

# Language and Australian Aboriginal History; Anindilyakwa and English on Groote Eylandt

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## Abstract

The survival of the Anindilyakwa language of Groote Eylandt on its encounter with English is a story of Aboriginal people's adaptability and perseverance in the face of alternate visions for their island. When the Church Missionary Society arrived and, with Anindilyakwa people, established the Angurugu mission, an ongoing tension over which language would be the language of the land began: English or Anindilyakwa? This essay argues that, since that time, Anindilyakwa people have used strategies of both accommodation and strategic resistance to maintain the strength of their language, compelling even missionaries and government to adapt to Anindilyakwa interests. Australia's language histories such as this have implications for historians as we consider whose languages we listen to and remember. For historians, part of the ongoing process of reconciliation will be using Aboriginal languages as well as acknowledging and incorporating the stories of Australia's languages in our work.

*Ena ayaka eningarakburakba-kiya ngakwurra-langwa nara-wiya a-kirukwularrina  
aduwaba ngakwurra-langa ena ayakwa ... Ena Amurnduwurrariya amamurukwa-  
murra akina na-ngekburakjungwunuma ngakwurra-langwi-yada, angalyi-yada akwa  
warnumalyi-yada ngarraki-dirrburakinama.*

These words of ours are from the old days before we were born...The words come from our ceremonies to teach us about places and relationships.<sup>1</sup>

So the old man, Gula Lalara, nicknamed 'the Professor' of Groote Eylandt, explained the deep value of Anindilyakwa words, words of his ceremony, his country and his kin. Anindilyakwa is the language of the people of Groote Eylandt and Bickerton Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria.<sup>2</sup> In Anindilyakwa song and story, the language was carried to the island long ago by *Yandarnga* (Central Hill) on his journey from the mainland to where he now proudly sits at the centre of Groote Eylandt.<sup>3</sup> '*Jingura neñilwiljaga, jingura äna ajaugwa jaugulanwa neñadidjuwa äna,*' goes the story.<sup>4</sup> *Yandarnga* cast off stones – his sons – as he travelled and they spread that language so it covered the whole island.

Anindilyakwa is a fascinating language.<sup>5</sup> 'The world's hardest language,' some say.<sup>6</sup> Incredibly grammatically complex, anthropologist Peter Worsley called it 'one of the worst languages in Australia to learn.'<sup>7</sup> It was long believed to be a language isolate, that is, having no demonstrable relationship with other languages (like more famous language isolates such as Basque or Korean), but only recently linguists have claimed it is actually part of the Gunwinyguan family of

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<sup>1</sup> Gula Lalara in *Eningerribirra-langwa Jurra*, Angurugu: Groote Eylandt Linguistics, 1993, preface.

<sup>2</sup> Although there are fourteen Aboriginal clans living on Groote Eylandt and nearby Bickerton Island, the Anindilyakwa language they speak belongs to the Wanindilyakwa clan in particular. I use 'Anindilyakwa speakers' or 'Anindilyakwa people' to refer to all fourteen clans. The Bickerton clans are Wubuy speakers but have also learned Anindilyakwa.

<sup>3</sup> David H Turner, *Life Before Genesis, a Conclusion: an understanding of the significance of Australian Aboriginal culture*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan 1985, 72–73.

<sup>4</sup> 'The Anindilyakwa language, the sons took it, this language of ours, they spread it everywhere this one.' David H. Turner, *Life before Genesis, a Conclusion: An Understanding of the Significance of Australian Aboriginal Culture* (P. Lang, 1985), 72–73.

<sup>5</sup> Anindilyakwa can also be spelled 'Enindhilyakwa' and was spelled 'Anindilyaugwa' during the 1950s and 1960s.

<sup>6</sup> Bill Cope, 'The language of forgetting; a short history of the word' in Morag Fraser (ed) *Seams of Light; Best Antipodean Essays*, St Leonards: Allen & Unwin 1998, 204.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Worsley & Martin Edward Thomas. *Peter Worsley interviewed by Martin Thomas*, 2010

Arnhem Land.<sup>8</sup> Nearly every Anindilyakwa word ends in the vowel 'a', giving the language a beautiful softness which makes the words wonderfully singable. Little children speak it, so it has good chances of survival, for now.

In September 2012, on the other side of Australia in Canberra, the House of Representatives tabled its report on indigenous languages, *Our Land Our Languages*.<sup>9</sup> It reminded us that just as 'terra nullius' was a fiction, monolingual Australia is a myth. It is a myth that says 'only Standard Australian English can benefit a person' and 'English is *the* language of this land.' The report urged Australians to begin to shed the language myth and see Indigenous Australian languages as equally valid in Australia today as part of reconciliation.

My contribution is to suggest that part of acknowledging the value of Indigenous Australian languages is acknowledging that they also have a part in Australia's history. Language is ever-present in histories of intercultural engagement or contact because language defines communities.<sup>10</sup> Language is political, it has been used to include, to exclude, to assert and construct identities and diminish others. Indigenous Australian languages, like all languages, have histories. Their presence shaped encounters between indigenous people and English speakers. They are not mere relics of an ancient era, artefacts for linguists' libraries. Nor are they destined to be swept away by English as if their only history were one of their inevitable passing away. Many languages are lost. Some 'sleep', awaiting their resurrection by language revivalists. Others live. They live on the adaptability, innovation and perseverance of their speakers. This, I shall argue, is evident in stories of the survival of the Anindilyakwa language on its encounter with English. Australian language histories as these have implications for historians as we consider whose languages we listen to and remember.

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<sup>8</sup> Marie-Elaine van Egmond, *Anindilyakwa Phonology, Morphosyntax and Genetic Position*, PhD thesis, Sydney University, 2012, 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> Shayne Neumann, *Our Land Our Languages Language Learning in Indigenous Communities. Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities*. (House of Representatives. Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Ostler *Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World*, New York: Harper Collins, 2005, 559.

I am no expert in Anindilyakwa language or culture. I speak English. I first set foot on Groote Eylandt a couple of years ago, a bewildered student from Canberra, in a foreign place. I cling to my language CD and dictionary (products of the missionaries) trying to hear the language. I get by. I know enough to ask in Anindilyakwa, 'ngambuwa?', 'where are you going?' the closest you get to 'hello, how are you?' (Anindilyakwa speakers enquire about your travels, not your feelings). But I am utterly dependent on the hospitality of Anindilyakwa speakers, to accommodate me on their country by speaking English and to share some of their history with me, an outsider.

Anindilyakwa speakers have been translating language and culture for centuries. Nunggubuyu people (literally 'people who speak Wubuy'<sup>11</sup>) also live on Groote Eylandt, having come before the mission time, bringing their own ceremonies and songs from the mainland. Most Groote Eylandters have long operated at least bilingually, using both Wubuy and Anindilyakwa. The two languages share the title of being, most likely, the most grammatically complex Australian languages.<sup>12</sup>

The Macassans also journeyed to the island to harvest trepang, trading with Anindilyakwa people for centuries.<sup>13</sup> They traded for fish hooks, glass, cloth, tobacco, rice and alcohol.<sup>14</sup> Most crewmembers were Macassarese speakers from Makassar in Sulawesi but crewmembers also came from Borneo, Timor, Java, New Guinea and North Australia.<sup>15</sup> Some Anindilyakwa people travelled widely with the Macassans on their journeys, learning the Malay Creole of the crew.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> 'Nunggubuyu' is a contraction of 'nung' meaning 'person' and 'Wubuy'. Victoria Burbank, *Expressions of Anger and Aggression in an Australian Aboriginal Community*, PhD Thesis, Rutgers University 1980, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Collin Yallop, *Australian Aboriginal Languages*, London: Andre Deutsch 1982, 40.

<sup>13</sup> The Macassans had been trading with Anindilyakwa speakers since at least the 1700s, though some archaeologists believe they began coming much earlier. Anne Clarke, *Winds of Change: An Archaeology of Contact in the Groote Eylandt Archipelago Northern Australia*, PhD Thesis, Australian National University 1994, 14.

<sup>14</sup> Campbell Macknight, 'Macassans and Aborigines' *Oceania* 43 (4), 1972, 305–306.

<sup>15</sup> James Urry and Michael Walsh, 'The Lost "Macassar Language" of Northern Australia' *Aboriginal History* 5, 1981, 94.

<sup>16</sup> John W Harris, *Language Contact, Pidgins and the Emergence of Kriol in the Northern Territory: Theoretical and Historical Perspectives*, PhD Thesis, University of Queensland 1985, 114.; Urry & Walsh, 'The Lost "Macassar Language"', 94–95.

Anindilyakwa speakers incorporated Macassan words into their language; jurra (from 'surat', meaning paper), dambakwa (tobacco), waja (sugar), djara (from 'djarung', meaning needle).<sup>17</sup>

Next came the missionaries. This is where a story of the negotiation and struggle for Anindilyakwa's continuing legitimacy begins. Unlike the Macassans, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionaries, settled on the island, bringing English, a new culture and new religion with them. The missionaries' first exploratory expedition to the island was in 1916. They examined the island, taking turns to rename its features after friends and relatives. One literally made his mark on the island when he renamed *Yandarrnga* (Central Hill), 'Mt Ellie', in honour of his wife, cutting her name into the rock with an axe. The 'carving improved both the stone and the atlas, for now this central hill has a name,' as if an Anindilyakwa name were no name at all.<sup>18</sup> The myth of *terra nullius* had cleared the landscape, not only of people, but of placenames and language. For him, the atlas was a blank page to fill with English. The missionaries agreed on the Emerald River at Yadigba as the location for a 'half-caste mission' and in August 1921 commenced construction of their mission. During the Second World War, they abandoned this site and established a new mission to Anindilyakwa people. Their endeavour to rename and translate Groote Eylandt into something they could understand and accept as part of their vision for Australia began.

Jabani Lalara told the story of the origins of the mission for the Angurugu school kids.<sup>19</sup> It was translated into English by the women of Groote Eylandt Linguistics Centre for the benefit of us English-speakers.

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<sup>17</sup> Judith Stokes, Macassan Words which have come into Anindilyakwa, Judith Stokes Material, MS 3518, Box 4, Folder 25, Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra (hereafter AIATSIS); Macknight, 'Macassans and Aborigines'.

<sup>18</sup> Keith Cole, *Groote Eylandt Pioneer: A Biography of the Reverend Hubert Ernest de Mey Warren, Pioneer Missionary and Explorer Among the Aborigines of Arnhem Land*, Melbourne: Church Missionary Historical Publications 1971, 25.

<sup>19</sup> *Akina yada nangajinuma war akwa wuyarrirda aruma nangajukwama akina Yadikba Mission. Ababurna alikira wurrariyakama wurrukulya kembirra wuyarrirda nuwarriyakama akina. Kemba narralarrka wurrakina wurrabiyarbuwa warnungkwarba biya nuwilyaba Wuarrmarrba akwa nuwilyaba Wurramara akwa nuwilyaba Lalara akwa wurrukula warnungkwarba Numbulwar-langwa wurr-Murrungun nilikena-murru-manja numangkadirra nenumikirra Bill Hodge. Adinubwiya nalikenuma Mebirruwerruwa biya akina akungwa narrilabena-manja akina eningaba wurrakina nalikenuma adalyuma-languwa. Yakwujina Angurrkwa mudalyuma warnungkwarba nangwanja akwa anlyelyumbukweyina ngamanja warnikingekburaka angalya*

CMS and the local people did a lot of talking and they used the older half-caste kids to translate Anindilyakwa to English and vice versa to decide to look for a better place to live.

The men that went on the search were from four tribes, one from Wurramarra, Wurramara, Lalara and some men from the Murrungun tribe and Bill Hodge.

The men stopped at Angurkwa, the mouth of the river, and discussed if this was to be the place. No, when the Yinungkwura (North West Wind) blows, the water becomes salty, so they continued up to Mungwardinamanja.

Because it was so difficult for the white fella to say that name, they took the name from the river mouth. Mungwardinamaja is where they're going to stay. So they had to change the name from Mungwardinamanja to Angurkwa so the white fella could pronounce it. The old men took the river mouth's name Angurkwa.

After that they went back to Emerald River and told the people about the new place that they found which is now 'Angurugu'.<sup>20</sup>

Anindilyakwa and Nunggubuyu men guided the floundering missionaries to an appropriate place. According to Jabani, at the establishment of the mission Anindilyakwa speakers sanctioned its construction, asserted their ownership over the mission and the persistence of their structures of decision making in the new mission context. They chose Mungwardinamanja, but agreed to call it 'Angurkwa'. Anindilyakwa people translated themselves to facilitate a productive relationship with the missionaries. When the white fella could not pronounce 'Mungwardinamanja', 'Angurkwa' sufficed. Perhaps the old men were simply exasperated at

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*enikadawa akena akina akungwa amakarduma, kembirra, wurrakina nalikena abalkayuwa adalyuma emikirra Yinuma. Akwa nalyanguwerribikajunwuna warnikingekburaka enikaduwa angalya-da yakwujina. Ena angalya emikirra Mungwardinamanja akina narrumanguma akina adalyuma-langwa kajungwa wurumangkadirra warnikiyengbija-yada wurrakina. Kembirra wurrakina nalawurradina Yadikba-wa akwa narrmaka warnumamalya-manja akina-langwa enikaduwa angalya ebina narrakburrangama enena angalaya Angurugu ngarrambilyama.* Used with permission of Jabani Lalara and Groote Eylandt Linguistics.

<sup>20</sup> Jabani Lalara, 'Looking for a New Place to Live' transcribed and translated by Groote Eylandt Linguistics, 2012. Used with permission.

the missionaries' clumsy pronunciation and poor memory for Anindilyakwa words. Willingness to compromise on this, however, shows their ability to incorporate these new missionaries into their world. Later, 'Angurkwa' morphed into 'Angurugu' as the name became further anglicised. Eventually the missionaries forgot that it ever was Mungwardinamanja.

Many Anindilyakwa people view the construction of the mission as an Anindilyakwa project. They incorporated the CMS designs into their own social fabric, taking ownership of the mission. Jabani also tells the story of how the mission church came to rest at its site at the centre of the mission.

That [missionary] man was standing here, and the old man [Old Bill] was standing here with the wheelbarrow, the wheelbarrow. And he said, 'we're going to find a place for a church.' And he said, 'Yeah? Well where?' And the old fella, he said, 'well I've got a stone here. If I throw that stone, if we see that stone where it's gonna landed, that's where the church, we're gonna build church.' So that man, Dick Harris, he threw the stone from here to there. And that stone, it's landed there.'<sup>21</sup>

I heard this story again and again from the old men. It is important. It was the stone, something belonging to the land, which settled on a site for the church. The story of the church's foundation mirrors, almost, the story of old *Yandarrnga* (Central Hill) who cast off rocks which then became the landmarks of the island. Yandarrnga's stones spread Anindilyakwa words across the country, but this stone spread a different 'Word'. Jabani's story shows how the new Angurugu church was woven into the stories about Groote Eylandt, featuring Anindilyakwa people and symbols. Anindilyakwa people interpreted events differently to Europeans, translating as they went, asserting their agency in ways missionaries may not have perceived.

Though the mission was built by Anindilyakwa speakers with their consent, they were not fully informed about the intentions of the CMS and what this could mean for their language. They

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<sup>21</sup> Jabani Lalara, oral history interview with author, 15 June 2012.

knew about the CMS mission on Roper River and how the youth there now spoke 'pidgin' (Kriol). But they could not have known about an evolving doctrine of 'assimilation' which would have them transformed into English speaking citizens of Australia.

CMS authorities embraced assimilation in the early years of the mission. During the construction of Angurugu, anthropologist A.P. Elkin published *Citizenship for the Aborigines* affirming that Aboriginal people could and should 'make progress towards civilisation and citizenship'.<sup>22</sup> Its first constitution for Aboriginal missions in 1944, written with Elkin's assistance, conveyed assimilation as the process by which Aboriginal people would come to function as equal citizens on white terms in white society. They proposed a period of 'development' in a location 'segregated from undesirable influences and contacts' where missionaries could work in evangelism, education, medicine, industry and agriculture. Through this, the CMS envisioned that Anindilyakwa people would one day 'take their place in the general Australian life...in our civilised communities.'<sup>23</sup> The mission was to be a kind of haven where 'Stone Age' men and women could be prepared to resist the coming temptations of 'civilisation'.

The CMS missions worked towards their vision of assimilation through practical measures: training people in agriculture, carpentry and domestic work. They 'detached'<sup>24</sup> wives, preventing polygyny. They brought children into dormitories and marched them to and from the school and the church. They matched Aboriginal 'house-girls' to missionaries' wives, requiring them to cook and clean, iron and wash. They established compulsory church attendance so that everyone would hear the Word of God.

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<sup>22</sup> Adolphus Peter Elkin, *Citizenship for the Aborigines: a National Aboriginal Policy* (Australasian publishing co. pty. ltd., 1944), 30.

<sup>23</sup> Constitution and Policy, May 1944, Secretary for Aborigines General Files, MS 6040, Box 6, Mitchell Library, Sydney (hereafter ML).

<sup>24</sup> Groote Eylandt Station, September 1945, Groote Eylandt Mission Reports 1939-1954, Northern Territory Records Service (hereafter NTRS) 1098, Box 1, Northern Territory Archives Service, Darwin (hereafter NTAS).



Most importantly for this story of the language, to be a fully functioning citizen, the missionaries required literacy in English. As the General Secretary of the CMS put it, 'there can be no future development of the Aborigine from a stone age man into a twentieth century citizen unless he can learn some English.'<sup>25</sup> How could a true citizen 'vote at an election for parliament [if] they cannot read or write?'<sup>26</sup> CMS policy made no mention of eliminating Anindilyakwa. Rather, it stated that missionaries should try to learn a 'native language' as is consistent with the traditional protestant commitment to the vernacular (it was, after all, an article of faith for Anglicans that the church use 'such a Tongue as the people understandeth'<sup>27</sup>). Nonetheless, the demands of assimilation took priority over the vernacular since, unlike overseas missions, Aboriginal missions, located on 'Australian soil', ministered to future citizens of the nation. The CMS insisted Aboriginal people be 'trained as far as possible to speak correct English.'<sup>28</sup> Later, in 1964, the CMS rearticulated its policy 'fluency and familiarity with English, as the language of Australia must be aimed at for all the people and corrupted forms of English should be discouraged.'<sup>29</sup> By 'corrupted' they meant Aboriginal Englishes or Kriol.

Not all missionaries agreed, one remarked it was only 'the old die hards' who believed 'Aborigines had to learn English if they were to survive and be assimilated.'<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, in mission practice, the 'old die-hards' had their way. To most missionaries, it was a matter of belonging to Australia. English meant opportunities and acceptance. Presenting Aboriginal people to white Australia as fluent, literate English speakers was a crucial component of their task of transforming Aboriginal people into citizens. For them, English was also necessary if Groote Eylandt was to realise itself as Australian soil. Moreover, for those who believed

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<sup>25</sup> Max Warren, 'Lonely Arnhem Land,' *Open Door*, 1 February 1950.

<sup>26</sup> J B Montgomerie 'That they might have life' CMS League of Youth 1958, Publications Featuring Arnhem Land Missions, Box 1, NTRS 1105, NTAS.

<sup>27</sup> Article XXIV of The Articles of Religion, London 1562.

<sup>28</sup> The Church Missionary Society of Australia and Tasmania Missions to Australian Aborigines Constitution and Policy, May 1944, Secretary for Aborigines General Files, MS 6040, Box 6, ML.

<sup>29</sup> Statement of Policy – Council August 1962, Secretary for Aborigines General Files, MS 6040, Box 6, ML.

<sup>30</sup> Earl Hughes in John Harris *We Wish We'd Done More: Ninety Years of CMS and Aboriginal Issues in North Australia*, Adelaide: Openbook 1998, 147.

Aboriginal languages had 'no future' anyway, the swifter the introduction of eloquent English, the better.<sup>31</sup>

But English could never simply replace Anindilyakwa for Groote Eylandt and its people. What could the English language say about ceremonies, places and relationships? For all the translating and compromise, there was an underlying tension. Both the English speaking missionaries and Anindilyakwa speakers held that theirs was the language of the land. For Anindilyakwa people, the Anindilyakwa language was irreplaceable. Groote Eylandt's songs, stories and ceremonies belonged in Anindilyakwa from 'the old days' and Anindilyakwa was embedded in the landscape and belonged in the mouths of its people.

The school was the heart of the tension. According to the Commonwealth, English was to radiate out into the community from the school. It was intended as the 'integral part' of the mission.<sup>32</sup> Commonwealth policy was that all instruction be in English.<sup>33</sup> As the syllabus insisted:

It cannot be too strongly emphasised that instruction in 'English' will not be confined to formal lessons in language. Every part of the curriculum and almost every lesson should be partly directed towards the acquisition of skill in the use and comprehension of English.<sup>34</sup>

Policymakers considered Aboriginal languages not merely a distraction but counterproductive. As late as 1969, Welfare Branch presumed that 'remedial work' might be necessary due to the 'inhibitory influences' of 'bilingualism in education'.<sup>35</sup> Teachers had to report whether, how

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<sup>31</sup> Alf Wilson. CMS SA Box 38, Aborigines, Aborigines 18 January, 1963.

<sup>32</sup> Education of Native Children, 10 October 1949, Education of Aborigines in the Northern Territory – Policy in Regard to, Part 1, R.C. Mills, A431 1951/560, National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA).

<sup>33</sup> Letter from Paul Hasluck to Rev Clint, 22 May 1956, Education of Aborigines, A452 1956/168, NAA.

<sup>34</sup> Provisional Syllabus for use in Aboriginal Schools in the Northern Territory, 23 June 1950, Education of Aborigines in Northern Territory – Policy in regard to, Part 1, Commonwealth Office of Education, A431 1951/560, NAA.

<sup>35</sup> E P Milliken 'Report of Research Sponsored or Conducted by the Welfare Branch in the period June 1967-June 1969,' Missions/Administrations Conference, June 1969, Records relating to Aboriginal Affairs, NTRS 56, Box 4, NTAS

often and for what reason they used Aboriginal words.<sup>36</sup> The Commonwealth was not even 'paying lip service to the vernacular' but was 'definitely and actively opposed to the vernacular,' lamented CMS Aborigines Committee member and linguist Arthur Capell in 1964. 'Government policy looks forward to the loss of Aboriginal languages, so that the Aborigines may be "assimilated."' <sup>37</sup>

CMS people held various positions with regards to language. The Sydney-based Aborigines Secretary, JB Montgomerie, paid lip service to the need to use Aboriginal languages and acknowledged that Anindilyakwa people 'would appreciate it.' <sup>38</sup> Yet when colleagues members suggested more use of Anindilyakwa in church or school, his answer was always that 'the Department', the 'Director of Native Affairs' or the 'government' prevented it.<sup>39</sup> Given his missions were perpetually under-staffed, it seems Montgomerie found the government policy provided welcome relief: at least his missionaries would not have to take on language study as well.

On the other hand, young female school teachers, Judith Stokes and Norma Farley, were among the most eager to use Aboriginal languages, as seems to have been a trend across a number of Aboriginal missions.<sup>40</sup> Teachers were the most entangled in an Anindilyakwa-speaking world and perhaps, through their daily interactions, Anindilyakwa-speaking children and parents convinced the mission teachers that using their language would be the best approach. Still, the mission teachers felt strong pressure to promote English according to what they called 'the Welfare Department's rules.' <sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Education Circulars – General Management of Commonwealth and Mission Schools, 1 July 1959, Welfare Branch Annual Reports 1959-60, NTRS 56, Box 9, NTAS.

<sup>37</sup> Arthur Capell 'Linguistic change in Australia' in Arnold R Pilling & Richard A Waterman (eds) *Diprotodon to Detribalization: Studies of Change Among Australian Aborigines*, East Lansing: Michigan State University 1970, 247.

<sup>38</sup> Groote Eylandt Mission Minutes of Staff Meeting held 22 April 1955, NTRS 868 Box 10, NTAS.

<sup>39</sup> Minutes of Meeting of Aborigines Committee held 11 July 1947, MSS 6040/4 CMS Aborigines Committee Minutes 1945-1950, ML; Groote Eylandt Mission Minutes of Staff Meeting held 22 April 1955, NTRS 868 Box 10, NTAS.

<sup>40</sup> For example, Beulah Lowe and Milingimbi mission and Nancy Sheppard at Ernabella were early adopters of Aboriginal languages in the school context under assimilation policy.

<sup>41</sup> Letter from CMS Secretary for Aborigines to the Head Teachers of CMS Aboriginal Missions, 5 May 1965, Judith Stokes Material, MS 3518, Box 3, Folder 1c, AIATSIS.

Despite the 'rules', Anindilyakwa was always present in Angurugu School. The CMS's inability to staff its schools fully presented an opportunity to Anindilyakwa speakers. A number of Anindilyakwa individuals pursued roles as teachers, so there were always Anindilyakwa teaching assistants who interpreted for the children. The missionary teachers were grateful, finding that the kids concentrated better when they heard their own language. Seeing its utility, Stokes even used Anindilyakwa in the classroom.

When we used to get silly she said '*nara n'awilyamba*' 'don't fight.' When we used to get silly, you know, '*nara aruwariya eningaba nungguwa*' 'you stay good and don't be bad.' When she was in the classroom she used to speak Anindilyakwa.<sup>42</sup>

Given the tensions between policies coming from Sydney and Canberra and Angurugu's classroom practice, a common refrain in the mission staff minutes in the 1950s was the 'dilemma' over language in the classroom. The kids learn better in Anindilyakwa, but what about English? What about government policy? What about resources?

Outside the school, missionaries used English, expecting Anindilyakwa speakers to pick it up. Most argued that since Aboriginal people supposedly possessed greater linguistic talent, it was simpler for them to learn English. This would 'take the pressure off' the missionaries.<sup>43</sup>

Anindilyakwa speakers, however, could not be forced to operate in English. Continuing to speak Anindilyakwa even within the mission was an assertion that the mission was not owned nor even controlled by the missionaries. It remained Anindilyakwa country. The dormitory girls actively maintained their language when they could not hear it from family:

We spoke our language ... Our language was maintained, when we were sort of hung around amongst one another. But when we went to the church to congregate and the young women wanted to say, to talk after church to their parents or anything, all

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<sup>42</sup> She was Judith Stokes. Rhoda Dugururru Lalara, oral History interview with author 23 April 2012. Anindilyakwa transcription with the assistance of Elizabeth McCoy.

<sup>43</sup> Transcript of interview, 30 April 1975, Miss Lois Reid, Box 42, CMS SA.

we did was go to church and then we went our separate ways. We only saw grandparents come up maybe sometimes on the weekend.<sup>44</sup>

Not even the closely watched dormitories ever became English-only spaces. An old Nunggubuyu woman told me that this was where she first learned Anindilyakwa: in the girls' dormitory. They learned English according to the degree to which it served their interests and to which they had opportunity to learn. Various levels of English competency could be used to control one's engagement with the mission and achieve the desired benefits from missionaries or later from BHP. Some, such as Nandjiwarra Amagula, pursued fluency and literacy in English and received praise and privileges from missions.<sup>45</sup> Others, it seems, did not. The missionaries believed that Anindilyakwa speakers who could not read in English had deliberately chosen not to learn.<sup>46</sup> Language 'barriers' can be used to control interactions and to limit exchange. I have sometimes wondered myself, when talking with Anindilyakwa speakers about their history, if at times they've chosen to not quite understand or not quite hear my questions. Perhaps they did understand, or perhaps I was asking a wrong question. Likewise, during mission times it seemed that some resolved to learn little as a means of evading missionary authority and teaching. Sometimes it was preferable not to 'have ears to hear' what missionaries had to say.

Anindilyakwa also offered an escape from the missionary 'gaze'; it was empowering. The language barrier meant that the missions could never become totalising institutions.

Anindilyakwa speakers maintained their own sphere of operation within the mission through language. Even little children could overcome a missionary through language; they revelled in the old trick of feeding the most hated teacher dirty words, telling her they meant 'hello, how are you?'<sup>47</sup> Missionaries were reminded daily by Anindilyakwa sounds that despite any work

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<sup>44</sup> Nancy Damarrdada Lalara, oral History Interview by author, 29 April 2012.

<sup>45</sup> R.B. Dent 'Angurugu Groote Eylandt Building Report October 1965' NTRS 1098, Box 2, NTAS.

<sup>46</sup> D.N. Farley & J.Stokes 'Groote Eylandt Mission Reports for Month ending 31<sup>st</sup> July 1952.' NTRS 1098, Box 1, 1939-1954, NTAS.

<sup>47</sup> Nancy Damarrdada Lalara, oral History Interview by author, 29 April 2012.

regime or discipline they imposed, they remained foreigners on someone else's land, never fully aware of what people were thinking or feeling.

Towards the late 1960s the mission policy changed. The CMS recognised both the value of Anindilyakwa language to its speakers and the limitations of their English-only approach. Years of experience with Anindilyakwa people convinced missionaries that assimilation would depend on a degree of accommodation of Anindilyakwa preferences and even a hybridisation of cultures, particularly in church. As one missionary explained in 1965, although English was 'natural in a Government policy of Assimilation... nothing can be the medium of truth to a man's mind better than his own tongue'; Aboriginal languages were needed.<sup>48</sup> The administrator of the Northern Territory, Harry Giese, softened his previous resistance to bilingual education in the mid-1960s after facing increasing pressure from educationalists and missionary organisations. After Capell's consistent lobbying, Giese agreed to subsidise a CMS linguist in 1965, and conceded that 'some teaching in the vernacular' might be beneficial.<sup>49</sup> The belief was that education in the vernacular would aid English literacy and thereby promote assimilation. Soon after, the CMS employed Judith Stokes as a missionary linguist. Assimilation on Groote Eylandt eventually had to make room for the continuing presence of Anindilyakwa. Without rejecting assimilation, the CMS incorporated Anindilyakwa language into its mission project. Suddenly all missionaries were strongly encouraged to learn Anindilyakwa and Anindilyakwa speakers worked with Stokes and began translating Christian texts and songs as well as translating their own stories into English. For missionaries, this translation also meant relinquishing control of their message and accepting that Christianity would be reinterpreted in Anindilyakwa ways.

Some missionaries were uncomfortable; attempting to learn Anindilyakwa meant risking that a missionary could be a failure. Rumours of compulsory language exams (as was already the case

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<sup>48</sup> Barry Butler "What shall they Read" *Open Door*, July 1965, 14-15.

<sup>49</sup> Minutes of the Church Missionary Society Aborigines Committee meeting held 20 October 1965, MSS 6040/5 CMS Aborigines Committee Minutes 1960-1968, ML.

at Milingimbi, a neighbouring Methodist mission) terrified some Angurugu missionaries.<sup>50</sup> Some made a real effort to learn and were frustrated at how little time they had for study.<sup>51</sup> For others, their slowness and ignorance – all the things, which English-speakers typically accused Aboriginal people of – would be exposed in language lessons. Missionaries feared Anindilyakwa speakers would laugh at their broken attempts at language. Linguists reminded the missionaries ‘one should laugh along at one’s own mistakes’ but this didn’t always come naturally to missionaries who had become used to being the ones who ‘know best.’<sup>52</sup> I wonder, is the hesitance of English speaking Australia to learn Aboriginal languages today based on the same fear?

By Gough Whitlam’s election, the Anindilyakwa language team had translated such a wealth of material and had such skilled teaching assistants that Angurugu was among five schools chosen to commence bilingual education: a great achievement. But the experiment was short-lived and suspended in 1976. Bilingual education was implemented so rapidly that teaching materials were written on the go. It suffered from lack of language resources and a high turnover of teachers. Most damaging was a squabble between linguists over orthography, trying to squeeze Anindilyakwa sounds into a Latin alphabet. The spelling saga continued for over a decade, holding back a sustained language programme in school.<sup>53</sup> Anindilyakwa speakers have struggled on despite the linguists’ debates and uncooperative principals.

When we had this bilingual happening at the school... the principal, he didn’t like the way that we were doing that. You know what? All those papers and the books that we did, all ended up at the dump...Most of the books that were in our language were at the dump.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> AIATSIS MS 3518 Groote Eylandt Collection, Box 3 Judith Stokes Material, Folder 2, Letter from Judith Stokes to Earl Hughes and Peter Carol *Re Staff Language Learning*. 6 January 1970.

<sup>51</sup> David Woodbridge, ‘Angurugu Groote Eylandt Chaplaincy Report’ June 1970, Groote Eylandt Mission Reports 1970-1973, NTRS 1098, Box 2, NTAS.

<sup>52</sup> Report of the Linguists Conference, December 1971, MS 3518, Box 3, Folder 7, AIATSIS.

<sup>53</sup> Bill Cope, ‘The language of forgetting’, 207.

<sup>54</sup> Rhoda Dugururru Lalara, oral History Interview by Author, 23 April 2012.

More recently, in 2008, the Commonwealth Government introduced the National Assessment Program (NAPLAN). In September 2008 the first NAPLAN results were released. Remote indigenous schools performed poorly. Then, in a classic knee-jerk move, in October the Northern Territory's Minister for Education introduced a new policy; all schools would be English-only for the first four hours of the day. They could use local language for the hour after lunch, that is, if the kids even came back in the afternoon. Never mind the long-established consensus among linguists that kids who learn to read their own language first will read English better.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, at Angurugu, Anindilyakwa speakers, ever innovating, found ways to use their language.

Yes, that's what the government said, but the new principal said that it doesn't matter about what the government said, it's your school, tell the stories in your language. There'll be two cultures there. So young children they get the culture. In other places they're losing their language and it's a bit hard.<sup>56</sup>

The First Four Hours policy was dropped in the lead up to the 2012 Northern Territory election, but the change was made quietly: people on Groote didn't hear about it.<sup>57</sup> The *Our Land our Languages* Report found that the surest way to increase school attendance in indigenous communities is bilingual education.<sup>58</sup> Currently the attendance rate at Angurugu Community School is around 37 per cent.<sup>59</sup> The kids aren't learning English or Anindilyakwa at school. They're not in school.

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<sup>55</sup> Jane Simpson, Jo Caffery & Patrick McConvell, *Gaps in Australia's Indigenous Language Policy: Dismantling Bilingual Education in the Northern Territory*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2009.

<sup>56</sup> Rhoda Dugurrru Lalara, oral history Interview by Author, 23 April 2012

<sup>57</sup> Greg Dickson 'Ngurrju! Manymak! Pupuni! NT drops First Four Hours in English policy' *Fully (sic) Crikey's Language Blog*, 11 July 2012. Accessed 22 March 2013. Available from: <http://blogs.crikey.com.au/fullysic/2012/07/11/ngurrju-manyamak-pupuni-nt-drops-first-four-hours-in-english-policy/>

<sup>58</sup> Neumann, *Our Land Our Languages Language Learning in Indigenous Communities. Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities*.

<sup>59</sup> 'Angurugu School, Angurugu NT' *My School*. Accessed 22 March 2013. Available from: <http://www.myschool.com.au/>



I talked to Anindilyakwa speakers about how they feel about language these days. They see that their relatives on the mainland at Numbulwar are losing their languages and worry. Wubuy is only spoken by the old people now. Anindilyakwa speakers did not face mass displacement or dispersion on colonisation as other language groups did. They have been better placed to keep their language strong. Living on islands and on their own country helped, as did the fact that the mission community used only a few languages (Anindilyakwa, English, Wubuy and Kriol). Numbulwar was also a CMS mission. Though it was a mission primarily for Wubuy speaking Nunggubuyu people, it was built on Wandarang land. With the land rights movement of the 1970s, many Kriol-speaking Wandarang people returned to their country and Kriol overtook Wubuy as the dominant language.<sup>60</sup>

In other places, numerous language communities live together. Jane Simpson has shown how difficult it can be even for those committed to keeping their language strong to use it day to day in places where many languages are spoken, where older speakers are frail, and where Englishes are dominant. Young Aboriginal people see that English is the language of those with money and institutional authority and face strong pressures to speak it.<sup>61</sup> Seeing their relative disempowerment compared with English speakers they conclude that their own languages are less useful. But, as Simpson demonstrates, these languages are only appear less useful because English-speakers make them so; in interactions with English speakers, the onus is nearly always on the speakers of indigenous languages to accommodate English speakers.<sup>62</sup>

Anindilyakwa speakers do not want to let their language weaken. The women who work at Groote Eylandt Linguistics are very proud of their work for the school and community, translating and producing language materials.

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<sup>60</sup> J. Sandefur, "Kriol of North Australia; A Language Coming of Age," *Work Papers of SILAAB: Series A* 10 (1986): 63.

<sup>61</sup> Jane Simpson, "What's Done and What's Said: Language Attitudes, Public Language Activities and Everyday Talk in the Northern Territory of Australia," *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 34, no. 4 (2013): 390.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 395.

The job that I'm doing is very interesting, helping the community just to make the language stronger, not to fail on speaking in our language. I've seen some other communities, they are losing their language...we don't want to do that.<sup>63</sup>

But what about English, is there a place for English on Groote Eylandt?

Yeah, it's important ...but then English is everywhere. English is all over the world, but our language is in only certain areas and we want that. That's why some of us live in towns and cities but we still talk to our children in our language. We like them to learn about white cultures too, but not forget about ours.<sup>64</sup>

English is everywhere, but Anindilyakwa is for Groote Eylandt. The politics of language and land rights intersect. In many Aboriginal cultures, language identifies where you belong and to whom you belong. Linguist Nick Evans has called Aboriginal languages a 'passport'; the speakers of languages will be connected to the creative beings of the land, to the ancestors, to their songs, and so have a right to be on that country.<sup>65</sup> Recognising a right to language is recognising a right to country and identity. On Groote Eylandt, Anindilyakwa is the language of places, of songs and of stories. Only Anindilyakwa can connect speakers and their land in this way.

The missionaries and bureaucrats who introduced English had a vision of granting Aboriginal people the chance to operate as equal citizens in Australia, and of realising their land as part of a united, 'civilised' English speaking Australia. But it is also Aboriginal land. It is Anindilyakwa country. Perhaps we English speakers who talk about land rights need to do some hard work, be willing to be beginners, and start learning language. Perhaps as historians we need to take seriously the value of learning Australian languages. After all it is 'normal' to learn a European or Asian language when studying these histories, what makes Australia so different? Indeed, some historians of Aboriginal Australia are increasingly learning Pitjantjatjara, Yolngu Matha

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<sup>63</sup> Rhoda Dugururru Lalara oral history Interview by Author, 23 April 2012

<sup>64</sup> Kathleen Mamarika oral history interview by author, 5 September 2012

<sup>65</sup> Nicholas Evans, *Dying Words: Endangered Languages and What they have to Tell Us*, Malden: Wiley-Blackwell 2010, 8.

and Anindilyakwa. Increasingly, Australian historians are engaging with non-English language sources, including oral histories in languages other than English, although much more needs to be done. As one woman told me, we need to learn language to recognise properly both her history and her land.

I expect your people to try and understand our language and try and speak it too so you can understand it ... Because early settlers come to our country, our land and they expected us to learn theirs and speak theirs, so I expect them to do the same.<sup>66</sup>

This woman knows her land and language have a history. Linguists tell me that what people believe about their language's history actually shapes how and whether they use it – history and language are dynamically connected.<sup>67</sup> For this woman, the 'settlers' expected English so now she expects visitors to use Anindilyakwa. Part of acknowledging the continuing impact of colonisation in Australia is to acknowledge that Australia has this language history. To recognise Indigenous Australian languages as real languages with a valuable part in 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia, we need to recognise that Indigenous languages did not simply 'die out', nor are they necessarily in the process of doing so, but have a history. Most of all, to recognise that Aboriginal languages have a history is also to recognise the possibility that they also have a future. Even languages pronounced 'dead' are now being revived, given the assistance of governments and educational institutions.<sup>68</sup>

Anindilyakwa's history of English language contact is happy compared to stories of hundreds of other Australian languages. Anindilyakwa enjoyed physical isolation from European colonists for many years. Its survival on its encounter with English has been a story of Anindilyakwa speaker's flexible adaptation as well as, at times, their strategic resistance. Anindilyakwa people have been willing to learn English as they saw necessary, but also found ways of protecting

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<sup>66</sup> Kathleen Mamarika oral history interview by author, 5 September 2012

<sup>67</sup> Maïa Ponsonnet, "'Brainwash from English?': Barunga Kriol Speakers' Views on Their Own Language," *Anthropological Linguistics* 52, no. 2 (2010): 163, doi:10.1353/anl.2010.0010.

<sup>68</sup> For example, once dead Kurna language is now taught at TAFE in Adelaide.

Anindilyakwa-only spheres of life. The mission was characterised by ongoing negotiations and unanswered questions. Whose linguistic vision for the island would prevail? In the context of assimilation policy, Anindilyakwa people manoeuvred so that their language could stay strong. Eventually, missionaries found they could not keep ignoring Anindilyakwa; it was not dying out, it would not go away. If they were to achieve any success in working with Anindilyakwa speakers, missionaries would need to re-orient their own vision for the mission. Later, the language had the support of the Anindilyakwa Land Council and CMS and persevered. Anindilyakwa also persevered through the self-determination era, now the intervention and despite its exclusion from the school, by its speakers' ability to compromise, innovate and persist. The kids still speak it, but as ever, it is only one generation away from endangerment. Keeping language strong does not need to be a battle. We English speakers – historians included - can also contribute to maintaining their strength by recognising and remembering the languages of the land