



# kakadu™

NATIONAL PARK



1

## Aboriginal languages

Language is the life blood of culture.

The cultural identity and unique world view of each people is carried in their language.

English (or other language) interpretations of complex Aboriginal concepts like the Dreamtime tend to be over-simplified and sometimes misleading.



2

1 3

Culture remains strong in Kakadu's people as it continues to be passed from one generation to the next

2

Traditional dance depicts stories that connect Bininj/Munggyu with the land

3

Studies show that there were about 200 Aboriginal languages in Australia at the time Europeans arrived.

These distinct languages have extensive vocabularies and complex grammars.

Today about 100 languages are still spoken to some extent while 50 have a significant number of speakers.



Australian Government



# PARK NOTE



## GUN-DJEIHMI, A LIVING LANGUAGE

It is the language spoken in the central part of Kakadu. Here Gun-djeihmi is used here to show some of the characteristics of Aboriginal languages.

### VOWEL SOUNDS

- a – as in father or the u in but
- e – as in bed or the ai in air
- i – as in the ee in feet
- o – like or said quickly
- u – as in push

### CONSONANT SOUNDS

- b – bank
- d – dog
- dj – jump
- g – gun
- h – like the Cockney tt in bottle – bo'le, or like oh-oh
- k – cake
- l – lift
- m – mad
- n – nose
- ng – sing
- nj – canyon, or like boyn if at the end of a word, e.g. bonj
- r – rice, carry
- rd – as in harder with an American accent
- rl – as in curl with an American accent
- rn – as in burn with an American accent
- rr – like the tt in butter said very quickly so it is trilled
- w – wait
- y – yell

### LONG CONSONANTS

- bb – like long English pp
- dd – like long English tt
- djdj – like long English tch

### DIPHTHONG SOUNDS

- ai – like eye
- au – like house
- ayi – at the end of words, eye-ee
- ei – like they
- eu – like air-oo said very quickly
- eyi – at the end of words, as in payee
- iu – like ee-yoo said quickly, or the eau in beaut
- oi – as in poise
- ou – like low
- ui – like gooey said quickly



Language is one important aspect of culture. It is spoken during the daily activities of Kakadu's people - while weaving, gathering and preparing food, making tools and weapons and in song and dance.



### STARTING WORDS WITH 'NG'

Say the word 'singalong', then practice dropping the start of the word so it becomes 'ingalong' and then 'gnalong'. The 'ng' sound is sometimes said very faintly in Gun-djeihmi so that the word would sound more like 'along' with just a hint of the 'ng' at the start.

### STRUCTURE

Gun-djeihmi is a polysynthetic language. That is, it can express in a single complex word an idea that takes a whole sentence in English. For example, abanmarneyawoihiyukiurrundeng can be broken into the following parts:

- a – I
- ban – then
- marne – for
- yawoih – again
- yiuk – honey
- yi – with
- rrurnde – return
- ng – non-past tense

In English we would use eight words to express this as "I bring the honey back for them again."

### VERBS AND TENSES

Gun-djeihmi has five tenses, each shown by a different suffix. Look at the different forms of the verb ginje, to cook.

- Imperative – yiginjemen – "Cook it!"
- Non-past – yiginje – "You are cooking it."
- Past completive – yiginieng – "You cooked it."
- Past durative – yiginjeyi – "You were cooking it."
- Irreals (unreal) – yiginjemeninj – "You didn't cook it."

### DO YOU MEAN ME?

Gun-djeihmi has a complex system for indicating exactly who is being referred to and who isn't. Compare the following:

- anire – "we two (excluding you) go"
- arrire – "we (more than two, excluding you) go"
- ganire – "we two (including you) go"
- garrire – "we (more than two, including you) go"

### NOUNS

There are four noun classes – masculine, feminine, vegetable and neuter. These are indicated by prefixes to words.

#### Masculine – na

- na- rangem – boy
- na- marngorl – barramundi
- na- gohbanj – oldman

#### Feminine – al

- al- ngururrkmaj – olive python
- al- gordou – broilga
- al- gohbanj – old woman

#### Vegetable – an

- an- mim – seed
- an- djeuk – rain cloud
- an- yiuk – honey

#### Neuter – gun

- gun- ngei – name
- gun- boi – cooking stone
- gun- bid – hand

Well you got different clan groups - they talk for their land, they talk for their ceremony sites, they talk for their culture way - we talk for ours.'

Bessie Coleman, Wurrkbarbar/Jawoyn Clan

## ESCARPMENT LANGUAGES

The languages still actively spoken in Kakadu are Gun-djeihmi (also called Mayali), Kun-winjku and Jawoyn.

Gun-djeihmi and Kun-winjku languages are regarded as dialects of one another because speakers can understand each other. Jawoyn is a separate language.

These languages were spoken on, or adjacent to, the Arnhem Land escarpment and share similar structure and grammar. Because of this they, and other languages in the region, are grouped into a large language family called the Kunwinjku language family.

## LOWLAND LANGUAGES

Gagudju is one of the few floodplain languages still remembered. This complex language was the major language spoken in the northern part of Kakadu. The name Kakadu is an interpretation of the name Gagudju.

Although hard to know exact figures, in the period from the foundation of Darwin in 1869 to 1930 it is estimated that the Aboriginal population of this area had been catastrophically reduced to just 4% due to factors that included violence and the introduction of exotic diseases.

Many of the lowland languages are extinct or remembered by only a few elderly people today. The people of the sandstone plateau area were further from Darwin and survived the effects of contact better.

## MULTILINGUAL SOCIETY

The large number of languages in the relatively small area of Kakadu is some indication of the great diversity and complexity of Aboriginal society. Most Aboriginal people were at least bilingual and many spoke three or four languages. This is still the case today. English is often a person's second or third language.

## PLACE NAMES

Sometimes places are named for the presence of a spirit from the creation era. Namarrgon Djadjam is the name of the place where the lightning man, Namarrgon resides.

Other names relate to events in the creation era. Badbong Bawardedjobgeng is the name of a distinctive rock in the Nourlangie region. The name means 'the short-eared rock wallaby cut the rock'.

Some names, such as Anbangbang and Mardugal, have no known meaning.

The linguistic diversity of Aboriginal Australia is demonstrated locally in Kakadu. The map shows the main languages of the Park.



'Bininj culture really strong...very strong for us Bininj. When I was a girl my grandmother, I learn. Same thing I do with younger generation. You have to look after country, for your grandfather country, like mother country, take care.'

Yvonne Margurulu, Mirrar clan

'Our land has a big story. Sometimes we tell a little bit at a time. Come and hear our stories, see our land. A little bit might stay in your hearts. If you want more, you can come back.'

Jacob Nayinggul, Manilagarr Clan

For more information contact:

Bowali Visitor Centre,

Kakadu National Park

PO Box 71, Jabiru NT 0886

Tel: (08) 8938 1120 Fax: (08) 8938 1123

info@kakadu.com.au

www.kakadu.com.au

© The Aboriginal Traditional Owners of Kakadu National Park and the Commonwealth of Australia.