

Report to the Federal Parliamentary Inquiry into Language learning in Indigenous communities: by Genevieve Campbell as representative of the Ngarukuruwala group and on behalf of the Tiwi Strong women's group. July 28th 2011. Community referred to: Tiwi Islands Northern Territory. Language: Tiwi. (language code tiw)

Sample of the Strong Kids Song lyrics:

*Ngariwanajirri ngawurra ninguru magi awarra ngini
ngawa ampi ngamaninguwi putuwurumpura
ngajirti awa jawaya mulujupa
Tiwi ngirramini ngini ngawa ngampangiraga*

*Ngariwanajirri working together to listen and helping one another.
Hang on to old stories from our ancestors that they left behind
Let us not lose our culture and the language we speak*

I must preface this report by saying that I am not a linguist. I am a musician who has been working with a group of Tiwi strong women and elders (at their instigation) on the Strong Kids Song Project, the aim of which is to preserve and maintain Tiwi song culture by creating new arrangements of old songs, in language, and using the traditional musical skills of the Tiwi ancestors while engaging with Tiwi youth through modern musical styles. The effect of language loss on the traditional song culture is proving devastating and language has therefore become a central element of our work together. I will endeavour in this report to give a brief outline of the language situation in the context of the Strong Kids Song, a project the women have created in an attempt to connect song, language and culture to the strengthening of young Tiwi people's connection to their community, their country, their elders and their culture. This song project has the central aim of engaging kids and teenagers with their language to consolidate identity, culture and community through a feeling of pride in who they are. The report will mention the problems the project faced in this goal due to the language situation. I want to make clear that I am not in a position, nor do I intend, to criticise the professionalism or dedication of any teachers on the Tiwi Islands. I am merely reporting on my experience and how the language policy in the schools has affected the work I have been doing in the community.

G.Campbell

'The songs are about people. We hear stories. We put the story into songs. Events, celebrations, funerals, so that singing and dancing about everything is how we maintain our culture. We don't write things down like you mob. Our songs are our history books'

Regina Kantilla. Tiwi elder.

Almost every aspect of the Tiwi community; mythological, historical and social is referred to in song. Their subject matter is either connected to kinship and country or topical, describing new occurrences in the community and issues or topics of interest to the audience. In the Tiwi context, language loss is not just a matter of changing means of communication. The old songs hold the social history, the spiritual identity of the people and the place. With the loss of the old language the community is suffering the loss of cultural and historical record. Many old words that named places, bush foods, hunting instruments and methods as well as precisely explaining states of mind, and marked kin relationships and ancestors' identities are being lost. There is also the prospect of historical record being lost as there are fewer and fewer who can understand the words in the old songs.

The Ngarukuruwala Project

Since 2007 the strong women's group and I have been working together on a collaborative music project, called *Ngarukuruwala, we song songs*, the primary purpose of which is to create new music that blends Tiwi song traditions with contemporary musical styles. The women had already been composing in what they call modern style (featuring guitar accompaniment and western harmonies that they learned in the days of the Catholic Mission on the island) and into Modern Tiwi. They did this so that children would learn stories and place names and associations, within a song that used a language and a musical style that they could relate to. There are many such songs in their repertoire that include old Tiwi text, that no-one can translate but that still everybody sings. Even in the context of non-Tiwi musical styles, the women strongly maintain the Tiwi practice of improvisation of text and extemporization of melody and always sing in language, which is a blend of Modern and New Tiwi. The CD we made a few years back won best Traditional Music recording at an Australian Indigenous Music Awards festival. This is something of which the women were especially proud because it reflected their determination to keep the music fundamentally Tiwi. The desire to reclaim archived song and narrative recordings was a direct result of the creative work done by the senior women on traditional songs performed as part of that project.

In the past 2 years I have been working specifically with a group of elder song men and women auditioning, documenting and learning from a large amount of ethnographic song material recorded by anthropologists over the last century and recently repatriated to the community from the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) in Canberra. The painstaking task of transcribing text and then translating it, where possible, into Modern Tiwi and then English is one that the elders see as vital to the preservation of the knowledge held in those songs.

The information being collected to complete metadata for the recordings from AIATSIS comes directly from elders. Knowledge of country, kinship systems, ceremony and community history is held in songs and therefore is held by those who know those songs. They have been able to recognize words, subject matter, names and country specific song texts. Using this knowledge they have identified individual songmen as the most likely performers. The impact of the returned recordings has been great. It has inspired a sense of both pride and sadness at the realisation that such a rich and complex skill is almost completely gone. Creating a meaningful resource for the community has become very important as a way to connect young Tiwi people with their past, through the old language and the old songs.

The Strong Kids Song: Funded by DEWHA through its Indigenous Cultural Support programme and FaCHSIA through the NT Red Cross Communities for Children.

At the same time as these recordings were being listened to in detail by the older women and men, the younger women (in their 50s) were taking part as mentors in a conflict resolution and crisis management program at the women's safe house. These sessions identified song as an excellent way to get a message across to young people who may have problems with literacy and/or formal teaching methods.

The resulting Strong Kids Song is a project that has developed over the last year, with the women in collaboration with the younger generation of women and their children to write an original song in both English and Tiwi about the importance of being strong, making peace and being proud of Tiwi culture. The idea was to lead discussions with kids around concepts of ancestry, elders, connection to country, and how they can be a source of support and identity. These were a combination of rules the kids knew they should follow and aspirations the women had for the young generation and the future of Tiwi culture. The underlying aim of the women from the outset was to use song as the vehicle for teaching about culture, ceremony and language through a fun collective project. We were a bit of a travelling road-show, taking the old

recordings around for people to hear. These often became a springboard into discussions amongst the old people about family and memories as well as informal teaching sessions where they explained the words and the meanings and then the ceremonies to the children.

Three sets of 'good rules for life' were produced, one by each of the three community groups. These were then composed into Modern Tiwi song words by the senior women with input from their grandchildren where possible. Unfortunately the children's command even of Modern Tiwi (deemed the appropriate level of language for the song) was not strong enough for them to have much input in this process.

Sections of the text were rewritten into New Tiwi (a simplified version with numerous English loan words) in order that the children were able to learn the song and pronounce the words successfully. The fact is even Modern Tiwi is now only spoken proficiently by those over 40 and the women's 'new' versions of songs are becoming increasingly seen as the traditional version appropriate for use at funerals and other ceremonial occasions. A further simplified version of a small part of the text was therefore created and taught to the children at Pirlangimpi and they sang it for the CD recording. All other children in the project learned the text in English and took part in singing the Tiwi with the older women. The final recorded song features individuals from each group speaking the words they chose from the song text.

Results of repatriation of archived recordings from AIATSIS

As well as being linguistically old and new, the Strong Kids song also comprises elements of Tiwi musical transformations. The women worked the lyrics into a song in the Kuruwala or 'Modern, story-telling' style, using a local country melody and with guitar accompaniment. They then worked with a group of Sydney jazz musicians on ideas for a modern treatment and decided to use the melody of chorus of the song 'By the Rivers of Babylon' for the chorus. The band then played a simple accompaniment to support this section of the song. This then leads into a modern treatment of the same words. A number of children and young adults were involved in choosing the sound and 'groove' for the modern section, playing around with ideas for the beats and sounds and 'grooves' and editing together all the various voices who'd recorded their parts of the song on my laptop. A few teenagers and some older gentlemen then spent a couple of days at the digital studio labs at Charles Darwin University, giving the teenagers an opportunity to be part of the sampling and production process and using the linguistic and artistic knowledge of the old men to be sure editing of the old songs was done appropriately from a poetic as well as musical point of view.

The rhythms played by the drummer (who's not Tiwi) are closely informed by the beat patterns of the 1912 performance and are the result of close and careful study. Senior songwoman Clementine Puruntatameri performed a call to the spirits of the country at the beginning of the song. Roughly translating as "I am here! This is me!" it was sampled into the modern section in order to symbolise the connection between young people and their elders and to provide an example of a strong, proud Tiwi voice to which the children can aspire.

The motivation behind the 'sampling' of the 1912 recordings was three-fold. One was that by embedding them into the new song and CD, the songs and the old language would become widely heard in the community, especially by young people who may not have been exposed to them before. Another was with the hope that it would inspire a sense of musical identity and history in the kids while showing them that 'traditional' culture can also be 'hip'. The fact that the copyright of all the old recordings is owned by the anthropologists who took them - not the performers themselves, the hassles we went through to get access to them and indeed having to ask permission to hear them in the first place is something that has caused quite some bewilderment and anger amongst the community. Embedding some into a CD produced and owned by the community therefore became very important.

The return of old recordings has certainly resulted in a renewed interest in song culture, their history and the old language amongst many young Tiwi people, with the elders as teachers and mentors as well as performers. It has also resulted in a desire to further document and preserve a corpus of Tiwi songs as well as maintaining the skills of composition and song poetry in whatever new form might develop. It would be a huge and probably impossible task however to try to keep the skill of poetic song composition alive. There is one old man at Pirlangimpi and four at Wurrumiyanga who can sing at ceremony. Although they don't speak the old language they remember enough words and enough about the pronunciations to sing their own repertoire of songs. They don't improvise much, but sing the kinship and country songs that they know. The annual Kulama ceremony that was the main vehicle for improvisatory song practice has not been held for about twenty years on Melville because there are no qualified songmen left living there. It was held last year on Bathurst Island after a number of years without, but with only a handful of attendees and no young learners. Without a concerted effort the ceremony will disappear completely. We hope to raise funds to help mount a community Kulama early in 2012, with the instruction and engagement of Tiwi teenagers and young adults the core aim. The booklet accompanying the CD (which was given free to everyone in the community) contains the text of the 1912 songs in Old Tiwi song language as well as the new song lyrics in Modern Tiwi and in English.

Language Policy

Forty years ago Mr A. Capell wrote “Children who find their language as not worth learning soon come to think of it as not worth having, and will grow up either without a knowledge of it, or at best an imperfect knowledge which will lead quickly to linguistic decadence and breakdown... No pronouncement on the subject has been made, but it seems clear that government policy looks forward to the loss of Aboriginal languages, so that the Aborigines may be ‘assimilated’ into the European community.”(Pilling 1970):247 The situation with the Tiwi language and how it is treated in schools became an issue for the Strong women and me as we tried to complete the Strong Kids Song project, which I have discussed earlier in this report.

The catholic primary school St Therese’s at Nguiu (now called Murrupurtiyanuwu Catholic School or MCS) had always had an element of Tiwi in its instruction due to Father McGrath who apparently spoke Tiwi very well and was at the mission 1927-1948. As Jennifer Lee (who worked on the Islands in the 1970s and 1980s) says, this would “..undoubtedly have only been oral teaching, as there was no written form of the language.. and it probably consisted of teaching assistants using the language to instruct children and perhaps in the telling of stories.” (Lee 1987:7) This seems to be the recent situation there now too. Curriculum teaching is carried out by English speaking European teachers with Tiwi assistants as support staff speaking Tiwi.

A bilingual teaching programme was introduced at MCS (with community approval) in 1975 and consisted of an extensive oral programme using Modern Tiwi, with gradual transition into English. Reader books in Modern Tiwi were produced to facilitate the youngest students’ exposure to the language of their parents in the school environment, while teaching them Tiwi cultural material in the language deemed most appropriate for that subject matter. Pularumpi and Milikapiti Schools are both government schools. Milikapiti has never had a bilingual system, but does have a time set aside each week for ‘culture lessons’ which comprise story telling in Tiwi. Pularumpi did have the same bilingual programme as MCS but by the late 1980s it had stopped.

I have heard anecdotally that the effectiveness the bilingual programme at MCS was in part undermined because of the fact that the language spoken widely in the community changed from Modern Tiwi, the language in which the readers were written, so that the children were being instructed at school (for only short periods anyway) in a language that was not in fact the language they spoke at home. Nonetheless, the elder women and I found a stark contrast between the children at MCS (who had a bilingual start to their education) and those at Milikapiti School (with none) in August 2010 with regards to their proficiency in

picking up the Modern Tiwi song lyrics that were the focus of the Strong Kids Song project. The Nguuu children were generally more engaged with the old women in informal song discussions too. Far more willing and eager to be part of the talking about old songs, singing along with the older women as they composed the new song (in Modern Tiwi) and wanting to have a try at writing some song lyrics themselves.

It was therefore with some large frustration that we were told on our follow-up visit to the MCS School in February 2011 that Tiwi was no longer to be spoken in the classroom, that any part of the song we wanted to work on would have to be in English, and that any further work on the Tiwi part of the song would have to be in "culture" time. The women were extremely upset to have been treated in this way. I understand that it was probably simply a matter of the teacher following the new rules, doing as they felt they should, but the fact that an elderly Tiwi lady was told not to speak in her own language to her grandchildren was a very unfortunate occurrence. The irony of the fact that this was a project funded largely on the strength of its promise to connect children with their elders and their culture through language was not lost on those in attendance. The women (a couple of whom are on the Tiwi Land Council) were also very concerned that they had not been made aware of the scrapping of the Bilingual system. At the time of writing they are deciding how they are going to respond to the situation. The Strong Kids Song has been widely praised for having brought children and their grandparents together in a rewarding, empowering way with the preservation of language at its core. For the system to now work directly against that seems absurd.

You can say more in your own language. Our children are stuck half way between Tiwi and English. They need to know English of course, so they can move on into the world. But they still need to know their own language so they will always feel strong and proud about who they are and so they can learn about where they come from. Teresita Puruntatameri. Tiwi Elder.

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