Answers found in translation

A new book reveals the fascinating interaction between Christian missionaries and the Anindilyakwa-speaking people of Groote Eylandt, the largest island in the Gulf of Carpentaria, as Adam Spence reports.

ANU historian Dr. Laura Radermaker engaged with Indigenous communities using innovative research methods to produce Found in Translation.

It is a story of culture persevering and cultures colliding in unexpected ways, and how language can be used to influence and subvert.

Radermaker was inspired to pursue this story almost a decade ago. The Apology to the Stolen Generation prompted her to question the people implicated in so much suffering under the auspices of helping.

It was in the diaries of female missionaries that she found so much about the Indigenous experience of colonisation in everyday life, of cross-cultural interactions, seemingly perplexing at times with friendships bridging cultures.

"I got hooked on missionary history in Australia," she says. Over many trips to Groote Eylandt, she came to slowly know the community, and let them come to know her.

"I spent time at the linguistics centre, agod care centre, art centre and around the community, often sharing what I had found in the archives as people would tell me about their families," she says.

"Over time, I learnt not to ask too many questions, but to wait for what people had to share with me. When they were ready, I would be introduced to another relative and learn more. I also interviewed dozens of missionaries, most of whom still care very deeply about the people of Groote Eylandt and were eager that the story be told."

To understand the story, we have to go back to 1943, when the Christian Missionary Society established the Angurugu mission on Groote Eylandt, in Australia's remote north. Operating under a policy of assimilation that prohibited using Aboriginal words, missionaries were forced to abandon their typical methods of translating Christianity into local languages. Though finding their acquiescence to this policy odd, Radermaker understands why they did so.

"In Australia, their reliance on government funding and enthusiasm for assimilating Aboriginal people into white Australia meant most overlooked Aboriginal languages," she says.

The barrier posed by language hampered the efforts of missionaries but provided an opportunity for Aboriginal people, both for subversion and cultural survival. Aboriginal people could ridicule missionaries, share secrets and discuss their own interpretations of the missionaries' teachings, free from interference.

"Language also meant being able to experiment with missionary ideas," Radermaker says. "Some took Christian themes and mapped them into their song lines (au ng in their language). Although missionaries didn't know it, there are places around Groote Eylandt associated with the Christian cross, heaven and hell."

The prohibition on missionaries engaging with Aboriginal language subsided by the late 1960s, giving way to cooperation with Indigenous communities on bilingual education and linguistic research.

Missionaries and government authorities intended to change Indigenous culture, to assimilate it into European culture. Instead, by creating an environment for subversion and later by fostering cooperation, missionaries had given Indigenous culture ways to prevail.

"Some found writing a useful way of recording their traditions in ways that complement their ongoing living oral traditions," Radermaker says.

"They wrote down songs, song lines and secret names, all kept safely in print. Together with missionaries, they recorded the names of hundreds of plants in their language, such that their vast botanical knowledge will be kept for generations."

In the face of mining on their land, writing has been an important way to uphold claims and knowledge of land, now that the knowledge of the Old People is also recorded in print.

One of the most perplexing aspects of the story is how the Indigenous people look back on the missionaries and those times. Radermaker says the older people remember often cruel discipline, humiliation and the dismissal of their culture as 'pagan superstition'.

"Yet they also remember with fondness the missionary teachers and nurses, and speak of pride in a community working together in those days," she says. "Many see no conflict between Christianity and Indigenous spirituality, and have a respect for the spirituality of the missionaries, despite those missionaries' own dismissal of Indigenous culture."

Her research has more recently focused on putting Indigenous people at the centre of the mission story, pursuing oral histories with Tiwi Island communities off the Northern Territory.

"It's all about putting Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives in the fore, rather than simply as 'filling in' the gaps of a history recorded largely by missionaries."