

Background

Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture Co-operative (Muurrbay), based in Nambucca Heads, Northern NSW, is a leading Aboriginal language centre and publisher of quality research. Muurrbay began in 1986, when Gumbaynggirr Elders joined together to revive their language. Muurrbay means 'white fig tree' in the Gumbaynggirr language, the white fig playing an important role in the Dreamtime. Muurrbay's purpose is to support Aboriginal people, particularly Gumbaynggirr, in the revival and maintenance of their language and culture, and so strengthen their sense of identity, self-esteem and links to country.

Aunty Maggie Morris, original member and patron of Muurrbay, who passed away in early 2005, passionately wanted to pass down the language and traditions of her Gumbaynggirr people. The Elders worked with linguist Brother Steve Morelli to run the first Gumbaynggirr language course in Sherwood, west of Kempsey. Muurrbay is now a registered training organisation and is based in the old church on Bellwood Road, Nambucca Heads, where Gumbaynggirr language classes began in 1997. There are more Gumbaynggirr speakers in 2009 than there were ten years ago. You could say that the language has had its lowest ebb, but now the tide of speakers is slowly but surely rising. So Muurrbay continues to grow as a centre for Aboriginal community activities including Gumbaynggirr language classes for adults and children and publishing dictionary-grammars and story books, as well as auspicing the world famous Gumbaynggirr Elders Choir.

Muurrbay auspices Many Rivers Aboriginal Language Centre (MRALC), a regional language centre that provides strategic support for Aboriginal communities of coastal NSW who want to revitalise their languages. Seven languages are supported, covering the NSW coastal strip from the Queensland border to the Hawkesbury River. From north to south these are: the Bundjalung – Yugambeh dialect chain; Yagirr; Gumbaynggirr; Dhanggati; Gathang (Birrbay, Warrimay and Guringay); Hunter River & Lake Macquarie Language (Awabakal/Wonnarua); and Darkinyung. Language revitalisation refers to situations in which the language is no longer being fully passed down from one generation to the next. While this applies to all the languages of this region, there are some situations in which individual speakers are passing on their language knowledge.

We work closely with Elders, and local language, culture and educational organisations to conduct research, publish accessible grammars–dictionaries and develop engaging educational courses and resources. With the Aboriginal Languages Summer School, run annually in Sydney for three NSW

languages, and the publishing of *A Handbook of Aboriginal Languages of NSW and the ACT*, Muurrbay has proved itself as a leader both in Aboriginal language organisations and as an Aboriginal publisher of high quality research and educational materials. Muurrbay also auspices several other groundbreaking projects including the Gumbaynggirr Elders Choir, and various recording and publishing projects with language groups throughout coastal NSW. Muurrbay and MRALC are funded by the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts.

Publishing language resources

Muurrbay–MRALC began by focusing on language research and over the last three years has published many language resources, including grammar–dictionaries, teaching resources and short stories. It is important that communities have good access to research results, and a percentage of all books are distributed free of charge. The books are carefully researched and reviewed, with extensive community consultation undertaken before we progress to publication. Desk-top publication using InDesign ensures good quality publications which reinforce the status of these languages, and encourage positive attitudes in the general public. Muurrbay–MRALC has produced grammar–dictionaries for the language from the Hunter River and Lake Macquarie, Darkinyung, Dhanggati, Gathang and Gumbaynggirr, with Yaygirr to follow this year. All languages change all the time. After seven years, a second edition of the Gumbaynggirr Dictionary was published, it reflected all the work that had been done including a slight change in the spelling system, more information about the way the language works (grammar) and information about new words that had been created to talk about things to do with many areas of current day life including office and household goods.

The authors of *A Handbook of Aboriginal Languages of NSW and the ACT* approached Muurrbay to publish this ground breaking resource, as they wanted such a significant book to have an experienced Aboriginal publisher and copyright holder, and for any profits to go back into language revitalisation. This survey of NSW and ACT languages is a valuable reference and educational resource, useful to Aboriginal people who want to revitalise their languages and to those in the broader community who want to know more about our rich linguistic heritage. Several teaching resources have been published, like the *Barriyala Let's Work Gumbaynggirr Language Student Workbooks* and *Mayalambala– Let's Move It* a poster-based teaching resource. These teaching resources have been created so that they will be useful for more than one language. *Mayalambala* is based on pictures, so

can be used for any language. Story books for children, such as *Dulaybam Dunggirr (Grey-faced Wallaby and Koala)* and *Bamay Possum's Party* are also valuable for children.

Muurrbay also markets the independently published autobiography *Nganyundiya Miimingundiya Jagunda (Into My Mother's Country)* by Aunty Jessie Williams, Gumbaynggirr Elder and Muurrbay Board Member. Aunty Jessie was born in Nambucca Heads in 1924, her fascinating life story gives insight into Aboriginal ways of healing. Muurrbay is exploring ways to record the oral histories of the Elders of Northern NSW with a view to publishing their stories in the future.

Language learners have varying needs. Muurrbay has delivered full-time and part time Certificate II and IV Gumbaynggirr language courses, and it is a requirement that adults who want to teach in schools have completed this training. An on-line version of the Certificate II course is planned due to demand from Gumbaynggirr people who live around the country. A Gathang Certificate I course, developed by Muurrbay staff, has been delivered via team teaching in Taree, Great Lakes and Port Macquarie TAFES. Other courses have been delivered more informally for those who just want to pick up some lingo and pass it on to their family and friends.

Staff

Chairperson/Muurrbay Co-ordinator: Ken Walker

MRALC Co-ordinator/Linguist: Anna Ash

Language Teachers/Researchers: Maxine Jarrett, Dallas Walker, Gary Williams

Administration: Pauline Hooler, Tyson Ferguson

Teacher-linguists: Amanda Lissarrague, Steve Morelli.

Linguist-IT: Julie Long

Information and Technology Specialist: Sue Tomkins.

Testimonials

‘Muurrbay and Many Rivers are leading the country in the preservation and revival of Indigenous languages that had previously been thought to be dead. The model of Aboriginal leadership and ownership of the languages and cultures of the region, combined with collaboration with non-

Aboriginal experts in language and education, is producing outstanding publications and educational programs.’ Dr Diana Eades, Honorary Research Associate, University of New England.

‘I am writing in support of the Muurrbay Language Centre who I have had dealings with. Being a language speaker from the Bundjalung Nation I am very aware just how important it is to teach our Indigenous language in schools and communities. So I give my utmost support to Muurrbay because I know the wonderful job they are doing for the Aboriginal community of Many Rivers.’ Charles Moran, Bundjalung Elders Committee member.

‘I just wanted to thank you for letting me have a copy of the handbook. I think it is absolutely first rate, as is the dictionary. Your Centre is just so far ahead of any other!’ Dr Luise Hercus, Professor of Linguistics, Australian National University.

‘Muurrbay and MRALC are national leaders in Aboriginal language research and revitalisation. These are extremely well managed organisations with a wealth of staff talent and commitment, effectively supporting community groups, productively collaborating with government, universities, TAFE and schools, and consistently delivering high quality teaching and landmark teaching resources and reference material.’ Dr Caroline Jones, Senior Lecturer, Education, University of Wollongong.

‘Thank you for all the support you have given us at Bellbrook. Your willingness to travel to our community to discuss our needs and your preparedness to consult with elders as intellectuals in the field has been very encouraging and has assisted the promotion of Dhanggati culture for our young people’ Deb Brown, secretary, Thunghutti Tiddas.

‘Muurrbay and MRALC have the most ambitious language revitalisation program in NSW, and probably one of the most successful in Australia. Their brief covers an enormous area, from the Hawkesbury to the Queensland border, and for this region they carry out community consultation, language teaching, research and publication. Their achievements would be remarkable even for a much larger and better funded organisation. Because of the nature of my own involvement with them my interest is particularly in their publication record: four highly professional dictionary/ grammars, six books of teaching resources, and a state-wide guide to the languages of NSW, all over a period of about four years. There are very few, if any, language revitalisation organisations in Australia that could match this.’ Dr Jim Wafer, author *A Handbook of Aboriginal Languages of NSW & the ACT*.

‘Muurrbay has provided an invaluable service to the Biripi Nation. Their professionalism and assistance helping us reconstruct our language was amazing, and their continued support and assistance is very much appreciated. Money cannot buy what Muurrbay has given the people of the Biripi Nation.’ Jeremy and Tracy Saunders, Biripi - Gadhang Language Group.

‘The ongoing work on Bundjalung, Dhanggati, Gadhang, HRLM and Wonnarua, Darkinyung and Yaygirr by Many Rivers linguists makes a vital contribution to the school language programs. I am very thankful for the vital contribution that Muurrbay–MRALC makes to the success of the Aboriginal Language programs in NSW schools. May you thrive and grow! , Aboriginal Languages Consultant, Curriculum K-12 Directorate, NSW Dept of Education and Training.

‘Muurrbay and MRALC have helped enormously by researching the meanings of Indigenous place names in the Lower Clarence. The Indigenous Signage project, partnered by Muurrbay, North Coast TAFE, Clarence Valley Council and North Coast Computer Project has breathed new life into our community and regenerated interest for the importance of this community’s language program. The first village sign of *Illarwill* (black duck) is already up with others soon to follow! Thank you so much for all that you have done!’ Bernie Francis, Coordinator, North Coast Computer Project/ IT Teacher, North Coast TAFE.