Past Visions, Present Lives: sociality and locality in a Torres Strait community.

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Abstract

This thesis explores dynamics of sociality and local identity on Warraber Island in the Torres Strait. I argue that Warraber residents' representation of themselves as a distinctive collectivity needs to be understood in terms of indigenous conceptions of relatedness and difference and with reference to local moral terms of communal life, in particular a valorised striving towards the idealised vision of moral relations known as *gud pasin*. This value is informed by a dense network of cognatic connections existing among Warraber residents – encapsulated in the local discourse of *"ol wan pamle"* (all one family), in addition to shared identification as a Christian community.

Warraberans envision the past through ideas of temporal rupture, indexed to the arrival of Christianity in the region and linked to the positive transformation of Warraber life. This forms a reference point in local thinking about ancestors. Warraberans depict their ancestors as both 'natives' and 'foreigners' linked respectively to the pre-Christian period and the marine industries of the post-missionised colonial era. These temporal associations, and their implicit moral inscriptions, generate poignant areas of ambiguity concerning personal ancestry, and also prominent pre-Christian sites and dance performances thought to be associated with head-taking and sorcery. The image of the sorcerer is itself contentious, appearing partly as a moral Other, and partly as a source of local power.

Such dynamics of difference appear as integral to contemporary social life on Warraber. Differing Christian affiliations, ancestral emphasis and perspectives on the past certainly contain potential for contestation. Productive activities are markedly gendered and family networks involve strong personalised loyalties that compete with broader social obligations. However, the value of *gud pasin* is shown as ultimately valorising inclusiveness, generosity and a concern with community harmony. Moreover residence on Warraber Island emerges as an important context for common experiences that help distinguish the population as a distinctive, emplaced community within the diversity of Torres Strait populations.

Intense attachments to Warraber Island are communicated in local notions of 'belonging' to place. This is characterised by knowledge and familiarity and also by birth and residence. In this context, the marine realm continues to be a central component within Warraber collective identification and notions of local distinctiveness. Warraberans represent themselves both in historical and contemporary terms as incomparable marine workers, hunters and fishers. Transactions in marine products, whether related to generating income or for consumption, continue to be a focus of Warraber life and are inextricably woven into the practice of familial relations, whereby marine resources are transformed by human activity into a 'currency' of relatedness shaped by moral understandings that inflect the landscape as much as the conduct of sociality.

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Note on Language and Orthography

At Warraber Island, everyday speech events occur in the language called Torres Strait Creole (TSC). TSC has attracted a variety of names. Warraberans variously refer to it as *Kriol, Blaikman tok, Yumpla tok, Brokin* or *Brokin Inglis,* and as *tok blo mipla* (our way of speaking). Following Shnukal (1991, 1983), I refer to it herein as Torres Strait Creole or simply TSC.

In the Torres Strait, TSC was developed out of the altered speech contexts associated with the introduction of Christianity in the 1870s. Warraberans associate TSC with the 1871 arrival of the London Missionary Society to the Torres Strait, regionally referred to as the "Coming of the Light". A common expression is that *wen lait lo worl bin kum, ol tok brokin inglis* (When Christianity arrived, everybody spoke TSC). Warraber ancestors were less directly affected by this language shift than other Islanders as no foreign missionaries were resident during the early decades of missionisation. Their early introduction to this new form of speech occurred via marine industries.

Warraberans say that their ancestors learned to speak what Ray (1907:251) referred to as 'jargon English', on marine industry boats which afforded extended interaction with Europeans, Pacific Islanders, Papuans, and other Torres Strait Islanders. Fluency in this new speech form was required in marine industry contexts where different language speakers required a common language of understanding. Ray described this 'jargon English' as

> the usual medium of intercourse between Europeans and the islanders of Torres Straits … consisting of colloquial English words, with many phrases based on native idioms. This jargon is also used by Australians in the straits, and by the people of Mowata and Kiwai on the opposite coast of New Guinea (Ray 1907:251).

Warraberans probably began working on boats as early as the 1870s when marine industry boats were recruiting from Warraber's neighbouring island, Poruma (Mullins 1995). Shnukal (1988:5) says that TSC became the first language of Yam and Masig Island people in the 1920s and a decade later by those resident at Warraber, Poruma and Hammond Islands.

According to Shnukal (1988) the TSC vocabulary remains eight-five per cent English derived. Fourteen per cent of the vocabulary is derived from the preceding languages and used in contexts where there are no English words available. One per cent of the vocabulary is from Japanese, Malay-Indonesian and a number of Pacific languages.[1] TSC may have developed out of Pacific Pidgin English but speakers of eastern and central-western Torres Strait languages "... radically modified its phonology (sound system), syntax (grammatical system), lexicon (vocabulary), semantics (system of meaning) and pragmatics (system of use) ..." (Shnukal 1983:26).[2]

TSC, as recorded by Shnukal, may well be primarily used in daily interaction between familiar interlocutors. Shnukal (1992:97,99) notes that the language she records comprises "everyday conversations" that "I heard spoken around me", rather than "formal elicitation".

In the current period it seems likely that the linguistic 'ecology' of the Torres Strait Islands is dynamic, and that Torres Strait Creole is neither static nor definitive of local variations of English use, particularly as it is co-present in the islands with standard English (as taught in the classroom). Certainly I encountered interactions that involved greater or more restricted mixtures of TSC and standard English, rather than a discreet separation of the two, and the use of TSC definitely carried associations of informality and intimacy.

As a result, it may be that more and less formal variants of creolised English exist in the Torres Strait, perhaps in the form of a continuum with TSC at one pole (most informal/intimate) standard English at the other (least informal), with a diverse range of intermediary forms. The resulting spectrum of linguistic options would mean that any given choice is dependant upon the context and purpose of a given speech act alongside the known linguistic repertoire of an interlocutor.

These preceeding languages spoken in the Torres Strait comprise two languages, which although distinct, partially consist of a shared vocabulary (Ray 1907:265) and

[1] There are a few Austronesian words in the Warraber Broken vocabulary: *talinga* (ear), *susu* (breast) and *kaikai* (food; to eat). These are derived from Pacific Pidgin English (Shnukal 1988).

[2] Other languages like Tok Pisin (Papua New Guinea), Bislama (Vanuatu) and Pisin (Solomon Islands) also developed in relation to Pacific Pidgin English (Shnukal 1988:3, 1991).

phonology (Wurm 1972:346). [3] The eastern language is related to Papuan languages and has generally been referred to as *Meriam Mir* or *Miriam* (Bani, 1976, Haddon 1935, Ray 1907, Shnukal 1991, Passi and Piper 1994). The language spoken in the western and central islands has been classified as a member of Pama Ngungan family, the largest sub-group of Australian languages (Bani 1976; Ford and Ober 1991; Ober 1994). Haddon (1935) and Ray (1907) referred to this language as the 'Western Language' or 'the Mabuiag'. According to Ray (1907:6, 509, 510), the language form spoken by *Saibaialgal* (from Saibai, Dauan and Boigu), *Kulkalgal* (Tutu, Yam, Nagi and Masig), and *Kaiwalgal* or *Kauralgal* (from Muralug and Moa) were dialects of the 'Mabuiag' language spoken by *Gumulgal* (people of Mabuiag and Badu).

Unlike the eastern language, the language spoken in the western and central regions of the Torres Strait has attracted a variety of names by scholars. The language has been variously referred to as *Kala Lagaw Ya* (Bani 1979, Ford and Ober 1991, Passi and Piper 1994, Shnukal 1991, Wurm 1972), *Kala Lagau Langgus* (Bani 1976, Bani and Klokeid 1976, Ford and Ober 1991), *Yagar Yagar*[4] (Bani 1976, 1979, Ford and Ober 1991), 'Western Torres Strait Language' (a direct translation of the term *Kala Lagaw Ya*) (Bani 1979, Ford and Ober 1991), and 'Mabuiag' (Ford and Ober 1991, Ray 1907, Shnukal 1991).

The central islands have not always received explicit mention in descriptions of the 'western language'. Recently, Ober and Kennedy (1992:1) have countered this trend by opting for a more inclusive term: 'Western-Central Language'. They note four dialects within this language that are geographically commensurate with Ray's (1907) classification. Ober and Kennedy (1992:2) maintain that there is "very little difference " between the four dialects: *Kala Kawaw Ya* (Saibai, Dauan, Boigu), *Kala Lagaw Ya* (Mabuiag and Boigu), *Kulkalgaw Ya* (Central Islands) and *Kawalgaw Ya* (Kubin and Noerupay (Horn Island)).

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[3] For a discussion of the relationship between western-central and eastern languages and neighbouring languages spoken in Papua New Guinea and Australia, see for example, Ray (1907), Ober and Kennedy (1992), and Wurm (1972).

[4] Bani (1979) points out that his earlier use of the term *Yagar Yagar* (Bani 1976) was incorrect according to 'island elders', who regarded this term as a 'slang word'.

The term *Kulkalgaw Ya* is being increasingly used at Warraber to denote the language spoken throughout the Central Islands though it is also referred to as *Mabuiag* and *Kala Lagaw Ya*. One informant suggested that the language should technically be called *Dada Lagaw Ya*, where *dada* means 'midway' or in the 'middle'. Warraberans generally view *Kulkalgaw Ya* as constituting a 'dialect' of *Kala Lagaw Ya* that is very closely related and mutually intelligible. They note that the main differences are reflected in intonation and nomenclature both between and within island groups. For example, Yam Island residents call the Smudgefoot Spinefoot fish *kibim*, while Warraberans refer to it as *kurbim*. Another difference mentioned by Warraberans is the use of the suffix *pa* in the top western islands and *ka* used in the middle-western and central islands. A common Warraberan way of referring to *Kulkalgaw Ya* in the Creole language is *langus blo sentral* (the language belonging to the Central Islands) or simply *langus*. Warraberan competency of *Kulkalgaw Ya* is highest among elderly people (see chapter 4). I use the term *Kulkalgaw Ya* (KY) throughout this thesis.

I conducted interviews in TSC as it is the first language of almost all Warraberans,. In the chapters that follow, I have translated all narratives and discussions into English but retain certain phrases and terms employed by Warraberans. I use an italicised font throughout this thesis to highlight everyday speech events in TSC including terms derived from *Kulkalgaw Ya*. In this thesis, I follow Shnukal's (1988) orthographic conventions. The phonetics of Warraber TSC speakers is predominantly similar to that described by Shnukal (1988:12). Shnukal's orthographic conventions are set out below. I have replaced her examples with those from the Warraberan TSC vocabulary.

Torres Strait Creole Vowels are:

     a – pronounced as 'a' in 'ask' (e.g. *angere*; hungry)

     i – as 'ee' in 'see' (e.g. *biri biri*; species of bird)

     e – as 'e' 'set' (e.g. *peleth*; species of fish)

     o – as 'or' in 'for' (e.g. *sokoro*; raw clamshell dish)

     u – as 'oo' in 'boot' (e.g. *yupla*; plural form of 'you')

Dipthongs:

     ei – as 'ay' in 'say' (e.g. *Meiu*; an island)

     ai – as 'ie' in 'lie' (e.g. *thaiwa*; broken coral)

oi – as 'oy' in 'boy' (e.g. *mathaiomoi*; a Warraber lagoon where mathai fish are likely to be caught)

au – as 'ow' in 'now' (e.g. *paunga*; clamshell lip)

Consonants:

The consonants p, b, t, d, k, g, s, z, l, m, n, y and w are all pronounced as in English. There are two exceptions.

r – 'is sometimes a flap and sometimes a trill'.

ng – as 'n' in 'sing' (e.g. *ngursi*; snotty nose)