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INDIGENOUS STUDIES, INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE:
DIALOGUE OR CONFLICT IN THE ACADEMY?

Lynette Henderson-Yates & Darlene Oxenham (Eds.)

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INDIGENOUS STUDIES, INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE: DIALOGUE OR CONFLICT IN THE ACADEMY?

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CONFLICTING KNOWLEDGES: BARRIERS to LANGUAGE CONTINUATION in the KIMBERLEY

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Abstract

The Kimberley Language Resource Centre (KLRC) earned its status over three decades as the representative body for Kimberley languages. In 2004, the organisation started to respond to grassroots concerns about the lack of language speakers in the younger generations. Aboriginal people are also connecting loss of languages to loss of bio-cultural knowledge. In 2006, the KLRC began promoting language continuation strategies such as Teaching On Country. The organisation uses a series of diagrams to assist with this work and is developing an Aboriginal oral curriculum. Lack of support from within government and education circles for these strategies led the organisation to reflect on the difference between Aboriginal and Western knowledge systems. This paper questions Western approaches to education and argues that Aboriginal holistic knowledge must be supported within appropriate teaching and learning contexts to ensure the survival of languages and knowledge. It makes a case for evidence based, community engaged research examining language and knowledge continuation. It asks that Western education providers, who segregate language knowledge from experience and from country, examine and revise their practices. In conclusion, it calls for a realistic dialogue with government which honours the intentions of former Prime Minister Rudd's Apology to the Stolen Generations.

Introduction: *Wilalaŋwulimi ŋgarragi thaŋgani yaniŋgi*

On presenting this paper at the 2009 Indigenous Studies and Indigenous Knowledge conference in Fremantle, one of the contributors to this paper, a Bunuba woman from Fitzroy Crossing in the Kimberley, hesitated to speak her language on the country of another Aboriginal group so far away from her own country. The solution came to her when she remembered a visit to Rottnest Island the year before. There she met the spirits of ancestors forcibly taken to the prison in the early 1900s. She and others spoke to these ancestors in their language. Referencing this event allowed her to respect protocols while also addressing the conference attendees in Bunuba.

This example of negotiating cultural protocols in intercultural situations captures some of the complexity of supporting language continuation in the Kimberley Region of Western Australia. It is widely accepted that colonisation has effectively ended some aspects of old practices, namely a totally nomadic and hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Other aspects of Aboriginal practices have not been ended. Colonisation imposed a way of governing society and educating younger generations which conflicts with Aboriginal governance and education systems, but these systems were operating for time beyond imagining meaning they cannot be so easily erased. Language is the foundation of land and family and knowledge and teaching and learning. None of these things have been completely erased in the Kimberley, but the continuing attrition against traditional languages is slowly wearing the people down.

An example of this impact, of course, is the very requirement to write this paper (i.e., tell this story for diverse Kimberley people) in formal English and in a structured way acceptable for an academic journal. The person putting these words on paper is non-Aboriginal, English speaking and accustomed to academic writing. To counterbalance this circumstance, which it is not possible or perhaps even appropriate to overcome, the Bunuba language used at the end of this paper will not be translated into English. It should be noted that Bunuba is chosen only because one of the authors of this paper is a Bunuba speaker. The use

of an Aboriginal language is intended to acknowledge all the languages of the Kimberley.

The Kimberley Language Resource Centre (KLRC)

Aboriginal activist, anthropologist and linguist Gloria Brennan first put forward the idea of Aboriginal, locally controlled "institutes of Aboriginal languages" (1979, pp. 52-55). The KLRC was the first such regional Aboriginal language centre, incorporated in 1985. It was set up in an era when the establishment of Aboriginal organisations across the nation to deliver services to Aboriginal people was seen as an expression of self-determination (Foley, 1999). Regional meetings of Aboriginal people such as the one at Crocodile Hole informed and reinforced the decision to establish a Kimberley language organisation (Kimberley Land Council & Warringarri Resource Centre, 1991).

After 25 years, the organisation has cemented its status with Kimberley Aboriginal people as the peak representative body for languages within the region. It services an area of 422,000 square kilometres with six towns, approximately 50 remote Aboriginal communities and numerous outstations. Aboriginal people make up almost 48% of the population of the region, a target group of roughly 16,500 people (Kimberley Development Commission, 2009).

Twenty-five years on, however, self-determination is problematic in the current political climate; particularly in regard to the mainstreaming of Aboriginal services. The Howard Liberal government struggled with the nature of Aboriginal collectivism within a liberal conservative ideology which sees "the citizenry is a collection of individuals, not groups" (Aly, 2010, p. 22). The Labour government is tackling Indigenous disadvantage through restructuring the service delivery of government departments rather than revisiting self-determination. This is a problem for an organisation such as the KLRC which delivers services which no government department has the expertise or on the ground knowledge to deliver.

Funding for "languages" is provided through the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts (DEWHA). This funding is inadequate and the selection criteria have no basis in the reality of Kimberley language continuation needs. In 2010, $22.5 million worth of projects were submitted nationally, fighting for a share of $9.3 million of funding. In this year the KLRC's operating funds were reduced and it received no funds to support seven language groups who had applied through the organisation for assistance. Furthermore, Aboriginal controlled organisations such as the KLRC were competing with government organisations such as TAFE and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies for a share of this money.

The origin of the KLRC was founded in the fear of older generations (now gone) that the after effects of colonisation would continue to endanger, and eventually extinguish, the Aboriginal languages and cultural knowledge of the Kimberley peoples. The disruption of the oral transmission of this knowledge to younger generations is the key factor in the continuing loss of languages. Yet as the older generations pass on and the urgency to revive and maintain languages in the Kimberley grows even greater, the organisation is operationally resourced at the minimal level possible by the federal government, a level which gets exponentially less each year.

Six full-time and two part-time staff are able to keep the organisation functional. To deliver a service to the region described above there are four administrative positions and four language orientated positions. This amount of staffing makes a move away from government funding very hard to achieve (Kimberley Language Resource Centre, 2010). The KLRC is governed by an elected board of 12 Aboriginal Directors under the recently revised rules of the Office for Indigenous Corporations (ORIC). Directors, who sit on the board for two years, are elected at an annual general meeting. They are chosen from and accountable to a two hundred plus membership, representative of the thirty or more languages still spoken in the Kimberley (about a fifth of the remaining national languages). The Directors guide policy and oversee the strategic direction of the organisation. This governance structure has an important role in setting an Aboriginal agenda, but as will become apparent below, this agenda does not coincide with the agenda of government and Western education.

Reviewing and strategising

In 2005, the KLRC underwent an internal review. This was initially driven by a crisis regarding unexpended funding which had been sourced for discrete language projects. Linguists and other non-Aboriginal contractors could not be found to initiate unformulated projects and, as will be explained in this paper, it was clear external factors were preventing effective service delivery. An additional motivation for the review was that more and more people, especially the older generations, were questioning why children were not speaking languages, despite all the work that had been done on documenting them (see Kimberley Language Resource Centre (2010) for a more detailed analysis of this situation).

Throughout this paper we use the term *language continuation* to capture the aspirations of all Kimberley language groups; whether their goal is to revive a language with one or two speakers or maintain a language with a thousand speakers. Language continuation does not differentiate between the goal and the method of achieving that goal. The term is used in contrast to *reclamation, revival,* and *maintenance* as used within the field of linguistics

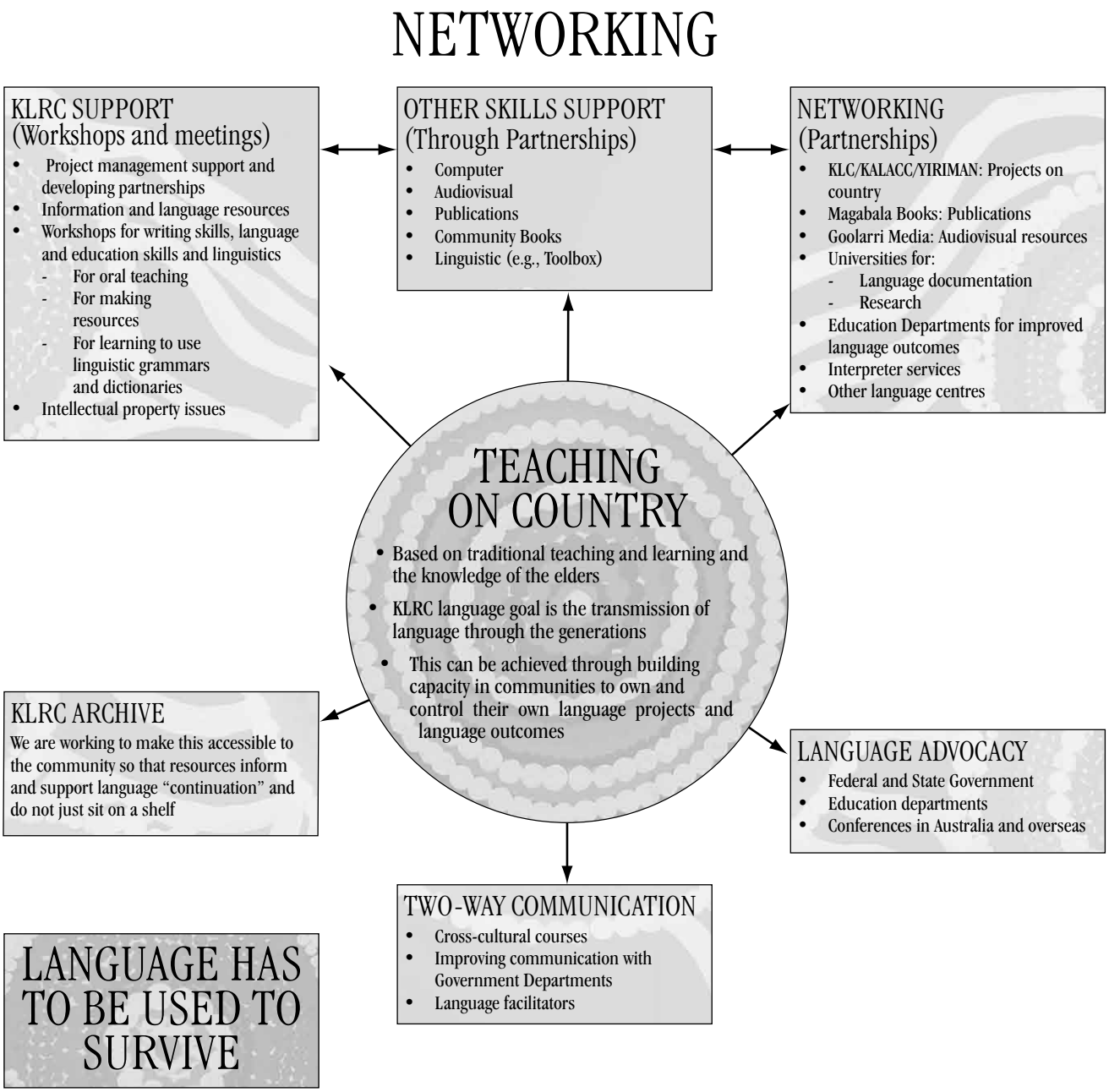

Figure 1: Networking model to support the aims of the Kimberley Language Resource Centre.

and language education where the terms categorise different language continuation situations and in the process define what is the most appropriate method of supporting an individual language. The terms *revive* and *maintain* are used in this paper, however, to distinguish between languages that need to be lifted up and languages that need to be kept going.

Using diagrams to tell a story

Since 2006, the KLRC has documented strategic direction, scope of operations, strategies and the philosophy of Teaching On Country in a series of diagrams. The purpose of the diagrams has been to tell a story to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The diagrams have been thoroughly endorsed by Kimberley Aboriginal people through use in a variety of situations (e.g., meetings, workshops) with Directors, members, elders, language speakers, Aboriginal community linguists and other audiences. In regard to non-Aboriginal audiences they have been effective as an advocacy tool as well as to facilitate understanding of the barriers for language continuation in the Kimberley.

Figure 1 was developed in 2006 and it represents the scope of the KLRC's work and the importance of networking for effective service delivery. One useful aspect of this diagram for advocacy purposes is that

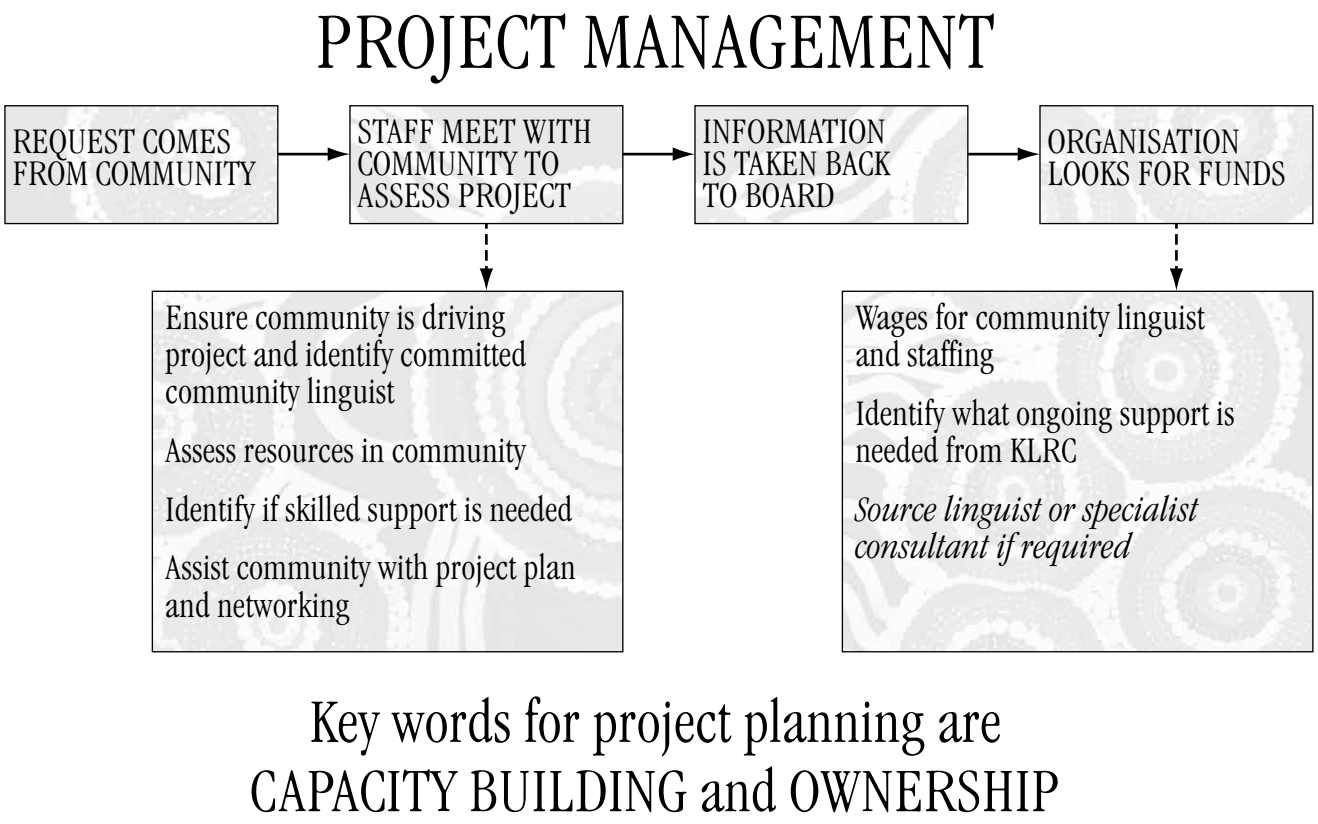

Figure 2: Project management model for the Kimberley Language Resource Centre.

it shows how much the KLRC is carrying as a service deliverer, contrary to the common belief emanating from the linguistic arena that the organisation's only purpose is to facilitate documentation and resource making (Schmidt, 1990, pp. 56-59).

At the time this diagram was being used in the field, the concept of Teaching On Country (TOC) came strongly to the fore and began to be used as a reference point for the goals of the organisation and how networking assists those goals. TOC is an approach to language continuation which recognises that the core of any successful language and knowledge transmission program or strategy is the elders and language speakers. It also centralises the role country plays as a base from which language and knowledge stems (see also Figure 4).

TOC was developed from the ground up with input at the community level, so this approach automatically centralises the KLRC's strategy of building capacity in communities to own and manage language continuation. The linguistic documentation approach to language continuation may have recognised elders as sources of language but it did not contain a strategy to strengthen the role of the community in ensuring revival and maintenance of language occurs orally, at the grassroots level and between all generations.

Language documentation directs language and knowledge away from family and community towards the development of a product such as a grammar, a bilingual book or an audiovisual teaching resource. While there is value in these materials when they are actively used by Aboriginal communities, the values are Western ones. The development of such resources is based on the notions of a literate culture that uses written materials as a major part of education.

In the past the majority of these resources in the Kimberley required non-Aboriginal expertise or were structured towards a product which required extensive work to be done away from the community (e.g., linguistic grammars or editing audiovisual materials). Therefore, ownership did not actually sit with the Aboriginal people. Many of the resources created for Kimberley language groups are criticised by those groups for being too technical and unusable, containing incorrect language, using a writing system people do not like or cannot read, being out of print and unavailable or not containing enough language or information.

Figure 2 was developed alongside Figure 1 to capture a revised, capacity building model of project management. As mentioned above, a crisis developed within the organisation when funds could not be expended due to the lack of availability of non-Aboriginal linguists and consultants. It became clear that it was the model of project management that had created this problem. The previous model was to source funds

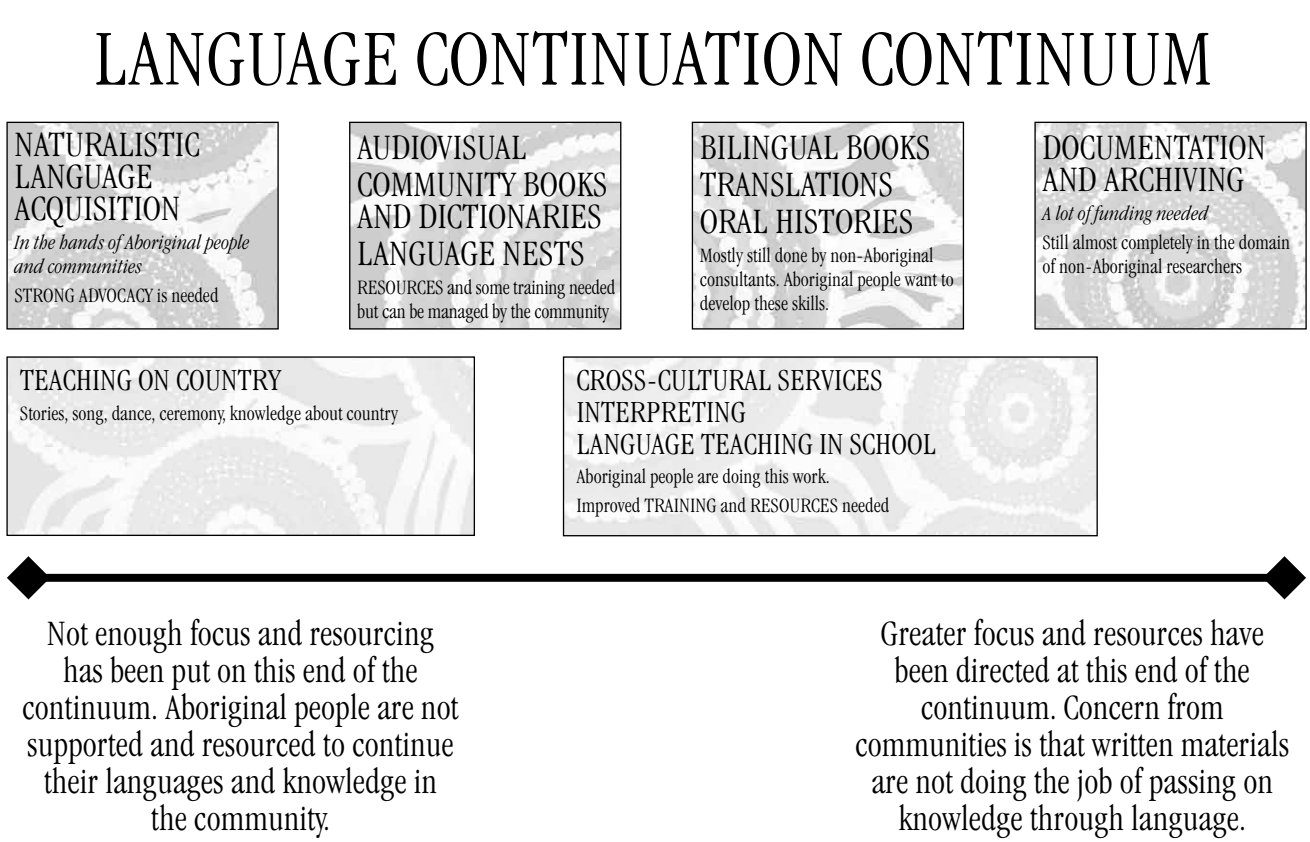

Figure 3: Language Continuation Continuum for the Kimberley.

for an external consultant who would then develop a project with the community. In consulting with language groups to identify which projects the unexpended money could be used for, staff found that community representatives could sometimes not remember asking for language work in the first place. This indicated "top down" identification by management and linguists of language preservation needs which had been presented to the board as an approval for funding.

Furthermore, when the staff returned to language groups to discuss project design, in most cases they discovered community representatives had not been asked to think about how the project could be managed or who in the community could be involved beyond the elderly speakers. This highlighted not only the reliance on external consultants but also the lack of ownership of language continuation programs or strategies. The new project management model ensures both these factors are eliminated as barriers to success before a project begins. The language group decides on the project, develops a project plan and identifies if a linguist or other external support is needed. When an external consultant is contracted they are asked to support a program or strategy the community has already settled on rather than to develop a discrete project based on their own expertise. In this way the external consultant's expertise is used more effectively to support an Aboriginal agenda.

Ironically, as the KLRC became clearer about the language needs of Kimberley language groups and the barriers to effective service delivery, the organisation began to struggle to get funds. Government funding is very limited and the private sector does not typically fund language continuation as they misunderstand this as the responsibility of the Western education system.

The KLRC observed that the type of projects language groups were requesting were not fitting the criteria for government funding. These criteria are very product focussed and preference an outcome such as a DVD, publication or other physical proof of an activity having taken place. This was confirmed to Directors and staff of the organisation by a senior government official during a visit to the Kimberley in 2009.

If a Teaching On Country funding submission offers only one measurement; the satisfaction of the older generation that the younger generations have learned something, this submission is unlikely to be supported. Whether the successful learning outcome be speaking more language or learning about country, family or cultural traditions through language, since this measurement does not fit government criteria the community is effectively being told "this is up to you and not our responsibility to resource".

Exploring the issue of difficulties with program funding led to the development of the Language Continuation Continuum in 2008. Figure 3 maps

THE BUILDING BLOCKS FOR LANGUAGE CONTINUATION

Any language in the world will continue to survive if it is used. For Kimberley Aboriginal people the language and knowledge the land speaks is the strongest foundation block for revival and maintenance.

Aboriginal people document their own languages and make their own resources.

Aboriginal people build on language in relevant contexts.

Children go to school with knowledge of their languages. Adults increase knowledge of their languages.

SPOKEN LANGUAGE IN THE COMMUNITY

TEACHING ON COUNTRY

The foundation stone of oral language and knowledge. The knowledge of the elders and the language speakers.

Figure 4: Building Blocks for Language Continuation in the Kimberley.

out all possible types of language continuation work. Once this diagram was developed the central problem became visually much clearer. The left hand side of the continuum shows at what point Aboriginal people are in control of their own languages and knowledge and have it within their means to build on their own capacity to maintain and revive them. Nevertheless, most of the resources for language continuation work have been focussed at the right hand side of the continuum. This imbalance in resourcing implies that while Aboriginal people wish to hear language in their communities, the broader community wants to be able to see it, whether as a product or a report.

The reason why the KLRC get fewer requests for grammars, dictionaries and books and more requests for TOC could be put down to commonsense. Documentation, particularly of the written type, cannot replace oral transmission between generations and the interactions between people using natural speech in real life contexts. There is no country in the world where a first language is learned primarily through writing. After participating in decades of documentation activities, Kimberley language groups are beginning to see that something else needs to be done to revive language in their children.

As an Aboriginal governed, grassroots organisation, the KLRC responds to requests from the communities. As their requests change the organisations needs to be responsive. The government, it appears, is under no such obligation. Perhaps the problem with sourcing funding is the capacity building model of project management itself? Using the management model in Figure 2, the KLRC ensures projects are Aboriginal controlled; with an emphasis on a community coordinator or an Aboriginal community linguist as the drivers of the work. The type of projects being requested fit at the left hand end of the continuum, so funding bodies are being asked to directly fund Aboriginal people without the leadership of non-Aboriginal experts such as linguists, anthropologists, ethno-biologists, teachers or filmmakers. Despite the government rhetoric around "capacity building", building capacity for Aboriginal controlled language and cultural continuation is excluded from government financial support.

In order to further visualise a pathway for language continuation Figure 4 was developed. This diagram represents Teaching On Country as the foundation block for language continuation. The blocks form steps into the Western/non-Aboriginal world, including schooling and documentation. This figure is useful to demonstrate why focussing primarily on documentation and school language programs do not result in language use. If projects and strategies focus on documentation and resource making at the top, there is no proven method of moving back down to

the foundation block to recreate naturalistic language acquisition. Although some Aboriginal groups, such as the Kaurna in Adelaide, have revived their language from nineteenth century written sources it was, tragically, their only option, since there were no fully fluent speakers living. The language will continue to grow and evolve. That will take many years but the Kaurna community are an integral part of that process (University of Adelaide, 2005).

The strong message which can be taken from the Kaurna is that language was so essential to their cultural practices they wanted to revive it even from records written by non-Aboriginal people. Foley refers to a nineteenth century policy dubbed "smooth the dying pillow". The phrase is adapted from Bates (1938) and the policy "was based on the assumption that what was left of the Aboriginal populace would now die out" (Foley, 1999). Missionaries and subsequently anthropologists documented language and culture in the spirit of that policy, not in the belief that they would be assisting future generations to continue their languages and cultures but because they believed they were making a record for posterity. While it is fortunate that the outcome of this ideological approach has enabled the Kaurna to reclaim their language, many continue to interpret these lessons of history for endangered and indigenous languages as "a quest that must call scholars of every type" (Evans, 2010, p. 231).

These are different times. The languages of the Kimberley are said by people to be sleeping. However, this is not to say they are no longer spoken. There are living speakers of at least 30 languages in the region – speakers of all ages. The number of languages stated does not entertain linguistic debate about what is a language and what is a dialect (Wardhaugh, 1998, pp. 23-25). For the KLRC, a language name is an identity marker for the groups the organisation works with in the region.

Furthermore, for Kimberley Aboriginal people languages are tied to areas of country and contain within them detailed knowledge of that country, something common to indigenous groups around the world (Evans, 2010; Nettle & Romaine, 2000; Maffi & Woodley, 2010). The people from that country are the only ones for whom the languages and the knowledge have real meaning, and for whom the transmission to the next generations has the most importance. So whether one language is stated in academic terms to be "related" to another grammatically is of no relevance. The KLRC believes an unbalanced amount of resources should not be directed towards such academic debates and interests. Instead, Aboriginal people need to be directly resourced to revive and maintain languages.

Although the KLRC's use of the phrase "building blocks" began prior to governmental use, a coincidental parallel which can be drawn from Figure 4 relates to the Federal Government's Building Blocks for Closing The Gap (FaHCSIA, 2009). There are seven federal building blocks which are identified as central to Indigenous peoples' equal participation in Australian society: Early Childhood, Schooling, Healthy Homes, Safe Communities, Health, Economic Participation and Governance and Leadership.

The omission of a building block which speaks to the linguistic and cultural foundations of Australia's first peoples makes a very strong statement – one which the KLRC addressed in a submission to FaHCSIA during the consultations for the National Indigenous Representative Body (Kimberley Language Resource Centre, 2008). If the federal government wants to eliminate Indigenous disadvantage in Australia, it appears to be willing to do so at the expense of the cultural and linguistic traditions of thousands of years. The approach being taken by government in the areas of early childhood, schooling and economic participation in particular, cannot adequately account for languages and cultures since the focus is on Indigenous participation in the dominant Western education and economic arena. The language of these programs is English.

Pearson (2009, p. 34) asks "what happens to discrete Aboriginal communities where people desire to maintain their language and culture? Is there no future for them except to assimilate or to languish in dysfunction and inexorable cultural pauperization?". The programs and strategies of *Closing The Gap* will continue to chip away at the foundation stone in Figure 4, resulting in less and less opportunities for languages and knowledge to survive. As mentioned above, there is no government department, either federally or in Western Australia, whose role is to prevent this loss. In contrast, this is the defining purpose of the KLRC.

In summary, these four diagrams were developed in succession over a period of three years, each building on the concepts developing out of the previous ones. Since 2008, all four have been regularly used to set out the language continuation objectives of the Kimberley Language Resource Centre. They have been successful tools for generating discussion with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, community members, academics, educationalists and government. They tell a story – but also establish a problem.

The knowledge problem

Another diagram also emerged out of discussion with Directors and staff. Figures 1 to 4 present the barriers for language continuation from an operational perspective. However, they do not specify clearly what external factors are preventing successful language continuation. In discussing and revisiting the story above and all the elements within it, we pinpointed a major external factor. There is constant pressure for Aboriginal people and elders in particular to "prove" their credentials in the Western sphere of government and education. This leads to the realisation that

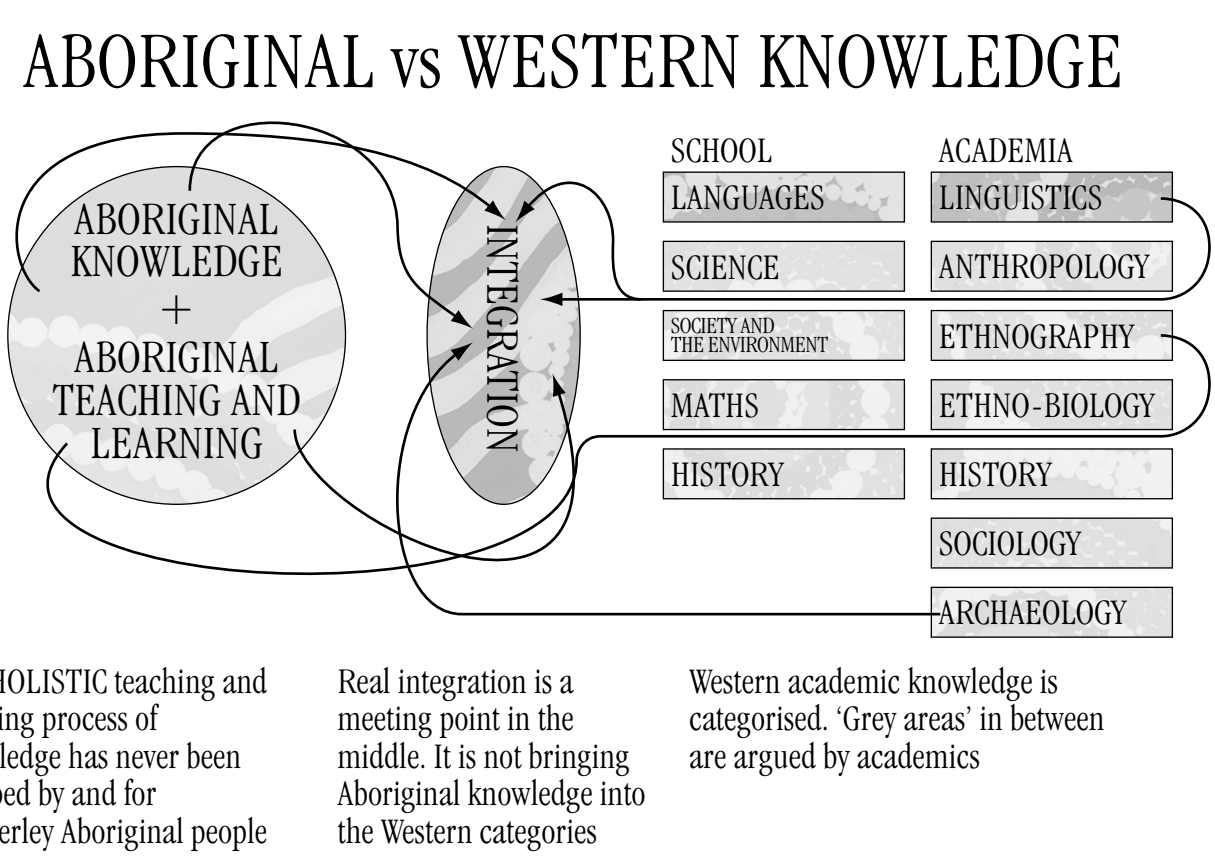

Figure 5: Visualising the integration of Aboriginal knowledge and Western knowledge.

constant tension between Aboriginal knowledge systems and non-Aboriginal ones places barriers at just about every step of Figure 4 and prevents the organisation from being able to direct resourcing to the left hand end of the Language Continuation Continuum (Figure 3).

Figure 5 is the diagram which emerged out of this discussion and is intended to capture the tension between two different knowledge systems. The boxes on the right hand side reflect the tendency in Western academia to categorise knowledge into fields of study. This is paralleled by learning areas in the school curriculum. In contrast, Aboriginal knowledge is referred to as holistic (Kelly, 2005). This is to say that all areas of learning and knowledge are interconnected. An example might be the kinship (or skin) system; the network of family relationships. An anthropologist trained in a university might claim this as their academic field, yet Aboriginal groups across the Kimberley also relate in kinship with plants and animals, which steps into the domain of the ethno-biologist. The knowledge also comes with stories; is that history or ethnography? There is the examining of society itself which comes through sociology and the additional search for archaeological answers to both how people lived and creation stories, which return us to country again. This interconnectedness can go on indefinitely.

For the KLRC, one other factor comes into strong focus when looking at this diagram. Language appears as a curriculum area (Languages) and as an academic field (Linguistics). These represent the study of languages. What the KLRC represents is the continuation of languages and knowledge which run through every academic learning area. Thinking about Aboriginal knowledge through language demonstrates most clearly how a holistic knowledge system loses its integrity when it is broken into categories.

The circle on the left of the diagram represents the Aboriginal knowledge system – or it may be systems. This is for Aboriginal people to define. The central point of representing the knowledge in this way is to demonstrate how Western academia is interacting with Aboriginal knowledge. It is in the nature of a raiding party; researchers explore Aboriginal knowledge within the circle defined by the framework of their own specific field. They dip into the circle and take and adapt the knowledge for reproduction in (predominantly) English. In education, the parts of Aboriginal knowledge required for school curricula are developed into units of learning which can be taught in the English language.

Even when the focus is specifically language outcomes, such as documentation projects or school language programs, this way of pulling the knowledge into the Western categories cannot have the result

of continuing languages and knowledge. Language becomes compartmentalised within the academic areas. School language programs in particular are limited in being able to revive or maintain language through knowledge – not least because minimum time is allowed for most language programs within the school timetable.

In order to find or direct resources to the KLRC, it is required to work within the confining boxes of Languages and Linguistics. This is neither effective for language continuation nor carriage of Article 30 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child:

> In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language (United Nations, 1989, p. 1).

The lines in Figure 5 represent the non-linear process by which elements of the two knowledge systems may lead to a meeting point of integration. Aboriginal people need to be supported to take their knowledge from the circle to the point of integration in such a way that it is not framed by Western academic or cultural perspectives.

Those non-Aboriginal people working in areas of research involving Aboriginal people or knowledge, or directly with Aboriginal people through government departments, need to take a step back, review their practices and ask themselves whether they are really helping progress the continuation of languages and knowledge. They may in fact be hindering it because, as Foley states:

> … failure to properly understand the importance of "Aboriginal control of Aboriginal affairs" to indigenous people can create tension where white supporters think they know better than the Koori community (1999, p. 1).

Getting round the barriers

In mid 2009, the KLRC wrote a ministerial briefing and submission which was given to both the Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs and the then Federal Minister for Education. The document requested support for the development of a Teaching On Country Early Years and Integrated Curriculum. The KLRC asked for resources to develop "a curriculum framework that captures the Aboriginal teaching and learning process from early childhood up" (Kimberley Language Resource Centre, 2009, p. 1) while at the same time supporting research into how this knowledge can be integrated effectively into the Western curriculum as children with an Aboriginal heritage enter the school system.

When this document was written, Figure 5 had not been developed. Working on the premises emerging through Figures 1 to 4, the organisation believed requesting support for an Aboriginal curriculum of teaching and learning might be the way forward. We appealed to government by asking for support for language and knowledge continuation while also acknowledging the need to engage with the Western education system. The submission spoke to the complexity of arguing for the continuation of different languages and knowledges in the face of the overwhelming push to improve English language and literacy outcomes in locations such as the Kimberley. The submission also asked for support to survey, from an Aboriginal perspective, the status of languages across the region. This information would without doubt be useful to both Aboriginal people and government; particularly the education system.

This submission fell on deaf ears. FaHCSIA did not respond and the Minister for Education directed the organisation towards the Western Australian Department of Education, a step the organisation has not seen reason to take. There has to date been no acknowledgement from any department of the KLRC's argument that this is not a Western education crisis, but an Aboriginal one. The conclusion which must be drawn is that the governments of Australia do not see it as their responsibility, or obligation, to deal with that crisis.

Which way now?

Developing Figure 5 will hopefully allow the KLRC to frame its arguments in a different way. It has brought the organisation to the point of understanding that it needs to provide *evidence* for the *benefits* of continuing Aboriginal languages and knowledge. The KLRC believe the benefits of Aboriginal knowledge and Aboriginal teaching and learning in the Kimberley must be taken as given. Where or what is the KLRC's evidence for that? The diagrams above paint a story for the KLRC. They show what is possible in language work, what the organisation does, what the future goals are and what barriers need to be overcome. Underpinning all this is the strong desire of Aboriginal people to continue languages and knowledge into the future. The generations alive now do not want their future generations to look back and say "why didn't my grandmother teach me anything of my heritage languages and knowledge?"

So how can the KLRC begin to map Aboriginal teaching and learning processes in order to raise the circle of knowledge to the same status as a school curriculum or an academic field of study? How can real

integration into these areas be encouraged? The KLRC has already proposed an Aboriginal curriculum as a way of fore-fronting the orality of Aboriginal languages and knowledge and allowing Aboriginal people to take control of the education process. The basis of this curriculum is to support the transmission of languages and knowledge on country, in the community and in the home. The rationale is that strengthening languages and knowledge at the grassroots allows better decisions to be made about how to integrate with, and not assimilate to, the wider community and Western education.

In looking for evidence to support this rationale the KLRC will need to collect its own evidence based research data to support the arguments it is putting forward to government and about education. Framed as questions, these research areas include, but are not limited to: Is Teaching On Country a successful way of continuing languages and knowledge? Are community designed and managed language programs and strategies sustainable and effective? Can linguistic and other resources be made useful for the community? How do Aboriginal elders assess the learning of younger generations? Does owning traditional knowledge and having a strong Aboriginal identity help children in the broader Western society? Will a future generation of traditional Aboriginal language speaking children do better or worse off educationally and economically?

Conclusion

This paper tells the story of an Aboriginal organisation which has spent 25 years searching for the best methods to ensure the continuation of Aboriginal languages and knowledge in the Kimberley Region of Western Australia. Despite the Western academic tendency to separate languages and knowledge from context and from country and the inability of government funding programs to appropriately support Aboriginal capacity, the KLRC has created a broad knowledge base and a set of resource skills which are invaluable tools for understanding and ensuring language and knowledge continuation in the Kimberley. The organisation uses these tools at the community level to support language groups in their endeavours and to advocate to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike.

The organisation's approach to grassroots engagement speaks directly to the desired outcomes of the Closing the Gap initiatives. In his Apology to the Stolen Generations, along with his pledge to end Indigenous disadvantage, former Prime Minister Rudd, stated:

> The truth is: a business as usual approach towards Indigenous Australians is not working. Most old approaches are not working. We need a new beginning—a new beginning which contains real measures of policy success or policy failure … a new beginning that draws intelligently on the experiences of new policy settings across the nation … We embrace with pride, admiration and awe these great and ancient cultures we are truly blessed to have among us cultures that provide a unique, uninterrupted human thread linking our Australian continent to the most ancient prehistory of our planet … Let us turn this page together: indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, government and opposition, Commonwealth and state, and write this new chapter in our nation's story together (Rudd, 2008).

If these words are to have any meaning and new policies are to have any impact, government must engage in genuine partnership with organisations such as the KLRC. The lack of engagement to date belies these words from the Prime Minister. The Kimberley Language Resource Centre is a community based, Aboriginal governed organisation which carries the aspirations for the "unique" and "great and ancient" languages of Kimberley Aboriginal people. To ignore the organisation is to ignore the voices of many hundreds of people from across the region whose fear for the survival of their languages and knowledge grows stronger day by day. To ignore those voices is to stand by and let that fear become a reality.

The circle of learning from elders to children

Binarri-awudugu buga yani-ingga.
Biyirri-ingga gurrij burragi thangani jurali-nhi.
Ngay walanggarrarru yarrangi yani thangani wurrgawudagi jurali-nhi.
Baljuwa garrgawurrunugu thangani birranggunhi ling ngarra burrudi.
Yarri-ingga binarri-yawuwarrmagi bugayani.
Bugayani nganggawunbirragi thangani mindija yalhay gandanday-nhingi.
Thirrili-ngarri waraway.
Biyirri-ingga garrayili-awuni binarri-awunmagi nyirramiyani.
Yuwana-yalhay thangani banban-tharrarrwirragi.

Ngalu, Thalbakbiya (June Oscar), *Nganyamiya* (Mona Oscar)

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The contents of this paper are not entirely the authors' but represent 25 years of the Kimberley Language Resource Centre's work. This paper is intended to honour the old people who set up the organisation and the dedication of the committee members, past and present. We acknowledge Kimberley Aboriginal people, their languages, their elders and their ancestors.

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