

TITLE: KIA ORA... AOTEROA: WHAT CAN WE LEARN?¹

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Ngarra-li-ga Gurrumayuu (Acknowledgement to Country)

Yammaa nginda Gamilaraay winnungulda. Ngay nhama Turrbal gaalanha Yuggera gurrumayuu. Ngay ngarra-li mirran diddiyaa maayandu burra-baa yilaalu. Ngay ngarra-li ngiyani wiira-y yilambu, ngiyani Yugal-yudagaa gaalanha Burruguu-ngali ngiyani-li nhama. Maraah nhama walabaa, wurrugaa yanguru gaalanha ngiyani.

Ngay gabayiindah guu nginu ba gaalanha winanga-li ga nhama ngay gaa-gi ga guwaa-li.

Gabayiindah.

Ngarra-li-ga burra-li winanga-y (Acknowledgement begins with Recognition)

If I was to write or present the above Acknowledgement to Country at a public gathering in Aotearoa (New Zealand) a staggering 60 per cent, both Māori and non-Māori would understand what I had said at a very basic level. This is because a pōwhiri, or a traditional Māori welcome in language is firmly embedded within Aotearoa culture. It is a practice performed by dignitaries, both Māori and non-Māori from the Prime Minister to pre-schoolers across Aotearoa.

The pōwhiri is a formal process of welcome and encounter (Mead, 2003), that encourages both engagement and participation (McClintock et al., 2012). Traditionally a pōwhiri would take place on a marae (community meeting place), but has evolved to include a variety of contemporary settings (Higgins and Moorfield, 2004). The hosts (tangata whenua) welcome the visitors (manuhiri) onto the marae in several steps including: calling the visitors onto the marae (karanga); formal speeches by hosts and visitors (whaikōrero) all in a process of making the strange familiar (whakararata), to tame, subdue, make amenable, and create a responsive, control (Māori Dictionary, 2016).

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From a communication perspective, the pōwhiri is a formal ceremony that establishes the relationship between different groups and allows greater understanding inclusive to race, culture and status. In Australia a traditional “Welcome” or “Acknowledgement” to country is generally spoken in English not the native language, and many believe it to lack sincerity and be too generic as stated by Bundjalung Aboriginal writer Kerryn Pholi.

... let us reflect on the strange ritual that is the Acknowledgement of Country. That is, the obligatory mumble about paying respects to the traditional owners of the land upon which a drab office block or dingy school hall is situated, and within which a dreary meeting or joyless assembly. (Pholi, 2016).

Not only are we witnessing a lack of cultural capital and understanding within the Australian model—we are also seeing demonstration within Australia that the same awareness of Indigenous language as represented in Aotearoa is very low, well let’s face it... non-existent.

As a side note – does anyone know an Indigenous Australian language word for “Australia”? No... of course not. Aotearoa is even written on the New Zealand Passport. Not only lacking a term of reference for the very country we live in, most Australians have no idea about the extent of linguistic diversity across Aboriginal Australia.

In Australia we sometimes see use of Indigenous signage, which though can help, but all too often it remains common as generic interpretive signage in displaying statements as “*this is the Aboriginal word for...*” rather than recognising and or acknowledging individual Aboriginal First Nation regions and dialects.

To be fair, this though is changing with Indigenous signage now greeting the visitor with increasing examples, road-signs, parks and wild life that name the individual First Nation Australian language of the region—with visibility of languages in public spaces now on the increase (Meakins, 2015).

But don’t get too excited, as such advancement is minimal in comparison to Aotearoa where Māori is an official language of the state and protected constitutionally. The difference is clear, as a language Māori holds a firm, treasured place in New Zealand society, culture and identity. Where as in Australia the Aboriginal language is absent replaced by an acknowledgement to country which many see as the rhetoric of non-believers who “feel compromised and unhappy about saying words you don’t really mean” (Pholi, 2016).

Bunma-li baluwaal-ma-li dhalibaa-yaa (Change will never happen without a commitment towards change)

When researching this paper I was surprised to find that back in 1980 less than 20% Māori knew enough te reo (Māori language) to be regarded as native speakers (History of the Māori language, 2016), and fewer than 100 children could speak Māori (Albury, 2015) back in 1980. We are in a very similar position today in Australia with only 12% traditional Aboriginal language speakers left in our Aboriginal communities (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

Aotearoa recognised the atrocities of British colonisation and committed to bringing the language back from the brink. Today the Māori language though still endangered is seen as a priority in establishing a unique, inclusive harmonious bi-cultural identity in Aotearoa. Contemporary research states that 83% of the Māori youth and 70% of the European youth agreed that the Māori language must be saved because it is part of a shared, inter-ethnic New Zealand identity (Albury, 2015).

Giirruu ngaar (Too difficult)

In Australia, we often hear that Māori is easy to learn because they speak only one language and it would be too difficult to implement the many Aboriginal languages in schools throughout Australia. That is simply not true—Māori has a number of dialects associated with various regions. The differences are overcome with the introduction of a pan-Māori that is spoken and understood throughout the country.

Linguists generally state that there are major dialect divisions in Māori. Within these divisions there is also regional variation, and within regions there is tribal variation. Older speakers of Māori are more likely to speak Māori identifiable with a particular dialect or region. Observations are that a considerable amount of dialect mixing is occurring amongst younger speakers, especially those living in urban areas. (He Kōrero mō Te reo Māori, 2016)

Prior to colonisation Aboriginal Australians were reared with the capacity to be multilingual, having to speak a number of Indigenous languages when growing up due to shared ceremony, cultural and intellectual trade occurring throughout Australia (Steele, 1983, pp. 160-2). Professor Raymond Evans has also written extensively of not only Aboriginal Australians ability to be multilingual but also the multi-layered meaning connected to kinship ties and land demonstrated from such practice.

...that 'in instinct and moral principle' the Aborigines were 'immeasurably our superiors'. 'You live like a bird of prey,' two missionary trained Breakfast Creek blacks, Dalinkua and Dalipie, had admonished whites in the late 1850's, 'and if you amass wealth, you soon become a bird of passage... you do not seek the good of the land where you dwell'. (Evans, 1992, p. 87)

Language spoken over many dialects and regions is represented in both our culture and our history as Aboriginal Australians over tens of thousands of years. Even today as Aboriginal children, we are taught that when on other people's land you respect the local culture. Therefore you are introduced first through your mob, family and language. The fact that many Aboriginal languages are spoken is not problematic; you teach the local language of the region. And with language comes history and place—not just for Aboriginal people but for non-Aboriginal too. Rather than divide the culture, you all become richer (Grant Snr, 2016).

How else do you think we communicated when we came to participate in collective ceremony such as the Bunya festival where over 30 mobs were represented? Or do people think Aboriginal people turned up and didn't talk to one another because we didn't know the local language... of course not.

It is a custom of Aboriginal narrative as old as Aboriginal people themselves as documented below in an excerpt taken from Page 25 from 'Kamilaroi and Kurnai' (Fison, and Howitt, 1991) originally published in 1880.

"This custom is still observed, and the first question of a stranger is, 'What murdoo?' —i.e., 'Of what family are you?' ("Gason's Dieyeri tribe," p.13. Cox: Adelaide, South Australia, 1874.)

It is this easy... Rather than teach only Brisbane also teach Meanjin, instead of only Sydney say Warrang. Our capital city is Kamberri for Canberra, Melbourne is Narrm and Perth is Boorloo. The real problem here is not in the language but in understanding why becoming educated within the local Indigenous culture is so threatening...

... and to who?

Burrul maadha (Authoritarianism)

The greatest obstacle to overcome I believe in Australia, is that we are witnessing a culture built on a neoliberal form of Authoritarianism that is preventing inclusive practice. A culture built on fear of the "other" or maintaining hegemonic principals of sameness... and persecution of those who won't, or are unable to fit in (Waters, 2015).

Authoritarianism is not a new, untested concept (...) while its causes are still debated, the political behaviour of authoritarians is not. Authoritarians obey. They rally to and follow strong leaders. And they respond aggressively to outsiders, especially when they feel threatened. From pledging to 'make a country great again' by building a wall on the border to promising to close mosques, attack refugees and blame ethnic groups and those on welfare for societies problems (MacWilliams, 2016).

And due to a rise in neoliberal authoritarianism the tendency in Australia is to blame the victims rather than offer them a way out. Academics, bureaucrats and policy makers are defining "victimisation" as part of the problem. And worse get in the way of what needs to be understood and done to address the wrongs, that blights the poorest and marginalised and for many culminates in alienation and even persecution towards those most vulnerable (Georgatos, 2015).

Even Aboriginal people who now find themselves in positions of authority have little choice but to act out the "deprivation or injustice by others": usually something does not appear as a privilege unless it is lived as a deprivation or injustice by those less privileged (Memmi, 2000, p. 102).

Garri-y Garrama-li (Decolonisation)

For Aboriginal peoples to move beyond the process of colonisation, we must first unsettle the power hierarchy that co-exists within the binary of the present relationship. The binary relationship, though shifting back and forth, will always return a position of power to non-Aboriginal people, as they are the most powerful in their own construction (Phillips & Lampert, 2005, pp. 1-7; Hart, 2003, pp. 12-16). This occurs to such a degree that even

those of us who remain privileged in accessing education and a position of authority continue to find our future potential restricted within the opposition of this ongoing binary relationship (Waters, 2012, pp. 227-228).

Aboriginal people are constructed as the “other”. This other is constructed as in deficit, weaker and different (Mander et al., 2011). This weaker framing of the “other” within discourse is significant as institutions have historically embodied spaces far bigger than themselves. One example is the university seen not only as a place of education, but also to symbolize truth, knowledge, merit, achievement, trustworthiness, objectivity and normality (Fine et al., 2004).

Therefore such representations bolster the power of the privileged member of this binary and constitute hierarchies that work to exclude, deprive and even silence the marginalized member. Inherent in this process is the requirement that the marginalized member adopt the privileged member’s assumptions, ideologies, values and indeed, their culture as a way of becoming legitimate (Sammel and Waters, 2014, p. 1237).

Minyaaya dhaay gaalanha nginda-dhu (Who are you and where did you come from)

In order for Aboriginal languages to flourish and our identity to grow we have to decolonise and reclaim our intellectual property, cultural and social capital independent to the mechanisms of Western Knowledge Production. Yes I am a lecturer, a scholar, published writer and academic, but first and foremost I am Kamilaroi First Nation Australian Aboriginal. My Yanguru (Moiety) represents my genetic memory connecting me to the oldest living culture in the world.

My Yarudhagaa (Totem) reflects my genealogy and remains Kubbaanjhaan. This connects me to my Burruguu-ngayi-li (Dreaming) as defined through Gawuban Gunigal... the Waterways, Songlines and Dreaming paths throughout the East Coast of Australia with Budjaar recognised by many Aboriginal First Nations as our creator” (Spearim, 2012; Knox, 2012).

In addition to maintaining our own unique Aboriginal epistemology and world-view research also states clearly that bilingual teaching improves literacy, participation and access to students. Bilingual children often outperform monolingual children in tasks of cognitive control. This includes metalinguistic awareness, which improves reading readiness (Yelland, et al, 1993).

Monolingual children have a limited set of resources to help them develop metalinguistic awareness. However those children who speak a second language are able to better ‘step back’ from, or abstract about their own language in better understanding the relationship in forming a ‘word’ and its meaning as arbitrary (Fernandez, 2007, p. 3).

This advantage may be a consequence of the fact that bilinguals have more practice controlling attention due to an ongoing need to manage two languages. They appear to develop a more analytical orientation to language due to their experience in organising two language systems. However, existing evidence is limited because possible differences in ethnicity and socioeconomic status have not been properly controlled.

To address this issue, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds were considered showing bilingual and monolingual children performed identically, whereas children from higher socioeconomic families were advantaged relative to children from lower socioeconomic families (Moreton, 2007) which again support the idea that the privileged members of a cultural hierarchy work to exclude, deprive and even silence the marginalized member.

Guwaa-li yalagiiarraay Marii (Language as identity)

Bilingual education represents an encouraging facet of efforts to improve primary schooling both quantitatively in terms of participation and qualitatively in terms of learning processes. Public education in many multilingual nations still involves submersion in the ex-colonial language, which results in highly wasteful and inefficient systems (Benson, 2010).

Maintaining distinct languages, at least in part, has also been seen as an essential part of being indigenous. Language is an important component of one's identity. It is fundamental to understanding values, beliefs, ideology and other intangible aspects of culture. It enables people to communicate as specific peoples and determines participation, access to knowledge, leadership and depth of understanding (United Nations, 2009, p.57).

For Aboriginal people to take their rightful place in Australian society there needs to be educational programs that is based on a life time journey of questioning and reflection to pursue collaborative inquiry. We need to explore our subjectivities as Aboriginal people as inclusive—not excluded within Australian schools and education that affirm maintenance of our cultural memory.

Wila-y (Conclusion)

In finishing I want to ask readers one simple question that highlights just how important language is to our identity...

How old is the Dreaming?

The truth is not nearly as old as you think, definitely not the timelessness creation most associate to the word. As a term of reference, 'The Dreaming' only came into acceptance 78 years ago through an anthropologist called A. P. Elkin.

In the late 19th century Francis Gillen, the stationmaster in Alice Springs who spoke the local Aboriginal Arrernte language became the first person on record to use the expression "dream times" as a translation for the complex Arrernte word-concept *Ūlchurringa* ("Alcheringa";), the name of Arrernte people's system of religious belief... (Nicholls, 2014)

The anthropologist Baldwin Spencer popularised Gillen's words in his 1896 account of the Horn Expedition. Without academic endorsement by someone of Baldwin Spencer's standing, the term may never have survived. Initially the uptake of Gillen's terminology was gradual, but it morphed over time into "Dreamtime".

In A. P. Elkin's 1938 book *The Australian Aborigines: How to Understand Them*, the anthropologist began using "Dreamtime" more or less interchangeably with "Dreaming"... and so in 1938 only 78yrs ago the Dreaming was born... (Nicholls, 2014)

Notice in Aotearoa, whether discussing the country (Aotearoa), a traditional welcome (pāwhiri) or the culture (ahurea), it is the Māori language which remains the dominant term of reference. This not only acknowledges Māori but also acts as a process of decolonisation that allows a reclaiming of Aboriginality as a renaissance in cultural identity and builds inclusive practice.

If Australians are serious about closing the literacy gap and creating a truly inclusive collegial education we need to not only acknowledge the past but recognize our future potential and begin a cultural shift that enables better understanding of who we are and what we represent. We need to prioritise the survival of Aboriginal languages and most importantly commit to change.

After all we have more language speakers today than Māori did less than 50 years ago. If they can turn it around why can't we?

Ngiyani ngiima yilaadhu yalagiirray ngiyani gimiyandi gaalanha yilaalu-gi gi ...

(We are here today as we were yesterday and will be forever ...)

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