15 *Revitalising Meriam Mir through sacred song*

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Abstract

Many Elders and other members of the eastern Torres Strait Islander community are concerned about the future of their language, Meriam Mir, and other intangible expressions of their culture. This heritage includes a repertoire of hymns and choruses that developed following the arrival of Christian missionaries in the late nineteenth century. These sacred songs are still valued within the community as a living tradition, and new songs continue to be added to the repertoire. As a young boy growing up in Townsville, Toby Whaleboat learned Christian songs with texts in Meriam Mir, Torres Strait Creole and English. In collaboration with Meriam Elders and with support of the University of Newcastle, Toby Whaleboat is currently facilitating a number of activities to preserve, revitalise, and disseminate the rich tradition of songs in his ancestral language. This paper focuses on eastern Torres Strait Islanders in mainland Australia, and their ongoing efforts to strengthen language and culture through song. Drawing upon Toby Whaleboat's personal experience, it examines some of the methods by which the Christian song repertoire is maintained and revitalised in mainland Islander communities, particularly in relation to contemporary performance and the dissemination of these songs. The authors identify some of the challenges inherent in revitalising Meriam Mir through sacred song and discuss the Torres Strait Islander Sacred Music Network, a collaborative approach to identifying, recording, notating and performing Christian hymns and choruses with Meriam Mir songtexts.

Keywords: Meriam Mir, Torres Strait Islanders, hymnody, Christianity, songtexts, endangered language

1 Introduction

Situated in Torres Strait – a band of water that both links and separates the Australian mainland from mainland Papua New Guinea – are many islands, reefs, cays and islets. The inhabited eastern islands of this region are Ugar (Stephen Island), Erub (Darnley Island) and Mer (Murray Island). Lying close to the northern tip of the Great Barrier Reef, the island of Mer, together with the neighbouring islands Dauar and Waier, form the Murray Islands group. The volcanic soils of the eastern islands are fertile and the surrounding sea and reefs rich in marine life.

Formerly, the Melanesian Australians who live in eastern Torres Strait spoke Meriam Mir, a Papuan language that had two dialects: one spoken in Ugar and Erub; the other in Mer and Dauar.[1] Meriam Mir is no longer spoken in Erub or Ugar, the last full speaker having died in Erub around 1940 (Shnukal 2004:123, n. 25), and people now communicate using Torres Strait Creole (Yumplatok) – the lingua franca of Torres Strait – or English, or a combination of these two languages.

In the latter half of the twentieth century many eastern Torres Strait Islanders, seeking opportunities in employment and education, moved to mainland Australia, the majority settling in Queensland. The result was that the remaining speakers of Meriam Mir were either in Mer or among small groups of eastern Islanders within the wider Australian community. In the late 1970s, it was thought that approximately 700 Meriam people spoke Meriam Mir as their first language, 'which presumably included eastern Torres Strait Islanders living on other islands of the Torres Strait, and on the mainland of Australia' (Piper 1989:1), in towns and cities such as Cairns, Innisfail, Mackay, Mareeba and Townsville.

According to data in the Catalogue of Endangered Languages (ELCat)[2], in 1996 there were around 320 speakers of Meriam Mir. The *National Indigenous Languages Survey 2005* reported that there were around half this number. The linguist Nick Piper[3] estimates the number of fluent speakers to be currently fewer than 50. This is confirmed by speaker Elimo Tapim (pers. com. 2015), who believes that, at present, perhaps 200 people are passive speakers (that is, they understand Meriam Mir), but only around 40 people are fluent speakers. Piper has observed that 'today the language is at risk of dying out as young people are learning the Torres Strait Creole rather than Meriam. Most of the Meriam speakers are now aged in their 60s or 70s and when they pass away, so will their knowledge'. Thus Meriam Mir could be described as a critically endangered language.

The aim of this chapter is to focus specifically on one Torres Strait Islander language (Meriam Mir) and to examine how it may be revitalised through Christian song in contemporary mainland communities. Although Torres Strait Islanders sing hymns and choruses with texts in English, Yumplatok and some other languages, these are not considered here, since our discussion centres on the particular case of Meriam Mir. The chapter includes an interview with Toby Whaleboat (see section 5 below), recorded by Matthias in 2015. The information contained in the interview exemplifies how, in recent years, knowledgeable Torres Strait Islander musicians have used their specific agency and Christian beliefs to instigate cultural maintenance programs with an emphasis on language and song revitalisation.

This interview is framed within a discussion of examples of the Christian song repertoire ('language hymns' and choruses with Meriam Mir songtexts) of eastern Torres Strait, focusing on Islanders in mainland Australia, and their ongoing efforts to strengthen language and culture through song. This approach allows for an exploration of some of the methods by which this repertoire is being maintained and revitalised in mainland Islander communities, particularly through contemporary performance and dissemination of the songs. In the concluding section of the chapter, we identify some of the challenges inherent in revitalising Meriam Mir through sacred song and discuss the Torres Strait Islander Sacred Music Network, a collaborative approach to identifying, recording, notating and performing Christian hymns and choruses with Meriam Mir songtexts.

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[1] For some examples of differences in the two dialects, see Haddon (1935:193).

[2] http://www.endangeredlanguages.com [accessed January 2016].

[3] To date, Nick Piper is the only non-Islander in Australia to have studied Meriam Mir in depth. She is currently a doctoral candidate at James Cook University, where she is continuing her linguistic research into Meriam Mir. She is also a member of the Torres Strait Islander Sacred Music Network at the University of Newcastle. For these and other observations by Nick Piper, see Torres Strait Islander Sacred Music page, University of Newcastle website [accessed December 2015]. For further information about the project, and other personnel involved in the Torres Strait Islander Sacred Music Network, see http://www.newcastle.edu.au, and follow the pathway: research and innovation / institutes and centres / education and arts research / torres strait islander sacred music / about us.

2 'Language hymns' and songtexts

Many Elders and other members of the Meriam community are concerned about the future of their language and other intangible expressions of their culture. These include 'language hymns'; that is, Christian hymns with songtexts in Meriam Mir that have been performed by eastern Torres Strait Islanders since the arrival of the first Protestant missionaries in the early 1870s.[4] They are usually accompanied by rhythmic beating on a *warup* 'single-headed skin drum'.[5] There are two types of language hymns: polyphonic hymns, in two or three vocal parts, that have their origins in the Polynesian-style *hīmene*; and gospel or Sankey-type hymns[6] with tuneful melodies and triadic harmonies, often featuring a refrain. Some hymns blend musical features of both styles.[7]

For the younger generation of Meriam who were born and raised on the mainland, these sacred songs are generally the main repository of Meriam Mir. As Lawrence (1998:59) has observed, 'hymns with vernacular texts provide an important resource of language knowledge and cultural heritage'. For a number of reasons, however, language knowledge gained mainly through a study of Meriam Mir hymn texts is necessarily incomplete:

- The songtexts function as poetry and, as such, do not exhibit complete sentences that occur in the spoken language.
- Meriam Mir is a complex language having many grammatical and other linguistic features that are not found in English; such features are not fully represented in Meriam Mir songtexts where the grammar has often been simplified.
- The subject matter of the hymns is limited to religious topics and consequently the vocabulary is similarly limited.

Moreover, any study of the language forming the songtexts needs to be based on the actual sung versions, since the published hymnbooks incorporate many alterations and errors (see below).

Through both internal and external influences, the spoken and written forms of Meriam language have undergone many changes. Owing to early missionary endeavours in the late nineteenth century, for example, the written form of Meriam Mir gradually became divorced from the spoken language; the grammar was simplified and the pronunciation of existing words was sometimes altered (see Ray 1907:5, 152 & 228; Mullins 1995:175). Additionally, new words referring to Christian concepts and Biblical events were introduced.[8] A further complication is that some of the differences between sung texts and speech evidently existed in the years preceding the introduction of Christianity. For

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[4] Elsewhere, Fairweather (formerly Lawrence) has given accounts of the introduction of Christianity to eastern Torres Strait, the development of Christian hymns and choruses, their musical characteristics and performance practice, and of the outside influences on the sacred song repertoire (see Lawrence 1998 & 2004).

[5] The London Missionary Society (LMS) forbad the use of drums in church, but after 1915, when the LMS ceded its churches in Torres Strait to the Church of England (later, the Anglican Church of Australia), the use of drums to accompany hymn-singing was permitted. This practice continues to the present day. On the mainland, the Sankey-type language hymns are occasionally accompanied by both drum and guitar.

[6] Ira D Sankey was an American solo gospel singer who composed Christian songs in the gospel-hymn genre. In the late nineteenth century he worked with evangelical preacher Dwight L. Moody, a fellow American, as part of the Protestant revivalist movement in the USA and Great Britain. In the 1870s, Moody and Sankey published a collection of hymns (widely referred to as 'Moody and Sankey'); Sankey later revised and enlarged this work (see Sankey n.d.). Many of the gospel hymns became popular within the Protestant churches and with their missionaries, including the LMS, which introduced them into Torres Strait, translating the songtexts into the vernacular languages of Torres Strait, including Meriam Mir (see, for example, Hunt 1888).

[7] Some of the early British missionaries also composed hymns by setting Meriam Mir words to existing Protestant English hymn tunes (see, for example, Hunt 1888); but it was the Pacific Islander missionaries who had a lasting impact on the Christian hymn repertoire of the eastern Islands.

[8] For a list of and information about these words, introduced in the late nineteenth century, see Ray (1907:166 & 167).

example, the traditional pre-Christian sacred songs – specifically those relating to the Malo-Bomai cult in eastern Torres Strait – were described by the linguist, Sidney Ray (1907:50):

> The language in which these songs were given differed considerably from the common speech of the natives. Sometimes the difference appeared to consist in the use of archaic Miriam [Meriam Mir] forms, sometimes in the use of strange or foreign words. Sometimes the differences seemed to arise from the alteration of words to suit the air to which they were sung.

The alteration of words to suit the melodies of songs is a common practice in the Christian hymnody of eastern Torres Strait. The most common form of alteration is the addition of syllables; these are usually formed by inserting a vowel, for example:

spoken word	**sung word**
dasmer	*das**e**mer*
gair	*gair**e***
gerger	*ger**e**ger*
kupkup	*kup**i**kup**i***
laglag	*lag**e**lag*
ople	*op**o**le*
urut	*urut**e***

Added vowels do not normally occur in initial position. In Meriam Mir hymn texts, however, such added vowels are largely the result of errors in transcription, translation and orthography by the early Pacific Islander pastors and teachers, particularly those who were from Sāmoa and other islands in Polynesia. An added complexity was the difference between the Erub/Ugar and Mer/Dauar dialects of Meriam Mir, which seems to have been either confused or ignored.

A vocable (usually *e* or sometimes *a*) can also be added within a line, or at the beginning or end of a line. These sounds are normally non-lexical; they are added as euphonic or eurhythmic particles (for musical reasons), or for emphasis. As such, they serve to add greater emotional meaning to part of a text (as is common practice in many Pacific music cultures). Two examples of vocable insertion in language hymn songtexts are:

• *(**A**) ad keriba ad*	(Ah) God, our God; and
• *Wi marau abara mer (**e**)*	They preached His word (eh).

Hymn texts may also contain combinations of added vowels and vocables.

In addition to the above, the problems inherent in the printed hymnbooks of the late twentieth century have developed largely as a result of earlier errors in translation, transcription and orthography, and the women who are lead singers[9] today still find it necessary to make corrections to printed hymn texts. Thus, texts that are printed in the hymnbook published around 1973[10] do not accurately represent the sung texts as they are performed by Erub, Ugar or Mer singers. Furthermore,

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[9] For a description of the custodial role of individual women who are lead singers in the performance and maintenance of language hymns, see Lawrence (1998:59, 61).

[10] An outline of the early LMS publications that included Meriam Mir hymn texts can be found in Ray (1907:226-227). By 1885, the sacred song repertoire, as published in *Euangelia Mareko Detarer* (LMS 1885), had increased to 112 hymns. In 1924, when the Church of England hymnbook was first published, the number of hymns in Meriam Mir had grown to 131 (*Credo* 1924). When Rev. Boggo Pilot (*c.*1973) first published his updated liturgy and hymnbook, 204 Eastern Islands hymns were included. The hymnbook *Island language hymns*, published by the Anglican Church of Australia (1995), was a reprint of Pilot (*c.*1973) in an abridged form, but contained many errors. (For further details, see Lawrence 2004:59, 60.)

with the 1995 reprint of the hymnbook, more typographical errors occurred – thereby compounding earlier orthographical problems – and hymns composed since 1973 were not included. Lead singers therefore need to keep their own exercise books in which they write down the texts of language hymns, including newly composed ones, although some texts have obviously been memorised but not written down. Additionally, there are older hymns that were not published in the hymnbooks; they remain in the current repertoire as part of the oral tradition. Even today, there is no standardised orthography for Meriam Mir; nor is there a complete dictionary (but see McConvell et al. 1983; Piper 1989 (and footnote 3, above); Ray 1907:49-87 & 131-165; and Ray 2001). In mainland communities, there are few lead singers with the breadth of musical expertise to be able to pass on their knowledge to the next generation. Confirming Piper's observation about the endangerment of Meriam Mir as a spoken language (see above), these women are ageing and there is a serious risk that, when they pass away, so will their knowledge of sacred song repertoire and performance practice.

All of these factors make learning hymn texts extremely difficult for younger singers. As a result, in many instances, the oral transmission of hymns is of greater relevance than the reading of hymn texts from the printed books, which nowadays seem to serve mainly as a mnemonic device. To redress this situation, a small group of Elders who are fluent in Meriam Mir recently formed a committee in Townsville to review, correct and republish the songtexts of eastern Islands language hymns.[11] A draft document was drawn up in 2009 and an edited version (a second draft) produced in 2010 (Elimo Tapim pers. com. 2015). This revised hymnbook – 'Eastern Island Hymns: Torres Strait' – remains a work in progress. It is uncertain, at this stage, whether it will include language hymns that were composed since the early 1970s and also older existing hymns that, for one reason or another, were omitted from earlier publications.

An example of a language hymn songtext that had many errors in the earlier hymnbooks is the following well-known hymn of thanksgiving. It is here presented in its corrected version.

Audio example 15.1: Language hymn: Eastern Islands hymn no. 199 *Peirdi esoao meriba Ad*, composer unknown, performed by St Stephen's Torres Strait Islands Ministry Choir, Townsville, North Queensland (from Songs of Praise from Torres Strait [CD with booklet], Track 11, produced by Karl Neuenfeldt and Nigel Pegrum, 2007; used with permission)

Eastern Islands language hymn no. 199: ***Peirdi esoao meriba Ad***[12]
Composer: Not known. Text by Lui Bon, *c.*1942

Peirdi esoao meriba Ad	Now (we) thank our God
Now thank our God	
Nerkep lam a kodomer lam	From our hearts and voices,
Heart from and voice from	
Merbi tadaisa okakis dikoda	You've brought us together
Us brought together gathered	

[11] Its members, supported by staff at the North Queensland Diocesan office (Anglican Church of Australia), are: Gaidan Gisu, Mamam Martin, Elimo Tapim and Gretne Cloudy. The late Anemah Ghee and the late Renah Tapim were also members of this group. All of these people in Townsville are originally from Mer, except Gretne Cloudy who is from Ugar (Elimo Tapim pers. comm. 2015).

[12] Corrections to Meriam Mir text (as printed in the hymnbook) and literal translation by Bill Bourne, Erub, January 1996. Free translation by Helen Fairweather with assistance from Bill Bourne. Later corrections to Meriam Mir text and English translations by Mabege Tabo and Nick Piper, December 2015.

Debele erkepsam waiskeder. Very good prayer will rise up.	(It would be) good to raise up our prayers.
Refrain:	
Mi abi tag lam sikak uridili We his hand from bad not are	Because of his actions, we are happy.
Abara werkab meribim au degdeg His blessing us for over beyond	His blessing for us (is) boundless.
Kaka ko omar I too love.	I too love (Him).
Lu bakedida abele gerger Thing happened this day	Something happened today
(E) mimi op bapita. We met together.	(When) we met together.
Peirdi esoao meriba Ad Now thank our God	Now (we) thank our God
Nerkep lam a kodomer lam Heart from and voice from	From our hearts and voices,
E debe lu ikeli merbim He good thing making us for.	He's making good things for us.
Abele gesep au sererge. This earth very happy.	The world rejoices.

Younger generations of eastern Torres Strait Islander musicians raised on the mainland do not have the skills or depth of knowledge required for the composition of new language hymns, for such polyphonic hymns are musically complex. Language hymns also require specialised performance practices (such as those undertaken by the lead singer) that may not be feasible among smaller mainland populations. Also, as the Anglican priest Elimo Tapim[13] (pers. com. 2015) pointed out, younger singers on the mainland often do not understand the purpose or function of specific language hymns; hymns that are appropriate for different occasions – such as burials, the Coming of the Light commemoration, or tombstone openings – or for particular parts of a church service.

Such difficulties are even more pronounced for younger Meriam living in locations like Newcastle, New South Wales, where there are no resident Elders and only a tiny group of Torres Strait Islanders. Consequently, while new language hymns may be composed in the islands of eastern Torres Strait, they are rarely composed on the mainland where the majority of newly composed Christian songs are choruses (Creole, *kores*).

[13] Rev. Elimo Tapim is the priest-in-charge at St Stephen's Anglican church in Townsville (Torres Strait Islander Ministries, North Queensland Diocese). Now in his 70s, he is one of the remaining fluent speakers of Meriam Mir, with an extensive knowledge of the hymnody of eastern Torres Strait. He is a respected Elder and an associate member of the Torres Strait Islander Sacred Music Network at the University of Newcastle.

3 Christian *kores*[14]

Whereas language hymns are maintained and performed on the mainland within Torres Strait Islander Anglican congregations, *kores* are more popular among members of the Pentecostal churches and other smaller church groups. For non-denominational community events, however, language hymns as well as *kores*, are sung. Anglican congregations also sing *kores* in their church services and at interdenominational fellowship gatherings.

As Lawrence (2000:35) has observed:

> Broadly speaking, the texts of *kores* are usually much simpler in structure than the older style hymns, often consisting of a single brief stanza or verse that is repeated a number of times. Likewise, the melodies and harmonic structures – generally based on the Western triadic chordal system – are less complex than those of language hymns. Because of these features, *kores* are relatively easy to learn and memorise.

With their basic harmonic structures, musically simpler melodies and guitar accompaniment, the performance of *kores* does not require the technical expertise of a lead female singer or a knowledge of intricate vocal parts. Most often it is a man who plays the guitar; he usually selects the appropriate *kores* to be sung and he leads the group. Among younger members of mainland church congregations, the Sankey-type language hymns are sometimes adapted to be sung in a similar style to *kores*, accompanied by guitar, or guitar and *warup*. In the Pentecostal churches, younger singers may also accompany *kores* with electric guitars, drum kit, electronic keyboard or computer-generated music. *Kores* composed by mainland Islanders can have stanzas in various languages (see Lawrence, 2000 & 2004:67). Texts of *kores* are often in English, Yumplatok (Torres Strait Creole), or combinations of these languages. Songtexts may also be in Meriam Mir, especially those that have been composed in Mer but are now performed by Meriam in mainland communities.

In mainland performances, a *kores* with a songtext in English – originally composed by a non-Islander – may have an additional stanza consisting of a translation into Meriam Mir, written by an Islander. Conversely, an English version of a Meriam Mir songtext occasionally forms an extra stanza in some *kores*. The main reason seems to be so that younger Meriam, who have English as their main language, can understand the Meriam Mir words that they sing. In this way, some *kores* serve as a language knowledge resource for younger singers. This is important because, to date, there are no collected works or published books of eastern Torres Strait Islander *kores*. There are, however, various audio recordings commercially available, although few of these have been made in mainland communities.

4 Audiovisual recordings

Will Kepa, Karl Neuenfeldt[15] and Nigel Pegrum have, in recent years, been involved in recording Islander performances, as part of a project in producing Torres Strait Islander community CDs/DVDs. This project is sponsored by the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) and is ongoing. Two CDs, recorded in Erub (*Erub era kodo mer* 2010) and Mer (*Keriba ged* 2014), contain examples of language hymns and *kores*; community recording in Ugar has yet to be completed.[16]

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[14] For a detailed account of the history and development of Christian choruses in eastern Torres Strait, see Lawrence (2000:35-41).

[15] Dr Karl Neuenfeldt, a musician and a cultural studies scholar, has been actively researching and recording Torres Strait Islander music, in all its forms, for many years. He is a Conjoint Fellow, School of Creative Arts, University of Newcastle, and a member of its Torres Strait Islander Sacred Music Network.

[16] For details of the practice and process involved in the project, see Neuenfeldt and Kepa (2011). Details of these commercially available recordings are listed in References below.

Recordings, produced by Neuenfeldt and Pegrum, of eastern Torres Strait Islander musicians in a mainland community (Townsville) include: *Songs of Praise from Torres Strait* (St Stephen's Torres Strait Islands Ministry Choir 2007), and language hymn selections from a CD released as part of an exhibition at the National Museum of Australia (n.d.[2002?]).

It is important to note that the printed hymnbooks, and the exercise books kept by lead singers, contain songtexts only; they do not include music notation. Consequently, audio recordings play an essential role in documenting the melodies, vocal parts and instrumental accompaniments of the musical settings of Meriam Mir texts. Apart from the commercial recordings mentioned above, there are various audio recordings that provide examples of sung texts in Meriam Mir, and many of these are from the repertoire of Christian songs. The anthropologist Jeremy Beckett (2001:75-77) has provided an informative overview of earlier field recordings, archival collections and discography, including reference to music notation of Torres Strait Islander songs. In Mer, from 1958 to 1961, Beckett recorded songs, including language hymns, using a reel-to-reel tape recorder. From 1995 to 1997, Helen Lawrence (now Fairweather) made audio recordings in Erub, using a cassette tape recorder. Both of these field collections, held in the sound archive of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), have been digitised and are available to eastern Torres Strait Islanders and, with some restrictions, to other researchers.

In the 1990s, the Torres Strait Islander Media Association (TSIMA) established small recording studios and editorial suites, with basic equipment, in some of the outer islands, including eastern Torres Strait. This enabled trained local personnel to undertake audiovisual recordings in their own communities which, in turn, could be broadcast from Thursday Island. On an informal basis, individual Islanders make their own audiovisual records of special events, especially those that include singing and dancing. Contemporary songwriters in mainland communities occasionally make audio recordings of newly-composed Christian *kores* as learning aids for use by other members of their congregations (Toby Whaleboat pers. com. 2013). Additionally, some Torres Strait Islander churches have recorded congregational singing and, in the past, have released cassette tapes, many of which are no longer readily available. Young Torres Strait Islanders in mainland Australia now make their own recordings of language hymns and *kores*, as well as secular songs and dances, using readily available digital technology and smart phones.

All of these recordings form a significant and valuable resource for language maintenance. Nonetheless, they cannot replace live music performance, for the customary methods of music transmission and performance practice cannot be learned from audio recordings alone. Performance practice, in particular, can only be learned and understood within its cultural and communal setting, and directed by knowledgeable music practitioners.

5 A contemporary singer-songwriter: Toby Whaleboat

One singer-songwriter of the mainland-born younger generation is Toby Whaleboat, whose mother was born in Mer and father in Erub. In this section we present an interview with Toby Whaleboat – a knowledge-holder who is keen to preserve his ancestral language – in which he explains the motivation for his work on revitalising Meriam Mir through song. Toby lives in Newcastle with other members of his family, including his two older brothers, Tat Whaleboat and Dalton Whaleboat. They belong to an extended family of well-respected musicians, dancers, composers and Christian pastors. He composes secular songs, dance songs and Christian *kores*, and teaches these songs and existing language hymns in Meriam Mir to non-Islander musicians in Newcastle, including his New Zealand-born wife, Elise Whaleboat. Much of this cross-cultural work has been done with the support of Philip Matthias at the University of Newcastle and members of its Echology choir. Matthias is currently initiating, with assistance from Benjamin Lambert, the music notation of some of these songs. Bernadette Matthias – a non-Islander who is an accomplished singer – has, under the mentorship of Toby Whaleboat, also publicly performed solo in Meriam Mir *kores*. Whaleboat's original songs – and hymns and *kores* with Meriam Mir songtexts by other composers – have already

been performed by Echology at various venues in Newcastle and Townsville, with the collaboration of members of the eastern Torres Strait Islander community. Additionally, Echology has performed Meriam songs at overseas venues, including Sunday Mass at St Peter's Basilica, Vatican City, in 2013 and at workshops in 2012 at the Lincoln Center, New York, as part of the Rhythms of One World Festival.

In the 1960s when the pearling industry came to a close in Torres Strait, many eastern Islanders moved to the mainland in search of employment and educational opportunities for their children. Harry Whaleboat, Toby Whaleboat's father, became a fettler on the railways in the Hughenden district of North Queensland, and it was here that Toby was born. He later lived in Townsville where he received his schooling. Toby Whaleboat's mother, Akazi Whaleboat (née Tapim), was a fluent speaker of Meriam Mir. His father, having been raised in Erub, spoke Torres Strait Creole (Toby Whaleboat pers. com. 2013). Thus, Toby and his siblings grew up hearing both languages spoken, as well as learning English, and listening to their mother sing Meriam songs. Akazi Whaleboat was a lead singer with an extensive knowledge of the Christian song repertoire, and Harry Whaleboat was a talented singer-songwriter (Toby Whaleboat pers. com. 2015).

Figure 15.1: Toby Whaleboat (photo by Helen Fairweather)

Interview with Toby Whaleboat[17]

In 2015, Philip Matthias interviewed Toby Whaleboat about language, identity and cultural transmission. This interview formed part of a video presentation at the workshop entitled 'Revitalising ancestral song traditions in Indigenous Australia', held at the Australian National University on 6 March 2015, as part of the 14th annual Australian Languages Workshop.

> I was brought up in Townsville and that's where I grew up speaking Torres Strait Creole and Meriam Mir. I'd like to see the younger generations today growing up and speaking Meriam Mir as well. My Dad was born on Darnley Island [Erub]. My Mum was born on Murray Island [Mer]. But my heritage comes from Murray Island. My Grandad [Weser Whaleboat] is a Murray Islander. So we come from the village of Umar, and the other village on the Island that we have. My clan is Peibre clan . . .
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> In the late 1890s Cambridge University undertook an anthropological expedition in the Torres Strait and the purpose of the expedition was to study an Indigenous Australian group of people that still had their language, their culture, [and] their tradition intact.[18] So Murray Island, Mer island, in the eastern Torres Strait, was the island chosen for this expedition. Murray Islanders still had in those times their cultures, their dancing, their singing.
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> The Meriam language was 100 per cent spoken in the eastern Torres Strait Islands. However, over many decades following colonisation, the majority of Murray Islanders, [and other] eastern Torres Strait Islanders, moved to the [Australian] mainland. Now the majority of eastern Torres Strait Islanders are living on the mainland. A lot of our people today, because of living on the mainland, they had to adjust to the system on the mainland.
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> It was a necessity for Murray Islanders, for eastern Islanders, to speak English. They were on the mainland because they wanted a better standard of living, because Murray Island wasn't that developed yet with education, with infrastructure. So a lot of Murray Islanders moved down to the south, and eastern Islanders moved down to the south for employment and for education purpose for their families.
>
> However today, living here on the mainland, a lot of Torres Strait eastern Islanders have lost the Meriam Mir language. It's starting to die within the community and die out, because the teaching is not there for the younger generation. That's one of the reasons Philip [Matthias] and I have been working for many years now to try and revitalise the Meriam language again. It's very important to bring our language back, for our kids to learn that language, the Meriam language.
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> It gives our generation, the younger generation and our people a sense of identity, who they are . . . They can say that they are Meriam people because Meriam people speak Meriam Mir. If they lose that Meriam Mir, they lose their identity. My grandfather [Weser Whaleboat], he was a composer and a writer of eastern Island Torres Strait songs. He wrote many hymns in the early 1900s to the mid 1900s.
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> He also went to war in World War II. He was stationed in Horn Island [in western Torres Strait] and that's where he wrote one of his pieces. It's called 'Debe lamar e zogo'. It means 'good Holy Spirit' . . . He wrote that song and he taught it to the Meriam community and still today, in churches up in Far North Queensland or in North Queensland, some churches still sing that language hymn that he wrote in the 1940s.

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[17] The transcript of this interview was edited, and explanatory notes added, by Helen Fairweather, January 2016, with permission and suggestions from Toby Whaleboat.

[18] The Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits in 1898 was led by Alfred Cort Haddon, who had earlier visited Torres Strait as a marine zoologist in 1888–89. The first Christian missionaries from the LMS had arrived in 1871 but, as the Expedition in 1898 was mainly concerned with salvage anthropology, its members did not take a close interest in Torres Strait Islander Christian music of the late nineteenth century.

Audio example 15.2: Kores: *Debe lamar e zogo*, composed by Weser Whaleboat, performed by Toby Whaleboat and Elise Whaleboat (recorded by Philip Matthias, Adamstown Heights, NSW, 27 June 2014)

Kores: ***Debe lamar e zogo***[19] 'The Holy Spirit'
Composer: Weser Whaleboat, *c*. early 1940s

Debe lamar (e) zogo	The Holy Spirit
Good spirit sacred	
Keribim (e) watabu	will come down (to earth) for us.
Us for comes down	
Ad ira mir natomelu	I'll show you God's word,
God of word I'll show you	
Ki lage abele.	which we want.
We want this.	
Debe lamar (e) zogo	The Holy Spirit
Good spirit sacred	
Keribim (e) watabu	will come down (to earth) for us,
Us for comes down	
Ko keribim tigarede	To also deliver us
Also us to take	
(E) gaire adud, adudelam.	from all evil.
every evil, evil from.	

Philip [Matthias] and I have actually taught that song as well to the [Echology] choir here in Newcastle, and Philip has written it in a music manuscript. It's the first time we've seen it written down in that format and it's very exciting. When I showed it to the Elders in Townsville, they were very inspired and excited to see it written down.

Philip and I will be undertaking some workshops in Newcastle and also in Townsville, Queensland. These workshops will involve teaching Meriam songs to the Meriam people in the community, in Newcastle and in Townsville, and also teaching the wider community as well [about] the significance of Meriam songs, and to encourage the wider community to be involved, to keep our songs and our language alive. This is a vital part of keeping the Meriam Mir language alive.

These workshops we will do, we hope to involve our Meriam traditional Elders that still have the language, that still speak the language fluently. We'd like them to come along and be involved in the workshops. So they can teach the younger generation and the wider community. Philip and I, we've written many songs down. Philip has written these songs in music manuscripts. It is the first time I've ever seen Meriam songs written down in music format.

We've taught these songs to the community here [in Newcastle], to Philip's [Echology] choir, and we've sung these songs at the July 1 Festival[20] in Townsville. And one of the Meriam Elders

[19] Meriam Mir text transcribed by Toby Whaleboat, 2014. English literal translation and free translation by Helen Fairweather, December 2015. Corrections to orthography and translations by Nick Piper and Mabege Tabo, March 2016.

[20] The festival referred to here is the Coming of the Light. It is celebrated annually by Torres Strait Islanders on 1 July, the anniversary of the arrival of the first LMS missionaries in Erub, eastern Torres Strait, in 1871.

there, Uncle Elimo Tapim, quite a prominent Elder in the community, he's actually said that it was reinvigorating that he saw the Newcastle choir, Philip's choir, sing those songs in Meriam Mir. It was quite an inspiration for him to hear it and for the community to hear it as well. So that's why they've asked us to bring the workshops to Townsville.

Figure 15.2: Toby Whaleboat (centre, front) with members of the Torres Strait Islander community, the University of Newcastle chamber choir 'Echology', and members of the Torres Strait Islander Sacred Music Network, with Canon Rod MacDonald, St James Cathedral, Townsville, 2015 (photograph by Karl Neuenfeldt)

So we are hoping within the workshops to teach younger Meriam people how to write Meriam language songs. This is really important for our younger generations to learn how to write Meriam songs and to speak Meriam songs and to sing; speak the language and sing the language songs, and teach it to other people in their community. I spoke to Philip about my dream, you can call it, about having a large concert in Townsville. Townsville consists of a large majority of eastern Islanders, and around North Queensland and Cairns and Mackay, a lot of eastern Islander communities, they live in those towns.

We just recently had a Christmas concert, only last Christmas [2014], and we sung a few of our songs there at the concert . . . one of the songs was 'Omar, Omar, Omar', which is love, the love of God. This song is a special song. It was taught to me by my Mum when I was a very young child and she would sing it to me at night and she would sing it in the house. When I was in her room she would sing the song to us as children.

The commemorative service for the Coming of the Light in Townsville was held at St Stephen's Anglican Church. The priest-in-charge was Rev. Elimo Tapim, Toby Whaleboat's maternal uncle (see note 13, above).

Audio example 15.3: Kores: *Omar, omar, omar*, composed by Jimmy [?] Wailu; all vocal parts (unaccompanied) performed and recorded by Toby Whaleboat (Shortland, NSW, 18 June 2015)

Kores: ***Omar, Omar, Omar***[21]
Composer: Jimmy [?] Wailu *c.*1970s

Omar, omar, omar ide igardi	(It was) love that carried Him;
Love, love, love (doer) took	
Bamrerdi sataurogе	(And left) Him hanging on (the) cross.
Hang Himself the cross on	
Asiasi E digier,	He suffered and suffered, in great pain.
Pain He suffer	
Watwet mam ide poni desami	(The) dry blood forced His eyes shut.
Dry blood (doer) eye closed	
Tepaiterdi Tabara mam egomdari	His blood spilled over and pooled
Poured His blood pooled	below.
Au muimui omar ko meribim	He also has a great love for us;
Big deep love also us to	
E meriba, meriba Agud.	He (is) our God.
He our, our God.	

I taught that to the [Echology] choir here [in Newcastle] and to Bernadette [Matthias], and Bernadette performed the song in the Christmas concert. At the Christmas concert, in the audience were a lot of non-Indigenous people sitting there. There were other songs that we sung as well. *Opole Audlam* ['The Lord rose from the dead'], another great hymn from the eastern Torres Strait Islands; we sung that and we sung many other eastern Torres Strait Islander songs. The response that we got from the audience after the concert, it was overwhelming.

They really loved the performances and just to hear Meriam Mir language, an Indigenous Australian language, sung here . . . we taught that song to the whole audience that was there in the concert and everyone participated and sung this song. It was very special. It was a very special performance to hear the wider community, the non-Indigenous community, sing Meriam Mir language songs. It was very special to me. Very important for us, as Indigenous people, to hear the wider community sing our songs, so we know that our songs will be revived and it won't die. If everyone sings our songs, and keeps it ongoing, and [we] teach it to our younger generation, then this is who we are as Australians: non-Indigenous and Indigenous coming together singing those songs.

So, my Granddad, he was a composer, and he is a well-known composer for his generation and in his time. My Dad wrote a lot of songs as well. He composed a lot of songs, language songs and English songs. [This is] a farewell song, farewell to everyone. May God's Holy Spirit go with you, and the angels guide and keep you safe, and God's love will always be with you forever.

[21] Corrections to Meriam Mir text, and English literal translation, by Rev. Elimo Tapim, Townsville, December 2015. English free translation by Elimo Tapim and Helen Fairweather. Later corrections to orthography and translations by Adimabo Noah, Nick Piper, and Mabege Tabo, January 2016. Elimo Tapim (pers. comm. 2015) explained: '*Omar* has two meanings – love and pity. You feel pity for someone that you love'.

Audio example 15.4: Kores: *Debe ki wabim gaire le*, composed by Harry Whaleboat, performed by Gai Bero, Wya Sailor, May Simbolo, Merwez Whaleboat, Toby Whaleboat, Lelay Wailu and Victor Wailu (recorded by Karl Neuenfeldt and Nigel Pegrum, Townsville, North Queensland, 4 July 2015)

Kores: ***Debe ki wabim gaire le***[22] 'Goodnight everybody'
Composer: Harry Whaleboat *c.*1994

Debe ki wabim gaire le	Goodnight everybody,
Good night you for every person	
Wa bakauware wabi uteb ge	You are going home.
You going your place at	
Ad ira lamar zogo mena wadawer	God's Holy Spirit goes with you,
God of spirit sacred continually you with	
Angela giz ko kemem	Angels will guide (you) all.
Angels all will guide	
Ad ira niai eded, a eded asemurkak.	God of eternal life, and life without end
God of forever life, and life finish not.	
Ad ira eded, Ad ira niai, niai karem,	God of life, God of eternity,
God of life, God of always, always ever for,	
Ad ira eded, Ad ira niai, niai karem.	God of life, God of eternity.
God of life, God of always, always ever for.	

Now, I have been writing songs as well and I love writing songs. I'm beginning to write a lot of Meriam Mir songs now. I've written a lot of English language songs. But I would like to encourage more and more Meriam people to write and sing Meriam Mir songs, with English translation.

Philip and I have been working for many years now to try and revitalise the Meriam language again. It's very important to bring our language back, for our kids to learn that language, the Meriam language, because it gives our generation, the younger generation, and our people a sense of identity of who they are . . . They can say that they are Meriam people, because Meriam people speak Meriam Mir. If they lose that Meriam Mir, they lose their identity. I'd like to encourage a lot of Meriam people and also the wider community, to write and sing Meriam Mir songs.

6 Challenges

From the information that Toby Whaleboat shared in this interview we can begin to understand the value of, and the limitations inherent in, the cultural transmission of sacred songs among eastern Torres Strait Islanders in mainland Australian communities. For passive speakers of Meriam Mir – who are neither fully literate in nor fluent speakers of Meriam Mir – composing new *kores* and other

[22] Transcribed by Helen Fairweather with assistance from Donald and Dulcie Whaleboat. Meriam Mir text and literal translation by Dulcie Whaleboat. Free translation by Helen Fairweather, December 2015. Minor corrections to the orthography by Nick Piper, March 2016.

songs can be problematic. In a location such as Newcastle, where there are no musically or linguistically knowledgeable Elders in the immediate community, it is difficult for young songwriters and performers to readily access advice or relevant cultural information. Instructing non-Islander musicians in performing sacred songs, such as language hymns in Meriam Mir, poses another, yet related, set of challenges that need to be met.

Some of these challenges may be broadly identified as:

- difficulties encountered in writing new songtexts using Meriam Mir, as language knowledge (e.g. vocabulary) might be limited
- inexperience in speaking and writing Meriam Mir, sometimes leading to inconsistencies in orthography and grammatical construction of songtexts
- cross-cultural transmission of existing Meriam Mir *kores* and language hymns to non-Islander singers, resulting in changes to musical interpretation and to Islander performance practice.

Through a process of collaboration with Meriam Elders in North Queensland, and with the support of the University of Newcastle, the Torres Strait Islander Sacred Music Network aims to resolve some of these difficulties. One of its goals is to bring the eastern Torres Strait Islander sacred song repertoire to the attention of the wider community in Australia. A variety of strategies is being employed, including notating, teaching, recording and performing the music. A community 'Singing Space' is planned for the Wollotuka Institute at the University of Newcastle, in part to engage this music with Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities alike. Toby Whaleboat further aims to facilitate a number of activities to preserve, revitalise, and disseminate this rich tradition of songs in Meriam Mir and, as he outlined in his interview (above), he plans to lead songwriting workshops for younger eastern Torres Strait Islanders living in North Queensland. These workshops are timed to coincide with the Coming of the Light celebrations each year.

7 Conclusion

These ongoing efforts to strengthen language and culture through song raise complex issues of authenticity, innovation, ownership and appropriation, particularly in relation to contemporary performance and dissemination of songs within the broader Australian community. Moreover, as Matthias has observed during public performances of Meriam Mir songs given by Echology, both singers and audiences alike become engaged with the rhythmic, melodic and polyphonic aspects of the music, especially in the singing of language hymns. He also noticed that performers and audiences seem able to sense that this music has real connection for Torres Strait Islanders and their identity, and that this connection can engage, in a wider sense, with contemporary performers and audiences of all backgrounds. This is in keeping with Anna Shnukal's (2004:111-2) observation that: 'Islander custom and language were apparently always syncretic, receptive to difference and outside influence and eager to accept and transform them' (see also, Lawrence 2004). It may well be that what is being experienced now, among the younger generation of mainlander Meriam, is a continuation and further extension of such syncretism and transformation.

Although this chapter has focused on the texts of contemporary sacred songs, it is important to consider that Meriam Mir also survives in eastern Torres Strait and in mainland Islander communities in the form of texts of secular songs, such as those performed for Island Dance (*segur kab wed*, 'play' dance songs), and in songs and chants for Old Fashioned Dance (*kab kar wed*, 'real' dance songs) (Lawrence 1997). More than 10 years ago Jeremy Beckett (2004:13), who earlier recorded many of these dance songs, expressed the view that Torres Strait Islander music was 'on the threshold of change . . . Also largely unexplored is the mainland-born generation of Islanders.' He posed two important questions:

- What kind of identity have the next generation of mainland-born Islanders made for themselves?
- Who are their models and how do they identify themselves to their own and to others?

Beckett (2004:13) concluded that to 'be an Islander you must have an island, but for the mainland-born this "island" has to be discovered all over again, and imagined'. He further concluded that writing about this will necessitate focusing on individuals 'rather than some homogenised Islander constituency'.

In this paper, we have focused attention on Toby Whaleboat as one such creative individual. The views of Toby Whaleboat provide a basis for non-Islanders to begin to reach a deeper understanding of how mainland-born eastern Torres Strait Islanders rediscover and imagine their ancestral islands – Erub, Ugar and Mer – especially within the context of creating, recreating and interpreting Christian songs. In particular, Toby Whaleboat's willingness to share his knowledge and music experiences expresses a generosity of spirit and a way forward for reconciliation, even if within the boundaries of a Christian music repertoire that previously was unknown to the majority of non-Islander Australians. As Toby Whaleboat stated earlier (see Interview above), 'this is who we are as Australians: non-Indigenous and Indigenous coming together singing those songs'.

We need, however, not only to sing these songs but to record, notate and disseminate them and, by encouraging others to recognise their value and significance, bring them into the mainstream music traditions of Australia. The responsibility, then, in preserving and revitalising Meriam Mir through sacred song, lies not only with eastern Torres Strait Islanders themselves, but with those singers, musicians and linguists in mainland Australia who are concerned that Meriam Mir is among those languages on the critically endangered list. In lending assistance to the revitalisation project, and in providing a respectful learning environment, we shall not only contribute to our diverse Australian heritage but we shall enrich our musical lives, and possibly our spiritual lives as well. The current project proposed by the University of Newcastle's Torres Strait Islander Sacred Song Network encompasses a collaborative approach. It has the potential to serve as a template for similar projects and to lead towards a wider study that includes the secular in addition to the sacred.

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Dedication

Dedicated to the memory of Renah Tapim, an esteemed and knowledgeable singer of language hymns, a member of St Stephen's Torres Strait Islands Ministry Choir in Townsville, and a fluent speaker of Meriam Mir, who died during the final stages of the preparation of this chapter.

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