



Title	<i>Mangalili Origins</i>
About the artist	Clan - Mangalili, Moiety - Yirritja, Homeland - Djarrakpi
Gallery/source	Sullivan & Strumpf
Date of purchase	3/2/26
Buying Circle	Fiona Hardie, Sarah George, Wendy Kozica
Shadow members	Fiona Brockhoff, Fiona Edwards, Susan Jones
Dimensions (H X W)	137 x 72cm
Medium	Earth pigments on Stringybark

CONTENT/SUBJECT/AESTHETIC QUALITIES

- Wayilkpa Maymuru is part of the esteemed Yirrkala-based Maymuru family of artists. Through her refined and meditative mark making, Maymuru Wayilkpa navigates the space between what is revealed and what is concealed in her contemporary interpretations of ancient Mangalili Clan narratives.
- This work tells the story of the settlement of her homeland Djarrakpi (at the base of Cape Shield, the northern perimeter of Blue Mud Bay, on the eastern side of the Gulf of Carpentaria) by ancestral beings - a story of death, rest and rebirth in the sky. An understanding of this work relies upon a basic outline of the Mangalili Clan's 'outside story' as follows: It was in ancestral times when the Guwak (Koel Cuckoo) men - Munuminya and Yikawana - sitting in the shade of the bush cashew tree, instructed the ancestral Guwak, to lead the Mangalilil people to a new place at Djarrakpi. Having seen the people settled in their new homeland they announced to the Mangalili their farewell - that they, the Guwak men, were to travel out to sea, to a place in the sky, and that they would become stars which would shine out of the night sky.
- So a canoe and paddles were made and their journey began by paddling down the Milniyawuy River which flows into the Blue Mud Bay near Djarrakpi. In the bay, strong winds developed and a wake from the ancestral turtle capsized the canoe. Various fish, sea creatures and logs offered help, but the Guwak men had destined themselves as offerings, so were unable to be saved. They and subsequent Mangalili souls are seen today in the Milky Way.
- The night bird Guwak flew along the coast. At long last he came to Djarrakpi and in the moonlight he saw a sacred tree on the cliff. As he landed in the top of the tree he saw the Gunyan (sand crabs) playing in the sand at the foot of the cliff. As he sat looking about he realised his friend Marrnu, the possum, was inside the hollow tree. He sent Garanyirnyirr, the cicada, down the tree with a message for Marrnu, who came up the tree, and they spent the night talking about the sacred places of Mangalili.
- The designs underneath the figurative imagery all relate to Djarrakpi.
- In the top half the tracks of the possum and the crabs is visible in the design.
- They then sent the cicada with a message to Nyapilinu and asked her to come with them into Mangalili Country. Nyapilinu is a somewhat mystical being hovering in the background of the mythology. Information about her is very sparingly given and only after many years of contact. She taught the Yolnu women many things – how to look for look for food, how to make bark

string weave and make baskets. The digging stick which she made for stripping bark is a very important symbol on the bark paintings, as with this she made all the Yirritja waterholes.

- Mangalili Country is also site to one of the ancestral ceremonial/burial grounds called the Yinapunapu, a low relief sand sculpture at Djarrakpi, in which bodies of the dead are ceremonially placed. The death of the two ancestral hunters, the Guwak men, the founders of Djarrakpi, initiated the first rites of mortuary for the Mangalili people. Guwak's Yinapunapu is said to be on top of a sandy rise, above the sandunes at Djarrakpi.
- This work has reference to this ceremony, the Guwak ancestor,s and the role of Yinapunapu at Djarrakpi. Placing the body within the confines of the sand sculpture has a notion of cleansing, and over time, as the soft tissues of the body return to mother earth, the bones are laid bare and lean for the final rites of passage back to the Mangalili reservoir of souls. A metaphor for this action of cleansing is used by the Mangalili in their sacred paintings by way of depicting Mirriya or Gunyan (the Ghost or Sand Crabs) picking the bones of a fish carcass on the beach. The sacred clan design for the sandsculpture at Djarrakpi, both adorn and surround the crabs.
- Another reference in the work is to the maternal thunderhead cloud, Wanupini, which is depicted as the anvil-shaped wet season cumulonimbus. The saltwater flows to the horizon where it is taken up as water vapour by Wanupini, who carries it to the escarpment where she gives birth through rain. This is a metaphor for the soul's journey from life to death to rest to rebirth.

TECHNIQUE

- In Mangalili art the cosmic realm is reflected through compositional discipline, repetition and restraint. Wayilkpa Maymuru's visual aesthetic is distinguished by a rigorous formal discipline centred on dense, finely controlled linear structures. These lines generate a shimmering optical field across the surface of the painting, producing a sense of vibration and movement. Lines are layered in parallel or subtly oscillating formations, evoking the flow of the Milky Way as an ancestral pathway, while simultaneously recalling the movement of saltwater currents. Through this aesthetic strategy Wayilkpa collapses distinctions between sky and sea, reinforcing Yolnu cosmological principles of continuity and relationship.
- Wayilkpa's palette is typically restrained and deliberate, favouring natural ochres, whites, blacks and muted earth tones. She has more recently started painting with subtle pinks and oranges. Spatially Wayilkpa's compositions resist Western sense of perspective. Rather than foreground and background, her paintings operate as all-over fields, reflecting Yolnu non-linear understandings of time and space. Viewers are invited not to look into the painting as an image, but to experience it as an immersive surface, an encounter with Country and cosmos rather than a representation of them.
- Abstraction functions as a lawful mode of disclosure, allowing cosmological knowledge to be made present without revealing restricted sacred information.

CONTEXT

- The Mangalili clan is a Yirritja moiety group within the Yolnu Nation and cultural system of NE Arnhem Land in the NT. Within Yolnu epistemology, visual art is not an autonomous or purely aesthetic practice, but a lawful and cosmological act through which ancestral authority, land tenure, and universal order are continually enacted. For the Mangalili Clan, art functions as a medium that binds people, Country, and cosmos into a single indivisible system of meaning.
- In Yolnu ontology (and expressed in Mangalili practice) Country is not confined to land and sea, but extends into the sky, forming a cosmic geography inhabited and activated by ancestral beings.

- A central celestial reference in Mangalili art is the Milky Way which is understood as an ancestral river or pathway, along which ancestral beings travelled, carrying law, knowledge, and life. This celestial river is conceptually aligned with waterways on Mangalili Country.
- Mangalili artists invoke the Milky Way through fine, repetitive line-work, rhythmic sequencing, and expansive compositional fields that suggest movement, flow, and ancestral presence. These visual strategies do not illustrate the Milky Way in a literal sense, rather they activate its cosmic significance. The shimmering optical effects produced by layered lines recall both starlight and reflected light on water, unifying celestial and marine realms.
- For the Mangalili the sky is not a backdrop, but an active participant in governance, guiding social and ceremonial life and existence.
- As a Yolnu female artist, Wayilkpa's practice also affirms womens' roles in holding and transmitting cosmological knowledge, demonstrating that artistic authority derives from inherited responsibility rather than individual innovation.
- Her work exemplifies how this cosmological knowledge continues to be expressed, affirming Yolnu sovereignty, continuity and responsibility. Wayilkpa's practice demonstrates that Yolnu art functions simultaneously as law, cosmology, and cultural memory, challenging Western frameworks that seek to separate these complex domains.

COLLECTION STATEMENT

The detailed representation of ancient knowledge systems and beliefs in this work, its weight and authority, make this work one of the most significant in our collection. This is also the first work on bark bought by the Circle Collective. It was one of the larger works at the Sullivan & Strumpf exhibition *Hidden in the Stars* (February 2026), which appealed to us for the purposes of our collection.