The Sea that Speaks Yan-nhangu: The Language of the Crocodile Islands

In the dry of 2010 I flew to the Crocodile Islands (North East Arnhem Land) to live and work with the Yan-nhangu speaking Yolngu people and learn their language. After studies at Sydney Uni I jumped at the chance to collaborate with the last few proficient speakers of Yan-nhangu, struggling to document and pass on their distinctive local culture and language. Their concern for this vibrant linguistic and customary inheritance has generated a family of interrelated projects to support language and livelihoods activities on the homelands. I have been working on documenting Yan-nhangu language for an online audio-pictorial database for the local school. Together with planned posters, books, manuals and teaching aids we are working on facilitating children’s active engagement with their language and aspects of their unique marine culture.

Following on from this we are creating practical activities on country to elicit words and expressions connected to life by the sea. We have made fish traps, canoes and travelled around and between the islands recreating traditional activities to give children opportunities to experience life on their country and to hear the words of the sea. Like the preschool Language Nests and the Crocodile Islands Rangers and Junior Rangers Program, these projects are aimed at preserving aspects of Yan-nhangu marine culture. Yan-nhangu people share a maritime cultural ensemble evolved over millennia of intimate coexistence with their sea country. Today Yan-nhangu people continue to sing and dance the ceremonies and care for the sacred sites of their sea country.

The Yan-nhangu language is a storehouse of and vehicle for this precious inheritance. Held inside the language of the islands is the record of seasonal changes and the immense biodiversity of this pristine part of a changing world, balancing tradition with innovation, and continuity with change. The intergenerational transmission of Yan-nhangu ecological knowledge (YEK) is critical to the survival of this unique marine culture. Nonagenarian senior traditional owner Laurie Baymarrwangga declares:

‘Nhangu dhangany yuwalkthana Yolngu mitji marnggimana dhana mayili mana limalama ganatjirri morimba barathalayuma gurku mana wanggalangga’.

“We continue to make strong the stories of our sea country for the benefit of a new generation.”

To keep this knowledge alive means to continue ‘walking in the footsteps of the ancestors’ \(^2\), following the traditional way and protecting Yolngu culture. We never give up trying to make a place for our culture in this new ‘modern’ world. In order to do this we are finding new ways of using available modern technology.

In February 2010 we contacted an indigenous film maker called Paul Sinclair to help us record our work on the islands. With our project, called the making of a betngu (fish trap), in 2010\(^3\) we performed the reconstruction of a traditional fish trap, one of three kinds customarily used on Murrungga\(^4\) (the largest of the outer Crocodile Islands).\(^5\) More recently he returned to help us make a gal-gal (Dhuwa bark canoe). We elicited words for peeling bark (dudalmiyama) from the tree “Eucalyptus tetradonta” (gadayka), hole making (bartijun) and sewing (mindapuma). These techniques and words, apart from their everyday meanings, are also understood to contain ancestral powers intrinsically present in every word, every action handed down by the ancestors\(^6\).

The reconstruction of a gal-gal is not an isolated attempt to rebuild a means of historical transport, a mere archaeological curiosity: it is part of a concerted, multilayered and vibrant revitalisation of the Yan-nhangu cultural and linguistic inheritance. The documentation of this vital material will become available for the benefit of the broader community. Baymarrwangga says this is a gift for the future, a gift for all Australians.

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\(^2\) James, B. “Talking Culture on Country: Yan-nhangu Ecological Knowledge in the Crocodile Islands”. Kantrly Liof: June 2010: 14

\(^3\) James, B. (2011) “Fish Traps of the Crocodile Islands”.( in press)

\(^4\) Photograph of Betngu fish trap at Murrungga Island 2010 Chiara Bussini

\(^5\) Photograph of Betngu fish trap at Murrungga Island 1937 by D. F. Thomson. *Courtesy of the Thomson family and Museum Victoria.*