



**P R I M E
M I N I S T E R**

**ADDRESS BY
HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRIME MINISTER
KAY RALA XANANA GUSMÃO
AT THE GARMA FESTIVAL**

Garma Festival, Gulkula, Northeast Arnhem Land,
Northern Territory, Australia

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Palácio do Governo
Avenida Marginal
Dili, Timor-Leste

I acknowledge the people of the Yolngu Nation. I pay my respects to Yolngu Elders past and present, and recognise the leaders, families and communities who have cared for this Country.

In particular, I acknowledge the Gumatj clan, on whose land we gather today at Gulkula.

Mr Djawa Yunupingu, Chairman of the Yothu Yindi Foundation, Yolngu leaders and community members.

I am honoured to join you on Yolngu Country and to be welcomed here with the Senator the Honourable Penny Wong, Minister for Foreign Affairs; Australian ministers and parliamentarians; and ministers and representatives from our friends across the Pacific region.

Thank you for welcoming me to Gulkula and for the generosity and friendship that have been shown to my delegation.

From the moment we arrived, we have felt at home. We have felt a strong sense of place and culture, in a community where solidarity has meaning and history has weight.

Timor-Leste and Arnhem Land face one another across the sea. That sea forms part of the world of both our peoples, shaping our livelihoods, our stories and our relationship with the land around us.

Coming here to Garma, I feel a closeness between our peoples.

Our histories and cultures are different, but both have been shaped by ancient traditions and by long struggles to protect our identity and determine our own future.

The theme of Garma this year is **Bukmak**, meaning **Everyone**.

It reflects the openness of this gathering, where people from different communities and countries are warmly welcomed to experience Yolngu culture, listen, learn and build relationships.

Even in the short time I have been here, I recognise something very familiar to me. Yolngu culture has endured because elders, families and communities have continued to carry it.

Timorese culture also reaches back through untold generations. It lives in our many languages, our sacred houses, our ceremonies and in the relationships between families, ancestors, the land and the spirits of our people.

Our culture has survived centuries of foreign rule, war and occupation. It has been a source of knowledge, dignity and defiance for our people.

Our creation story explains the relationship between the Timorese people, our ancestors and our land.

The story tells of a young boy who found a small crocodile stranded and suffering in the heat.

Concerned for the crocodile, the boy carried it to the sea and saved its life.

The crocodile never forgot his kindness. Years later, when the boy wished to see the world, he called the crocodile, now grown strong, and climbed onto its back.

They travelled together across the ocean for many years, until the crocodile became old and could travel no more.

The crocodile told the boy that, when it died, its body would become an island where the boy and his descendants could live.

Its body became the island of Timor.

This is why the Timorese people call the crocodile, **Avô**, grandfather, and why it is sacred to us.

Our story teaches us that our land was not simply found or taken. It was given to us through an act of kindness and an act of sacrifice. This gift also created an obligation.

The land is not just something that belongs to us. We also belong to the land and carry a responsibility to protect it for the generations that will come after us.

When I was a political prisoner in Jakarta, I wrote a poem about Grandfather Crocodile rising from the sea and stretching his body across time until his back became the mountains of Timor.

Those mountains are where our people were born, where they built their communities and where they have taken refuge during times of conflict.

I understand that the crocodile also has deep significance in the traditions of the Gumatj people and across Arnhem Land. For Yolngu people, Bärü, the ancestral crocodile, is connected to law, identity, ceremony and the relationship between people, Country and sea.

These teachings are carried through song, dance and ceremony, and through the knowledge passed by elders from one generation to the next.

Here at Gulkula, a sacred Gumatj ceremonial site and place of learning, I am deeply impressed by the way this knowledge continues to be shared, practised and kept alive.

Our stories are different, and I speak with respect for meanings that belong to Yolngu people. But across the Timor Sea, our peoples share an understanding that stories, ceremony and culture are not merely memories of the past.

They are living guides that carry knowledge and responsibility from one generation to the next, bring people together and guide how we live.

In this way, Garma does more than celebrate Yolngu culture. It continues the ancient tradition of gathering at Gulkula to teach, listen, exchange perspectives and strengthen the relationships between families, clans and communities.

By welcoming people from across Australia and our region, Garma also creates an opportunity for others to learn from Yolngu people, deepen their understanding and build relationships founded on respect.

This is especially important at a time when fear, mistrust and intolerance are driving people apart in many parts of the world.

Understanding grows when people meet, listen to one another and recognise the dignity, history and experience of others.

The people of Timor-Leste understand the importance of gathering to honour our ancestors, share knowledge and pass our traditions to our children.

We also understand the power of culture to deepen mutual respect, strengthen the bonds between communities and bring people together to shape a better future.

Friends, sisters and brothers,

This year, Garma marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act. This anniversary honours a long struggle by Aboriginal people to secure recognition and control over their land.

For generations, Yolngu people have defended their law, their culture and their relationship with Country.

They continued to organise, negotiate and speak even when governments refused to listen.

The struggle for land rights is not only a struggle for the legal ownership of land. It is a struggle for the power to decide what happens on that land, how it is protected and how its resources are used.

Both our peoples have had to struggle against the belief that others could know what was best for us, control our land and sea and decide our future on our behalf.

Friends, sisters and brothers,

In 2011, the Timorese President, Dr José Ramos-Horta, came to Garma. The following year, our government hosted a group of Yolngu elders in Timor-Leste.

Today I am privileged to address this festival at the invitation of the Yothu Yindi Foundation and to learn about Yolngu life and culture in northeast Arnhem Land.

I propose that we strengthen the friendship that we have built and give it practical meaning for our people.

This could include opening discussions on an agreement of friendship and shared cultural understanding between us.

It could include creating opportunities for elders, young people, artists and community leaders to visit one another, exchange knowledge and discuss the challenges and opportunities facing our peoples.

By coming together to share our experiences, cultures and knowledge, we can strengthen not only our communities but our region as a whole.

Mr Djawa, thank you again for welcoming us.

I hope that before too long we can welcome members of the Yolngu community back to Timor-Leste with the same generosity and friendship that you have shown me here today.

I would be honoured to welcome you to the beloved land of Grandfather Crocodile, to walk with you, sit with our leaders, meet our young people and visit our sacred houses, mountains and communities.

Together, we can share our stories and our sense of solidarity and belonging.

Between Arnhem Land and Timor-Leste lies a sea. Let us make sure that this sea continues to connect us, to carry our stories and to sustain our communities.

Thank you.