

EDITION 1 2013

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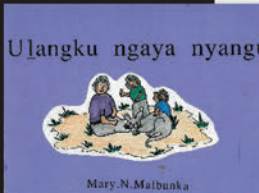
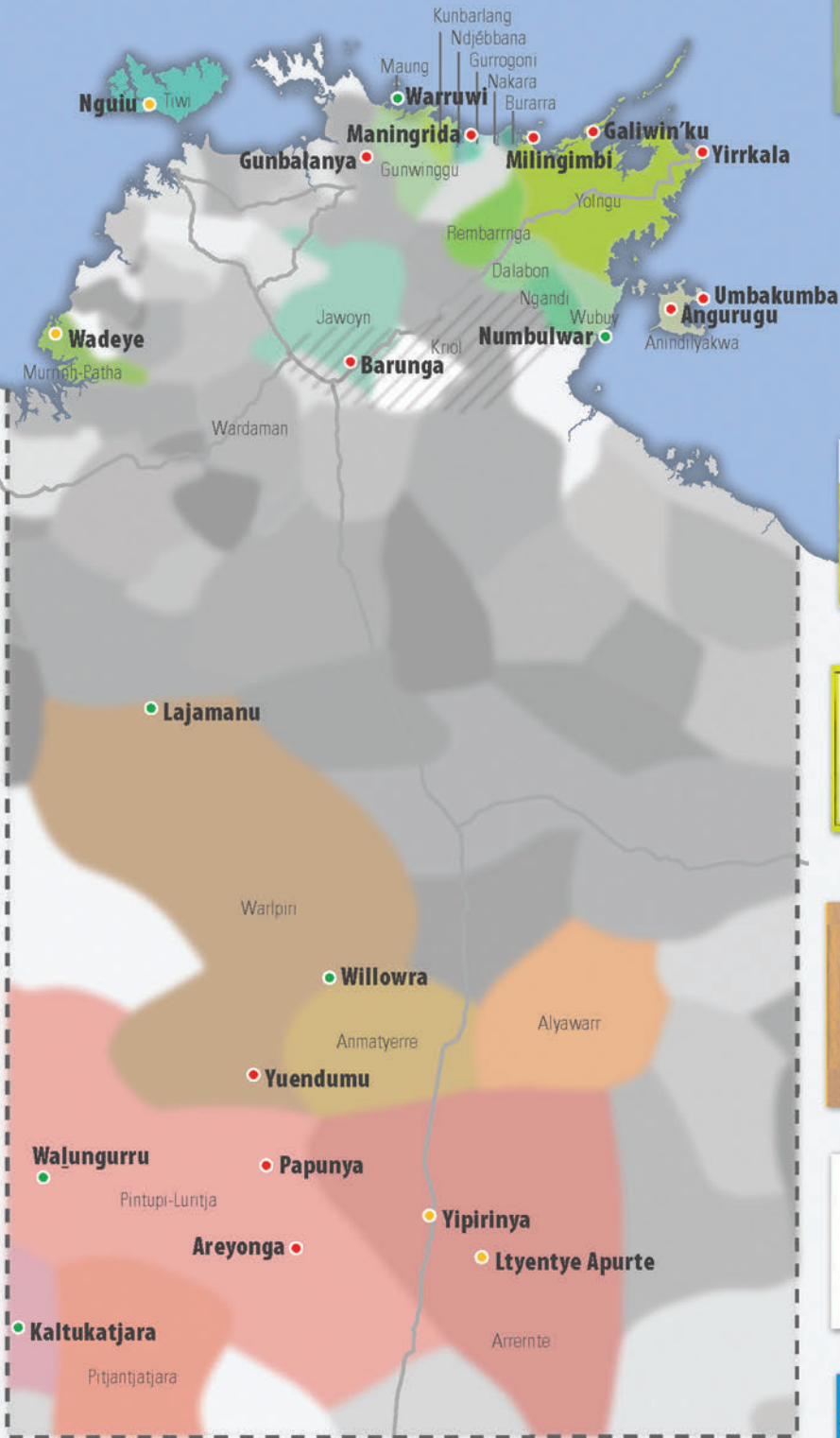
**TRAINING THE NEXT
CROP OF WILDLIFE
WARRIORS**

**THERE'S NO
ABORIGINAL WORD
FOR CANCER**

**MAPPING
THE ROAD TO
MOTHERHOOD**

Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages

- Literature Production Centre
- Literacy Centre
- Catholic/Independent School



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Australian National University



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Language specialists **MICHAEL CHRISTIE** and **BRIAN DEVLIN** are leading a web-based project to breathe life into more than 25 Australian Indigenous languages through a unique living archive of endangered literature.

With many Australian Indigenous languages and literature under threat, a team of dedicated researchers has travelled thousands of kilometres throughout the Northern Territory, working to preserve more than 4000 Indigenous stories.

For thousands of years, traditional stories have been the vehicles through which Indigenous Australians have passed knowledge and language from one generation to the next. Now the internet is providing an interface not only to help Indigenous people preserve some of these stories, but also to provide an educational and research resource for academics and the broader community.

Professor of Education and project leader Michael Christie said that during the era of bilingual education in the NT (1973 to 2000), more than 4000 books, recordings and audiovisual materials in excess of 25 languages were produced in 20 Literature Production Centres.

“Almost 40 years on, much of this literature is endangered and the texts are vulnerable,” Professor Christie said.

As valuable tools chronicling Indigenous cultural heritage, the topics of these stories range from environmental knowledge to traditional practices, oral literature, ethno-botany and history.

“It was part of an international movement to allow children to begin reading and writing in their own languages at school,” Professor Christie said.

“Thousands of books and other school materials were produced in Australian Indigenous languages by Aboriginal people, in collaboration with staff in school bilingual education programs across the NT. Many were traditional elders who were interested in bilingual education because it would allow their children to learn both traditional Indigenous knowledge and mainstream Australian knowledge. Although often illiterate themselves, they were committed to the possibility of preserving their knowledge using

Endangered Indigenous literature finds a safe home

TEXT

Leanne Coleman

IMAGES

Fiona Morrison

whatever tools were available.”

Realising the texts were vulnerable, Professor Christie and CDU Associate Professor in Bilingual Education Brian Devlin set up the “Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages” project, aiming to build a digital archive of endangered literature in collaboration with the language-owning communities. With more than 4000 titles on their list the team, — ➔

A FAMILY AFFAIR

Waymamba Gaykamaṅu, originally from Milingimbi, 440 km east of Darwin, remembers her father telling the story about the Makassan fishermen he met as a boy. As he told it, Waymamba’s father was standing with his uncle fishing off Howard Island, east of Milingimbi. They were approached by a Makassan captain named Gätjin, who gave Waymamba’s father the Makassan name Garra Maṅalay. “It was the name of a city from far away; maybe from where the Makassan was from,” she said. “He kept that name because it was given to him. He kept it until the day he passed on.”

This story and others told by her father are included in the archive. Waymamba, alongside Professor Michael Christie,



Waymamba Gaykamaṅu is working with the team to record audio files of her father’s stories in the Gupapuyṅu language.

formed the first Yolṅgu studies group and taught language and culture for more than 20 years at CDU. She is now working with the team to record

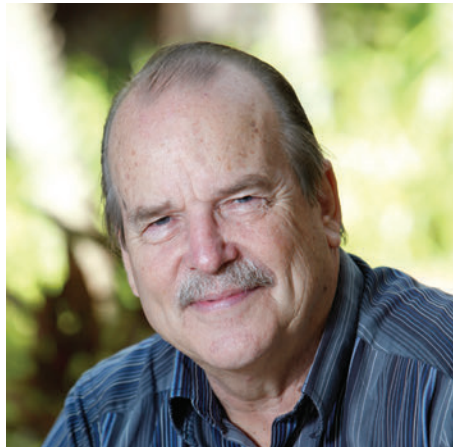
audio files of her father’s stories in the Gupapuyṅu language to add to the repository.

“The books were compiled in the community schools to help teach the children how to read and write in their own language,” she said. “The community got together and some people told the stories in language, while others recorded them or illustrated them with pictures.

“This archive is very important, not only to Yolṅgu Indigenous people, but also the whole Indigenous community, to keep their language and culture strong.” Eight of her father’s stories, published between the mid-1970s and the late 1980s, will feature in the archive.

A speaker of the Yolngu language Gumatj, Associate Professor Brian Devlin has worked in applied linguistics in the NT for more than 30 years. Having been employed in the Indigenous communities of Yirrkala and Galiwin'ku during the bilingual era as a teacher-linguist and school principal, Dr Devlin is a chief investigator of the "Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages" project alongside Professor Michael Christie. He has seized the opportunity to bring these important historical records to life using 21st Century technology.

"Back in the early '80s, we recorded the stories using typewriters and basic printing equipment," he said. "This [Living Archive] project provides us with a great opportunity to make the archive as interactive as possible by combining the text and images with sound, so that those using the archive will be able to hear how the words are pronounced in language. Indigenous children will be able to listen to the recording and read along with some of the stories.



Associate Professor Brian Devlin has worked in the field of applied linguistics in the NT for more than 30 years.

"We have also started working on the development of e-books, which use historical audio recordings of elders telling traditional stories or recordings that have been collected by the Living Archive team as they travelled throughout the NT in search of books."

One such recording was of an Indigenous elder talking about the

concept of language shift, which Dr Devlin recognised as an integral part of language research. In his doctoral thesis at Columbia University, entitled "Language Maintenance in a Northeast Arnhem Land Settlement", Dr Devlin found that many traditional clan languages were giving way to a common peer-group vernacular spoken by Indigenous youth.

"Language shift is occurring in many communities," he said. "Although the elders expect the children to grow up speaking traditional clan languages, the large communities and their schools have brought Indigenous children together from different clans. In these situations, often the traditional languages have been forsaken and replaced with a modern alternative spoken and understood by all.

"As part of this project, we also hope to record the variety of Indigenous languages, and the stories that surround this evolution and language shift. The archive will include traditional Indigenous and modern Indigenous languages."

including project manager linguist Cathy Bow, staff from the Australian National University and the Northern Territory Government, began a year-long search, travelling thousands of kilometres throughout Northern and Central Australia to give these books new life.

"There are some amazing stories," Ms Bow said. "Many of the books have been produced by teachers, elders or linguists to teach the students language, but many have also been written and illustrated by the students themselves in language. The stories range from traditional Dreamtime stories to the first contact of Indigenous people and the Makassans and experiences of Indigenous communities during World War II."

With the support of the communities visited, Ms Bow has located thousands of titles, which have been transported to Darwin to be digitised, or left with the language-owning communities to scan and send through to the research team.



Cathy Bow has worked with Indigenous communities to source books written in language, locating thousands of titles.

"Many of the schools and literacy centres had well-catalogued collections, but we also found books in dusty sheds covered in spider-webs and piled up in wheelie bins," she said.

"In some cases there was only a single copy of a book left and a few books had disappeared or been destroyed altogether. Without this digital archive, these stories could have been lost forever."

Ms Bow said that respecting ownership by seeking permission for digitisation, and building the archive in collaboration with the language-owning communities has enabled the communities to make decisions about sharing their intellectual property. It has also reconnected lost stories and illustrations with the places and people of origin. "We have found family members who had no idea that their father or mother had been involved in the creation of these books, or of the family stories the books told," she said.

Professor Christie said the website was more than simply a repository

of materials to preserve language. It also aimed to engage academics and the wider community. "The web-based archive will enable researchers nationally and internationally to engage with the texts and related resources, and with the original language-owning communities to pursue collaborative and grounded research," Professor Christie said.

"Australia's languages have evolved over many thousands of years to enable and enact unique human relationships with the social, cultural, technical and natural worlds. This resource will make publicly available a large archive of previously unavailable resources to support this work.

"As a living archive that will continue to grow, this resource will facilitate connections with knowledge and language owners, most often descendants or relatives of the original storytellers. 🌸"

The project was funded through the Australian Research Council and conducted in partnership with the Australian National University and the Northern Territory Government Department of Education and Training.