

## LARRAKIA LANGUAGE PROJECT

### *A Living Culture in a Changing World – A Tribute to Yirra*

Sue Roman and Mark Harvey

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Larrakia country covers the areas of Darwin and surrounds. It is bounded by the mouth of the Finniss River, Manton Dam, and around to the mouth of the Adelaide River.

#### **YIRRA AND CHANGE**

The Larrakia Language Project is introduced by a summary discussion of the changes that occurred in the lives of Larrakia people during the first half of the twentieth century. Particular examples of such change are examined from the personal perspective of an individual whose life spanned the first fifty years of the past century. The effect of the changes experienced on the Larrakia language is demonstrated in the life of this person and that of her children. Today's talk begins with the introduction of the person central to my presentation.

A Larrakia woman named Yirra, or Yirra Badoo, was born around 1900 into a family and group experiencing first contact with Europeans. The changing social and cultural world that she experienced during the course of her fifty odd years affected the passage of her Larrakia language. The span of her life and that of her children witnessed changes whose effects encompassed the near loss of a language. The recent history of the Larrakia language leading up to the derivation of the Language Project is presented within the context of Yirra's changing world and that of her children.

Yirra was familiar with Larrakia country. She travelled as a young child with her

father and others to many parts of Larrakia country. Yirra's parents would have been born not long after Europeans first came to Darwin. Yirra was of the first or maybe second Larrakia generation acquiring a non-Aboriginal language as a child, to whatever degree of proficiency - a fairly significant change, although not threatening in itself to the continuity of the Larrakia language.

However the effects of first contact on Larrakia society began to limit Larrakia lifestyle considerably. Before Yirra was in her early teens or younger, approximately, the European administration built Kahlin compound, in the area of what is now called Cullen Bay, a harbour suburb of Darwin. Initially Kahlin was a compound for Larrakia. Larrakia people who wanted to live in the established area of the town were expected to reside inside the compound. So too were the small number of people from neighbouring groups who had come in to the town area of Darwin, It was the first attempt to keep Aboriginal people 'off the streets'.

Some Larrakia began to be employed for a range of domestic duties. People would work during the day and be expected to return to Kahlin at night. The effect of this change on Yirra, and on her language inheritance, can only be postulated. From what we know, it seems that increased English proficiency during the day was replaced by conversing in Larrakia outside of work hours. It appears people were free to conduct themselves according to their traditional lifestyle at weekends and for much longer periods. It appears to have been a matter of tolerance of the customary practices and lifestyle of Larrakia, provided it did not impact greatly on the establishment and functioning of European settlement. Yirra continued to speak Larrakia as fluently as the language had been spoken for generations past. We make this judgement from our limited knowledge of Yirra as handed down to us orally.

With changes in legislation, the Welfare Act in particular, people from other areas were brought in or came in to Darwin. They too became residents of Kahlin, for the same reasons as its first inmates.

Naturally enough there was a degree of separation within Kahlin of Larrakia (and perhaps their friends) from people of other language groups. It seems that Larrakia camped towards the end of the compound nearest to the coastline. There was some contact between the different groups however, both within Kahlin and in the perimeter of the settled areas. Although the European administration encouraged other tribespeople to return to their country, an increasing number of such people began to live in the same areas as Larrakia. Accounts relate that Larrakia language remained the spoken language.

The effect of these fairly dramatic changes in lifestyle and cultural inheritance had on language appears to have been minimal, relative to what was to follow.

Kahlin represented an attempt at a formalised removal of people's capacity to maintain their inherited ownership of their land and practices in relation to it. Simultaneously with this attempt at disinheritance, Yirra and others of her age became the first generation of Larrakia women to have children of mixed race. This quickly led to changes that would have a very dramatic effect, on language.

The policy and practice of forced removal of children from their parents was instituted. It was perpetrated mostly on parents whose children were of mixed race and on others in some instances. Kahlin underwent a change to provide for this practice. It was fenced internally so that children in one area were separated from their mothers and other Aboriginal family who were now isolated from their children in a different part of Kahlin.

Yirra, aged around twenty, had a child – Lindy - by this time. Yirra was one of the people affected by the isolation within Kahlin. An aspect of Yirra's response to this changing circumstance and her attempts to manage it has been told to me by Yirra's daughter. Yirra resorted to calling out to Lindy through the fence separating them.

She would wail, or cry out. Wailing is an Aboriginal system or mechanism, like a

combination of calling out, sending messages, public expression of unhappiness and other emotions. Yirra would call out night after night to her daughter, in language. She would pass bush tucker through the fence at night. It seems that Yirra was clearly worried about the effects of the enforced separation.

Yirra's second child was taken at a young age to an institution in Alice Springs. It was the practice to send children from the Centre of the Territory to the Top End and Vice-versa. Larrakia were kept in Darwin as a source of labour, primarily domestic labour. His descendants continue to live there. The effect of this practice on language is obvious.

Yirra was thus employed at this time to look after a European family's children. It seems remarkable now that Yirra, while being deemed not able to be responsible for her own children was charged with the responsibility of looking after the children of people who, in Yirra's eyes at least, were associated with the decision to separate her from her children.

These events were often described to us by Lindy, who is the mother of Roger, Annabelle, Audrey, Rachel, myself and Bill.



This photograph of a painting at the entrance to Nakara primary school in Darwin captures the change manifested in this period of Yirra's life. It is an aspect of her management of that change. The traditional lifestyle depicted in the painting,

catching and cooking fish and other bush tucker, cooking on the beach and feeding the children is symbolic of Yirra's continuing, inherited values and lifestyle being the vehicle for coping with and adapting to the changing circumstances of her life. (Yirra is the woman on the right, nursing the child. The older non-Aboriginal child, standing, grew up to be the artist commissioned to paint a mural at the Nakara school. She entitled the painting *A Tribute to Amy*. 'Amy' was the European name by which Yirra was known. The artist stated at the time of the painting that she valued the period of her life when Yirra cared for her, that she had vivid memories of the bush tucker, the smells of the fish and other food, the place and the people.)

Lindy gained employment of her own as she got older. With the onset of World War Two, Lindy and her first child were evacuated to Adelaide. She gave birth to her second child in Alice Springs on the trip south, on the back of the truck. This migration removed Lindy and other Larrakia further from the Larrakia inherited world and its language. Yirra became married to a Tiwi man around this time and lived at Milikapiti on Melville Island for a period.

On returning to Darwin after WW2, each of Lindy's next three children, except for her youngest, were taken from her shortly after birth and institutionalised in Darwin.

The partial separation of Lindy from her inherited language was subsequently exacerbated by the further partial separation of Lindy's children from their mother. It was a small and purely circumstantial benefit that neither Lindy nor her children were removed from their country. The effect on language across two generations was dramatic nonetheless. Yirra had returned to Darwin and attempted to spend time with the first of Lindy's two children. She did not see much of her grandchildren however. I have heard Annabelle recount how, on at least one occasion, even when she was released into her grandmother Yirra's care for an afternoon by the institution's superintendent, the welfare authorities saw a half-caste child with a full blood woman and intervened to take Annabelle back to the institution. Considerable as the extent of separation from inherited language was, it has been interesting to observe that Annabelle has an ear for the Larrakia language. She

has been able to listen to the recordings of the language produced by the Language Project and can more readily pronounce the words than others of us. Having acquired some of the language as a child and subsequently forgetting it from lack of practice, it has come back to her as she listens to it.

Yirra passed away not long after the birth of Lindy's second youngest.

These events are described to illustrate the entrenchment of the process of separation or alienation across successive generations, and their effect on inheritance of language.

The near loss of language essentially took two generations.

Yirra was a fluent Larrakia speaker who gained proficiency in the English language. Lindy was a language speaker, whose primary language used was English. I and my siblings have a limited knowledge of the Larrakia language, to varying degrees.

## **THE PROJECT**

By 1990, the Larrakia language had all but disappeared. The project was initiated and has developed or unfolded in recognition of the social and cultural significance of language based knowledge and transactions. Expressed in the negative, the project is an attempt to halt the diminution of identity that accompanies and results from the loss or non-transference of language generationally.

The Language Project was prompted by the passing away of my mother. I was concerned that there were fewer and fewer language speakers left and what was happening to our inheritance, particularly our language. Without being aware of what was possible, it was clear that something had to be done before the remaining speakers passed away.

I approached a friend who introduced me to Dr Mark Harvey, who asked me why I wanted to do something in regard to preservation of the Larrakia language. He responded to my explanation by saying he would help.

From about 1990 to 1995, he volunteered many hours over weekends and night-times, when we would speak with people, recording information on tapes, checking places and pursuing aspects of words and their meanings with whomever and wherever necessary and possible.

This information gathered has been archived for its proper protection.

### **Procedures followed**

The initial task was to get words and information recorded on tape.

This can be done partly at people's residence.

Some of it must be recorded on site. Language that refers to particular places, that may be about a dreaming path for example, is often invoked and more clearly remembered on site.

More obviously, determination of the exact location of sites which have specific words associated with them, including but not limited to site and place names, requires all day excursions frequently. This has been arduous for the people with the knowledge as they are often elderly. The work required of the Aboriginal people with the language based knowledge being recorded and developed is frequently exhausting mentally as well as physically.

Planning of events, especially excursions, has to be flexible as arrangements are subject to sudden change.

Standard rates of pay for information in projects of this nature apply. During the voluntary phase of the project, we had to forego this and were able to obtain small

items for household use in lieu of payment, by arrangement with the people involved, being close family for me in most instances.

I have come to understand the fundamental requirement of checking of all primary information obtained through an independent source. This is not easy given the small number of speakers we have had to work with. Dr Harvey may wish to discuss this point further. It has unfolded recently in the project that some of the initial work done recording the location of particular places and sites and to a lesser extent their names appear inaccurate. Further checking work has had to be done in this instance. The project may thus have a secondary benefit for the work of the Northern Territory Place Names Committee.

The project management by committee is supported by the project coordination work I undertake.

### **THE ORIGIN of the present project**

In about 1998, I was involved in making submissions to the Commonwealth Government about its proposed response to the recommendations of the Inquiry into what is known as the Stolen Generations.

One of the four areas of government response to the *Bringing them home...* report from that Inquiry was to provide funds to ATSIC to administer language renewal programs involving languages affected by past practices of removal of Aboriginal children from their families.

ATSIC designed a program for renewal of languages and a submission to ATSIC was prepared in conjunction with Dr Harvey, that fitted very neatly with the program guidelines and purposes. As a result of the support of the local Regional Council of ATSIC, a funding allocation decision was made by the relevant national ATSIC program area. Those decisions now reside with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services.

The Larrakia language project has run for over eighteen months to date. It provides for Dr Harvey's secondment to the project and for project coordination, support and administration by me. It is awaiting continued allocation for completion.

I wish to state that I have acquired some understanding of the linguistic discipline from Mark and subsequently from FATSIL forums, FATSIL being the Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages. This has probably been necessary in order to shape the project appropriately and effectively and to support Mark's work. An example of needing to understand some aspects of linguistics has been in understanding the necessity to fully record and describe the language prior to engaging in making the results of the language project accessible to others. I'll develop this point a bit further later.

### **Framework**

The framework of the initial Larrakia Language project has four parts:

- A **Vocabulary**
- The development of **Dictionaries**
- The writing of a **Descriptive Grammar**
- A **Kinship Description**

The work entailed in achieving these project results is considerable and of an expert academic and technical nature.

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<p><b>Technical aspects of the project</b> MARK HARVEY</p>
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*Insert Dr Harvey's talk here.*

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## THE CONTINUING WORK

### **Support**

I wish to state the people and agencies that have been involved in the project:

- Larrakia people obviously, who own the project's core material
- Mark Harvey whose professional work, voluntary over many years, is the primary force of the project's conduct.
- Other Aboriginal people with knowledge of the language.
- The North Australian Research Unit of the Australian National University, for its recognition and support.
- ATSIC, in particular, for its recognition of the Larrakia language as appropriate for renewal and support.
- FATSIL (Federation of Aboriginal and TS Island languages)

### **The access and educational project**

Once the primary objectives of the language project have been completed, it is necessary to undertake a second project that can provide two results. They are:

- access protocols and
- learning curricula and learning materials for the range of interested parties. Apart from other Larrakia people, this range includes academic disciplines, other non-Larrakia people including and perhaps especially school children.

I'm informed that New South Wales is recognising that in addition to Indonesian, Japanese, French, German and other languages taught in schools, teaching of Aboriginal languages can be developed and practiced. Most States and Territories have a Languages Other Than English (LOTE) program for this purpose.

It is my intention to seek the support of the Territory Government, with the continuing support of ATSIC, and appropriate funding support of ATSIIS for this second stage of the full restoration of the Larrakia language. The policy of government and the programs of its agencies have recognised the value of this initiative and hopefully will continue to do so.

### **CONCLUSION**

In preparing this talk, I was taken by the irony in this piece of history. The change experienced by Larrakia, and similarly for other Aboriginal peoples', that had most impact on the loss of language was the removal of children or Stolen Generations policy. It has been the government response to the Stolen Generations Inquiry report that has provided the resources for ATSIC to support language restoration projects such as the Larrakia project.

I pay tribute to my grandmother and to the many people who strived to preserve their inheritance and who ensured that it continues through to their descendants born many years after their passing.