

The Miriwoong Perspective on Land Rights

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The traditional Miriwoong country lies in the Kununurra area in the north of Western Australia but also stretches for about 100 kilometres beyond the Northern Territory border and used to encompass the northern parts of the lands now covered by Lake Argyle (Olawsky 2010a). The Miriwoong and Gajerroong people were granted partial traditional ownership rights to their traditional land by the High Court in 2002 after a Native Title court case.

The Miriwoong language is a non-Pama-Nyungan language of the Jarrakan language family. Miriwoong is spoken fluently by no more than 20 individuals who are all older than 60 (Olawsky 2010a/b). The NILS Report classifies Miriwoong as ‘severely’ to ‘critically endangered’ (Brenzinger et al. 2003).

During two fieldtrips dedicated to documenting linguistic structures in Miriwoong information on the culture of possession was recorded. A summary of the information shared by the Miriwoong people is the subject of this talk. We will address how inheritance of land/territory is organized along kinship lines and cultural beliefs and practices. In addition, the correlation of land and identity as well as the notion of ownership among the Miriwoong will be discussed.

Bio

David Newry is a Senior Language and Culture Consultant at the Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre in Kununurra. Among other commitments he is engaged as main presenter of the cultural awareness program. David has been the key figure in developing the Miriwoong Seasonal Calendar, which links Miriwoong language and culture with the land of past, present and future generations. David functioned as the chair of the Mirima Council for over two decades. In recognition of his skills, he was recognised for his Outstanding Individual Contribution to Arts and Culture by the East Kimberley Aboriginal Achievement Awards in 2011.

Christina Ringel is writing her PhD about the linguistic expression of possession in the Australian language Miriwoong. In 2013 she was the Special Intern at Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre. She returned to MDWg in 2014 and 2015 to do fieldwork with the Miriwoong. Christina obtained her Master’s degree in Linguistics at the University of Düsseldorf, where her research focused on languages in northern Brazil and German Sign Language. Christina was involved with the language archive at the Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi in Belem/Brazil and the maintenance of the Awetí language corpus (assisting Dr. Sebastian Drude).