

CHANCELLOR,

I have the honour to present to you for the award of the degree of Doctor of Arts, Honoris Causa, Mr Gumana, a Yolngu Aboriginal man of high esteem.

The award recognises outstanding leadership and achievement in the fields of the arts, Aboriginal cultural maintenance, Aboriginal community advancement and the promotion of inter-cultural understanding and respect.

Mr Gumana was born in north-eastern Arnhem Land in about 1930. He grew up around Gangan, near powerful sources of traditional lore and culture and alongside the continuing presence of the creative ancestors. His early life was steeped in tradition and the learning of skills such as the making of canoe voyages across the open sea to Groote Eylandt.

When he was a young man Mr Gumana was diagnosed with leprosy. It was then a fearful disease and Mr Gumanawas brought into the Channel Island leprosarium for confinement and treatment. Later, he was moved to the new East Arm facility. Mr Gumana underwent treatment for more than a decade. During that time he learned English, got married and became a Christian. He also began painting, drawing on his memory to depict scenes of his country and its stories. That way he kept strong his links with his land.

Mr Gumana said later that during his time around Darwin he learned three ways to look at the world – the Yolngu Aboriginal way, the western way, and God's way. His importance as a mediator in many complex situations flows from that ability to see and understand things from these different points of view.

Eventually Mr Gumana returned to Arnhem Land. He settled at Yirrkala and was given an important place in local life as the eldest son of the clan leader Birrikitji. By then, issues were arising about the future ownership and management of the land which the Yolngu people had thought was theirs alone.

In 1962 Mr Gumana joined with other Yolngu artists to paint the panels which were installed on either side of the altar in the Yirrkala church. The panels depicted the creation stories that gave the Yolngu their claim to the surrounding lands. The panels inspired the bark petition of 1963 which put all Australians on notice that there were people whose claims to land long pre-dated European arrival in 1788. It was a turning point in Australian history.

In 1968 Yirrkala people took action in the Northern Territory Supreme Court to protect their interests in their land. They claimed that they had occupied the land since time immemorial and that the government had no right to negotiate arrangements for mining the land without their

consent. Mr Gumana acted as an interpreter and cross-cultural bridge during the proceedings. The Yolngu lost their Supreme Court action, but the loss was a direct catalyst for the enactment of laws which protected Aboriginal land rights in the Northern Territory.

The homelands movement, the return of Aboriginal people to live on their traditional country, was one of the outcomes of the new land rights system. Mr Gumana led his clan back to its traditional country at Gangan, about 150 kilometers south-west of Nhulunbuy. There, Mr Gumana led his people in the creation of a homeland centre for about 80 people. Gangan has been acknowledged as one of the notable success stories of the homelands movement. That is to the great credit of many people, in particular Mr Gumana.

In 1992 Mr Gumana was ordained a Minister of the Uniting Church, following study through Nungalinga College in Darwin. Mr Gumana regarded his course of theological study as part of the lifelong process of acquiring knowledge; while being ordained was a logical step in the discharge of his responsibilities toward his people. He says that he is a warrior on behalf of his people and that while a generation ago his weapons would have been spears, now his weapon is his tongue. Mr Gumana has said that his continuing study of the lore and life is essential so that his tongue can speak well.

Over the last two decades Mr Gumana's stature as an artist and ambassador for Yolngu culture has been recognised. He has been painting for almost sixty years and his work has been included in major local and international collections since 1966. He has travelled to London, Paris, Singapore and other places with art and dance troupes and he has featured in many documentary productions which describe Yolngu art and aspirations.

In 2002 Mr Gumana won the Telstra National Aboriginal Art Award, for a painting on a hollowed out stringybark log of the kind which was once used to store the remains of the dead.

Mr Gumana's status among his people was further demonstrated when he was selected to be the lead plaintiff in the 2005 Federal Court case which resulted in the affirmation of Yolngu native title rights over inland and coastal waters.

Mr Gumana is now continuing his life mission to bring knowledge of the western world to his Yolngu people, and to help outside people to learn about the Yolngu. He accepts that before he can teach about these things he must first learn as much as he can about life, culture and lore. For him, that is an essential part of the process of people learning how to be closer to each another in an undivided Australia.

Mr Gumana is now a senior man who has seen many profound changes at close hand. He can be well satisfied with his own role in helping to create a better Australia, a place where people can indeed live closer together.

CHANCELLOR

In recognition of his outstanding contribution to the whole of Australia and the Northern Territory in particular; especially in recognition of his part in creating a contemporary world where people can live together with mutual respect and understanding; and in acknowledgment of his notable work as an artist, I present to you for admission to the Degree of Doctor of Arts, Honoris Causa – Mr Gumana