

The Name That Was Written Down

(Note: No great revelations here just some notes on issues that perhaps those living in cities and mainstream life have not thought about too much.)

I

In the places where native languages intersect with colonial society there are endless possibilities for the re-spelling of someone's name. It may be the nurse who makes the first call. It may be the doctor. Then the name goes to the government for the birth certificate — and that is another potential site of intervention, another chance for the spelling to shift. If we are lucky, the school roll might reflect some sort of consistency with the birth certificate. But if it is a walk-in enrolment, or if someone transfers to another school, then all mayhem breaks loose again. Another set of possible spellings emerges, with no consistency at all.¹

A policeman, a clinic, a school, a birth certificate — each with its own system of spelling, each with its own version of the same name. It is enough to paralyze anybody these days. Banking, a passport, a driver's license — it is a complete and utter madness.

In some ways, it is almost cool that Yolŋu and other Aboriginal people are so hard for colonial society to interpret. But it is a nightmare when it comes to negotiating bureaucracies.

When the documents finally disagree — and they will — the only reliable link between them is often a non-Indigenous middle name. Peter, Sandra, Alex. The one thing the clerk got right. That is the quiet irony at the heart of it.

II

Colonial record-keeping had no shared standard. The act of writing and the spelling within it itself is colonial — written down by someone who did not speak the language, so the "correct" spelling is usually just the first one recorded. Even a relatively well-known mission in southeast Australia like Cummeragunja has a dozen different spellings across the records.² That is not a quirk.

III Orality

Australian Aboriginal peoples did not, of course, have a written language with an alphabet and orthography. Everything was oral — carried in paintings, in memory, in song, in story, across generations. So the challenge was never just spelling a name wrong. It was translating an entire oral world into a writing system that did not exist for it. That translation is still one of the biggest challenges in schools today.

IV

Beulah Lowe arrived at Milngimbi in 1951 and spent decades building a standardized orthography for Gupapuyngu. She analysed the language as having thirty-one phonemes — twenty-five consonants and six vowels — and her descriptions were the first linguistic work on any Yolngu language.³ Her alphabet uses digraphs like ny and ng, treated as single sounds, not two. The rolled rr. The retroflex consonants. English has no symbols for any of them, so every translator before her improvised, and the improvisations never matched.

Her orthography became the standard used across Yolngu communities today — in bilingual programs, Bible translation, CDU's Yolngu Studies courses, and linguistic descriptions. That is the second half of the story: the damage done by inconsistent spelling, and the decades of work required to fix it.

V

In the Year 7 class at Milngimbi taught with the master linguist Marcus Dhurrkay, most of the year was spent going from English to one of the Yolngu dialects, working on spelling. It is such a huge issue that it consumed the entire curriculum. But the truth is that all the Yolngu children have the capacity to be master linguists. It is the written language that needs to be mastered, not the other way around.⁴

Following Beulah Lowe's lead, schools need to spend serious time building the original skills of First Nations students — their oral fluency, their linguistic intuition, their command of their own language — before asking them to perform in a writing system that was never built for them.

VI

There is no reason — not a single reason in the world — why every Yolŋu child should not graduate Year 12 with very high-level matriculation HSC results. If only principals would start to realize that it matters for each kid to get a credential that is worth having — at university, in employment, in any setting that counts. The failure to do so is part of the ignorance and colonial overhang that still defines remote Australia.

Aboriginal children are master linguists in their very nature they must negotiate several dialects and then the doozy modern English. Starting in Year 7 or even before, working on writing and oracy is hugely beneficial and interesting. Going from writing to oracy and back and understanding the different forms and structures is very rewarding in a poly linguistic world like Arnhem land

VII

David Zorc printed a Yolŋu Matha dictionary in 1986 while working with Yolŋu at Batchelor College.⁵ Michael Christie and Waymamba Gaykamaŋu built a computer database from it. In 2015, John Greatedorex launched the first free online searchable Yolŋu Matha dictionary at Charles Darwin University — with fuzzy search, so you can find a word without knowing its exact spelling.⁶ In 2023, the Matha app followed, built with Yolŋu elders and language custodians under Dr Waymamba Gaykamaŋu, teaching pronunciation, spelling, grammar, and kinship directly.⁷

Yolŋu Matha is about six languages, roughly thirty clan varieties, twelve dialects — around five thousand speakers in northeast Arnhem Land.⁸ The dictionary labels each form by moiety, speech group, and clan, because Yolŋu themselves care deeply about which clan a word belongs to.

VIII

People still suffer from mono-linguism. Identity documents, legal claims, native title — all of it runs through names that were never written down correctly in the first place. Kitty Lewis, born about 1825 at Moira Lakes, died 1885 at Cummeragunja, is named as a known ancestor in the Yorta Yorta native title claim.⁹ Her name appears in the records in multiple spellings. The claim had to prove she was one person.

This is not a footnote to history. It is the ongoing machinery of dispossession, written one letter at a time.

Notes

1. A modern Aboriginal family tree may contain approximately 1,380 individuals with multiple spellings and repeated name variants for the same person.
2. The spelling of Cummeragunja varies across colonial records as Cumeroogunga, Cummeragunja, Cumeragunja, Cummergunja, Cummrageunja and Cummeroogunga.
3. Beulah Lowe, *Gupapuyngu: Alphabet and Pronunciation* (1975); Beulah Lowe, *Yolngu-English Dictionary* (ARDS, 2004). Lowe arrived at Milngimbi in 1951 and was the first person appointed to a dedicated linguist position by the Methodist Overseas Mission, in 1958. Her analysis identified 31 phonemes — 25 consonants and 6 vowels — and her orthography remains the standard used across Yolngu communities.
4. Personal experience: Peter Botsman and Marcus Dhurrkay taught at Milngimbi School in 2023, not far from the place where Beulah Lowe spent decades researching the orthography of Yolngu Matha, particularly Gupapuyngu. Marcus Dhurrkay is the grandson of Harry Makarrwarnta Munyarryun (also spelled Makarrawala, Mahkarolla), the Wangurri clan leader who was W. Lloyd Warner's principal informant and collaborator during his fieldwork at Milngimbi in 1927–29, which produced the remarkable and astonishing **A Black Civilization: A Social Study of an Australian Tribe** (Harper & Brothers, 1937). That text is known to have upturned the anthropological world. I think Marcus' grandfather was a giant who deserves co-authorship with Warner. The children carved a wooden epitaph for his grave at Yurrwi.. "I changed the world". He did.
5. R. David Zorc, *Yolngu-matha Dictionary* (School of Australian Linguistics, Batchelor, 1986).
6. Charles Darwin University, "CDU launches first online Yolngu dictionary", 10 February 2015, <https://www.cdu.edu.au/news/news-archive/cdu-launches-first-online-yolngu-dictionary>. John Greatedorex, dictionary creator, noted the fuzzy search function allowing students to search words without knowing accurate spellings.
7. Brenda Muthamuluwuy, David Nathan and Yasunori Hayashi, "Revitalising a language... app: new digital resources for Yolngu languages at Charles Darwin University", paper

presented at PULiiMA: Indigenous Languages and Technology Conference, Darwin, 21–25 August 2023. The Matha app (<https://matha.cdu.edu.au>) was developed with the authority of Yolŋu elders and language custodians, including Dr Waymamba Gaykamaŋu, Gawura Waŋambi, Joy Bulkanhawuy, Brenda Muthamuluwuy and Peter Girirrkirirr.

8. Robert M. W. Dixon, *Australian Languages: Their Nature and Development* (Cambridge University Press, 2002). Yolŋu Matha consists of about six languages, divided into about thirty clan varieties and perhaps twelve different dialects, with around 4,600 speakers recorded in 2002.

9. *Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Community v The State of Victoria & Ors*, Federal Court of Australia, Melbourne (Olney J), 18 December 1998. “Kitty Lewis” is named as one of the “known ancestors” in the claim.

Sources

Beulah Lowe, *Gupapuynu: Alphabet and Pronunciation* (1975). Published by the Methodist Overseas Mission, Milingimbi. Available through AIATSIS.

Beulah Lowe, *Yolngu-English Dictionary* (ARDS Inc., Winnellie, 2004). 190 pp. Web-based version available at ards.com.au.

Beulah Lowe, *Papers* (MS 5335), AIATSIS Collections, Canberra. Diaries, notes, correspondence and dictionary material, 1932–2003.

W. Lloyd Warner, *A Black Civilization: A Social Study of an Australian Tribe* (Harper & Brothers, New York, 1937). Revised edition 1958; third edition 1969. Based on fieldwork at Milingimbi, 1927–29, with Harry Makarrwaŋta Munyarryun as principal informant. Available at the National Library of Australia, State Library of South Australia, and other major libraries.

R. David Zorc, *Yolnu-matha Dictionary* (School of Australian Linguistics, Batchelor, 1986; reprinted 1996). 290 pp. Held at AIATSIS (call number L Y625.003/1) and the National Library of Australia.

Charles Darwin University, “CDU launches first online Yolngu dictionary”, news release, 10

February 2015. <https://www.cdu.edu.au/news/news-archive/cdu-launches-first-online-yolngu-dictionary>

Yolngu Matha Dictionary, Charles Darwin University. <https://yolngudictionary.cdu.edu.au>

Yolngu Matha App. <https://matha.cdu.edu.au>

Brenda Muthamuluwuy, David Nathan and Yasunori Hayashi, "Revitalising a language... app: new digital resources for Yolngu languages at Charles Darwin University", paper presented at PULiiMA: Indigenous Languages and Technology Conference, Darwin, 21–25 August 2023.

Robert M. W. Dixon, *Australian Languages: Their Nature and Development* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Members of the Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Community v The State of Victoria & Ors [1998] FCA 1606, Federal Court of Australia, 18 December 1998.

<https://www.judgments.fedcourt.gov.au/judgments/Judgments/fca/single/1998/1998fca1606>

Members of the Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Community v Victoria [2002] HCA 58, High Court of Australia, 12 December 2002. [https://www.hcourt.gov.au/cases-and-](https://www.hcourt.gov.au/cases-and-judgments/judgments/judgments-1998-current/members-yorta-yorta-aboriginal-community-v-victoria)

[judgments/judgments/judgments-1998-current/members-yorta-yorta-aboriginal-community-v-victoria](https://www.hcourt.gov.au/cases-and-judgments/judgments/judgments-1998-current/members-yorta-yorta-aboriginal-community-v-victoria)