

# Arnhem Land: Where Australia Day means 'thankyou'

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WHILE some denounce Australia Day as Invasion Day, an Aboriginal clan from northeast Arnhem Land uses it to welcome doctors, nurses, teachers, police and the community to their land and to thank them for their contributions.

On Thursday, the Rirratjingu clan will hold a bungul, or welcoming ceremony, in the township of Nhulunbuy, to bring people together.



Dhunumbu Munuggurr, 5, will dance the Rirratjingu clan's Wuyal dance that represents the sugar bag man story on Australia Day to celebrate people from all walks of life coming together with Yirkkala's indigenous people. Picture: Michael Franchi

Clan leader, Bakamumu Marika, 59, says: "Australia Day is a very significant day for Australians, including Yolgnu people, the First Australians. We don't talk about negative things. It's about a birth of citizenship and freedom, for all of them on our land.

"We acknowledge the people that are experienced and carry out professionalism in their fields of work. I died in hospital twice last year. And they brought me back to

life. And I thank them for being here. We share with them what we value, which is our culture.”



Dhunumbu Munuggurr being painted by grandmother Bawuli Marika for the Rirratjingu welcoming ceremony with a Rirratjingu clan design (minytji) depicting the wirrkul (Wagilak sisters who traveled with Wuyal the Sugar Bag ancestor) pattern on his face and Gulwirri (palm) design on his chest. Picture: Michael Franchi

The Rirratjingu mostly live at Yirrkala, 15km from the predominantly white town of Nhulunbuy, which took a

massive hit in 2014 when Rio Tinto closed the alumina refinery, losing 1200 workers. Bauxite mining continues, but the town has been hurting. The Rirratjingu say those who remain in Nhulunbuy choose to be here, which has brought everyone closer.

“They have made a great friendship with Yolngu people,” says Witiyana Marika, 55, a founding member of the band Yothu Yindi.

“When I was a band member, I used to think that the whole Australia shouldn’t celebrate Australia Day. I was in a political mind as a young man in my 20s. Now I’m 55, and this thing is going to go forever, we might as well stand and celebrate and walk together, all people.”

Witiyana will lead some 30 men and women — including five-year-old grandson, Dhunumbu, the “star of the show” — in the bungul dance, which tells the story of the sugarbag (produced by native bees) man, an ancestor spirit who gave names to sites across the area.



## FOR SUNDAY PUBLICATIONS 22/1/2017 ## DO NOT RUN BEFORE ## Dhunumbu Munuggurr, 5, will dance the Rirratjingu clan's Wuyal dance that represents the suger bag man story on Australia Day to celebrate people from all walks of life coming together with Yirrkala's indigenous people. Pictured a Nuwul Beach in Yirrkala. Picture: Michael Franchi For the Yolngu, it a

reinforces their connection to country; and on Australia Day, they share that connection.

The clan has been highly active in the fight against domestic violence, travelling to Canberra in November to meet with Malcolm Turnbull to raise awareness, fundraising \$130,000 for the Northern Territory's "No More" campaign, and running football and music programs with strong anti-violence themes.

Bakamumu says they were moved to action after a death in Yirrkala 2015. "One of our wives got killed arguing over kava and smokes," he says. "Her brother stood up got a stick, hit her on the head, she fell down and never woke up.

"It was such a sad thing to see families fight. So we took a strong stand. We wanted to show that it's serious business, saying to the nation, 'No More'."

Witiyana saw a lot of the world when he toured with Yothu Yindi. "Australia is the best place in the world," he says, "because it's home. We still have our strong rituals. We are still here."



Dhunumbu Munuggurr, frolicks on the beach to burn off nervous energy before dancing to celebrate people from all walks of life coming together with Yirrkala's indigenous people. Picture: Michael