

Those who have cut out the people's tongue reproach them for their dumbness: The Yan-nhangu Dictionary project 1994-2011- The Yan-nhangu Dictionary team response to the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs "LANGUAGE LEARNING IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES"

Those who have cut out the people's tongue reproach them for their dumbness.

The legacy of indigenous policy continues to have a major stake in understanding the conditions under which indigenous people are struggling to keep their languages. The forced removal of children (prevalent until the 1970s), insistence on mainstream education without education in their own culture (recognisable in breach), prohibition of the use of a mother tongue (legislative repression of bilingual education), distortion of history (terra nullius) and discrimination in access to cultural resources (erosion of land rights, demise of ATSIC), and the relapse of assimilation¹, must be recognised as factors of concern to any analysis of linguistic rights.

Planned compulsory assimilation, even if thought at the time to represent enlightened humanitarianism, is at once destroying human diversity, while well along the road to ethnocide. Policies of cultural assimilation, enforced monolingualism and the legislative repression of bilingualism introduced into Northern Territory remote indigenous community schools, under guise of remediating educational failure, cast teachers as frontline soldiers in a terrible battle of cultural imperialism where children are the victims and their future the spoils of war. The consequences of such a barbarous policy include the disintegration of local political and social institutions—of culture, language, of local religion, family ties and undermine the micro economic opportunities of disadvantaged groups. In Australian indigenous groups continue to suffer the thinly veiled imperialism of the settler culture, extant in explicit policies and implicit in the institutions of assimilation hastening the destruction of personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and the lives of indigenous people.

Australia prefers the industrial model of education, which emerged in Britain in the nineteenth and twentieth century, aimed at improved industrial efficiency, it groomed youth for repetitive factory tasks, basic literacy and numeracy. In 2007 Unicef released a comprehensive assessment of the lives and well-being of children and adolescents in the economically advanced nations. The report, measuring 40 indicators of quality of life – including the strength of relationships with friends and family, educational achievements and personal aspirations, and exposure to drinking, drug taking and other risky behaviour – found that British children have the most miserable upbringing in the developed world, followed next by American children. Given Australia's mimicry of the Anglo-American model, what aspirations do policy makers have for already disadvantaged indigenous children?

¹ Planned compulsory assimilation, even if thought at the time to represent enlightened humanitarianism, is at once destroying human diversity, and it is a crucial vehicle for ethnocide.

Senior traditional owners of the Yan-nhangu² language found themselves in an invidious position. On the one hand, they recognised the unwillingness of their youth to engage with the demeaning assumption of English monolingual superiority, on the other, powerful negative discourse from state institutions and the media, undermining their cultural values. In line with local tradition they created practical projects focusing on the intergenerational transmission of their own language and values to create the Crocodile Islands Initiative (CII). The CII initiatives to enhance linkages between biological and linguistic diversity as a basis for sustainable culture based livelihoods, management of natural and cultural resources and wellbeing for future generations.³ Practical projects like the Crocodile Islands Ranger (CIR) program, the development of a Web-based Yan-nhangu Ecological Knowledge (YEK) Data-Base for schools and 'Language Nests' strive to provide opportunities for appropriate cultural transfer in increasingly troubled times. These programs exist as initiatives by people on the islands in the vacuum that exists in government support for these necessary activities. One of our key initiatives was the creation of the Yan-nhangu dictionary project.

The Yan-nhangu Dictionary project 1994-2011

In 1994 senior traditional owner nonagenarian⁴ Laurie Baymarrwangga proposed a collaboration to record her language. At this time only three hundred words had been documented and almost no information about the history, social organisations, ritual life, sociolinguistic characteristics and the local indigenous ecological knowledge was recorded. To this day she continues to struggle to sustain Yan-nhangu⁵ language and local knowledge and to counter the colonial economic and cultural assimilationist imperatives of the settler state and its powerful negative discourses. The dictionary project is directed at promoting continuities and innovations in Yan-nhangu local knowledge and encouraging biological and linguistic diversity on the homelands. The Yan-nhangu dictionary is part of the wider project to help Yan-nhangu children manage their natural resources, learn their local Indigenous Ecological knowledge (IEK), learn their language, and encourage residence on their homelands. Laurie Baymarrwangga puts it this way:

² Yan-nhangu is a Yolngu socio-lectal designation for six patrilineal *ba:purru* (clans) comprising *Walamangu*, *Malarra*, *Gamalangga*, *Gurryindi*, *Bindarrar* and *Ngurruwula* groups, originating in the Crocodile Islands (See also Yaernungo, Yanango, Yarenango, Yann[h]angu, Jarnangu, Janjango, Jan:angu, Jaer-nungo, Janango) (James 1999, 2003, 2009).

³ Yolngu is the term now used to describe an (Aboriginal) person throughout many of the northeast Arnhem Land languages called collectively *Yolngu-matha* (lit: people's tongue) and referring to a population of some 6500 people (Keen 1977, Morphy 1977, Williams 1986). Earlier anthropological literature has referred to these people as Murngin (Warner 1937), Wulamba (Berndt 1951, 1952, 1962) and Miwuyt (Shapiro 1981).

⁴ Over ninety years old.

⁵ Yan-nhangu is a Yolngu socio-lectal designation for six patrilineal *ba:purru* (clans) comprising *Walamangu*, *Malarra*, *Gamalangga*, *Gurryindi*, *Bindarrar* and *Ngurruwula* groups originating in the Crocodile Islands (See also Yaernungo, Yanango, Yarenango, Yann[h]angu, Jarnangu, Janjango, Jan:angu, Jaer-nungo , Janango) (James 1999, 2003, 2009).

'Nhangu dhangany yuwalkthana bayngu bulanggitj Yolngu mitji marnggimana dhana gayangamana mayili mana dhangany wanggalangabu mana limalama ganatjirri wulumba (maramba)'.

"We continue to pass on the stories of our land and sea country for the good of new generations".

The Yan-nhangu Dictionary project is an attempt to provide opportunities for Yan-nhangu people to tell their stories to a wider audience, a desire undiminished in the face of growing hardship.⁶ The rapid erosion of traditional cultural practices and norms, coupled with linguistic losses and the reduction of biological diversity, means that the child's home and environment is impoverished and that his/her world is forced into monolingual conformity. Local language and culture are under threat from the legacy of neglect and denial, of policies undermining homelands, repressing bilingualism, and suppressing the simple human right to live on your land and speak your own language. The destructiveness of these policies are overlooked by industrial interests intent on accessing resources while economic and administrative barriers to homelands continues to put children's cultural and linguistic futures at risk.⁷

The Dictionary project attempts to capture and record the rich and vibrant ritual, linguistic and ecological knowledge linked to the sacred ancestral sites of the seas and islands. The Yan-nhangu language is a vehicle for, and repository of this rich cultural and biological knowledge of the sea, the reward of generations of intimate coexistence with the marine environment. By challenging orthodoxy of monolingualism we are attempting to enhance the fundamental conditions of cultural existence, in language, in socialisation, in relatedness with the environment. The challenges are enormous, with no resources, to resist the power relations that silence, demean and oppress our voices, language and our very life choices.

Despite the rhetoric of reconciliation and multiculturalism, the colonial settler state, its institutions, and its servants have assumed that all Australians must speak Standard Australian English (SAE). However, it has been shown for thousands of generations that the language of the ancestors is a sustainable language, it is the language of human, cultural and biological diversity, the language of the land and sea. By empowering people and their languages, we sustain alternative values to simple acquisitive materialism, and we produce positive physiological resilience in an otherwise alienating modern world.

We continue to face many challenges in trying to bring appropriate cultural, linguistic and livelihoods opportunities to future generations of Yan-nhangu children "walking in the footsteps of the ancestors". The following challenges flow in large from the widely

⁶ Recently the estimated 560 outstations/homelands/communities of less than 100 people in the N.T comprising approximately 10,000 people have been denied their human right to support to live on their land by policy makers in the Northern Territory (Growth Towns) and have further disadvantaged another 40,000 residing primarily in larger 'townships' in the region (Altman 2006, Altman et al 2008: 2).

⁷ A recurring theme in Indigenous affairs draws tension between maintenance of Indigenous culture and the achievement of socioeconomic 'equity': essentially 'self-determination' versus 'assimilation'. Implicit in this tension is the view that attachment to traditional culture inhibits 'mainstream' economic goals. Dockery (2008) found conclusively that Indigenous culture should be viewed as part of the solution to Indigenous disadvantage in Australia, and **NOT** as part of the problem (Dockery 2008:2 my emphasis)

³ Yan-nhangu Dictionary Team. Senior Linguist Dr Bentley James

unacknowledged conditions of colonial imperialism inhering in modern Australian attitudes and institutions.... We continue to struggle:

- To raise awareness and stand up to the symbolic and assumed superiority of Standard Australian English (SAE);
- To challenge broader social, political and historical concepts stigmatising Aboriginal language and culture current in many of the assumptions of settler relations;
- Cartesian dualities proposing that industrial politico-economic and rational scientific strategies will overcome the traditional societies;
- Social Darwinism expressed in low expectations for indigenous people;
- Cultural imperialism, see low estimation of indigenous language and cultures;
- Negative cultural stereotypes positing indigenous culture as a handicap and leading to attempts to rectify this deprivation;
- Ideologies of language planning to conflate indigenous with multiculturalism and producing inappropriate policy;
- Ideologies of education and economic progress/development supporting global/market imperatives over distinctive local heritage and values;
- Settler state moral commitment to use education to make indigenous people fluent in SAE despite themselves;
- To lead by example, through local ongoing practices, not to be moulded by those who claim to have the answers, by those wielding the same old discursive, economic, and political force, but to show 'real' innovation in leadership in indigenous affairs;
- To challenge the naturalising discourse of subjection (signs outside communities) that legitimate and reproduce domination through the internalisation of oppression;
- Against the recent increasing symbolic amplification of the use of the pernicious us/them dichotomy;
- To overthrow the legislative repression of bilingual programs "First four hours English only";
- Over sovereignty, the assumption that might is right and the arrogance of coercion, to deny the voice of the landowners, and to create a theory and practice without their participation;
- Against this sovereignty by force and its institutions, laws, politics and privileging the settler discourse, silencing the voice of the land and sea country owners;
- Negative recognition of the existence of indigenous sovereignty (Mabo terra nullius) leading to a lack of political voice /official title to their seas/laws/policing;
- Against explicit and increasing economic disadvantage (in Illusory call for nonexistent 'real' jobs and the disbanding of the CDEP and a continuing decapitalisation of homelands and negligent support for remote residents;

- To right the historical obfuscation of Yan-nhangu Linguistic status within the expanding multilingual mission polity leading to its having been ignored;
- To despite infinitesimal economic power left us leading to no discriminatory spending potential, consequently we have no technology for recording;
- Despite a lack of materials or technologies for recording, nor an office/car/boat/pencils/political voice/power/official recognition;
- To attract expertise or support of any kind for this project and others in the region;
- To avert and acknowledge wide spread historico-political and linguistic misunderstandings about our desire to continue living on our land and speaking our languages.

This dictionary work is focused on the Crocodile Islands and Arafura Sea but the implications of our work are of much wider importance. As we continue to teach our children the unique customary marine management systems, IEK inhering in the language linked to the sea we perpetuate a holistic system of knowledge created in this locality that once lost can never be replaced. We are the people of the sea and we continue to care for it and in so doing create job opportunities and career paths for new generations. This is where government could be investing large amounts of money.

Commonwealth invests 3.5 billion in indigenous Australian but only 3.4 percent in working programs - such as indigenous protected areas (IPAs) and Caring for Our Country - that employ indigenous rangers in recognition of their unique knowledge of the land and its cultural and natural resources. But the Government through WOK and CFOC has refused to fund our language-based ranger program over the last five years, reproducing the plaint "We are oversubscribed!" Clearly the program is still undercapitalised! The indigenous investment strategy, if that is what it can be called, is obviously counterproductive, inflexible and unworkable.

Investments in people-in-place have shown positive returns in the very areas that otherwise defy the government's best efforts. In communities blessed with funded ranger programs, and IPA there is strong evidence of improved diet, exercise, greater economic participation, improved early childhood development and reductions in substance abuse, better mental health statistics and that is without the contribution to the priceless linguistic, cultural and biological diversity of the indigenous estate.

The Yan-nhangu Dictionary, linked CII and CIR Program provide enormous opportunities for language employment, research activities, livelihoods and positive engagement with kin, country and the positive investment in healthy homelands residence. Along with culturally appropriate livelihoods activities as a vehicle for linguistic maintenance and extension, career paths and positive role models there are banal benefits accruing to the state like coastal surveillance and bio-security, including weed management and ghost nets monitoring and removal, as well as community services including search & rescue, and a Junior Ranger Program. As our CII program expands and develops, we are seeking support, contracts and

opportunities for employment in dictionary work, in the development of an IEK data base, Cyber-tracker technology, Mobile Phone APPS, online pictorial encyclopaedia data forms to inform Natural Resource Management (NRM). These language and culture-based activities have economic benefits and ecological side effects such as feral animal management, monitoring of sea turtles, and meaningful work on country.

We have written to you the standing committee with the intention of making you aware of the legacy of indigenous policy and the conditions under which we are struggling to keep our language alive. We have informed you about the work of nonagenarian Laurie Baymarrwangga, and the children, these kids that are fighting for their language. We have shown you that there are opportunities to give people a space to speak their stories and these real people are giving their all to tell their stories, on their land, in their languages, to break the monolingual silence. We are some of the few people in the world who still possess a complete and priceless Australian Indigenous language and we are asking for help to save it, or at least, some assistance to alleviate the insurmountable challenges thrust before us as the state extends the pursuit of profit at all cost.

We have seen firsthand the impact of ill conceived and assimilationist policies on the lives of these old people, these families and their children; we have witnessed the terrible legislative repression of bilingual education, the thoughtless and reckless decapitalisation of homelands, and the racist disempowerment of the intervention. We have seen our land rights eroded, the wealth of our seas legislated away from us and sold to non indigenous fishing industries and powerful stake holders, our opportunities for equitable control of our inheritance squandered by the administration, and our languages denied a place in our schools, our voices silenced, our culture demeaned in the national arena.

Policies of cultural assimilation, enforced monolingualism and the repression of bilingualism in remote indigenous community schools, under guise of remediating educational failure, cast teachers as frontline soldiers in a terrible battle of cultural imperialism, where children are the victims, and their future, their culture, their language and their opportunities become the spoils of war. The consequences of such a barbarous policy have been made clear throughout history. Ask yourself, what happened to the indigenous languages of the people of Perth, Canberra, or Darwin? These people have suffered the same policies that your government and administration are supporting now. Policies that support the disintegration of local political and social institutions—of culture, language, of local religion, family ties and undermine the micro economic opportunities of disadvantaged groups. Australian indigenous groups continue to suffer the thinly veiled imperialism of the settler culture, extant in explicit policies and implicit in the institutions of assimilation hastening the destruction of personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and the lives of indigenous people.

You who have cut out the people's tongue reproach them for their dumbness. Well we, The Yan-nhangu dictionary team, the Yan-nhangu people of the Crocodile Islands, have spoken. We have made it clear to you that there exist vibrant opportunities the Yan-nhangu dictionary team has created for you to address these disadvantages, to right settler state injustices now, to support indigenous language learning in indigenous communities like Milingimbi and

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Murrungga now. Now the responsibility rests with you. Now it's up to you, the members of the standing committee, to respond in a timely and appropriate manner.

Yours in expectation the Yan-nhangu dictionary team