

Robert McLellan transcript

wapanj gulam
ŋay burrumga dhurwain
ŋay Gureng Gureng djaa

My name is Robert McLellan and I am a Gureng Gureng person and I come from Bundaberg.

I would say I've had quite an interesting language journey, that's spanned across quite a few years now, as the years get on. Probably back around 2016 or so, would have been when we started to really engage with language a little bit more in depth, in terms of myself and my community. However, but prior to that, my family, my community, we all still held, we carried forward the perceptions that our languages were lost and the idea of reviving them or revitalising them, or bringing them back to life in one sense or another would be to no avail. Because we didn't have the privileges that I now see, myself having an affiliation with quite a few Uni's now. And even having simple things like University logins to access material and information in libraries and archives and other spaces, and even just journal articles.

Those old journal articles written about our languages, or we didn't even know those things existed it was a whole different world. So to think that there was enough content to rebuild a language that hadn't been spoken for more than perhaps two generations or so, that concept was completely fine to us. So that's where that started back then. And we started working with, we had the opportunities to work with linguists and all of that through the Indigenous languages funding, through the ILA, which continues today and they fund various language centres around the place. So it was a quite humble beginnings in that respect. And I remember the first time hearing my language spoken was by a non-Indigenous linguist. And an older lady still a very lovely lady, but it was just a bazaar feeling to think that, to hear your language spoken by not one of your own people.

And I reflect on that moment still today and it was just quite a, it was quite a bizarre feeling at the time, but then to hear something spoken that was ours, something that we could be comfortable with, something that we could see ourselves in, you know, it was a truly remarkable feeling. So then my journey continued on and we just continued to do things with language. Wrote books, wrote different, did different performances, song, dance, spoke, implementing into like acknowledgement of country processes. Starting to get more people in the community speaking it. Children at schools. Non-Indigenous community members also. We did different programs and projects where we'd get everyone up singing and dancing and just that, that real communal sense where everyone could be proud of the first language of our community and our regions.

My community extends from Bundaberg South to the Barwon River, where we neighbour with Butchalla and Kabi Kabi countrymen. We go north to Gladstone, beyond Gladstone to Raglan Creek, inland to about Rawbelle or Three Moon and then we cut in before Childers in the south-west. So it's a pretty big area of land my Country, but, and also within that region there is an extremely, a diverse amount of languages that make up,

there's about 12 or more different dialects of my language. I'm just thinking if there's anything else I need to. I guess I haven't really spoken about the Uni stuff.

I later became engaged with the University of Queensland to continue a lot of this language work and I guess I was sort of split into two areas, predominantly, we focussed a lot of our time efforts and energy and working with communities, language communities across Queensland to develop what is now the graduate certificate in Indigenous language revitalisation. And it's quite a profound feeling now to be able to say that. Because it was a huge journey. It took a lot of work. It took a lot of consultation. We had an Indigenous, well we still have, today an Indigenous lead steering committee, and yeah, it was a lot, there was a lot of time and effort that went into developing that.

And I'm personally truly grateful for all of the work that others contributed, on their own languages, you know, it's one of those programs that's really, the quality of the program is what gets brought into it, and that's what communities are bringing to the program, to give them the tools and the skills that they need to continue to revitalise and make resources for their languages. You know, those things could be books, grammars, songs, all of those kind of things, that really do make a difference. And on the other side of that, I'm also working with the language data comments of Australia, which is led by the University of Queensland, but we have about 10 or so partners across different Universities, working to build a day, a centralised archival repository system, where we're identifying a lot of language materials because we know in the context of Indigenous languages, that much of our language material is dispersed all over the place. Sure it's in, it's amassed in different collections but it's dispersed. And up until now we've relied on the word of mouth really to find out where our language material is.

And we can never truly be sure to have found it all. So that's a real challenge when you haven't had the continuity of your language carried across generations but when it has been impacted by colonisation and your old people haven't been able to speak it or pass it on, that makes a big difference and now, and there's a lot of communities in that condition who are having to work with these materials and start to revitalise their languages. So I think it's incredibly important work and something that I'm certainly proud of myself also. I know my grandmother was never able to speak her language and she speaks about those old people whispering it, you know speaking very quietly. Or when the policeman would come around on the bicycle, the old people would tell them to run off to the back in the creek and just play very quietly and don't come back up until they tell them to.

And it was tough times then and I mean I think there was a fear. She always spoke about this fear from those old people that if those kids went to school and uttered any language they'd be taken away, or these sort of things would happen so that was really imposed, that fear was imposed upon our people. And it's really quite disappointing to see the impacts of colonisation upon our languages, our cultures and identities as it extends through today. But I think one of the most significant things for me personally in my language journey and the privileges that I've had, is hearing those stories from all those old people and then coming back and the full circle comes around when you find material

and little hidden gems and it just, it clarifies what we knew, when you see it documented a second way.

And it's almost as if, I know it sounds funny to say, but it seems as if this is real, this is real stuff. You know? And it's bizarre to think that we need, that we have this sense that western research papers are the tool to validate that. I know it's not, but that's the world we've been brought up to. But it's certainly welcoming to see that language sort of crossing over from what our oral histories are, and what's been documented also. And it's an incredibly privileged space to walk the line between both of them, and a responsibility that I don't take lightly and I know a lot of, while working in this space also take that job very seriously, so it's a pretty special place to be in.

I think in a revitalisation context, the use of music and song is incredibly important. It's incredibly important because it's the mode of which we can really engage with people and language learners of all different levels. Particularly I think about a lot of the projects that I did with schools, primary schools, and the language that we teach them through song and actions as well, get them singing and dancing together. That was incredibly important because it stays in their memory. I think that's, I think for us as Mob, a lot of that language and a lot of the stories and important knowledges were passed down through song and story. And it's a way of retaining that information so I think it's incredibly important. We'd use a lot of things like repetition which is not uncommon for some of the songs that we'd find, particularly going back through those old materials and hearing old recordings of those old fellas and old women who'd been recorded singing, you see different patterns in music, I guess from ethnomusicology point of view, you do start to see those patterns particularly in the sort of central to south-east Queensland region, our languages are somewhat similar. Quite distinct but somewhat similar in their systems and processes as opposed to the other side of the continent, yeah?

And our music sounds similar too, so there's similarities there. And there's commonalities in our dances and the way we do it. So it's an incredibly powerful tool for language learning and retaining that. There's been quite a few songs that we've used in like kindergartens, Prep 1, 2, 3, that whole sort of age group. I think they can become quite strong language learners. And particularly when you have a, you might take a format where you create new songs and most of the song is in English but you can take that opportunity to find the most important parts and implement your language. It might be a place name song, or it might be a song about animals, like the one I did. Recently a friend of mine Faith Baisden wrote the song, No Buru on the Bus, and that was an incredible tool for myself and others because she was generous enough to gift it to us.

So she wrote it and put in her Yugambah words, but then gave it to us in other communities and we could put our words in there and we could use that as a hands-on resource to go into different places, spaces, schools and the rest of it and the impact was really valuable.

I also had this opportunity, what's presented to me through First Language's Australia and the ABC. And it was a pretty, it was a fantastic collaboration where different language holders and sole well musicians travel around the country were able to sing a song in language and I wouldn't call myself a musician, or a good singer for that matter,

but do it for the cause, and the cause is the love of language and sharing that more broadly and I did have to encourage as much of my mob as possible to get up and give it a go too, because that's what I say, well if I can do it, so can everyone else. And so there was a great collaboration and I was able to sing that song No Buru on the Bus and they videoed it and it has great popularity.

It was spread around the place on ABC iview, there was a teaching resource put out for schools. It was even on ABC kids. I know I got a message the other day from one of my cousins, who's got her baby and it just popped up on the DV so it was quite a surprise for them too. I think the importance of that is. when I was a child growing up watching things on TV or going to school or, you know, our languages weren't featured in many places and spaces and that's important because while it's incredibly important that we are able to see ourselves within that, see ourselves within society every day instead of being the bit extra or off to the side by definition marginalised, yeah? So I think the rise or the appetite that there is now to see more language in public spaces, to hear it and this is coming from a time where old people weren't able to speak their language in public spaces or sing those songs, or practice ceremony.

So to see that that is changing now although the damage is done and we're working to recoup from that, but to see the appetite now is incredibly important for us. I think it gives a stronger sense of identity to young black fellas coming up and I only wish I was exposed to it a lot more of that in an every day setting. Sure we had our own family and cultural upbringings but when you went to school, when you went to other sort of public things with your friends and the rest of it, you'd leave your backpack at the door is the analogy. That backpack that you accumulate all of that cultural knowledge and all the understanding over time, well that's not, wasn't welcome in the classroom when I went to school and I'm not that old.

So, I think it's incredibly important. And I also, when I went back into schools, so that was, I was aware of that when I had the opportunity to go and back and teach language and songs to students, in the classroom, I always thought I wish someone had come into my classroom and did the same for me.

Well there are always, I feel every time we fix one thing something else pops and we're always trying to do that. It's tricky. So when it comes, oh, so. In terms of language revitalisation it's not an easy process. There's a strong consistent community of practice, dedicated Blakfellas and non-Indigenous people too who are helping us along this journey. But it takes real time and effort and it's not east, there's a a lot of challenges. One of the challenges that I always say, is the fact that our languages are so widely dispersed all over the place. We don't know exactly where they all are and that's a real barrier in terms of finding them. And then when we do find them and we do find they exist they're often locked down and we have to jump through all of these hoops, just to try and get access to the material.

And that's really disheartening, in fact it's a little bit infuriating for community who have to jump through these arbitrary hoops and try and prove that they have a right to view that material and they go through this extremely subjective nature, subjective, an extremely subjective process, I'm just going to start that again.

And they go through this extremely subjective process where they're vetted by non-Indigenous people, in many cases, you know, non-Indigenous people who don't have the training, the skills or the competency to really discern what is appropriate in this space and I find a lot of, and sure there's sensitive materials that are in there and that's legitimate concern. But that's our community's concern to work out, right? I think because a lack of competency in that area when it comes to sensitive information, there's a real fragility around it. And that the default response for some are to just lock it all down. And I can't say that without saying that there's a lot of institutions now who have very quickly become aware of that and are doing absolutely everything they can to not be the arbiters of access and not lock materials down.

Because they know at the end of the day, it doesn't help mob, it doesn't help us do what we need to do, because we don't have the time. The time goes on, our old people are dying from preventable diseases and the rest of it, we're going in a lot, a lower, you know, a lower age than probably we should be. And time is a real factor. Those old people who do have memories of that anthropologist who came around and recorded in the 60s or that, you know, those people are getting really old now and so it's important that we do in the interest of revitalising language and to do that to suit our priorities for once, that's the biggest difference. To take that material and develop what we want, that's a big deal. So it's important that we have access so that's a big deal.

There's also challenges now tying it, and it all gets tied into a bit of a know now. Then we move to open access to material and then we have the rise of generative AI now, who will, I see an example very recently where three or more Indigenous languages have had, have grammars made openly available, in the interests of communities accessing them and using them. And that has been exploited by generative AI in scraping that data to produce books which as I speak today are currently available on Amazon for \$60 a book. There's an example. I believe they're trying to sort that out. But it's a really tricky space. There's no black and white answer to all of this, and it's something that I see very clearly within my journey, particularly with ALDCA and something that we were really trying to make sense of and walk this one foot at a time and try and make the most informed and conscionable decisions that we can make really knowing that that impacts communities and where communities voices lie within that.

The whole, so much of what we do today has been compromised you know by colonisation and other aspects like that. So, people always talk about, there's some linguist who was always criticised and said well, it will never be spoken at its purest form again, you know? And who knows exactly, it might be, might not be. I mean, you know, when they divide there, we're really reliant on material that have had white fellas interpretation. And that is at the absence of the Indigenous and the word views on the rest of it, that can't be captured in that historical material.

So I think in that way, in that sense, a lot of this work we could say is compromised to a degree, but remain optimistic because there is a black fella side to all of this. And the power comes, the great strength comes we know, is when you get black fellows into those collections and working with those materials and they enrich those documents, videos, songs, transcripts the rest of it, they enrich that in ways that non-Indigenous people simply can't because they don't have that backpack that they carry from home full of all

of those cultural and family upbringings. And that probably should be said, and should be acknowledged in this conversation moving forward. But in terms of protocols I'll reserve that. Yeah.

Music is an incredibly powerful tool in preserving our languages, because it always has been. Right? We've always been great storytellers and time, as time was progressed a lot of the songs and dances are talking about specific events, points in times and just stories, you know stories for entertainment and other purposes so we're incredibly social people, that's what we are as human beings, you know. I think music resonates with anyone regardless of where you come from, so in that sense it's an incredibly powerful tool and it's an incredibly powerful tool for sharing our languages with other cultures too. In terms of what defines contemporary music, or what defines traditional music, that's really difficult to define, because as I said overtime stories keep coming, they're made up, they maybe based on real events they maybe based on law as well.

So there's all of these different categories to consider or I won't say category, it's just all these different I guess unique aspects to consider in terms of that role. I think what's most important is where it comes from and if these works are created by the language holders, by the descendants of that group, I think who's to say, who's to categorise it any other way than the way that the group intends to. Because that is it's our language, it's for us, and should we choose to share it, we'll pick the appropriate medium to do that. But music certainly is consistently one of the most powerful tools to do that.

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