

Ruth Ghee transcript

My name is Ruth Ghee. My connection to Country is the Zagreb clan of Mer Island, Murray Island in the Torres Straits, Eastern Torres Straits on my dad's side. On my mum's side is the Kabi Kabi nation and the Gooreng Gooreng nation of the Central and Sunshine Coast. I also identify as South See Island from the Ambrym Island in Vanuatu and also the Campbell Clan of Scottish heritage. When I was a young girl, probably about ten or 11, 12 years old and I used to sit with my dad, and I'd hear him speaking in this strange language other than English. He'd sit around with his cousin brothers and the funny thing was his cousin brother would, one of his cousin brothers would answer him back in language, in the same language and the other cousin brother would answer him back in the Queensland language, Queen's English.

I'd sit there I'd go, what are they talking about? This strange language I didn't know because even though I grew up around, in the community, I guess at that time, you know, my mum and dad were pretty much into the church, so languages weren't, you know, talked about within the church. Yeah, so every time I'd hear him talk, I'd be sort of like going, thinking to myself, you know, what the heck is he talking about? Not realising that he was speaking Meriam Mer. Then when I went to the Aboriginal Centre for the Performing Arts, I started to become aware of, you know, students, you know, we were allowed to start including languages into our songs, our original songs that we created and developed and I think that's where my interest started to begin in wanting to know more about my father's language.

Especially my dad's language because that was the community I guess, the Torres Strait Islander community that was closest to us. My mother's language Kabi Kabi and Gooreng Gooreng, I didn't hear anything from that although when they used to sing the, that welcome song, Gari Gynda Narmi, that is probably the only time I would hear the Gubbi Gubbi language. Just recently, I've just heard my grandfather, Stirling Minniecon, sing that Gari Gynda Narmi and that's his language. That's the first time I've ever heard him speak in his language or sing in his language. That's on video so I need to get that video for my children, grandchildren's sake.

Going back to my dad's language Meriam Mer, I started to, when we started to write our original songs I wanted to put at least some of those words, Meriam Mer into my songs when I was starting to compose, and song write. My first song that I wrote with the word Debe Neur which means either beautiful woman or strong woman and I wrote a song about a beautiful woman and the strength of a woman. That was the only bit of language that I put in there. Then I, just gradually I started to put just words that I knew. Although, like at home, dad would talk to us, like especially when he got angry or annoyed at us, his language would come out. So, we'd hear, you know, Dudum or come here quickly, you know. Or we'd hear Tabara bakuali which is, you know, "That's bad, you are being a bad child". I've continued that on in my household today you know.

By the time I'd finished ACPA, the Aboriginal Centre for the Performing Arts, I had songs that had just different languages in there, like scattered words. But then I went back to ACPA, and I started to teach language songs. I guess it was one of the things where my father held the languages of Meriam Mer was, he taught us singing in the

language. Not so much speaking, but songs were very prominent in our household, growing up. That's where the sounds and that I guess, just sat with me. And then I went to, what is it? Bachelor Institute of Tertiary Education in Northern Territory. It's a funny story. You know, the carrot that was dangling in front of me to go there was that I would speak my dad, learn one of the language units was learning Meriam Mer. Oh my goodness, you know, that was like, yes, finally, you know, I can go and learn my dad's language.

So, when I applied and of course I applied in the second semester and with language you are supposed to apply from the very beginning so that you can have a whole year of learning it. So, when they told me, well no you can't learn it next year, I was like, oh no, you know, I've just missed out completely. So, anyway I mean the language that I did learn though was Arrernte, the language of Alice Springs. That was good, that was a great experience to actually get my tongue around language, the sounds of the language, and the pronunciations and the vowel sounds and all those kind of things. But in doing the Arrernte language we still had to refer back to our own language which was, for me Meriam Mer.

Yeah, that really helped a lot because, there was a couple of elders from the Eastern islands, Torres Strait Islands in my unit too. So, I relied on them a lot to just help me with words and I ended up making a little story book I suppose the bilingual, English with the Meriam Mer translation, they helped me with the translation. I've turned that little book into a song too now, so. Let me correct myself there, it was a song first, turned into a book back into a song with the whole song in Meriam Mer. So that was a big journey for me which was just recently. For me I really believe, as a performer, as a song writer, as an artist, a performing artist, it's my responsibility to keep languages going, reviving it, maintaining it and preserving it.

That's the code for language workers today. For me, I think music and song is the best way to learn language. It's the easiest way to learn language and to just to hear the sounds of that language. I've been a choir director or a choir, I don't know what I call myself sometimes, an unconventional choir director for over 15 years and my specialty is, you know, choirs, singing in language. Specially my, the Meriam Mer language because my father's language now is starting to become extinct, which is a shame. For me, the only way that I can preserve it is through song and singing. So my mum, my mother's language Gubbi Gubbi and grandmother's language, Gooreng Gooreng, I have not had much to do with that and I'd love to get more involved in reviving that.

There is a Kabi Kabi dictionary out and I guess for me, as a song writer, the only way that I believe that I can preserve and maintain languages is through song. I've got a project coming up soon where I've just suggested to the young lady that I'm going to work with, you know, let's just find this Kabi Kabi dictionary and write an original song, you know, to bring that language back into action. I believe, to start young, if you want to keep those languages going, you need to start teaching your babies and speaking to them then because then they just soak it all in. They say, up until you are about 17, 18 you retain those languages. After that it becomes a real challenge then to try and learn something new I suppose.

A lot of First Nations songs of the languages that we use, because I'm from the Eastern Islands, if I'm doing some collaborating with a Western Islander, so there is all this collaboration that needs to happen between my elders and their elders and permissions. Oh, there is a whole lot of stuff. Like it gets a bit complicated sometimes. You need to get permissions, especially when a song has been in the community for so long, who do you ask permission to get that from? For me, I've just gone straight to my elders and they're the ones that direct me towards the right sources or give me the right names, the correct names.

Which is funny, because I've just recently, the Straight from the Strait Musical, that's been a learning curve for me with a lot of those challenges and getting permissions from community who have had these songs in the community for so long, who do you find, how do you find those composers? Just recently, you know, the song Pe dali, which we've been singing for years, even when I was a little girl we would sing this song, finally found out who the composer was. So, I found out that the song, Pedali, which is a church song that's been sung for quite a few years, few decades actually, the composer is Daniel Powell from the Eastern Islands, from Erub, Darnley Island. It's actually the, Pe dali is the Mer Island way of saying, but I found out that in Erub the family still sings it, Pe ike.

So, you know, just language will always evolve, all those kind of complications too, is finding, this is what it was in the beginning, and this is what it is now and that's actually in the musical too that one. So, yeah, and that's the only way I found out who owned, who composed that song. All these years I've been trying to find out. So, Cara Keri Web is a song about the sand crab. I wrote it for a festival in the Morton Bay Festival and it was about why the Morton Bay bugs were all disappearing. So, it came from that little project. Personally what happened, when I was, trying to get the rest of the English translated into Meriam Mer, it just started to feel right and it just started to roll on my tongue then, you know. Like how it's supposed to sound, which I found interesting, you know, being someone who is not fluent in the language.

I guess because I hear the sounds and, you know, try to get my tongue around the sounds that I hear, but it just started to flow a little bit more. Singing Kerkeri Wed ('Sand crab song'):

Giz meb,
Au me,
Nole kerkeri kak tabara sirip sirip
Mara tagpim ipit
Mara aukei diskirid
Mara kirim etkobei
Ma Nagedim Bakiamuda?
Teusmer segurem
Ki mena kirgir irdi
Atagem le ira kerker barki

Snap your fingers
Wiggle your toes
Bury your head
Where did you go

Come out and play
The night is young
The Spirit of Creation has just begun
Atagem le ira kerker barki
The Spirit of Creation has just begun.

Oh my goodness.

[End of recording]