

# YIRRKALA BARK PETITIONS

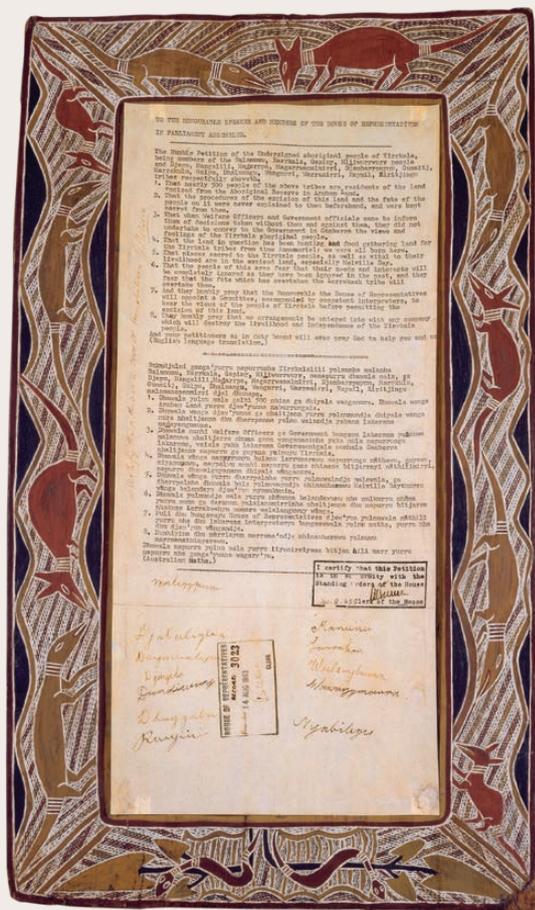
In August 1963, the Yolngu people of north-east Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory delivered the Yirrkala Bark Petitions ('the Petitions') to the House of Representatives in Canberra.<sup>1</sup> Written in both the English and Gumatj languages and signed by 13 clan leaders of the Yolngu people, the petitions were presented on pieces of bark painted with traditional designs representing the relation of the Yolngu people to the traditional lands of Yirrkala.<sup>2</sup> This was the first time a petition to Parliament had been made in a traditional Indigenous form, creating a bridge between Commonwealth and Indigenous law that was recognised by the Commonwealth Parliament.<sup>3</sup> The petitions were made in response to the Commonwealth grant of bauxite mining leases on Yolngu land, protesting the land excises and seeking recognition of the Yolngu People's traditional rights and ownership of the land.<sup>4</sup> The Petitions led to the establishment of a Parliamentary Committee that recommended the recognition of Yolngu rights as set out in the petitions. However, the Yolngu people were unsuccessful in their protest of the excise of Yirrkala land.<sup>5</sup>

Though the Yolngu people were unsuccessful in their immediate appeal to Parliament, the Petitions are recognised as a catalyst for the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights.<sup>6</sup> Considered 'founding documents', the Petitions started a momentum for future legal change including the 1967 referendum, the removal of the doctrine of 'terra nullius' by the High Court in *Mabo* (1992), the Commonwealth statutory acknowledgment of Aboriginal land rights in the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*, and the continuing tide towards Constitutional recognition.<sup>7</sup>

This month marks the Petitions' 50th anniversary. They are on permanent display for public viewing in Parliament House, Canberra.<sup>8</sup>

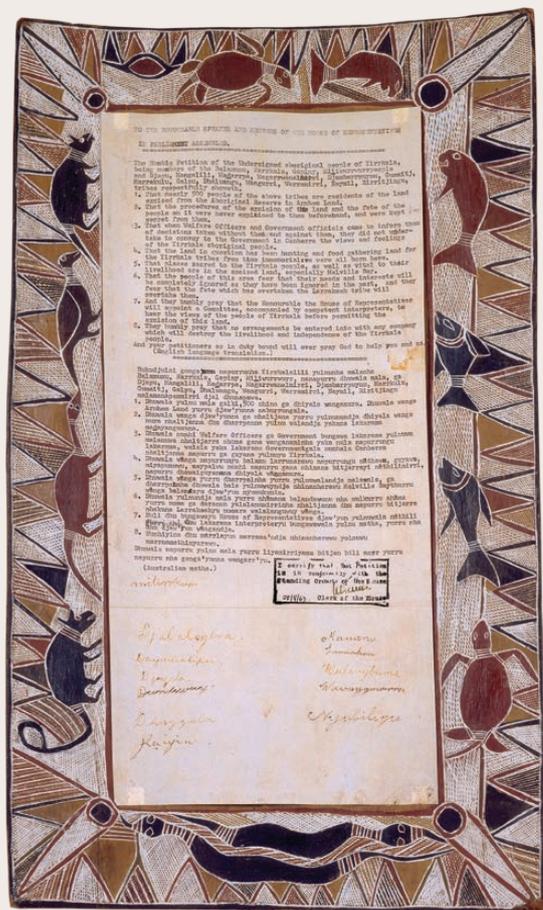
*Errin Walker, Indigenous Law Bulletin Student Editor.*

- 1 Museum of Australian Democracy, *The Yirrkala Bark Petitions*, Documenting a Democracy <<http://foundingdocs.gov.au/item-did-104.html>>.
- 2 *Bark petitions: Indigenous Art and Reform for the Rights of Indigenous Australians* <<http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/bark-petitions-indigenous-art>>.
- 3 Museum of Australian Democracy, above n 1.
- 4 Ibid; Aboriginal Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, *Yirrkala Bark Petitions 1963* <<http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/collections/exhibitions/yirrkala/home.html>>.
- 5 Museum of Australian Democracy, above n 1.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Merryn Gates Services for Arts et al, *Bark Petitions: Indigenous Art and Reform for the Rights of Indigenous Australians* (30 June 2009) Australian Government <<http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/bark-petitions-indigenous-art>>.
- 8 Museum of Australian Democracy, above n 1.



**Yirrkala Bark Petition 14.8.1963**

Yirrkala artists, Dhuwa moiety, 46.9 x 21cm, natural ochres on bark, ink on paper, House of Representatives, Canberra.



**Yirrkala Bark Petition 28.8.1963**

Yirrkala artists, Dhuwa moiety, 46.9 x 21cm, natural ochres on bark, ink on paper, House of Representatives, Canberra.

**TO THE HONOURABLE SPEAKER AND MEMBERS OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
IN PARLIAMENT ASSEMBLED.**

The Humble Petition of the Undersigned aboriginal people of Yirrkala, being members of the Balamumu, Narrkala, Gapiny, Miliwurrwurr people and Djapu, Mangalili, Madarrpa, Magarrwanalimirri, Djambarrpuynu, Gumaitj, Marrakulu, Galpu, Dhaluangu, Wangurri, Warramirri, Naymil, Riritjingu, tribes respectfully showeth.

1. That nearly 500 people of the above tribes are residents of the land excised from the Aboriginal Reserve in Arnhem Land.
2. That the procedures of the excision of this land and the fate of the people on it were never explained to them beforehand, and were kept secret from them.
3. That when Welfare Officers and Government officials came to inform them of decisions taken without them and against them, they did not undertake to convey to the Government in Canberra the views and feelings of the Yirrkala aboriginal people.
4. That the land in question has been hunting and food gathering land for the Yirrkala tribes from time immemorial: we were all born here.
5. That places sacred to the Yirrkala people, as well as vital to their livelihood are in the excised land, especially Melville Bay.
6. That the people of this area fear that their needs and interests will be completely ignored as they have been ignored in the past, and they fear that the fate which has overtaken the Larrakeah tribe will overtake them.
7. And they humbly pray that the Honourable the House of Representatives will appoint a Committee, accompanied by competent interpreters, to hear the views of the people of Yirrkala before permitting the excision of this land.
8. They humbly pray that no arrangements be entered into with any company which will destroy the livelihood and independence of the Yirrkala people.

And your petitioners as in duty bound will ever pray  
God to help you and us.  
(English language translation.)

Bukudjulni gonga'yurri napurrunha Yirrkalalili yulnunha malanha Balamumu, Narrkala, Gapiny, Miliwurrwurr, nanapurru dhuwala mala, ga Djapu, Mangalili, Madarrpa, Magarrwanalimirri, Djambarrpuynu, Marrkulu, Gumaitj, Galpu, Dhaluangu, Wangurri, Warramirri, Naymil, Riritjingu malamanapanmirri djal dhunapa.

1. Dhuwala yolnu mala galki, 500 nhina ga dhiyala wanganura. Dhuwala wanga Arnhem Land yurru djaw'yunna naburrungala.
2. Dhuwala wanga djaw'yunna ga nhaltjana yurru yolnunundja dhiyala wanga nura nhaltjana dhu dharrpanna yolnu walandja yakana lakarama madayangumuna.
3. Dhuwala nunhi Welfare Officers ga Government bungawa lakarama yolnuwa malanuwa nhaltjarra nhuma gana wanganaminha yaka nula napurrungu lakarama, walala yaka lakarama, walala yaka lakarama Governmentgala nunhala Canberra nhaltjana napurru ga guyana yolnuyu Yirrkala.
4. Dhuwala wanga napurrungu balanu larrunarawu napurrungu nathawu, guyawu, miyapunuwu, maypalwu nunhi napurru gana nhinana bitjarrai nathilimirri, napurru dhawalguyanana dhiyala wanganura.
5. Dhuwala wanga yurru dharrpalnha yurru yolnuwalandja malawala, ga dharrpalnha dhuwala bala yolnuwuyndja nhinanharawu Melville Baythurru wanga balandayu djaw'yun nyumukunin.
6. Dhuwala yolnundja mala yurru nhamana balandawunu nha mulkurru nhama yurru moma ga daranun yalalanumirrinha nhaltjana dhu napurru bitjarra nhakuna Larrakeahyu momara walalanguwuy wanga.
7. Nuli dhu bungawayu House of Representatives djaw'yun yolnuwala nathili yurru nha dhu lakarama interpreteryu bungawawala yolnu matha, yurru nha dhu djaw'yun walandja.
8. Nunhiyina dhu marrlayun marrama'ndja nhinanharawu yolnuwu marrnamathinyarawu.

Dhuwala napurru yolnu mala yurru liyamirriyama bitjan bili marr yurru napurru nha gonga'yunna wagarr'yu.  
(Australian matha.)

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I certify that this Petition is in conformity with the Standing Orders of the House  
14/8/63  
Clerk of the House

[Signatures]

Milirrpum, Djalalingba, Manunu, Daymbalipu, Larrakan, Dhayila, Wulanybama, Dundiwuy,  
Wawunymarra, Dhuygala, Nyabilingu, Raiyin

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House of Representatives  
RECORD 3023  
14 August 1963 (28 August 1963)  
CLERK

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