

**ABN: 88537537070**

Madjulla Incorporated



**SUBMISSION TO HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS INQUIRY INTO LANGUAGE  
LEARNING IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES**

We pay tribute to the contribution of Nyikina people and to Colleen Hattersley who studied to become a linguist to support our work to continue to enhance and maintain our wellbeing through the ongoing practice and preservation of our Nyikina language and culture.

**TERMS OF REFERENCE**

**The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages**

The benefit of giving attention and recognition to our Nyikina Language is a vital ingredient which contributes to strengthening our Nyikina cultural identity. Young people are an essential resource for sustaining Nyikina cultural action for without their involvement cultural identity and practice will cease. It is important for young people to learn how they fit into a contemporary culture and reconcile themselves to historical and social events. To this end cultural capital is built on the subjective experiences around cultural practice. Nyikina people are encouraged to fully participate in cultural and community activities as a process for constructing and strengthening their personal and community identity so they will have the cultural capital foundation to underpin social cohesion and economic sustainability.

*The rights enshrined within Articles 11, 12 and 13 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) outline Indigenous peoples collective rights to practice and preserve our languages, culture and spirituality, however, Indigenous peoples' languages are threatened around the world. The loss of indigenous languages signifies not only the loss of traditional knowledge but also the loss of Australian cultural diversity and spirituality.*

## **The contribution of Indigenous Languages to closing the Gap and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture**

Language is central to our cultural and spiritual identity. Language is the medium by which Aboriginal describe cultural practices, attachment to land and place, cultural items, and other cultural and spiritual activities. Furthermore, language plays a fundamental part in Indigenous people's identity by connecting individuals to communities, therefore providing cultural and spiritual context in the daily lives of our people.

### **The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education.**

Practice of language is intrinsically linked to the social and emotional well being of our people, leading to improved health and educational outcomes for individuals and communities. Many studies have shown that bi-lingual education enhances Indigenous children's learning experience including their English numeracy and literacy levels. Bi-lingual education provides our children with the foundation to actively engage with the dominant culture of our country whilst finding strength in maintaining our own cultural identity.<sup>1</sup>

A study conducted by the United Nations Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2009<sup>2</sup> has stated that:

“A major factor contributing to the disadvantaged position of indigenous peoples is the lack of quality education - which may be defined as education that is well resourced, culturally sensitive, respectful of heritage and that takes into account history, cultural security and integrity, encompasses human rights, community and individual development, and is designed in a way that is implementable.”

Regrettably, the status of many Aboriginal languages in Australia is critically endangered or extinct. Prior to colonisation, more than 250 Aboriginal languages were spoken. At the time of a national survey<sup>3</sup> was conducted in 2005, only 145 Aboriginal languages were still actively spoken, with most of these languages (110) categorised as “severely and critically endangered” by global linguistic experts. Only 20 of the Aboriginal languages are considered to be alive and “strong”. In 2009, the Australian Government launched it's first national policy focused on Indigenous languages: Indigenous Languages – A National Approach 2009<sup>4</sup> in response to the concerns and recommendations expressed within the National Indigenous Language Survey (2005).

---

<sup>1</sup> National Congress of Australia's First Peoples (December 2011) *Statement to the Australian Government on the Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities conducted by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee*. Retrieved from: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/IPeoples/EMRIP/Pages/SubmissionsStudyLanguages.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> United Nations General Assembly, *Study On Lessons Learned And Challenges To Achieve The Implementation Of The Right of Indigenous Peoples To Education*, August 2009

<sup>3</sup> AIATSIS and FATSIL, *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report, 2005*

<sup>4</sup> Dept of Regional Australia, Local Government, Arts and Sport (2009) *Indigenous Languages – A National Approach 2009*. Retrieved from: <http://apo.org.au/research/indigenous-languages-national-approach>

## Measures to improve educational outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second language

The extreme level of language decay can be directly attributed to the impacts of colonisation including the forced dispossession of our lands and cultural oppression by our colonisers. The loss of languages of some groups have had a long and enduring impact and Indigenous groups should assert their right to redress or compensation through Articles 7 and 8 of the UNDRIP. Both of these articles affirm our right to live as a culturally distinct group, free from forced assimilation, and destruction of our cultures. It follows that Governments should take all steps necessary to prevent any negative actions that may diminish our cultural value and spiritual identity. If any of these rights are violated, governments should provide appropriate compensation and redress.

Practical measures for domestic implementation can be found in a previous expert working group of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in 2008. The group reported<sup>5</sup> “language rights must be implemented as a collective and an individual right. It is crucial to recognise that indigenous peoples’ language rights include, but are not limited to:

- (a) *The right to maintain and to use their own language;*
- (b) *The right to have indigenous languages recognized in constitutions and laws;*
- (c) *The right to maintain personal names, place names and the proper names of their languages;*
- (d) *The right to be educated in the mother tongue (either in State schools or in their own schools);*
- (e) *The right to use indigenous languages in court and administrative proceedings;*
- (f) *The right to non-discrimination on the grounds of language in such domains as work, social security, health, family life, education, cultural life and freedom of speech;*
- (g) *The right to take part in public affairs and public service without discrimination on the grounds of language;*
- (h) *The right to establish indigenous media in indigenous languages as well as to have access to mainstream media in indigenous languages.*

Whilst the recommendations above are pragmatic in their approach, we will have little success in implementing them without the establishment of a National Language Institution which can act as an independent body responsible for the coordination of language policy and programs across Government as well as collaborate with Indigenous groups to create a national database of languages, which will assist in ensuring that indigenous languages are

---

<sup>5</sup> Report of the international expert group meeting on indigenous languages, UNPFII Seventh Session (E/C.19/2008/3)

practiced, preserved and revived. A national body empowered with a mandate and resources to monitor, support and promote indigenous language has the ability to increase language use and foster the overall health of a language as the example of the Maori Language Commission<sup>6</sup> in New Zealand has shown. This national institution has played an active role in achieving an increased public awareness of the Maori language along with *improving public attitudes across the nation of New Zealand (Maori Language Survey, 2009)*<sup>7</sup>.

**The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous languages and the effectiveness of the Commonwealth Governments Indigenous language policy in delivering its objectives and relevant policies**

Our experience over the past 10 years of working in this area has demonstrated that the effectiveness of the Commonwealth Government in investing in Indigenous language policy in delivering its objectives and relevant policies has highlighted serious under investment in a critical time when we have very few speakers of our language left to support this work. The investments have been adhoc and piecemeal and we have struggled to capture this important national investment and have lost the opportunity to fund the Nyikina linguist and language workers over the past 10 years which has made it extremely difficult to maintain momentum. Although the current status of Indigenous languages within Australia can be described as devastating, all is not lost.

*Many Aboriginal peoples are active in the maintenance and revitalisation of their endangered languages and with the right amount of energy and good will, and of course resources, it is possible for our endangered languages to be not only be preserved but revitalised and reactivated.*<sup>8</sup> *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia are working to maintain a modern identity that is rooted in country and tradition, and is reflective of traditional times and the adaptations to our ever-evolving culture and identity.*<sup>9</sup>

We acknowledge the **HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS INQUIRY INTO LANGUAGE LEARNING IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES** and submit the following recommendations.

*We recommend to the Committee:*

*Urgent investment to develop educational policies and programmes that reinforce the maintenance of Indigenous knowledges, languages and cultures by embedding perspectives*

<sup>6</sup> Maori Language Commission. (November 2011) *About Us* [http://www.tetaurawhiri.govt.nz/english/about\\_e/](http://www.tetaurawhiri.govt.nz/english/about_e/)

<sup>7</sup> The Australian Human Rights Commission. (December 2011) *Language learning in Indigenous communities – AHRC submission to the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs.* [www.humanrights.gov.au](http://www.humanrights.gov.au)

<sup>8</sup> Gugu-badhun language CD-ROM (Townsville, Grail Films, 2004)

<sup>9</sup> James, R. (2009) A modern history of the Gugu Badhun people and their country. Masters (Research) thesis, James Cook University. (<http://eprints.jcu.edu.au/9487>)

*into curricula; and that bi-lingual education is included as a medium of instruction where communities identify this as a priority in accordance with Article 14 of UNDRIP.*

*Encourage adequate constitutional and other legislative measures to recognise indigenous languages. As well as developing policies and programmes that strengthen the daily use of indigenous languages at all levels, in public and private institutions, internally and externally to indigenous communities consistent with Article 13 of UNDRIP;*

*Advocate for adequate resources (redress and compensation) for the preservation, revitalisation and promotion of indigenous languages and cultures as outlined in Article 11 of UNDRIP, recognising the cost of implementing programmes and projects in remote areas.*

*Promote the establishment of National Language Institutions in every State, in order for indigenous languages to be monitored, regulated, maintained and revitalised in collaboration with Indigenous peoples with their free prior and informed consent as per Article 11 of UNDRIP.*

### **Describe our group: Nyikina People of the *Mardoowarra***

The traditional lands of Nyikina people are located in the West Kimberley region of Western Australia. It was 'one of the last fertile regions of the Australian continent to be invaded and colonised') by Europeans. Thus, the invasion of Nyikina traditional lands is a fairly recent historical phenomenon, occurring in the 1880s. The initial occupation of the Kimberley in the early 1880s by Europeans for pastoral grazing relied heavily on accessing the water resources from the Nyikina lands. Nyikina people have engaged in a range of cultural actions which generated a heightened sense of cooperation and strengthened community unity, organisation and cultural synthesis through community cultural development. This resource base for Nyikina people consists of access to their traditional lands including the *Mardoowarra* (Fitzroy River), and is centered on Nyikina people with high levels of cultural knowledge.

### ***How long have we been running?***

Madjulla Inc has been working in partnership with Nyikina Inc for the past 10 years in the area of language and culture development.

### ***What age groups are you working with?***

We work with a range of age groups including young people aged 16-25 years of age who work with senior elder and cultural mentors ranging from 50-70+ years, to ensure transmission of knowledge from elders to young people.

### ***How many people are involved?***

The number of people involved varies each year depending on funding support to conduct workshops and research. The average number is about 15-30 per annum.

***Describe our projects and activities to record the use of our Nyikina language include:***

During the life of our projects we have received support for our language and culture work from the Commonwealth, The funding has been varied and is becoming increasingly difficult to access, as it is highly competitive. We have been fortunate in being able to collaborate with a local staff member employed by the Commonwealth who has seen the value of investing in our work. This staff member has been supportive in promoting our work and bringing investment to the region. Our projects and activities over this time include:

- Development of a Nyikina Language and Culture Program
- Publication of a wide range of bilingual books and CD-ROM's
- Purchase and development of a Nyikina Cultural Data Base
- Research and ongoing development of a Nyikina Plant data base
- Research and ongoing development of a Nyikina Dictionary

The products have been provided to local schools and libraries.

Our projects activities have helped Nyikina people to build their language and cultural competence and these skills and knowledge have been shared with the wider community. We believe if we can secure investment for the 2012-2013 period we will be able to generate a model of better practice in language maintenance for both national and international language maintenance.

***What we are aiming for in the future funding round of 2012-2013 period.***

We are seeking funding support for the Nyikina Language Continuation Project –  
Development of a model Computer Assisted language Learning resource

Following consultations between the partners, Madjulla Inc, Nyikina Inc, Protea Textware Pty Ltd, and Virginia Westwood between 2009 and 2011, a project has been instigated led by PhD student Virginia Westwood. The research study will involve individuals from the Yimardoowarra people as co-researchers with Virginia Westwood to design, implement and evaluate a model computer assisted language learning (CALL) program using the Nyikina language for initial data, which will provide a model transferable to other Indigenous and endangered languages.

The Yimardoowarra people are principally living in a number of communities along the Lower Fitzroy River in Western Australia including Derby, Pandanus Park, Jarlmadangah Burru, Looma, Bidan, Jimbalakudunj as well as Broome. Participants in the research study will be self-nominated after information is provided to Communities, relevant groups and individuals, as well as invited after personal reference through Nyikina Inc. and the Community Linguist, Colleen Hattersley, who has worked with the Mardoowarra people for around 12 years.

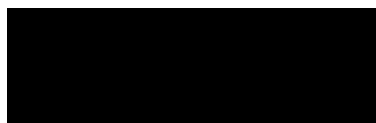
While CALL is very widely used to learn and teach Western languages, its use and success in indigenous and endangered languages has been extremely limited. It is proposed that by including the language speakers and cultural knowledge bearers as co-researchers in the design of a CALL product, it can develop with cultural sensitivity and relevance to ensure its success. This model, based on situated instructional design and actor-network theory, following Indigenous research methodologies, will be a world first. The research will use a design-based research approach which comprises four phases. These phases are not discrete and overlap as the process cycles through the phases to reach a satisfactory solution (the CALL model and resources) and design principles. In addition to initial consultations, Virginia Westwood will spend approximately nine months based on Nyikina country in Derby in 2012 to complete the research study.

In the **first** phase, consultations with the language group defines the problem of diminishing numbers of language speakers and teachers and identifies appropriate technologies to use as the platform for the CALL resource/s produced. Consultations and research initiated in 2009 are ongoing. In the **second** phase, Yimardoowarra people will be providing linguistic, cultural and practical skills to complement Virginia Westwood's CALL technology and methodology skills in designing a preliminary solution, or software prototype as well as draft design principles for the CALL model. This will be developed by Virginia Westwood as a starting point for the third (implementation) phase. The **third** phase follows a cyclic pattern similar to participatory action research, but will involve the Yimardoowarra co-researchers in designing as well as collecting and creating the resources and testing the incremental prototypes. In this phase, participants will be trained in technical skills in creating photographs, videos and audio recordings and multimedia editing skills on computer. The **fourth** and final phase involves refining the original design principles for the CALL model.

Outcomes include immediate and ongoing social, cultural and economic benefits for the Yimardoowarra people and a new model of CALL design for the wider community.

To this end we thank you for the opportunity to submit to the Enquiry.

Respectfully Submitted,

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of Dr Anne Poelina.

Dr Anne Poelina

Managing Director

1<sup>st</sup> May 2012