

To: r.dixon2@cqu.edu.au

Date: 4 October 2025

Dear Professor Dixon,

I hope you are well :-)

I am writing to ask for your expert assistance to mediate a local situation we have here in Kuranda.

Mr Michael Quinn, who has been working on recovering the Aboriginal languages from the descendants of Monamona Mission for decades, has been advised he has misinterpreted or misunderstood the way linguist PATZ arbitrarily labelled similar neighbouring languages, in this case 'Djabuganydji' relegating Buluwai and Yirrgay to 'dialects'.

SOURCE: A grammar of the Kuku Yalanji language of North Queensland By Elisabeth Patz, sourcing R.M.W. Dixon

1.1.2 Kuku Yalanji and its dialects

The concept of "own language" as distinct from "other languages" is an important aspect of tribal identity in Australia (as indeed it is for any nation in the world). Thus Aborigines distinguish their own language from that of another tribal group, even if the differences are only slight, sometimes represented by just a few different lexical items. Accordingly, **a tribal name is often derived from the language name in Australia**, whereas the reverse is seldom encountered (cf. Dixon 1980:33-43).

Where the self-termed "languages" of several tribes are mutually understandable, the linguist may recognise these as dialects of one superordinate language. But **"there was not usually any name for a group of tribes whose speech was mutually intelligible"**, nor for the language^ [the superordinate language] that we can - on linguistic criteria - assign to them. It is necessary to **choose some label for each language^**, and this usually has to be done fairly **arbitrarily by the linguist**" (Dixon 1980:43).

I have written to Mr Quinn on numerous occasions asking him to accept his misunderstanding and to start helping us correct the records. He has so far refused. The diabolical problem is that his misinformation has caused a lot of unnecessary fractures, disputes and heartache among Aboriginal descendant families here in Kuranda. He has basically tried to convince everyone that Buluwai and Yirrgay are 'dialects' or 'subgroups' of the language-super-group 'Djabugay Language Nation'. It's totally absurd he continues with this bogus terminology.

SOURCE: R.M.W. Dixon, Words of Our Country, St. Lucia, UQP, 1991, pp.6-7.

To summarize, names like Yirrganydji, Buluwanyji, and Gunganji break down into three components: stem yirr-/bulu-/gung-, then suffix GAY 'language,' then nyji 'having,' and their **literal meaning is people having the Yirrgay, Buluway, and Gunggay, languages respectively**. In Wood's opinion, the linguistically unanalyzable stems and archaic nature of the GAY suffix imply

that these are very old names, and form an old and longstable nomenclature.

Michael Quinn's misinformation is also putting the native title at risk because this language-super-group is invented and is not traditional 'law and custom' as per the Native Title Act:

SOURCE: alrc.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/dp82_chapter_4_defining_native_title.pdf

Section 223(1)(a): Traditional laws and customs

“that the reference to ‘traditional’ law and custom in the definition of native title must be understood in light of the proposition that

the native title rights and interests to which the Native Title Act refers are rights and interests finding their **origin in pre-sovereignty law and custom**, not rights or interests which are a creature of that Act.”

It would be great if you could assist. In particular we need the concept of a language-super-group or language nation called 'Djabuganydji' confirmed as an invented term. Also, that neighbours Buluwai, Djabugay and Yirrgay are distinct tribes with their own languages.

Thank you for your assistance.

Kind regards,

Jo Martin

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