

Miriwoong-Ainu Language and Culture Exchange Project

Detailed Report, December 2025

Background

The Miriwoong-Ainu Language and Culture Exchange Project (MALCEP) is an initiative by the Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre (MDWg) to facilitate an exchange of ideas and strategies between Australian and Japanese Indigenous people, represented by the Miriwoong and Ainu communities. Like many Indigenous groups in Australia, the Ainu are facing the same challenges as Australian Indigenous communities in that their language is threatened by extinction.

Our objective is to learn from each other and share strategies that will help preserve the precious heritage transmitted since ancient times. As part of this exchange, we have arranged visits from representatives of the Miriwoong and Ainu communities through the respective key organisations. On our end, we hosted a small delegation from *The Foundation for Ainu Culture* for one week and in turn met leaders of the Ainu community on their traditional lands.

Project activities

1. Visit of the Ainu delegation to Kununurra

Following extensive planning and preparation, the exchange started with a visit by two delegates from the Ainu community, from 30 March to 6 April 2025. The bios of the two visitors are shown below:

Mr Kenyu (Keni) Yamamaru was born in the Ainu town of Shiraoi and can be regarded as an emerging leader within the community. As a young person, he participated in a three-year training program for Ainu to become a traditional cultural inheritor where he studied Ainu culture comprehensively. Through this program, Keni became interested in the Ainu language and began to deepen the knowledge, and later became an instructor for STV Ainu language radio program and for introductory Ainu language courses for town residents. Currently, Keni works at Upopoy National Ainu Museum and Park and develops and implements Ainu language programs for visitors.

Dr. Mika Fukazawa is a linguist and a non-indigenous research and curatorial fellow at the National Ainu Museum in Upopoy (the National Ainu Museum and Park). She has been working at the Preparatory Office of the National Ainu Museum since 2017, when she received her Ph.D. from Chiba University (Japan). Since the opening of Upopoy in 2020, she has worked at the museum, managing various special and seasonal exhibitions, developing Ainu-language events and educational materials, and answering visitors' online and on-site questions about the Ainu language and culture. She also helped establish an Ainu Language Team as the Ainu Language Task Force at Upopoy, and managed the daily Ainu language tasks in and around the organization. As a linguist, she studies the Ainu language from historical linguistic approach, including dialectology and philology, and is also interested in the sociolinguistic approaches to revitalizing and preserving the Ainu language.

During their stay in Kununurra, our team introduced the visitors to the range of language revitalisation activities employed by MDWg. These are shown in detail below:

- Traditional Welcome to Country by Miriwoong Elders (Mantha) at Celebrity Tree Park
- Introduction to the work of MDWg – Presentation by MDWg staff
- Visit to Mirima National Park
- Community dinner
- Fieldtrip to *Ngamoowalem* (Lower Ord and Ivanhoe Range) and *Darram* (Diversion Dam) – Viewing of interpretive signage area
- Visit to the Miriwoong language education program: attending Language Nest sessions at different year levels
- Formal meetings with MDWg management to discuss collaboration details, marketing, and project promotion
- Visit to Waringarri Aboriginal Arts (WAA) and country trip
- Corroboree night with *Warlayi* (cooking in earth oven)
- Meetings with media: Interviews with Waringarri Radio (The Voice of the East Kimberley) and ABC Kimberley
- Public presentation about the work of Upopoy and FFAC
- Fieldtrip to Lake Argyle and *Galjiba* (Molly Spring)
- Boat cruise on Lake Kununurra

The public presentation on 3 April 2025 had the title “Missions and Projects for Revitalization and Transmission of the Ainu Language at the National Ainu Museum and Park” and was well attended by members of the wider community. The presentation was followed by time for questions, as well as informal exchange. The abstract of the presentation is shown below:

This presentation introduces our missions and projects for the revitalization and transmission of the Ainu language. The Ainu are an indigenous people from the northern region of the Japanese archipelago and surrounding areas such as Hokkaido, Tohoku region, Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands. The Ainu language is not a dialect of Japanese, and is very different from Japanese. In the mid-19th century, Japanese assimilation policies prohibited the Ainu's main customs, including the catching of salmon and trout in rivers and the use of poisoned arrows for hunting. The number of Ainu speakers also declined because Ainu parents did not teach their children the Ainu language under such harsh conditions. In *Upopoy*, the National Ainu Museum and Park, the Ainu language is a primary language. For the opening of the facility in 2020, we prepared various Ainu signs and descriptions, as well as the Ainu language programs for visitors. In this presentation, we will introduce the preparations and present situations of the language revitalization with our experiences and plans.

2. Visit of the Miriwoong delegation to Hokkaido

The visit of the delegation from MDWg to the Ainu community occurred between the 6th and 16th June 2025. Mirima Council CEO Dr Knut J. Olawsky was accompanied by Miriwoong emerging leader Miss Immara Taylor-Hannan and Office Manager Mrs Tracey Stranger.

The profiles of the delegation members are shown below, as used for our visit:

IMMARA TAYLOR HANNON - Language Engagement Officer 語学教師

IMMARA has been working at the Mirima Language and Culture Centre as a Miriwoong teacher since October of 2023. Immara aims at becoming a fluent speaker of Miriwoong and loves learning new words to strengthen the language that she teaches to children. Immara loves working with the kids “as we all join in together with interactive games which is a lot of fun” and a great way to learn Miriwoong language.

イマラ・テイラー・ハナンは 2023 年 10 月からミリマ言語文化センターでミリウング語の教師として働いています。ミリウング語を流暢に話せるようになることを目指しており、子どもたちに教えるミリウング語を強化するために新しい単語を学ぶことを楽しんでます。イマラは子どもたちと一緒に過ごすのが大好きです。「みんなで一緒にインタラクティブなゲームに参加するのはとても楽しく」、ミリウング語を学ぶのにも最適な方法だと言います。

KNUT J. “KJ” OLAWSKY - CEO & Senior Linguist 最高経営責任者, 上級言語学者

Dr Knut OLAWSKY has been the Senior Linguist and Manager at the MDWg since 2005. He works with the Miriwoong and Gajirrabeng people to preserve and revitalise their traditional languages and cultures. Operating in close partnership with a governing committee of traditional Elders, Knut has initiated a range of strategies for Miriwoong language revitalisation, some of which have been highly innovative for Australia. His efforts in helping to maintain and revitalise the Miriwoong language include initiatives such as the start of a Master-Apprentice program, Miriwoong Language Nest and other activities. In his role as a linguist, Knut has published grammars of Indigenous languages from Ghana and Peru. He is currently working with team members to describe the grammar of Miriwoong. Knut holds an MA and a PhD from Duesseldorf University (Germany) and has previously held postdoctoral positions at the University of California at Berkeley (USA) and the Research Centre for Linguistic Typology (La Trobe University, Melbourne).

クヌート・オラウスキー博士は、2005 年から MDWg の上級言語学者兼マネージャーを務めています。ミリウング族とガジラベング族の人々と共に、彼らの伝統的な言語と文化の保存と復興に取り組んでいます。伝統的長老で構成される統治委員会と緊密に連携し、オラウスキー博士はミリウング語復興のための様々な戦略を主導しており、その中にはオーストラリアにとって非常に革新的なものも含まれています。ミリウング語の維持と復興を支援する彼の取り組みには、師弟制度、ミリウング語ネストの設立、その他の活動などが含まれます。言語学者として、オラウスキー博士はガーナとペルーの先住民言語の文法書を出版しています。現在は、チームメンバーと共にミリウング語の文法の解明に取り組んでいます。オラウスキー博士はデュッセルドルフ大学（ドイツ）で修士号と博士号を取得しており、カリフォルニア大学バークレー校（米国）および言語類型論研究センター（メルボルン、ラ・トロブ大学）で博士研究員を務めた経験があります。

TRACEY STRANGER – Office Manager

TRACEY STRANGER has an interest in history, ecology and sustainability of biodiversity which encompasses traditional culture and language, especially how we communicate. She has a fascination with the human brain and how we perceive and interpret, hence her extended studies to understand mental health and communication and how important language is, in its many presentations. Tracey has a Bach Applied Science (Microbiology), Grad Diploma in Marketing and a Certificate in NeuroScience. She was drawn to the Kimberley region ~ ancient and sacred land. To live in harmony we surely must embrace the richness of founding culture entwined in the language and stories of the Miriwoong people. Tracey is very grateful to be working with and to assist the Board and Management of MDWg plus the Miriwoong Language Teachers with the growing number of community activities MDWg is engaged in to revitalize Miriwoong language and culture and ensure there is a smooth day-to-day administration of the Language Centre.

トレーシー・ストレンジャーは、伝統文化と言語、特にコミュニケーションの仕方を含む生物多様性の歴史、生態学、持続可能性に関心を持っています。彼女は人間の脳と、私たちがどのように知覚し、解釈するかに強い関心があり、メンタルヘルスとコミュニケーション、そして言語が様々な形でいかに重要であるかを理解するために、長期間の研究を行ってきました。トレーシーは、バッチ応用科学（微生物学）、マーケティングの大学院ディプロマ、神経科学の資格を取得しています。彼女は、古代の聖地であるキンバリー地域に惹かれました。調和して生きるためには、ミリウング族の言語と物語に織り込まれた豊かな文化を受け入れなければなりません。トレーシーは、MDWg がミリウングの言語と文化を再活性化し、言語センターの日常運営を円滑にするために行っている数多くのコミュニティ活動において、MDWg の理事会と経営陣、そしてミリウング語学教師たちと協力し、支援できることに非常に感謝しています。

The activities during our stay in Japan involved:

- Formal meeting with the FFAC leadership and key staff in Sapporo
- Presentation at Hokkaido University in Sapporo
- Visit to language and culture activities at Upopoy National Ainu Museum and Park, Shiraoi
- Presentation at Upopoy
- Visit to the Ainu museum at Nibutani
- Presentation at Nibutani
- Informal exchange about strategies at Nibutani
- Meeting with the Principal of Nibutani Primary school, exchange of ideas
- Visit to Noboribetsu Visitor Centre and geopark

The presentation we gave on three different occasions focussed on the work and strategies used at MDWg, as well as on the prospect of further collaboration between the Miriwoong and Ainu communities. The abstract as used in Japan is shown below:

**Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre,
Kununurra – Western Australia**

www.mirima.org.au

info@mirima.org.au

Knut J. Olawsky

Immara Taylor-Hannan

Tracey Stranger

**Saving Endangered Languages:
Miriwoong and Ainu communities working together
絶滅危惧言語の保存：ミリウング族とアイヌ民族の共同活動**

This presentation will reflect on aspects of the Miriwoong-Ainu Language and Culture Exchange Project (MALCEP) and focus on the work of Mirima Language Centre (Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre – MDWg), within the global context of language endangerment.

We will begin with an introduction to the issue of endangered languages, defining and classifying degrees of endangerment, and factors contributing to our current situation, as well as common strategies to save languages from extinction. Australian languages constitute one possible model of language revitalization and we will introduce this approach in the second chapter. The focus will be on the work of the Mirima Language Centre as an example of language centre work and the operations will be described in some detail.

In an attempt to bring the activities of the Miriwoong and Ainu communities together, we will also share our vision for ways by which both groups can collaborate and support each other by promoting our cause, involving authorities, and sharing successful strategies to keep our languages alive for future generations.

このプレゼンテーションでは、ミリウング・アイヌ言語文化交流プロジェクト (MALCEP) の側面を振り返り、言語の絶滅の危機という世界的な文脈の中で、ミリマ言語センター（ミリマ・ダワン・ウラブゲリング言語文化センター (MDWg)）の活動に焦点を当てます。

まず、消滅の危機にある言語の問題、危機の度合いに関する定義と分類、現在の状況に寄与する要因、そして言語を消滅の危機から救うための一般的な戦略について概説します。オーストラリアの諸言語は言語復興のモデルの一つであり、第 2 章ではこのアプローチを紹介します。第 2 章では、言語センターの活動例としてミリマ言語センターの活動に焦点を当て、その活動について詳しく説明します。

ミリウング族とアイヌ民族の活動を結びつける試みとして、私たちは、私たちの活動を推進し、当局を巻き込み、私たちの言語を未来の世代に残していくための成功戦略を共有することで、両グループが協力し、互いに支援し合うことができる方法についてのビジョンも共有します。

A copy of the slideshow used as part of the presentation can be made available. The slides included a summary in Japanese and an interpreter translated our words.

Impact of the project and lessons learnt

Given that the objective of the project is for both parties to learn from each other, the focus is on knowledge exchange and how new insights can be used to advance the current revitalisation work of the Miriwoong and the Ainu language communities.

General observations based on the exchange (with a focus on the MDWg visit to Ainu country)

At our visit to the headquarters of the Foundation for Ainu Culture and the Upopoy Ainu National Museum and Park we gained the following insights:

- FFAC is a very impressive organisation, employing about 200 people – 40 in Sapporo and 160 in Upopoy. Upopoy acts as the public face of the FFAC and is a facility established to convey the cultural identity of the Ainu people.
- The Japanese Government invested generously in developing and constructing the facilities at Upopoy, with a range of buildings across a large area in a beautiful natural and traditional setting.
- The facility is very functional, inspiring, and the technology used is based on the highest modern standards.
- There is a range of features that convey aspects of the Ainu culture, language, and identity to visitors, using a variety of innovative media and interactive experiences.
- The Ainu language is represented well at Upopoy and features strongly through a range of activities, displays, and media. with the objective of engaging visitors.
- Visitors walk away with a new consciousness that the Ainu language really is very different from Japanese. They may even have learnt some words and expressions in Ainu.
- Lessons learnt by visitors include the awareness that the Ainu people have their own cultural and linguistic identity which is displayed in a positive and engaging way.

Similarities and differences between the two programs

In observing the activities of the respective organisations (MDWg and FFAC), we find that there are more similarities than differences between the two programs and communities. A summary of findings is shown below.

Factors	Similarities	Differences
EXTERNAL FACTORS		
History	Both communities have been impacted by colonisation.	The impact of Japanese mainstream culture on Ainu culture was much earlier and has resulted in a higher level of assimilation.
Lack of relevant language policies	Neither the Japanese authorities, nor the State of Western Australia protect Indigenous languages (Ainu, Miriwoong) through a formally endorsed language policy.	The Western Australian Government is currently signalling the willingness to work in partnership with Indigenous language groups on developing a language policy.
Status and recognition on a national level	Both communities are not in the limelight of the general public but are struggling to ensure their efforts are adequately featured in the media and on Government levels. Both communities have been largely ignored or sidelined by mainstream society.	There is a significant difference in population size: The number of Ainu people is estimated to be at least in excess of 20,000 (possibly several times as much) while the population of Miriwoong people is estimated at ca. 1500. In terms of cultural setting, the “mainstream culture” between Japan and Australia are vastly different and involve multiple and complex differences.
Language vitality	Both languages are currently at the lower end of the language vitality scale (Level 8b according to the EGIDS scale)	
INTERNAL FACTORS		
Organisational structure and purpose	Both organisations are motivated and committed to revitalise their languages.	FFAC is a large organisation while MDWg is a small corporation. FFAC is a Government-sponsored organisation while MDWg is an Aboriginal Corporation and recognised not-for-profit organisation with charity status.
Dependence on Government funding	Both organisations strongly depend on grant funding by their respective Governments	The income source for FFAC is mostly from a single source (Government) while MDWg has been making efforts to generate income through a) multiple departments and agencies for a range of fixed-term projects, and b)

Factors	Similarities	Differences
		through self-generated income and donations.
Cultural identity	Both communities have a strong and conscious cultural identity	
Community language attitudes	In both communities, large parts of the community do not prioritise language revitalisation.	The Miriwoong community has imposed limitations on who is allowed to teach Miriwoong language while the Ainu community takes a more relaxed approach and allows ethnic Japanese to be involved in language teaching.
Commitment by some individuals	In both communities, there are key figures who are drivers for language revitalisation.	
Indigenous and non-indigenous working together	In both communities, there is a harmonious approach towards working together. Ethnical Japanese support the Ainu efforts in the same way as non-Indigenous Australians support the work of the Miriwoong people.	
STRATEGY		
Language revitalisation strategies	Both organisations have researched and reviewed a range of strategies to revitalise their languages and agree that language immersion models represent a functional and successful approach. This includes radio programs, community classes, and public signage.	The language revitalisation activities at MDWg seem more diversified as they involve a range of projects such as radio programs, community classes, cultural awareness courses, public signage, as well as tailored projects for certain areas of public life.
Language education	Both organisations aim at incorporating language learning at an educational level.	MDWg works very strongly with the local schools and Miriwoong is recognised as a school subject as part of the curriculum, while Ainu is only taught at selected schools, to a limited extent.
Resources	Both languages are supported through the existence of language documentation materials, as well as teaching resources, at least to some extent.	

Lessons learnt from the Ainu language revitalisation program

The MDWg delegation members took away a number of important learnings from their visit:

- Our delegation members are deeply impressed by the high quality of exhibits and activities at Upopoy, as well as by the scale of the FFAC.
- The facilities at Upopoy achieve in very efficient ways everything a museum is meant to achieve.
- We would like to adapt some of the technology such as wall-size video screens, interactive panels, and interactive games.
- Having a dedicated space accessible to the public also is very appealing and we want to ensure that the Miriwoong language is featured in a similar way when a cultural centre is established in Kununurra. When the time is ripe, we would like to learn further details from Upopoy on how to develop and implement relevant technology.

What can MDWg offer to the Ainu community?

We observed that the Ainu language has shifted from being used as an everyday means of communication towards retaining a highly symbolic function within the community and this is conveyed very efficiently through Upopoy. For us, this raises questions which the Ainu language community may want to explore:

1. We learnt about the existence of the Ainu Language Taskforce.
 - To what extent is the Ainu Language Taskforce able to reach a large percentage of the community?
 - Is it representative of the language community?
 - Are there any other language authorities?
 - If there are several groups or entities in the Ainu language space, to what extent can they work together?
2. MDWg has conducted extensive language planning with the community and experts in the field of language revitalisation. This is a process that has helped us greatly to assess our situation, develop our goals, and define strategies that align with these goals. If the Ainu community were prepared to engage in language planning, we would happily offer our support.

These are just initial thoughts and we would be happy to share some of the language planning materials that we have developed.

Collaborative impact

We agreed on strengthening and advancing our collaboration in the following ways:

1. Develop a joint statement that conveys the rationale of our collaboration and release it on our websites in English and Japanese. This has been completed and the respective web pages can be found here:

<http://mirima.org.au/news-events/news/>

https://www.ff-ainu.or.jp/web/potal_site/details/miriwoong-ainu_en.html

2. MDWg will produce a video to document our exchange and will share it with FFAC/Upopoy. This work is in progress.
3. MDWg has engaged with Australian media outlets to promote the outcomes of our exchange.

We consider the above steps as the beginning of a growing and lasting partnership between the two communities.

While the size of our respective organisations represents a clear difference, we both have a similar scope and similar target groups. We believe that MDWg can offer beneficial advice with regard to language planning and language revitalisation strategy.

We feel that the Ainu community could potentially benefit from a language centre based on the Australian model, perhaps with some degree of local adaptation. Should the option of developing such a centre eventuate, we would be happy to support this process through consultancy and advice.

The best time to push for additional government support might be now, as the International Decade of Indigenous Languages provides the appropriate framework for decisions on language revival.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the time, effort, and generosity contributed by our Japanese partners, which made all aspects of the initiative a pleasant and memorable experience. Specifically, we express our gratitude to

- Prof.em. Teruki Tsunemoto – President, The Foundation for Ainu Culture
- Ms Miyuki Muraki – Executive Director, Upopoy Headquarters
- Dr Mika Fukazawa – Research and Curatorial Fellow, Upopoy National Ainu Museum and Park
- Mr Kenyu Yamamaru – Ainu Language Instructor, Cultural Inheritance Division, Upopoy National Ainu Museum and Park
- Ms Shinobu Ueda – Administrative Assistant, Coordination Office, The Foundation for Ainu Culture
- Mr Kenji Sekine, Ainu language instructor, Biratori Town Office, as well as his wonderful family.

This project was only made possible thanks to a grant kindly provided by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) through the Australia-Japan Foundation.

In addition, we are very grateful for the generous support received from local and regional partners and sponsors. Their crucial assistance through monetary and in-kind contributions allowed us to fill the gaps.

