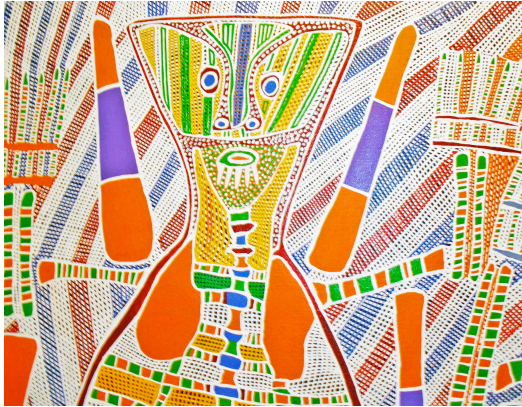
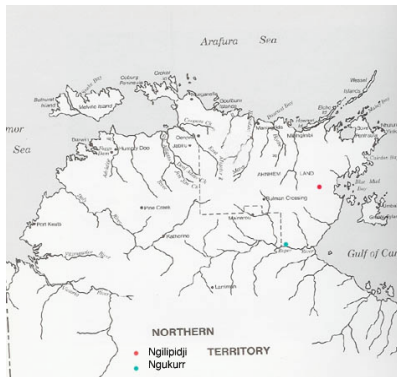


Luminous Bones: Djambu Barra Barra and the devil devil.



From the late 1980s a number of artists working in Ngukurr, a community in south-east Arnhem Land, started painting with acrylics on canvas. Wagilak artist Djambu Barra Barra was one of the first to take up the use of acrylics in the community. His work is firmly embedded within the traditions of Arnhem Land, however his use of brilliant colour and the medium of acrylic paint differentiates his work from other Arnhem Land artists who predominantly paint with ochre on bark. This paper explores how Djambu Barra Barra interpreted and modified aesthetic traditions from other parts of Arnhem Land using colour and form to depict ancestral power. It focuses on the devil devil, a thematic subject in which he invested great intellectual and creative effort, particularly in the latter part of his life. Luminous Bones refers to the brilliant colours with which Djambu Barra Barra represented devil devils, their internal organs and skeletons jumping off the canvas in lime green, bright orange, turquoise blue and deep magenta.



Djambu Barra Barra, was born in Wagilak country, near Ngilipidji on the Walker River west of Blue Mud Bay, about 200 kms north east of Ngukurr. Ngilipidji is near the site of the famous stone spear quarry and the spiritual home of the Wagilak clan. It is a point where a number of different artistic traditions coalesce. Unlike most artists who painted at Ngukurr, Djambu Barra Barra had virtually no contact with Europeans as a young man, nor did he work in the pastoral industry. He said he left his homeland when his Wagilak father, Ritharrngu mother and all his family were killed. After the loss of his family he embarked on a number of journeys travelling through Arnhem Land, following important ritual tracks, learning about the country and committing stories and places to memory. He was aware of painting styles from

different parts of Arnhem Land and he understood the notion of Yolngu aesthetics through ceremony and the painting of bodies and bark as a young man. He married Amy Johnson and moved to the Roper River mission in the 1960s. One of the predominant ceremonial roles of the Wägilak clan, in Ngukurr and neighbouring regions, is the leading of purification ceremonies at funerals. Djambu Barra Barra became widely respected for his ceremonial knowledge and he became the main funeral and initiation man in Ngukurr. This slide features a purification ceremony undertaken by Djambu Barra Barra as part of the funeral of a very old lady at Ngukurr.



The colonial legacy of the Roper region was one of the most devastating in remote Australia. The decimation of the population and cultural life by the pastoral industry has been described at length. Donald Thomson noted the ultimate effect of this in the region. He wrote

the most striking example of the rapidity with which depopulation can proceed may be seen in the valley of the Roper River...there is abundant evidence...that the Roper Valley supported, until quite recent years, a very dense population...But in 1936 there remained only a few completely detribalised Aborigines who lived as hangers-on of the Europeans (1998:34).

Most people in the area, excluding those of Yolngu heritage, no longer had access to their clan designs and there was an atmosphere of grave secrecy about the information that remained. There was an absence of a cohesive or coherent stylistic tradition in the immediate region and no history of public art making in Ngukurr, separate from the ceremonial domain.

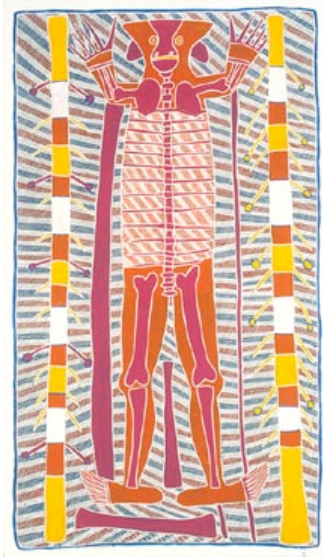


The Ngukurr artists started painting in 1987 after they initiated workshops in the community. These artists included Ginger Riley, Willie Gudabi, Djambu Barra Barra and his wife Amy Johnson. The artists were from different homelands, different language groups and had divergent life histories. Their paintings did, however, share two major characteristics: that of personal stylistic innovation and strong and expressive use of colour. Instead of focussing on printing, both Ginger Riley and Djambu Barra Barra decided they wanted to paint on canvas. In that first year of painting, along with the other fledgling Ngukurr artists, Djambu Barra Barra worked in a blaze of excitement and energy and paintings flooded into Beat St art centre. The freedom from the constraints of ritual and the use of Western materials instead of ochres and bark had a liberating effect on this diverse group of artists from the beginning. They invented new styles and modified others appropriate to the context. In the wild abandon the Beat St environment with art adviser John Nelson there were no restrictions on colour or scale and the artists were actively encouraged to experiment.



Although Djambu Barra Barra's heritage was Yolngu, his art, which represented an unusual amalgam of styles and influences, seemed to owe more of a debt to central and western Arnhem Land traditions. He adapted techniques learned earlier to new media and also to a new place and context, adopting the semi-moiety classificatory system of the Roper region and, like other artists in the region painting only his mother's and mother's mothers stories and garma subjects. He worked in the figurative tradition, incorporating many forms of infill and other decorative devices including dotting, dashing and detailed rarrk in bright colours on canvas.

Many of his works feature one or a number of ancestral beings or figures depicted using variants of the x-ray style. The composition of some of his works is remarkably complex, featuring interplays between figure and ground, whilst others are simple, almost austere. He is one of the only artists to successfully render rarrk in acrylic paint on canvas. Djambu Barra Barra's main themes were the kangaroo, the goanna and the crocodile, however it is his interpretation of the devil devil that I concentrate on today. The devil devil that Djambu Barra Barra paints is in fact the mokuy Djuwalpada an ancestral ghost who is believed to be the founder of the Wägilak homeland Nilipidj. From the mid 1990s Djuwalpada became and increasingly prevalent subject.



The term devil devil is one used extensively by a number of Aboriginal groups. It can have generic as well as specific meanings but in the roper region can also refer to mokuy. Aboriginal people often refer to them as 'cheeky ones'. They are malevolent ghosts or tricksters generally associated with public mortuary rituals connected to death, loss and burial. For Yolngu there are two classifications of the spirit of a deceased person. The birrimbirr represents the 'good' aspect of the spirit, which returns to the metaphysical realm. The mokuy is the ongoing presence or unsettled spirit of the deceased in a liminal state between life and death (Morphy 1991: 280). Morphy notes that the mokuy is associated with "the negative aspects of death, with the containment of pollution, and with the sociological aspects of death that affect the living. (Ancestral connections P. 271)

According to Rudder, the word Mokuy has several meanings, which overlap. As well as the unsettled spirit of the dead, a different type of mokuy can inhabit the 'outside' world. It can have its own name, a known place where it lives and particular activities that it undertakes like looking for honey. P25. Morphy says: "[It] is one of a category of beings that seem to mediate between the ancestral past and the present by interacting with both wangarr beings and true human beings. Mokuy seem to occupy the space between these two very different worlds..." Ancestral Connections p280 This kind of mokuy is thought of as belonging to a clan that owns the place where it lives, often a forest area. That clan will also have a ceremony where the activities of its mokuy are celebrated in dance song and painting. Ancestral mokuy associated with forested areas also provide law for harvesting, making and playing yidaki. The *mokuy Murayana*, depicted by David Malangi, is an important character in stories from Central Arnhem Land. *Murayana* travelled through Lake Evella and is associated with the Lorrkon ceremony. His body is decorated with leaves and roots and as Margie West noted, he was a 'trickster' associated with summoning up violent storms and has the ability to turn the country around.



David Malangi *The Mokuy Murayana*, 1989, 200 x 121 cm Ochre on board, NGA

Djuwalpara is one of these mokuy, associated with Nilipidji. His song cycle was handed down by Djambu Barra Barra to his grandson Benjamin Wilfred. It has been translated by Sam Curkpatrick and basically follows Djuwalpada's journey looking for his homeland, following the sugarbag bees and searching for stringybark honey. He throws his spear and it finds stone spear country. He travels the country with his spear, woomera and dilly bag. The plover, birrkpirrk, cries at the death of a relative. He calls out Lutunba, the island where Dhuwa-moiety birrimbirr souls of the dead return. Wata, a purifying wind carries the mokuy home to Nilipidji, on the voice of the 'plover'.



While organising the exhibition *Colour Country: art from Roper River*, based on my PhD research, I became aware of the cross-cultural musical collaboration Crossing Roper Bar. It features the Young Wagilak Group from Ngukurr and the Australian Art Orchestra with director Paul Grabowsky. During the performance the Wagilak men, including Benjamin and Evan Wilfred, present the Djuwalparra song cycle. The first time I watched CRB I saw the singers and dancers interacting with the painted image of the mokuy that loomed forbiddingly at the back of the stage. The singers called out his name and mimicked his movement and actions. A connection between the songs, the dancer's movements and the execution of the painting was evident.

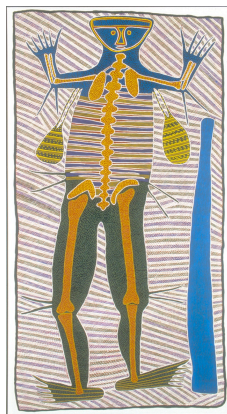
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The young Wagilag group performed CRB at the opening of *Colour Country* at the Museum and Art Gallery of the NT and they discussed their performance and the story of the mokuy in front of the Djambu Barra Barra's paintings in the exhibition. The lyrical story of the Djuwalparra song cycle performed by CRB however seems a bit at odds with Djambu Barra Barra's description of Djuwalparra in a number of stories he related in relation to specific paintings.

According to Djambu Barra Barra Djuwalpada was a very unpleasant character. He always referred to him as a devil devil and said of him: "Really bad man - no good man, he grab you. That hook, he can get you...Him la country, him everywhere. If people go in wrong place, 'im bone 'im...Inside bones - might be Aboriginal doctor might take 'em. When get up and walk, nothing. Pull 'im down heart. Number one, proper made one...Mokuy - debil debil. Same one." Djuwalpara has a wide range of powers and the ability to transform himself into a number of different manifestations. He also has different roles to play as he travels country. Djambu Barra Barra represented him undertaking a number of different activities and stages of his life, including as *Youngfella Devil Devil*, *Fighting Devil Devil*, *Crippled Devil Devil*, *Two Devil Devil*, *Hunting Devil Devil* and *Dead Devil Devil (Finished Up)* (1999). There is clearly more to the story of Djuwalpara than the song cycle would suggest. There are whole families of mokuy/devil devil painted by Barra Barra and complex scenarios depicted.

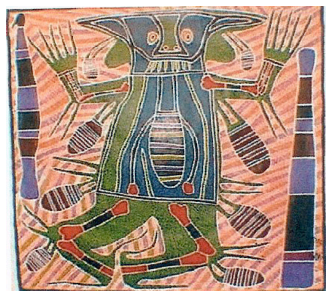
Most commonly however, Djuwalpara is depicted with spines or barbs protruding from his elbows, waist and knees and occasionally from his neck. He also has clawed fingers and toes. These sharp projections represent points of destructive power. Djambu Barra Barra represented the danger associated with this figure, magnified by his frightening visage, wide staring eyes and bared fangs. He is almost always depicted in paintings with his arms raised as if ready to pounce. Barra Barra said

He fighting man with blades on knees and arm. They can rip you open. Also feet can kick you. He fights with blades on elbows and knees - to kill whitefella or blackfella. The claw hands can tear away the ribs. And the teeth and the feet - they can cut. When he gets you by the ears you can't know anything.



The Devil Devil's magic powers include flight and the ability to hear and see things from a great distance. He has dilly bags that carry ritual objects and food, particularly 'sugarbag'. He is also often depicted with tree roots dangling down his chest and with with *woomera*, spears and *bambu*, or *yidaki*. *Cripple Devil Devil* (2000) has an illuminating story from the artist:

Cripple fella this Devil Devil. Somebody been fighting him. They cripple him. He can fly. That's how he sees the country. He can take baby from camp when he wants meat. He can kill that piccaninny by biting that nose. He plays didgeridoo - his own song. Some people have seen him. He's a clever man. That dilly bag near his ear - it's the same as telephone - he can hear everything that way.



This rendition illustrates the supernatural and particularly malevolent side of the Devil Devil that will kill and eat babies for food. In this representation of one part of the Dualpara story he has his *woomera* and *bambu* and a large number of dilly bags as well as tree roots around his neck. His legs are broken and deformed, but he can still fly across the country doing his business and causing trouble, before returning to his country Nilipidji.



The expressive use of Colour is the defining feature of Djambu Barra Barra's work. No other Arnhem Land artist uses colour with such expressive power and in so many permutations. *Devil Devil Man* was included in an exhibition at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery in London. The figure fills the space of the canvas with arms raised, talons at the ready. He has six fingers on his left hand, extended claws on his feet and spines on his knees, elbows and neck. The Devil Devil's body is a dark magenta with fine black dotting. His bones are deep blue, outlined in bright yellow. The background consists of yellow, green red rarrk, creating a composition in which disparate strong colours and textures are juxtaposed. The artist experiments endlessly with colour in relation to the depictions of devil devils, often using unpleasant and discordant colour combinations to reflect a sense of unease.

Djambu Barra Barra, along with most Yolngu artists, was interested in investing his paintings with a sense of ancestral power and of making these beings manifest. As well as harnessing the shimmering effects of rarrk, Djambu Barra Barra used colour to generate sensation and emotion on the canvas. In particular it seems that he understood the power of complementary colours to enhance these effects and to produce an oscillating painted surface.



Djambu Barra Barra, *Dead Ones*, 2005, 295 x 130 cm

Dead Ones is a monumental, almost three metre high painting now owned by Ngukurr Arts and held for the community. It sometimes accompanies performances of Crossing Roper Bar as a backdrop. It was first shown in the 22nd Telstra Aboriginal Art Awards in 2005, completed only months before Djambu Barra Barra's death. This was a very important painting to him and he said of it:

Bones this one (*Ngarra-gah*) for me. The one between the legs, mother gave birth and the baby died. All these Devil Devil are dead, only the bones are left. The one in the middle is the women's old husband. The one on the side is their elder son. They had no spear, tomahawk, nothing to eat that's why they all perish, die. Ceremony for this one long time ago – when person

passed away – bones from that person we sing song corroboree and put them away in log coffin, and take to the cave. Old culture.

The striking effect of this subject, a family of dead mokuy, which clearly combines the idea of birth surrounded by death is rendered almost perverse by the high key colouration. There are pastel pinks and mauves in the striated bodies of the two smaller Devils, but the painting is dominated by contrasts of bright orange and purple and red and green hues. They are offset against fine red, white and blue bands of *rarrk* in the background. This theme and the celebration of what might be seen as the unclean and gruesome aspects of death and decay are celebrated as transformational.

Although it is impossible to be absolute about the artist's intentions I think by looking at the composition, the scale and the striking use of complementary colours, it is clear that Djambu Barra Barra intended to imbue this work with the notion of ancestral power. The Yolngu, as Morphy has shown, invest their paintings with power by the use of detailed crosshatching turning works from dull outlines to brilliant fields of shimmering energy. (Morphy 1989) For Yolngu these representations are seen as emanating directly from the ancestral world and successful paintings hold this power within them. Djambu Barra Barra understood innately the power of juxtaposed colours as well as crosshatching to create this effect.

The creation of a sense of vibration can be explained by colour theory. Complementary colour as Clulow, (1972, 36) notes is hard to define but they are opposites and can be seen when one stares at a bright colour for a while then shuts the eyes and then stares at a white paper. The colour that appears is the opposite of the original colour, its complement. Complementaries provide maximum colour contrast, which, in the case of two brightly saturated colours, is usually glaring. Some complementary combinations are more potent than others. Purple and orange and red and green are of equal value, and for that reason, visually most confusing. The clash of strongly contrasting saturated colours can cause the objects depicted to vibrate. (Clulow, 1972)



Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, *Ngak Ngak*, 1996, 120 x 120 cm

Ginger Riley also understood this effect. In 1996 he painted *Ngak Ngak*, the sea eagle, in a bright lime green on a hot orange background. When asked why he painted the usually white sea eagle in these bright colours he said that was because it was beautiful but also because it made him look strong. It gave *Ngak Ngak* power. (Ryan)

Djambu Barra Barra uses a wide variety of colours to render devil devils and their implements. *Devil Devil Men* (1987) is another monumental painting on the same theme as *Dead Ones*. It shows how the artist interpreted the funerary theme of the dead *mokuy* on a grand scale in a completely different style and format and colour scheme.



In *Medicine Man* (1998) the *mokuy* is again surrounded by multi-coloured bones. His body, which is a livid green with a yellow dashing infill, dominates the composition. His bones and internal organs are a reddish brown with white outline and dashing. This is one of the examples where Djambu Barra Barra has combined clashing colours and textural infills to create a sense of power and disquiet.

It is intriguing that Djambu Barra Barra devoted so much time to representing the figure of Djawalpara in so many guises and stages of his life. It is true that he is considered the founder of his clan homelands and he developed a large repertoire of forms with which to explore his expressive potential. His paintings of the *mokuy* Djawalpara exhibit creativity in the adaptation of Yolngu aesthetic conventions to a new regional context. A true innovator in the context of Arnhem Land art, he has left an intriguing legacy and some still unsolved mysteries in relation to the devil devil and his story.