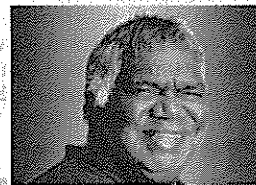


# Written in sand, a lesson in pride thanks to school

At my father's insistence, a whitefella education was combined with tribal lore

GALARRWUY YUNUPINGU



THE first time I heard the word "school" I was about seven, living with my extended family on the Gove Peninsula in the Northern Territory under the strict eye of my father. I spoke no English and knew no white people.

This day I was sitting on the beach on the other side of Melville Bay. We were just sitting, my friends and I, telling stories in the sand, marking the sand and telling the stories of the day.

The figures of two young men appeared in a canoe, in the distance on the water and we stood up trying to identify them before they came any closer. We ran to meet them when we realised who they were: our brother Raymond Yunupingu and our uncle Dak Dak Ganambarr.

They gave us fish and other food they had cooked and brought with them on their trip across the harbour. And they had brought a message for my father.

We were told that there was a call from the missionaries that all the kids from the bush should be going to "school". School was something that we had not heard of. We did not know what it meant. But the missionaries were calling this word and saying that all the kids of east Arnhem land should go to school.

It was a message — not a direction — and it was my father, as the senior man responsible for the family, who responded saying, "Let's go to Yirrkala and take the kids to school."

Up until this time we were in and out of Yirrkala, Port Bradshaw and Melville Bay. We moved with the seasons and the ceremonies, taking the lead from my father and the other senior people. But my father had decreed and we acted on his word and travelled to Yirrkala to see this school.

It is here that I arrive at the point I seek to make in this article. It was my father's direction that sent me to school. I did not even know the word, let alone know the journey that I was about to embark upon. It was a journey into a strange and foreign world. On that day, I did not even know English. What I knew was of my family, my culture and my land. Left to my own mind I would never have considered an education in the *balanda* world to be of any importance.

Had I been forced to go to school by anyone other than my father I would have followed my sense of independence and my will and refused. For what meaning, what value, could an education in a foreign tongue, about foreign ways, have?

But I was a child and fortunately the decision was not mine to make but my father's. And he had made up his mind.

His thinking, as always, was drawn deeply from the Yolngu world and in this instance he drew on the inspiration of Ganbulabula, our ancestral hero.

This is not the place to tell the full, brilliant story of this hero, except to say that he looked only to the future and he made new paths in the world. He looked up, to the future, through a circle of wild bees that drifted through the leaves of a stringybark tree. My father took inspiration from our hero and he decided that we must "look up and to the future".

He realised that if we were to survive in the future we had to embrace it with strength and discipline. He talked to his children and explained to us that we would always retain our culture and every part of our language and our identity, that he would never allow us to stop being who we were, and that the land was our backbone and from it we would remain who we were.

But, as children, we had to be prepared for the future and that future meant learning the ways of outsiders. He enforced his decision with discipline and determination. So we travelled to Yirrkala and the school became the activity of the day.

What was important to dad was that we learned to speak and to read and write in English. It was his duty to ensure we knew every word of our language and all the power of our ceremonies and culture.

School was very simple. We were seated on the ground and wrote out our 1, 2, 3s and ABCs in the sand. It wasn't until the late 1950s that we saw pencils and books but it was a start for us kids. We had good teachers. I still spoke Gumatj and my mind, as it does now, worked in Gumatj, though now I can translate my thinking into the words, ways and concepts of the Western world.

By the early '60s I was growing up to be a young man, a teenager. I had a teacher and a principal who were Victorian born and bred and they also taught Victoria's methods and syllabus, mainly in the area of literacy and numeracy. I had special tutoring from the principal and there were three white kids in the class doing the same correspondence as myself and five other Yolngu kids.

It was during this time that I was excelling at my schoolwork that there were suggestions that I would be eligible to go away to Victoria, to Geelong Grammar.

But when this was suggested to dad and mum they simply said "no". Dad felt, on his observation, that too much whitefella education in my brain would have taken me away from the families and he was well aware that too much indoctrination would have destroyed my sense of Gumatj self and would, in turn, have destroyed me as an individual.

But then in 1964 when the suggestion arose that I would go to the Brisbane Bible College he accepted the offer. I believe that his acceptance on this occasion was firstly due to my advancement in Gumatj learning and secondly the explanation to him that the bible college involved leadership training in a contemporary way.

In other words, he wanted me to learn how to lead in the white world as well. It was on these terms that he approved my leaving my country for the first time and travelling for an extended stay at the Methodist college on the river in Brisbane.

I went to Brisbane for nearly three years. It was a strengthen-

I chose a leadership course as dictated by my father and became a youth leader and this became an important role for me and when I returned to Arnhem land. I worked for many years at the Yolngu school, Dhupuma College, which had been established at Nhulunbuy by the Yolngu elders and which my father had championed. It is not lost on me that in 1978, the year I became chairman of the Northern Land Council, the Northern Territory government, in its first year, made the decision to close Dhupuma College and to open a rural college in Katherine. I still feel hurt by that decision.

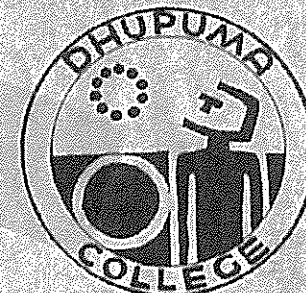
I feel this way because I still see some of the men and women whose education at Dhupuma College was cut so short. They are all wonderful men and women but they were prevented from being what they could be and restricted by lacking what the outside world demands.

My story carries lessons in it for us all. I was lucky and want others to have my experience. But there are others without the leadership and guidance I was so fortunate to have. I had a school to go to, a family to come home to, and was safe at night, with food on my table and love all around me.

My life wasn't dominated, nor my culture devalued, the way it is for so many Aboriginal people today. I want all my countrymen to have the opportunities that I had. I want them to be everything they are and that they can be.

My father's vision will be renewed at this year's Garna Festival which starts on August 6 at Gulkula near Nhulunbuy. The theme is "looking up to the future". It is a renewal of a commitment and a determination by Yolngu people to believe that we have not lost what it is we are.

We will remake our future so it is as beautiful as our past, but to take this path we need to prepare ourselves, discipline ourselves and believe in ourselves. If we have to start again, working in the sand, with dedicated teachers, then so be it.



Dhupuma's proud emblem

ing for me and a new way of looking at things.