋanharaw nhaltjan napurr dhu waŋa goŋ’dhu yan. Durukaliyi ŋunhi ŋayi buthurumiriw ga dhärukmiriw yolŋu, wiripuŋuy yolŋuy mala ŋuli bäki dhäruk rumbal-yu ga goŋ’dhu. Napurruŋ ga ŋorra’ barrkuwaṭj yäku mala nhakun dhäruk-miriw ga dhoŋulu, yan rumbal-yu ga goŋ’dhu napurr dhu dhäruk dhawaṭmaram walalanḡal.

Here is a language we use in dance, in ceremonies celebrating the ancestors. We follow their actions and movements, we mimic the way that they created the world we live in. We perform the characteristics of the ancestors in signs that celebrate their gifts to us in the form of the world, language, in the way we live our lives.

Dhäruk napurr ŋuli wiripuny dhawaṭmaram buŋgulkurr goŋ’dhu ga rumbal-yu napurrüingal rrambanji yan Djalkarikurr Romgurr, dhuwalatjan napurr ŋuli ŋamaŋamayun napurruŋguwuy ŋalapaḡmirriy. Waŋanhamirr wiripuny napurr ŋuli rumbal-yu ga goŋ’dhu ŋunhi napurr ŋuli nhina ga muŋa-muŋany yan, bawalamirruŋur, balanya nhakun wakir’ŋur, buŋgulŋur wo wakalmirri’ŋur.

This is a way of talking when silence is needed, in hunting, in ceremony, for fun. It is a natural part of life, signs show our connection to each other, to our Country, it is part of our heritage. It is something we want the children to know.

Dhärranayŋu nhininyŋu dhuwal rom napurruŋ. Napurr wäŋa nhininyŋuy ŋuli ga nhäma, wäŋa ga marŋgi nhaltjan napurr ga nhina rakikurr ŋunhi ga ŋayatham wäŋay ŋarakay, märr dhu djämarrkuli’marŋgithirr dhiyan dhäwuy.

‘The Illustrated Handbook of Yolŋu Sign Language of North East Arnhem Land’ describes the grammar, vocabulary, structure and conventions of YSL in a beautiful full-colour guide for learning. ‘The Illustrated Handbook of Yolŋu Sign Language of North East Arnhem Land’ has been distributed, free of charge, to

2 Bentley James, M. C. Dany Adone, Elaine L. Maypilama: The Illustrated Handbook of Yolŋu Sign Language of North East Arnhem Land.

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the children of North East Arnhem Land schools and Homelands. This is our gift to the new generation.

### ***References***

James, Bentley, M. C. Dany Adone, Elaine L. Maypilama: *The Illustrated Handbook of Yolngu Sign Language of North East Arnhem Land*. Melbourne: The Australian Book Connection 2020.