

Aboriginal Language Revival in South Australia
Gerhard Rüdiger, Neuendettelsau 16.7.2019

Index:

Page 1	Overview of Names, Organizations and Key Terms mentioned in this paper
Page 3	Personal Introduction
Page 4	1. General introduction
Page 5	2. Language
Page 6	3. Language <i>Learning</i>
Page 10	4. Language <i>Loss</i>
Page 11	5. Kurna Language <i>Reclamation</i>
Page 15	6. And Schürmann and Teichelmann?
Page 16	Further Reading

Overview of Names and Organizations mentioned in this paper:

In Australia — present-day:

- **Aboriginal *Kurna* Language Community**, metropolitan Adelaide
Kurna Warra Pintyanti (KWP) & Kurna Warra Karrpanthi: <adelaide.edu.au/kwp>
- **Aboriginal *Barnjarla* Language Community**, Eyre Peninsula (800km West of Adelaide)
Barnjarla Language Program: <barnjarlalanguage.com>
- **Wiradjuri people**: One of the larger Aboriginal Language communities in Western New South Wales involved in active language revival and teaching in public schools.
- **Late Aunty Dr. Alitya Wallara Rigney**, Director of Kurna Plains School and founding member of KWP
<en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alitya_Rigney>
- **Dr Rob Amery & Professor Dr Ghil'ad Zuckermann**, Linguists, Faculty of Arts, The University of Adelaide
<arts.adelaide.edu.au/linguistics>

In Australia — historical:

- **"Adelaide Tribe"**: name for Aboriginal Kurna Language Community by Colonial authorities
- **Colonial Administration** of the British Colony of South Australia (establish 1836)
- **South Australian Company** = British company established in the early 1830s to develop the newly settled South Australian colony as a private business venture of British investors
- **"Dresden missionaries" in Adelaide** between 1838 and 1846/1858): The missionaries **Clamor Wilhelm Schuermann** (1815-1893), **Christian Gottlob Teichelmann** (1807-1888), **Eduard Meyer (1813 - 1862)**, and Samuel Klose (not mentioned). Trained in Berlin, they were sent to the infant Adelaide settlement in October 1838 by the Dresden Missionary Society (see below) and closed the mission in 1846 because most of the local Aborigines had been driven away by the then more than 40,000 settlers in what is today metropolitan Adelaide.

- **Rev. Lancelot Threlkeld** (1788-1859), sent to Eastern Australia by the London Missionary Society, he was the first ever to record and publish an Aboriginal language systematically, the Awabakal Language spoken at Lake Macquarie, at the East coast of Australia. His work became the role model for the Dresden missionaries in South Australia.
- **Rev. George Taplin** (1831-1879), local Australian missionary amongst the Ngarrindjeri people at Raukkan (Point MacLea) Lake Alexandrina, South Australia. The Ngarrindjeri Language was first recorded by Dresden missionary Eduard Meyer, then in more detail by Taplin. In the 1870s, Taplin was commissioned by the colonial administration to gather and publish details about the then surviving Aboriginal communities in South Australia.
- **Charles Darwin** (1809 –1882): English naturalist, geologist and biologist,[6] best known for his contributions to the science of evolution

In Germany:

- **Lutheran Dresden Missionary Society**, established in Dresden, Saxony (East Germany) in 1836, moved to Leipzig in 1848 because of closer connections to local University. Today based in Leipzig as international mission agency for regional churches in East Germany (Ev.-luth. Missionswerk Leipzig, LMW). LMW is a Lutheran sister mission agency to Neuendettelsau Mission (MEW).

Key terms

- **Terra Nullius**, Latin for “Empty Country”, or land belonging to nobody: British Colonial principle sometimes used in international law to justify claims that territory may be acquired by a state's occupation of it.
- **Linguicide / Death of Languages**: Language death occurs when a language loses its last native speaker. By extension, language extinction is when the language is no longer known, including by second-language speakers. Other similar terms include linguicide, the death of a language from natural or political causes, and rarely glottophagy, the absorption or replacement of a minor language by a major language.
- **Native Title Claim / Aboriginal Title**: common law doctrine that the land rights of indigenous peoples to customary tenure persist after the assumption of sovereignty under settler colonialism. The requirements of proof for the recognition of aboriginal title, the content of aboriginal title, the methods of extinguishing aboriginal title, and the availability of compensation in the case of extinguishment vary significantly by jurisdiction. Nearly all jurisdictions are in agreement that aboriginal title is inalienable, and that it may be held either individually or collectively.
- **Native Tongue Title**: Proposal for the enactment of an ex gratia compensation scheme for the loss of Indigenous languages in Australia. Although some Australian states have enacted ex gratia compensation schemes for the victims of the Stolen Generation policies, the victims of linguicide (language killing) are largely overlooked by the Australian Government. Existing grant schemes to support Aboriginal languages are inadequate, and they should be complemented with compensation schemes, which are based on a claim of right. The proposed compensation scheme for the loss of Aboriginal languages should support the effort to reclaim and revive the lost languages. (Prof. Ghil’ad Zuckermann, University of Adelaide / Barngarla Language reclamation and revival program).
- **Whitefella/s**: Aboriginal slang word for white (settler) people in Australia.

Personal Introduction

Good evening and many greetings from Aboriginal South Australia.

My name is Gerhard Rüdiger, and I am a true-blue German, born in Frankfurt/Main, some 250 km north of here, near Frankfurt Airport.

I migrated to Australia in 2006, after having married my long-term Australian partner in 2005. Previously, I have trained as a Christian lay worker and worked in Christian Community Education, as I would translate what we call "*Gemeindepädagogik*" in German. This is a widespread professional role in most mainline churches in Germany, both Protestant and Catholic: We are working alongside parish ministers in educational programs of local congregations, from Sunday School, confirmation courses, Youth Work, Adult Education, all the way to programs for elderly people — you name it, we do it ... For most of my professional life I was working with people in cross-cultural life situations, i.e. refugees or migrants; in the churches' international development services; and — of course — international mission and Ecumenical education programs ... for me, however, mostly in Germany. Much of what you are doing here during this Summer School was part of my professional roles.

I have also studied Evangelical Theology, but never wanted to be a parish minister. Yet, ironically at the end of my professional life, one of my other roles in South Australia today is to serve the very small Evangelical German Language Congregation — as their pastor, lay preacher, organiser, and nanny for all and everything. This is a voluntary role, as our tiny congregations have very few financial resources. We receive hardly any support from anywhere — only Neuendettelsau Mission donated some 90 hymn books from their own regional Lutheran Church in Bavaria ... the nicest hymn books in Germany!

My previous professional roles in Germany also included organizing exchange programs with overseas partner churches. Thus I got to know a fair number of churches and Christian fellowships around the world, like Central America, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Cameroon in West Africa, and South Africa. Another such partner church was the Lutheran Church in Papua New Guinea, and this is where I first met my wife, way back in July 1992. Liz was then visiting her sister and brother in law, a Lutheran missionary from South Australia, Rev. Peter Hage, whom some of you from the Niugini connection may know. It took Liz and me about 13 years to get married, but eventually I arrived in Adelaide in 2006.

Through a coincidence in 2008/09 I got in touch with local Aboriginal communities. They were then engaged in reclaiming and reviving their own vernacular languages, supported by specialists at the University of Adelaide. Between 2010 and 2015, I worked professionally with one of these initiatives in South Australia, and since then as a freelancer. These reclamation projects are based on historical documents of language recordings by German Lutheran missionaries in the 1840s. The missionaries had been sent to South Australia by the Lutheran Missionary Society in Dresden, Saxony, today based in Leipzig, Eastern Germany. They are a mission sister society to Neuendettelsau Mission.

Eventually, we realized in Adelaide that I knew some of today's partner churches and mission agencies in Germany as the successors of the former missionary societies in the mid-1800s. Most of them had forgotten about their former commitment in Australia and it was quite a surprise for them to be re-contacted by the descendants of their former missionary "children" in South Australia.

My presentation here tonight is one result of our attempts to re-establish these contacts, and I am grateful to Neuendettelsau Mission to offer this opportunity.

Tonight, I would like to present to you an introduction into the wider context of this story and our commitment today, intertwined with reflecting with you about **three questions**:

- **What does language actually DO?**
- **Why language revival?**
- **A right to use your own “mother” tongue or vernacular language?**

You may want to give these questions already some thought, before we talk about them.

I am not a linguist, and certainly have no Aboriginal heritage. Languages have always been part of my life, but unfortunately I never found the time to study one of the Aboriginal languages with which I am involved. For you to follow with names and details, I have asked to print my complete presentation for you, but I may not read out the whole script, rather will try to speak freely. Let's see ...

1. General introduction

Aboriginal communities in Australia belong to one of the **oldest known and still surviving civilization** on the globe. Anthropologists today can find evidence for the settlement of the Australian continent about 65,000 years ago. But Aboriginal Studies, as we call it in Australian schools and Universities, have long been subsumed under “Australian History”. And, truly, many generations of mainstream Australians would have expected that indigenous people die out.

Yet, they did not. In fact, today, they are very much alive, and their numbers in public census figures rise faster than demographically possible. Why this is may be the case, I will address later.

Australia has been colonized by the British since the late 1700s. Initially, like the Spanish in South America or the British in North America, they used Australia as a penal colony for their petty criminals. Much of the “wilderness”, in the eyes of the new arrivals, was made habitable not on the backs of the famous “millions of Australian sheep” — but at the backs of hundreds of thousands of **convicts** in the 19th century, mainly from poverty stricken parts in the UK. To tell their story, would be worth a different paper.

Colonisation of Australia was conducted under a famous slogan and ideology: Australia was considered a continent first discovered by British seafarers, most famously James Cook in the early 1770s, and thus claimed for the British Crown. It was seen as a “**Terra Nullius**”, a Country belonging to Nobody. This concept is important for us to keep in mind tonight. In fact, it may probably have had consequences for many of your home countries, most notably in the South Americas, in Africa, and Australia-Pacific. I could also mention the two arctic poles and, no joke, the moon and the Mars: Wherever European explorers arrived first they would plant their national banner on the ground — thus claiming it against competing powers in Europa as property of their home country.

Terra Nullius has become a key concept of International Law. Since the 18th century it was basically an attempt to the relationship with other European colonial powers. However, it has its roots in ancient Latin Law — as “*res nullius*”, a thing (or an island then) belonging to no one: thus belonging to me, the “finder”.

And once the colonizers, as in the case of Australia, if not everywhere, discovered that that their newly claimed possession did indeed have previous possessors, i.e. inhabitants, they amended this concept to **not** to mean “empty country” (= *Terra Nullius*), but lands not exploited in the sense of Western Capitalism.

What this meant is simple. The newly arrived settlers were not “seeing” what they would have known from Britain: Cities, factories, farms, trade, market squares, money, roads, churches ... And, more subtle, there did not seem to be any property law (= land being “owned” by a person or a clan, that could be traded ...). In military and political terms, the colonisers did not “find” a king, president or any kind of hierarchical leader (as in New Zealand or Canada) to negotiate the ceding of the country.

Given all that, for Europeans arriving in colonies like South America, Asia, Africa, North America and Australia, most of their peoples were considered a lower class of civilization compared to Europe. Depending upon their military power and ability to resist colonisation, they were either respected or despised.

Charles Darwin may be a name familiar to you in this context. As a naturalist in the 19th century he explored many countries around the world. One of Darwin's main theories is that all species of life have descended over time from common ancestors. This branching pattern of evolution resulted from a process that he called natural selection. The struggle for existence in this selection process has a similar effect to an artificial selection process involved in selective breeding. In essence, Darwin's theory resulted in the Western slogan of the "survival of the fittest".

Tonight, I cannot go into the details of the dramatic consequences of Darwin's theories. But in Australia, it was the perfect rationale for what evolved since the early 1800s as human, cultural and, to some degree, natural genocide: The physical killings of large numbers of Aborigines, the dispersal or destruction of their cultural heritage, and the conversion of their country and livelihood to privately owned properties and farm lands. In other words, Australia was taken from its original peoples — the *Ab-origines* — as a wholesale theft by the British government.

2. Language

What has all of this, and much more, to do with our subject tonight — the reclamation, revival and survival of Aboriginal languages?

Well, you could say, all and everything.

If you think about it — WHAT DOES LANGUAGE ACTUALLY DO?

I would like to ask you to throw around some ideas and concepts.

Keywords:

communication, description of life, sharing of experience, describing country

In essence, you could say:

Using any kind language allows humans (and perhaps all forms of life) to share experience with each other. It is a code of sounds, symbols and/or actions that you and I perceive and interpret adequately. As with numbers, we have agreed that a specific sound carries a certain value. Language, thus, is not only a tool for communication, but more important it carries specific contextual information.

For example:

Water for people in a desert country, like Central Australia, has a distinctively different significance than for people in a rain forest or a coastal environment. For desert people, their word for "water" may carry the image of a country that appears dry and dead to us, rocks, sand ... inhospitable! But somewhere there is a hidden spring, or a waterhole holding the precious liquid.

For coastal people, it may be fishing, swimming or, in the case of the Pacific Islanders, the danger of their islands or coastal towns being swallowed by a rising sea level.

Fresh water (spring or rain water) keeps you alive, while in salt water — you can die of thirst!

Amongst us here tonight, we probably command more than 60 languages. In other words, almost all of us can in a certain context use a different language. This makes us global world citizens, as modern Western capitalism would like us to see it. But, indeed, what we do is to use a specific language for a certain group of people.

For me, this may be my native dialect from Frankfurt when I visit my sister's family. For you my dialect may be as alien as if I was coming from Mars. You may understand parts of it, if you had studied it. But you may not be able to grasp the deeper meaning of phrases, jokes, the expression of feelings, spiritual sentiments. Even a simple description of the local forests and valleys where my sister lives and that mean all to her — these may be empty words for you. I myself often don't understand why people in British comedies in Australian TV — laugh ...

Since we are at Neuendettelsau Mission with a strong commitment to Papua New Guinea, take this example: The Bible often uses the comforting image of a shepherd caring for his sheep, e.g. in Psalm 23 "The Lord is my shepherd, I will not want". You see images of Jesus holding a lamb in his arms. In Australia, however, as brutal as it may sound, sheep are a commercial asset, a commodity: You shear their wool, then slaughter the sheep or sell them on huge freighters to Saudi Arabia. In Northern Germany, where I lived for many years, I think of sheep as grazing peacefully on the coastal dykes, thus protecting us from storm flooding. In Papua New Guinea, sheep was literally unknown until only recently — their pet animal often was and is ... a piglet! But nothing could be worse than a pig for the people of the Bible — the Jewish community.

While I can speak to you in English — I am sure that I may sound clumsy to some, while others may have a hard time following me. Maybe not so much for using complicated words (I don't), but more for the context of what I am telling you: I talk about Australia, in particular in South Australia, the driest state on the driest continent on earth, and about Aborigines. But I am a German, and I speak to you, an international audience, in the Frankonian town of Neuendettelsau in Bavaria/Germany, and in the English Language, which for some of you also is a second or even third language.

In other words:

All is wrong, completely wrong. And, to be honest, I had a hard time to draft this paper — for this very reason! I hope that in a few years' time one of my Aboriginal colleagues can present a similar paper to you, as a summary of his lived experience.

3. Language Learning

In October 1838, two young men from Germany arrived at the coast of South Australia. The colony was just two years old. Officially, it was called into being by a royal act in Britain a few years earlier. The first British Governor for the colony of South Australia then proclaimed the province as part of the British Empire in 1836. Ever since, all its inhabitants are considered British subjects.

Interestingly, this was meant to include the indigenous people as well. Unlike the other Australian colonies, the initial royal act to establish the colony included a clause that the settlers provide for Aborigines to continue enjoying their country, livelihood and culture. Only a few years earlier, a survey of the devastating effects of British settlement in other colonies around the British Empire had made Britain aware of the plight of their colonial subjects. In particular, the native people in the Americas, Pacific Islanders, Southern Africa, and the colonies in Australia, showed to suffer dramatically. And the mainly Evangelical Christian initiators of the colony of South Australia were deeply influenced by the previous anti-Slavery campaign that had just a few years earlier, around 1800, abolished British slave trade.

So they had good intentions, these people around the South Australian Company in London. Unlike the first explorers of Australia and the settlers, they were aware that South Australia was not "*Terra Nullius*" at all, an empty country. Historians estimate that in the early 1830s, some 3,000 people of various Aboriginal language communities lived in a circle of about 300km around what is today the greater metropolitan region of Adelaide.

Alongside them were a few hamlets of perhaps 1,000 Europeans, run-away convicts, some adventurers, gold seekers, and other drifting people who tried to stay away from the more settled provinces in the East around Sydney or Melbourne.

However, for the South Australian Company, their South Australia project was a major business venture. *In* Britain, they sold shares for the right of choosing land in South Australia, after surveying was completed. The money thus collected helped financing the first fleet of ships with settlers. By the way, South Australia **was** sold to its “shareholders”, if you like, wholesale. Contrary to the regulations in the founding act, with proclaiming the colony of South Australia, Britain took possession of the entire territory — thus stole it ... wholesale!

The two of later four young men from Germany, who arrived in South Australia in October 1838 were sent there, and initially financed, by some of the key people behind the South Australian Company.

Their tasks:

- meet the natives of South Australia and befriend them;
- learn their languages and record them;
- teach these people the English language, civilise them and make them useful subjects for the colony;
- teach them the Christian faith and establish Aboriginal churches;
- make them adjust to the idea of the British colonising their country ...

These first two missionaries were the youngest son of a farmer’s family in North West Germany, Clamor Schürmann, and the oldest son of a cloth maker in a small town in East Germany, Gottlob Teichelmann. For tonight, we’ll focus on these two, then 23 and 31 years of age, when they set foot on the shores of Australia.

Interestingly, they had been invited to travel on their voyage with the second governor of South Australia, and his team. Previously, they had been trained as missionaries with a strong focus on learning languages. Their mission school was situated in the heart of the multicultural city of Berlin, in the early 1800s a place of refuge for many people from Europe previously trapped in the religious wars in their home countries. In 1838, the two young men became the very first missionaries of the Lutheran Mission Society in Dresden, who by a historical coincidence had been in touch with the South Australian Company in London.

On their voyage from England to South Australia, these two missionaries already had some debate with the government officials.

- The officers challenged these young missionaries in regards to their teaching of Aboriginal children in the colony: What language would they use?
- Schürmann and Teichelmann were not really shy: Of course, we will use the children’s native language!
- Why so?, was the officers’ reply, Would it not be much better for them to learn English right from the start to assimilate to the mainstream Australian society?
- Of course not, the missionaries responded: If we want to reach the peoples’ hearts for the Christian faith and schooling in civilisation, we need to approach them with what they know — the vernacular of their family. After all, for his Bible translations Martin Luther focused on the people’s tongue on the streets — the mothers, the children, the farmers ... So do we.

Even before Schürmann and Teichelmann arrived at the infant colony of South Australia, they were embroiled in a major debate: What language do we use to reach out to these Aborigines of whom we know next to nothing? Of course, the language of their heart — and of their world!

Behind this short paragraph is a complex story of intercultural exposure of these two young men. How had they been able to acquire the ability to learning and recording Aboriginal languages which have nothing whatsoever to do with any known European or Asian language? I do have some theories to answer this question, but we’ll still have to do a lot of research for a clearer insight.

Perhaps this is the point in our presentation to change perspectives.

So far I have been talking about the colonial history of South Australia = thus about our ancestors. For most Western historians this seems to be logical: most of our knowledge of indigenous peoples has been recorded by white observers for a mainly white readership. Our entire research ethos focuses on providing the source for what I say. But, obviously, a civilisation based on oral history, has no written records.

All what we know about the history of the recording of the Aboriginal Languages by these four German missionaries, we know from the diaries, letters and reports the missionaries sent to Germany. Almost everything else that they may have collected has been lost. And certainly, very little created by the Aboriginal peoples themselves has been preserved, if not in a museum or cave paintings.

So, in fact, if you think about it:

Reading these surviving records is like looking into a mirror! Right?

A mirror is a sheet of glass with a dark backside. If there is nothing dark behind this pane of glass, you simply look through it like through these windows into the garden. But looking into a mirror, you mainly want to see — yourself. You'll hardly ever think about the black backside of this sheet of glass.

So — we are reading the letters and diaries of the Dresden missionaries, indeed, the Australian history, as that of white people. But this is complete nonsense. This approach describes us as the acting agents of the story, the heroes. But we are only half of the story. The other half are, indeed, those people that the term "*Terra Nullius*" has simply made vanish from our attention. Yet, they had not disappeared in 1838, nor are they not existing today: Aboriginal Studies are not part of Australian *history*, but rather of very lively and colourful communities all around Australia.

So, let's change the perspective, as much as is possible tonight.

Historians estimate that at the time of the first encounters in the late 1700s up to 1.5 Million indigenous people lived on the Australian continent. Language specialists have researched some 250 languages across the continent, including 800 dialectal varieties, in two larger language families. Only 13 of these 250 languages are still acquired by children. About 100 native tongues in Australia are still spoken to some degree, but are seriously endangered with the passing of their elders. Perhaps 15 languages previously extinct are in various stages of reclamation and revival, and are being taught again.

As mentioned earlier, around 1836, around 3,000 native people lived in an area of roughly 300km around the city of Adelaide today. Way back then, Adelaide was a tiny settlement of a few tents and timber huts.

The Aborigines helped many of the first settlers to find appropriate places for farming and living. They recommended Adelaide to the first surveyor — near a creek, on higher plains, and not too far from the coast.

Further in the country, where I live today, they warned settlers in or near creek beds of flash flooding. They helped tracking other people or animals lost in the bush, or accompanied explorers on their tours across the country.

Like every civilisation, Aboriginal people had their battles amongst each other. But fighting with the aim of destruction must have been rare. This is not really a surprise. Almost all of the native people then were multilingual — they commanded several languages. The reason is simple — many families were established across language communities. Children would grow up with at least the two languages of their parents, perhaps other languages of grandparents or relatives and friends.

Many of the Aboriginal peoples may have commanded 5 or more regional languages, linguistically often not related with each other. Already the Dresden missionaries discovered it, but even for us today it is surprising how easy it seems for Aboriginal people re-acquire the Language of their Country.

Language borders, indeed hard borders as we know them today in the Western world, most likely did never exist. Language borders shifted with shared dialects across a territory.

Neither did Aboriginal people know property ownership. But every clan had a clearly assigned hunting and farming area which was respected by the neighbours and could be passed only after ritual permissions.

So, when Schürmann and Teichelmann arrived, the Aboriginal people around Adelaide were still widely accepting the influx of whitefellas. The “Adelaide Tribe”, as the whitefellas called them, had always lived at an intersection of Aboriginal travel routes along the Southern coast of the Australian continent and across to the North. And the Kurna people, as they call themselves today, believe that their country was — and still is — a meeting and learning place.

In their diaries and letters, Schürmann and Teichelmann describe how they first met the indigenous peoples. Some of them, obviously, already knew some English, or what you may want to call Pidgin English — a mix of local Aboriginal language and some English slang. So, courageous as these two missionaries were, they approached the first Aboriginal people they met and started conversing with them with their hands and feet, and some limited English. On their voyage, they had already studied the first ever analysis by an English missionary (Lancelot Threlkeld) of an Aboriginal Language at the East Coast of Australia, Awabakal. Of course, this did not help much — but the two young Germans soon discovered that the Aborigines themselves were curious about them.

Teichelmann reports several times an event that must have left a deep impression upon him: Several of the Aboriginal peoples in their first encounters with him asked for his name. And later they gave him a name in their own language, *Kartámmuru*, Older Brother. For any Christian theologian, “calling you by your name”, is a most important feature of the Bible.¹

Apparently, according to Teichelmann’s records, the Aboriginal people of the Adelaide Tribe, had their own fun with *Kartámmuru*. Not only did he perhaps appear as an imposing, tall man with a long beard, but he also began to engage in a discourse with them. Teichelmann is one of few missionaries who recorded complete dialogues with these indigenous peoples, and he often provides their names. Unlike most other whitefellas, he took them serious as people to communicate with.

But they were not shy either. Teichelmann reports a fair number of discussions they had with him about his faith, why he was here, why he always appeared to be working hard, why all these whitefellas were arriving and taking their lands, driving them out further and further. It is fascinating to read and still awaits a systematic evaluation about the missionaries’ language ability but also the changes in communication between the two parties. It is obvious, that Teichelmann and Schürmann became increasingly fluent with the language and affiliated with these people, and at times they lived with each other.

This brings us to the question: How did the missionaries learn the Aboriginal languages?

Unfortunately, because of the loss of the missionaries’ personal notes, we do not know much about this process. What we can glean from their reports is that there must have been an agreement among the Aboriginal people around Adelaide to teach these young men their own language and culture.

A number of Aboriginal Elders seem to have “adopted” these young men and have been sitting down with them to teach them. Remember, this was in the late 1830s, long before any adequate recording tools were available. Teichelmann’s diary and letters document his increasing ability to engage in more and more complicated discussions with these natives.

¹ Isa 43:1 But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. (ESV)

On 23 December 1839, just about 14 months after their arrival, the missionaries were confident enough to open a school for Aboriginal children — and their parents. It was no easy task as the natives were obviously very much set in their traditional habits of hunting or celebrating, as the missionaries complained. Already in 1840, then, the two young men published their first dictionary of some 2000 words and 100 phrases and sentence examples in the local language of the Adelaide Tribe, and a basic grammar. Soon they realised that the children were by far more eager and efficient students than white kids from British and, by then, German families. While much has been lost, four handwritten letters have survived from these students, in excellent script, sent to Germany apparently as part of a letter exchange about toys and messages.

Missionary Schürmann soon realised that learning Aboriginal languages was not too difficult for him, and he and his colleagues recorded two other regional languages, not related to the Adelaide tribe. Teichelmann continued to work with the local Aboriginal community, in later years preaching to large numbers of them in their vernacular. He continued refining the dictionary until 1858.

4. Language Loss

But already around 1844, the British colonial administration was not interested any longer in recording and preserving Aboriginal languages and culture. They had realised that Aboriginal communities in Australia, unlike Canada or New Zealand, did not form any military threat. Also, they considered learning English more important for the assimilation of Aboriginal peoples, and to become useful subjects for the colony.

The school for the children of the Adelaide Tribe was closed and the students forced to attend another school for children of various different regional language communities, with teaching in English. When in the course of the increasing influx of European settlers political tensions rose, the government established a couple of “mission stations” far away from Adelaide (even for today’s standards!). From about 1850 into the 1960s, younger Aboriginal people from the Adelaide region were forcibly moved to these government-run mission stations. (Alternatively, they moved away from the Adelaide region, many young men working on sheep and cattle stations in remote areas.)

At “missions”, the indigenous peoples were not allowed to speak their native languages any longer but English. Many of them developed what they now call a “mission station identity”. After the schooling of two or three generations in English, they had forgotten much of their heritage.

By the mid-1870s, a missionary from a local mission society in Adelaide, George Taplin, was asked to survey the surviving Aboriginal communities. Literally on the first page of his book, in his foreword, he laments that he could not find any trace anymore of the “Adelaide Tribe”. By then, the four German missionaries were still alive, and they knew each other.

In the Adelaide area, along the Australian East and South coast, and in South Western Australia, most of the Aboriginal communities were driven out of their lands, killed, and died of hunger and/or diseases because of the loss of their country and livelihood. Fencing one’s property became a most important business for early settlers — and is still so even today for property owners in cities and across the continent.

In Central Australia and in the remote North, Aboriginal communities are still living on their land, even though legally in many cases it is owned by commercial cattle stations. However, the physical features of Country largely remain. Thus the people can still maintain some of their spiritual and ritual traditions. As they live more closely together, surviving Aboriginal communities still speak their languages to some degree. But even there, many of the languages are at the brink of extinction. The simple reason being the enforced English-only education in schools, modern media, and a professional life — if at all — in an only-English speaking world. And with the passing of the elders, the younger generations increasingly lose their ability of commanding several languages, not least their own local tongue. Most local government business

has to be conducted in English, as administrators, teachers, nurses, police would not be encouraged, or put an effort, into learning the local language. Too difficult — too many!

Additionally, the intentional assimilation policy for indigenous peoples enacted by successive Australian governments, nationally and locally, causes itself an increasing loss of language. Today, a serious debate is raging through Australia regarding the language focus of indigenous education. Given their heritage of commanding several languages, even today, concerned teachers demand at least a bi-lingual education at primary schools. Remember the arguments of Schürmann and Teichelmann on their voyage?

The loss of language, culture, country and thus livelihood has led to a proportionally much larger prison population than what you would expect of the roughly two percent Aborigines in the Australian population. There are tremendous social, physical and mental health issues inflicting these people today, and throughout the past 200 years. Today we do not any longer kill individuals, but health issues, social inequality and injustice do the job for us ...

More importantly, with the loss of your mother's tongue — or, more typical, your country's language, — you lose your identity. English is not only a killer for vernacular languages, more important it is a language of nobody and nowhere. In fact, many Western "industrial" languages have become commodities themselves — you can acquire and learn them, but you'll know next to nothing about its peoples and cultures.

Aboriginal languages, and most likely many other ethnic minority tongues, consider their roots literally in their country. An Aboriginal friend of mine argues that you can't teach his language from level 9 of a high rise building at the University of Adelaide. He demands that for learning his language, you need to put your feet onto the ground to which this language belongs.

In essence, what has happened, language specialists call "**linguicide**" — the politically intentional murder of a language, and thus the related culture!

5. Kurna Language Reclamation

So, why Aboriginal language reclamation and revival?

— brief open discussion

One of my colleagues, Professor Ghil'ad Zuckermann, is a linguist at the University of Adelaide. He is conducting a survey about the psycho-medical effects of Aboriginal language learning. His project is still in an early stage, but already it is obvious across Australia that the simple fact of embarking onto the journey of trying to re-learn your mother's tongue and the vernacular of your Country has a healing effect for the Aboriginal people involved. The friend I mentioned earlier and many other Aboriginal people agree.

It is obvious — English is a no-man's language and cannot put in words adequately the life experience of a person from a specific place. It has got not sufficient words for the specific colours of the earth or the sky, the sounds of the winds or the sand, the relationships embedded in the language use, the taste of the water.

While early colonists considered Aboriginal languages primitive, for instance because of the lack of numbers, it is actually highly complex, in particular regarding suffixes for locations and relationships. As a non-linguist I can't go into details, and we would not have the time anyway.

But more importantly, English or any other colonizer's language will always remain alien to a specific place. It can't carry the imagery coming along with the sounds, thus remains void of any meaning and values. While you may spot MacDonalds across the globe, what you eat there is — alien. Not only that, the "M"

proclaims a vision of a society that is ... certainly not yours. You may like the MacDonalDs Burger — but “MacDonalDs” will never like you. In fact, it does not want the YOU in you as its customer. What it strives for is the standardised YOU, the consumer they can sell the same food with the same images and words across the globe. Everything else is — simply too complicated to do business profitably.

And exactly this is where all I have told you so far becomes highly political.

In the 1960s, an Australian anthropologist had made the effort to collect information about the Adelaide tribe, and had interviewed members of a neighbouring language community. They told him that they were calling these people from the past the “Kurna” people.

Thus the descendants of the Adelaide Tribe were given a name again, Kurna. They adopted this name despite not of their own. It would be similar to us adopting, for instance, the Spanish name for German, “*Aleman*”.

Since the late 1980s, descendants from the former Adelaide tribe re-discovered their heritage — and their country. Nothing much had been left from it either: Kurna Country today is a major capital city — concrete, roads, high rise buildings, cars and trucks and noise ... lots of it. Hardly any of the features have survived for large tracts of the land.

But, strangely, descendants began to return to Country — with a Capital “C”. For many of them this part of their own spiritual journey, and step towards healing their spiritual divide with their ancestors. They re-discovered the dictionary created by the German missionaries about 150 years earlier. An increasing number of people in Kurna Country, but so across Australia, re-identify with their Aboriginal heritage.

Many of the most active Aboriginal language teachers found a way back to their identity through the means of learning and then teaching their local tongue. The effect is even more dramatic for people who have the chance to live on Country. For many it is coming home after a long time of drifting.

This is also a key reason, mentioned earlier, for the increase of Aboriginal people faster than their demographics would allow. And since the 1980s, this phenomenon set in motion the movement for the revival of Language, Culture, Country, and Spirituality.

The rest of this story is told quickly.

By coincidence, a linguist from New South Wales, Dr. Rob Amery, came to be known to some of the key drivers behind this language awakening. Late Aunty Dr. Alitya Rigney, one of my bosses about five years ago, was then one of the first female principals of an Aboriginal primary school, established in the 1980s. She and her teachers were discussing what Aboriginal language they should teach — one of the more dominant languages from Central Australia or the local language?

It was no question: Within weeks they started teaching the Language of the Country where the school is situated, the local Kurna Language, despite knowing little more than their students.

When Aunty Alitya recruited the linguist Rob Amery, he started searching for and collecting other historical Kurna word lists and, of course, the dictionary of the missionaries. Eventually, they were able to pull together some 3,000 words from various sources in very different quality. They consolidated them by using neighbouring languages, where possible.

In a number of song writing workshops in the early 1990s, they utilised old and new sentences and phrases and began singing them in Language, even with the primary school children. Eventually they produced a first song book, then a funeral liturgy, and other educational material. All this was still based on the old dictionary and grammar.

But then they realised that, like in Modern Hebrew, they would need to find words for modern technology and ways of life not spoken about in the 1830s: Computers, cars, planes, telephone, etc. They identified

similar type words the Aborigines had created for horses, ships, guns, prison and so on. The missionaries had recorded them in the 1830/40s, and the Kurna Language reclamation movement used the principles behind this process.

Since the mid 1990s, an increasing number of people, government agencies and companies asked for terms and phrases in the Kurna Language to name buildings, parks, programs, schools, streets, and even animals or children. The Adelaide City Council made an effort to give Kurna names, for the first time, to all their 29 inner-city parks and dual-named in Kurna and English an increasing number of streets and squares.

Early Kurna Language courses were overrun by enthusiastic whitefellas, but there were not enough Aboriginal teachers. In particular, the Kurna community in Adelaide is quite small, with about a thousand people identifying with their Kurna heritage. Only a tiny group has the capacity to handle all the tasks.

A first field or practice for the new Aboriginal Kurna speakers were what we call “Welcome to Country” speeches: Increasingly more often, Aboriginal people are invited to express this “Welcome to their Country” to people not from Kurna Country, i.e. everybody not being a local Aborigine. This picks up an old ceremonial tradition which has become quite popular for many events in the Adelaide region (and so for other language communities). Also, it raises the awareness of whitefellas about the initial custodians of these lands, the local Aboriginal people, and that these lands had been stolen from them. In other words, we whitefellas live in in this country that belongs to the Kurna people as it custodians.

In 2010, the Kurna Language movement issued a reform of the grammar and syntax of their language material for the sake of easier teaching. The revised Kurna spelling is now being used across Kurna Country and the language being taught at a number of Aboriginal and mainstream schools. It has also become part of the National Australian Curriculum for what we call “Languages other than English” (LOTE). Linguists and educators developed a registered course to train licensed Aboriginal teachers. However, until today, only very few Aboriginal Language teachers have been employed by the Education Department, because they often lack full educational studies.

Today, the number of people speaking the language is still small, but they are increasingly fluent. And it will have to be their insistence to continue developing and maintaining the language as such and to find opportunities to use it.

Thus, there is much pride amongst the Kurna people and other language communities like this. Aunty Alitya Rigney could be scathingly critical of modern Australian politics of a still enforced assimilation of Aboriginal peoples, calling it the Australian version of “Apartheid”. Yet she enthusiastically described here “language as having been sleeping”, and never extinct, as other linguists claimed.

Indeed, the question remains:

Can a language be revived of which we have only a small number of words and phrases? Linguists expect that a normal person has command of about 10,000 words. And will or can this language be the same as before, or something completely different? How about the mix with other languages — for instance, through the anglicisation of the Kurna Language by using grammatical features and speech forms typical for English speakers? How about dialect differences in different regions?

The Kurna Language reclamation movement has now reached a state where it is leaving the academic realm of language revival. Rob Amery and other linguists are working at an extensive dictionary and grammar. A comprehensive learners’ guide has been published in 2014 and other educational tools, including quite popular video clips for children. How, then, can such a language find a place in the day-to-day communication of its people? Are there concepts of community development that allow the language to thrive in the daily life of its people? This latter question may become one of the most urgent for this whole movement.

Professor Ghil'ad Zuckermann, mentioned earlier, has helped bringing to life again another of the three languages recorded by the four German missionaries in the 1840s, Barngarla, about 800 km Northwest of Adelaide. He campaigns for the constitutional right of indigenous communities to use their language locally. Aboriginal languages should be taught as Languages other than English in as many schools as possible. A similar experiment in New South Wales, amongst the Wiradjuri people, shows that such an approach can change the relationship between whitefella and Aboriginal peoples of an entire region: The students eventually teach their parents the basics of their local Aboriginal tongue!

In essence, Zuckermann demands what he calls a "Native Tongue Title", i.e. a compensation for the loss of Aboriginal languages. He uses a political concept that is widely disputed in Australia, but has far reaching effects: Aboriginal people can claim the right of ceremonial use of their lands through a national court process, called "Native Title Claim". For the first time, private property ownership cannot restrict them from their use of Aboriginal lands for ceremonial purposes — i.e., the property fences have become widely meaningless, initially as deterrence against Aboriginal peoples.

Native Tongue Titles should allow for a similar process of the recognition of Language and Culture of Aboriginal peoples in Australia. This is a far-reaching goal, but an important vision. However, it is also a stepping stone of strengthening Aboriginal communities as political entities.

Australian Governments, and many of its population, oppose this step, as it may open the unresolved issues around the can of worms, "Terra Nullius" — the Empty Country. There is a political debate raging across the country about this very question:

- do we finally "recognise" Aboriginal peoples in the Australian constitution as an ethnic minority (Trapped Nation),
- or/and do we acknowledge Aboriginal peoples as people with whom we first have to sign a peace treaty, thus recognise their existence as a people according to international law, with whom we are still at war since 1778.

I won't go into this debate tonight — but again, it is closely linked with language revival.

In other words, what we are involved in here is not just an academic exercise or a cultural sentiment.

These programs are,

- literally, related to life and death of individuals and their families;
 - their spiritual and mental survival in a society widely alien (i.e. Western) that itself alienates the blackfellas;
 - of thousands of Aborigines in jail because of racial profiling and injustice by the police force of increasingly conservative governments;
 - of significance for the health and wellbeing of people who suffer because of their lack of access to appropriate medical treatment, and sufficient and healthy food supplies
- ... and so on ...

As with the improvement of the mental health of individual Aborigines, the reclaiming, learning and revival of Aboriginal languages changes the social dynamics of the communities. While English settler Australians tend to be protective of what they have, i.e. quite conservative, amongst the Aboriginal communities there is a vision and perspective for a brighter future.

At the same time, Aboriginal language revival often include the development of new concepts of a pro-active community life. It won't be easy, and there are huge obstacles, not least through the killer language English. But Language and Culture revival offer new roads out of the two centuries of misery.

6. And Schürmann and Teichelmann?

Well, church and mission history judged them as having failed their mission: They were never able to convert any of the Aboriginal people to the Christian faith. This is what they thought themselves and returned their calling already by 1846.

From what we know today, however, they never stood a chance: By the mid-1840, between 30,000 to 40,000 people lived around what is now metropolitan Adelaide. Even for today's standards in Australia, this would have been a large city. Most of the Aboriginal people were driven away, forcibly or simply because of all the fences around private properties. Or they lived and worked on cattle or sheep farms far away from home. The missionaries had become part of the mainstream Australian society who at the same time resented them for their sympathies with the Aboriginal peoples — the lowest human scum on earth, as some would have expressed their hatred.

The Dresden Mission Society had soon forgotten about their first missionaries, mainly because the Southern India mission field was a by far more attractive mission field. Connections with Australia were re-established again for the first time at their 175th anniversary, in August 2011, through a small Aboriginal delegation, amongst others including the late Dr Alitya Rigney.

In the long haul, our presentation tonight is a result of these contacts. Some other miracles happened over the years since the 1970s that helped us open many doors.

Teichelmann and Schürmann and their two colleagues would be absolutely gobsmacked of what has evolved out of their commitment almost 20 decades ago. It would be far beyond their wildest imagination. Since we are in a Christian mission centre, you may want to say: Their success became revealed in "God's own time" (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

Many thanks for your attention!

My third question to you was:

- **The right of your own "mother" tongue or native language? Would you be in favour or against?**
- Open discuss
- vote

#####

Contact:

Gerhard Ruediger, 3 Mader Court, Nuriootpa SA 5355, Australia

Email <gruediger@gmail.com>

If you are interested, I am happy to establish contact with Aboriginal language activist and academic researchers. Feel free to contact me.

Biographical Information

Gerhard Rüdiger, born 1952 in Frankfurt/M, Germany, graduated as a Christian Community Educator at the Protestant University of Applied Sciences in Darmstadt and studied Theology at Wuppertal, Bochum and Heidelberg. In Germany he worked in inter-cultural and Ecumenical community education, with refugees and migrants from Africa and Asia, and for mission agencies with partner churches from around the world. He came to Australia in 2006. After developing an interest in the history of the Kurna Language reclamation and revival, he has been supporting the Kurna and Barngarla Language reclamation projects between 2010 and 2015 part-time in administration, liaising and research, and now as a freelancer.

Further Reading:

Since I wanted to retain a more narrative style of presentation, I did not include footnotes. If you Google search for either the Aboriginal Language reclamation projects or the authors listed below, you'll find much more information, some of it freely available online, and even more through University access. For a first reading, if you are interested, I recommend the following titles, freely available as pdf:

- **Kurna Warra Pintyanti (KWP) <adelaide.edu.au/kwp>**
Website with background information re Kurna Language reclamation.
- **BARNGARLA PEOPLE, LANGUAGE & LAND <barngarlalanguage.com>**
Website with background info about the Barngarla Language reclamation project; Barngarla dictionary: <barngarlalanguage.com/dictionary>.
- **Amery, Robert: Warraparna Kurna! Reclaiming an Australian language. The University of Adelaide Press, 2016.** Free download as [pdf](#) from The University of Adelaide website. | Updated version of the 2000 edition, including the more recent Kurna Language reclamation and revival, and revision of language spelling. This is the most comprehensive publication of the history of the recording of the Kurna Language, and its revival. Since 1990, Dr Rob Amery is the principle linguist and researcher behind this project. Also see publications on "[Researcher's Profile](#)" page.
- **Zuckermann, Ghil'ad and Michael Walsh: 'Stop, Revive, Survive: Lessons from the Hebrew Revival Applicable to the Reclamation, Maintenance and Empowerment of Aboriginal Languages and Cultures'**, Australian Journal of Linguistics 31.1: 111-127. | Prof. Ghil'ad Zuckermann is an Israeli by birth and holds the Chair of Linguistics at The University of Adelaide. He is the principle researcher behind the Barngarla Language reclamation and revival. Michael Walsh is a linguistics researcher at the University of Sydney. Their paper reflects the role of linguists in the Aboriginal language reclamation process, based on the experience of the Hebrew Language revival. Download as [pdf](#). Also see "[Researcher's Profile](#)" page
- **Zuckermann, Ghil'ad; Quer, Giovanni; Shakuto, Shiori** (2014). "[Native Tongue Title: Proposed Compensation for the Loss of Aboriginal Languages](#)". Australian Aboriginal Studies. 2014/1: 55–71.
- **Zuckermann, Ghil'ad; Walsh, Michael** (2014). "[Our Ancestors Are Happy!": Revivalistics in the Service of Indigenous Wellbeing](#)". Foundation for Endangered Languages. XVIII: 113–119.
- **Lockwood, Christine Joy: The two kingdoms — Lutheran missionaries and the British civilizing mission in early South Australia.** Free download as [pdf](#) from The University of Adelaide Website. | PhD thesis in Australian History, describing the background and mission work of the "Dresden missionaries" in South Australia, with an emphasis on their position between the colonising project of "civilising" the Aboriginal peoples, and the missionaries' Lutheran theology background for faith mission. At present, the most comprehensive colonial historical study.