Kapua Gutchen: Educator, mentor and innovator of Torres Strait Islander music, dance and language at Erub (Darnley Island), Torres Strait

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Abstract

The contributions of local community members to Indigenous education can be an important component in curriculum programs. This article explores the contributions of one such dedicated and talented Torres Strait Islander community member: Meuram tribal elder Kapua Gutchen. He teaches at the Erub (Darnley Island) Campus of Tagai College in the eastern Torres Strait region of far northern Queensland. Focusing on the areas of music, dance and language, he is making a major contribution toward innovating, encouraging and sustaining cultural practices via both formal and informal educational activities. This article examines specifically his contributions to *Erub Era Kodo Mer: Traditional and contemporary music and dance from Erub (Darnley Island) Torres Strait*, a community CD/DVD funded by the Torres Strait Regional Authority in 2010. Kapua Gutchen's creation of new songs and dances for the CD/DVD was a conscious effort on his part to pass on knowledge of cultural practices to a younger generation that may not have the same opportunities he did to learn them.

Key words: Indigenous educators; Torres Strait Islanders: Indigenous music and dance; formal and informal education

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Introduction

The contributions of local community members to Indigenous education can be an important component in curriculum programs (Davis, 2004). Not only those designed to attain 'mainstream' goals but also those designed to imbue students with a sense of the inherent value of their community, their place, their history and their cultural practices. Music, dance and language can be key elements in such programs. Dedicated and talented community members can make a major contribution toward encouraging such crucial cultural practices and also contribute to formal and informal education (Costigan & Neuenfeldt, 2002) and cultural identity (Frith, 1996).[1]

1. Any research or projects involving Indigenous peoples should be driven as much as possible by those Indigenous peoples or communities (Bishop, 2008; Lincoln & Denzin, 2008). Research or project ethics in Indigenous communities involves "reciprocal and respectful relationships" (Smith, 2008, pp. 128-129). Bishop (2008, p. 154) calls for "co-constructing collaborative research stories" with a focus on "connectedness, engagement, and involvement with the other research participants within the cultural worldview/discursive practice within which they function". As per the aforementioned concerns, Kapua Gutchen was involved at all stages of the researching and writing of this article and vetted its final contents.

One such exemplary community member is Uncle[2] Kapua Gutchen (Gutchen, 2010). He can be characterised as an educator, mentor and innovator of Torres Strait Islander music, dance and language, in particular his work as a Meuram tribal elder with primary school children at the Erub (Darnley Island) Campus of Tagai College in the eastern Torres Strait region of far northern Queensland.

This description highlights some of his contributions to local educational activities by examining the songs and dances he composed, authored and choreographed for a community CD/DVD funded by the Torres Strait Regional Authority in 2010.[3] Recorded and filmed on-location, *Erub Era Kodo Mer: Traditional and contemporary music and dance from Erub (Darnley Island) Torres Strait* contains songs and dances by cross-generational members of the community. Along with sacred and secular songs by a range of adult performers are songs and dances performed by the primary school children, and their adult accompanists. As Kapua's comments reveal, his creation of the songs and dances was a conscious effort on his part to pass on knowledge of music, dance and language to a younger generation that may not have the same opportunities he did to learn cultural practices. Arguably it is community members such as Kapua Gutchen who are crucial contributors to successful efforts towards cultural continuity, revitalisation and innovation through education.

Kapua Gutchen's community and personal background

Erub (also known as Darnley Island) is one of the three inhabited islands in the eastern island cluster of the Torres Strait region. It is a hilly, tropical island of volcanic origin set amidst the scenic beauty and rich maritime resources of the Great Barrier Reef. Its approximate population is 350 people, the majority of whom belong to four tribes: Meuram, Peiudu, Saisarem and Samsep. Kapua Gutchen was born in 1957 at Thursday Island, one of the first generation to be born off-island. He was 'raised up' in households on both Erub and the nearby Mer (Murray Island), where some elder members were strong culture people not only well versed in communal knowledge but also speakers of Meriam Mir, the language of eastern Torres Strait. He also grew up speaking Torres Strait Creole or as it is also known Yumpla Tok. However, he observes that what he thought as a child was 'English' was not so, which was to have repercussions, positive and negative, for him and others of his generation when they started formal education:

> *[The family] never spoke English at home. We thought Creole was English at that time. Until we came to school, we find out that the [white/European] government teachers spoke different again ... The schoolteachers on Mer they made a policy there that you only spoke two languages at the school. You either speak pure English or Meriam Mir. You know, anybody talked Creole were reported and [got] the cane. But that [policy], eventually it changed later.*

His early childhood memories of music and dance reflect differences in how cultural practices were taught on the two islands. These may have arisen partly because of different experiences of colonialism (Shnukal, 1996). For example, a measles epidemic decimated the original population of Erub in 1875 and consequently

2. In Torres Strait Islander culture, the term 'uncle' or 'aunt' is an honorific title of respect for elders and does not necessarily denote an affinal relationship.

3. The *Erub Era Kodo Mer* liner notes contain the following vetted information about the Torres Strait Regional Authority: "The TSRA is an Australian Government Statutory Authority established in 1994. Its mandate is to improve the lifestyle and wellbeing of the Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal people living in the Torres Strait region. It strives to achieve this by: 'gaining recognition of our rights, customs and identity as Indigenous peoples; achieving a better quality of life for all people living in the Torres Strait region; developing a sustainable economic base; achieving better health and community services; ensuring protection of our environment; and asserting our native title over the lands and waters of the Torres Strait region.' Cultural activities such as music, dance and art play a pivotal role in ensuring traditional cultural practices are maintained and celebrated with pride and the TSRA actively supports arts activities and artists". See the TSRA's website at www.tsra.gov.au for more information.

some cultural practices may have declined (Mullins, 1992, 1995) and it was subsequently re-populated by diverse ethnic groups (Shnukal, 2002). As a young child at Erub he only did what he calls "a muck-around dance. That's the only time they would put me in there. And the rest of the time at the school dance group they wouldn't even take me. They reckon I clumsy, I can't do this, can't do that and there was several of us so". However on Mer it was totally different:

> *they had a thing to train people in a more traditional way than Erub. Because the elders they take us to an area away from the village and all us schoolboys were there and the training was there. They got a special method. Whereas when I look back in retrospect, [Erub] wasn't in-depth as what they were doing over there [at Mer]. So I was glad I spent time at Mer. Watched big dances, even Malo. [for the Malo-Bomai dance see Haddon and Myers 1908] So later on I pick up that the Malo language was different to the normal Meriam Mir.*

When he returned later to Erub, he observes that: "I attend them Island dancing here but when I think back I was probably only one of the very few people or kids in the dance, back when we were teens, that actually understood what they were singing about. Even when I go to church I know what they are singing about." He also remembers: "Some people here on Erub, not to run my people down here, but some of my people 'bin singing [hymns and] songs don't even know what they mean, even today."

One long-lasting result for Kapua of being exposed as a child to cultural practices training and daily use of an Indigenous language is that: "all them things put together sort of 'bin gain my interest in them things."Another long-lasting effect is that eventually he became a "cultural teacher": "That's why my job in the school here now is to try and get kids to understand [our Indigenous language]. So when they sing hymns and choruses [and participate] in island dance sort of things, they know what they are singing about. That's why I got work at the school here."

What follows are several concrete examples of how Kapua Gutchen's personal dedication and life experiences have informed his current work as an educator, mentor and innovator of Torres Strait Islander music, dance and language at Erub.

Paret Amili[4]

The original impetus for *Paret Amili* was when he saw some Islanders performing the *wesker* dance, which is an island broom dance, and they only used one of the two implements he remembered from his childhood on Mer. Whilst using the broom they omitted the *beno* (a woven, flexible flat-basket) used to help clean up leaf litter and other debris in the village. He recalls:

> *[Our culture teacher taught us] at school or we are at home that old lady [Nazareth] Romedio ... make us work, clean the house[-yard], sweep the leaves and things. And we always sweep them and she weaved that beno and we'd fill the rubbish up and carry that away.*

So he "made the new dance with the full set of the two [broom and *beno*] ... Otherwise how do you get rid of the leaves? You can't use a wheelbarrow in the dance".

There was also a more immediate community application for the underlying lesson contained in *Paret Amili*. For many Torres Strait Islanders, it is important for cultural practices to be taught in a social, cultural and environmental context (Costigan, 2003; Davis, 2004). Kapua explains: "the principle part of the dance is to teach our kids to keep the community clean...in the new time, we got rake and we got a wheelbarrow and things. But the principle of clean up is still the same. They rake up the leaves and litter into heaps and come carry it away." So at the primary school when students litter they are told to clean up:

4. *Paret Amili* (Kapua Gutchen, Composer-Author-Choreographer) Adar wed apako tapp/Paret amili e paret amili o kerbi uteb ge isser uteb o/Translation: Sweep the fallen leaves and litter into heaps and remove to make tidy/Sweep the rubbish into heaps and remove to make tidy/Around our homes and throughout our villages/For our villages are on sandy soil (*Erub Era Kodo Mer* 2010).

We constantly remind them, 'hey guys, you know at school we've got dance that tell us how to keep the community, school, and everything clean'. So we don't just dance the dance, you've got to [do what the dance does], like an act ... When you dance the dance you must believe in it: that throwing rubbish on the ground and things is wrong. That's what the kids are taught here.

Teacher/student interactivity is an integral part of the educational process:

We try to write [the song and dance] together and we find a tune and get them kids to do the movements. Then we tell them that it's no use ... to depend on someone else to come teach you [all the time] ... We try to get the interest in there. Get them to feel part of doing that sound, song and dancing and the cultural activity at school, while they're young.

Therefore a new song and dance arose from cultural practices and communal modes of transmission but also addresses contemporary issues such as educating children about the practical skill of keeping clean the community. This is a cogent example of the adaptive and dynamic nature of Torres Strait Islander cultural practices.

Zorom Zorom Baziarda[5]

A local legend arising out of natural phenomena (in this case the movement of heavenly bodies) and the specificity of Erub's tribal areas (Scott & Mulrennan, 1999) was an impetus for the creation of *Zorom Zorom Baziarda* (Kapua Gutchen, Composer-Author). The connections of people to place can be culturally important, even on a quite small island such as Erub, along with other affiliations such as clan and totem. Such affiliations to place can also grant rights to resources such as fish traps and gardens. According to Fuary (2009, p. 32), the sea is a means of orientating Torres Strait Islanders "cosmologically, socially and existentially in time and place". Further, their knowledge of both the seascape and the landscape are strengthened through cultural practices. Thus music and dance connecting natural phenomena with place can be vital components in imparting local cultural knowledge, which is part of Kapua's educational agenda.

He explains the background to the *Iluel/Ilwel* legend (see Haddon, 1908, p. 4) and his personal connections to it: "what inspired me was the story [is] about that evening star [Venus, *Iluel/Ilwel*] ... she's a Saisarem girl but she is a girlfriend to a Meuram boy (the moon, *meb*)," Kapua's own tribe. However, the two are in proximity only briefly each month. The song was created specifically:

so kids understand when in the first quarter why the moon [meb] is always close to the evening star [Iluel/Ilwel]. 'Cause that's the only time they're to come together, their relationship, once in a month. Then they have a lover's quarrel and each night they start to drift apart until he's back in the East [with his Meuram tribal people] and she's always in the West with her people. That's the story there.

Cultural protocols and intellectual property rights, that is, who owns a song or dance and how that song or dance can be used, are crucial considerations for Torres Strait Islander artists. It is "a grave matter of respect and integrity" (Neuenfeldt & Costigan, 2004, p. 122). As Quiggin (2002, p. 1) argues, an Indigenous artist "is a custodian of culture, with obligations as well as privileges". Kapua's own tribal connection to the legend was "the only way I can gain access to write the song because of her connection to my people in the legend ... If I didn't know the

5. *Zorom Zorom Baziarda* (Kapua Gutchen, Composer-Author-Choreographer) Zorom zorom baziarda ge/Ge koki pekem Saisarem ge e a e/Werr epe noh o o o taba gab ge/Noh epudari ge o/E waie Iluel/Ilwelmape debeka peikar/Neur ise gurr ge kutikuti kaida/Sopkak baraigidari i e/Au karem ge epe kerbialam basmauda (bummerr)/ Au karem ge epe noh o o Dauma Kes ge/Natkak baraigidari i e/ Translation: So brilliantly shining forth/There towards the northwest off the Saisarem tribal area/Stars oh how they travel on their heavenly tracks unabated/O Evening Star [Venus] just as a beautiful virgin girl you've dived into the sea setting so quickly (Into the deep blue sea you've suddenly disappeared from us)/(Setting there into the deep blue sea she'll go)/There always to the deep blue ocean she'll be setting as ever just to the side off Dauma Kes [deep channel off Ugar (Stephen Island)] (*Erub Era Kodo Mer* 2010*)*.

story then I wouldn't have attempted to write it". By telling the story he could "make people aware that I now have the right to write the story because of the connection for the two tribes".

It also is crucial to seek permission from the appropriate language group or family (Quiggin, 2007 in Janke, 2008). Therefore, notwithstanding his personal connections to the legend, Kapua also had to gain specific permission from Saisarem families, especially on Erub, to create the new work. Uncle Dick Pilot, head of the Saisarem tribe, the custodians of the sacred *Iluel/Ilwel* stone located on Erub,[6] gave him permission to "write the story and the story [is now] told in the school". However, he had to make his own *Iluel/Ilwel* dance "because the other *Iluel/Ilwel* dances on Erub are fairly old and I don't even know who the artists were that made them. So I had to more or less put my own song together".[7]

Thus although Kapua Gutchen is a cultural insider, to work effectively within the community's socio-cultural and educational contexts, he required approval to create a new song and dance. A personal (and communal concern) was that unless educational action was taken some cultural practices and knowledge might be lost:

> *it was already more or less fading in this time. And I be kind of worry that some things gonna be gone if you no sort of stepped in and take control of it. And they [the community] were happy about it. Now even some of the children's parents that were growing up didn't know that [legend] ... them stories didn't pass on. And they kind of ask me why I know. That's because I sat with old people before and understand them stories. And I, by making them songs, remind a lot of old people on the island there was a story there to tell and they didn't do that to their children and grandchildren. Now maybe some of them start talk now, at home. So sometimes when you do things you prompt the people's thinking to come back.*

Kapua's creation of *Zorom Zorom Baziarda* is a cogent example of several things: legends can provide valuable curriculum materials; even a cultural insider must work within local socio-cultural and educational strictures; and education via cultural practices can serve the purpose of helping revitalise knowledge.

Kiraro

A final example was expressly created for educational purposes. *Kiraro* (Kapua Gutchen, Composer-Author) is a story song naming insects and wildlife in the natural environment of Erub. It is worth quoting at length because it shows how a well-constructed narrative not only can be of educational value to students but also contain important environmental information:

> *Kiraro [Christmas beetle] came out of the ground and ate the leaves off the omei tree [native fig]*
>
> *Kitato [noisy Christmas beetle] sings the same old song all day long*
>
> *Pem [grasshopper] hops, skips and jumps to show off to the guai [green tree frog]*
>
> *Wadal [red ground ants] and soni [green tree ants] work from dawn to dusk*
>
> *Bukani [scorpion] hides under the rocks and so does naisi [centipede] too*
>
> *Auzi [caterpillar] crawls along the tam [tree branches] and then she'd fall*

6. Haddon (1908, p. 202) writes: "Iluel, Venus. Jimmy Dei informed me that Iluel or Ilwel, the large stone image of a woman that represents the evening star, belongs to Erub, and remained at a place called Irmed. When the sun goes down and the star comes up and shines with a faint light, any man or boy can take a small stone and hit the stone Iluel all over the body, head and limbs. 'By and by, sundown, Iluel he light, like moon".

7. Due to space restrictions on the CD, not all songs that were recorded could be included. A slower tempoed companion song to *Zorom Zorom Baziarda, Kei Armem Bagerr Kokipekem* (Kapua Gutchen, Composer-Author), and *United We Stand* (Kapua Gutchen, Composer-Author), a marching song, were not included. A song not included here for analysis but on the CD is *Au Sasmir Sasmir Omaskerr* (Kapua Gutchen, Composer-Author). However multiple copies of a CD with all recorded songs were supplied to the school. As well, several un-included hymns and *kores* were supplied to the community on a separate CD.

Kap [butterfly] finds a place to rest on a big red rose

Saposar [sand fly] and lag [mosquito] they're very very dumb

Gerr [hornet] and nab [wasp] love to sting I know that very well

Abob [blowfly] goes to the tip and finds nargerr [house flies] there

Si [goanna] runs through the jungle, whilst tabo [snake] coils and sleeps

Oh! Oh! Dear me, what next will I see?

The impetus for *Kiraro* was when a teacher asked Kapua if he could compose a song appropriate for teaching the grades two and three children *Meriam Mir* names for insects and wildlife. However, he recognised that "because they so small, we can't do it in the full [*Meriam Mir*] language thing because that'll be probably too heavy for the kids". He also knew that the children "know about half of the names already; they only have to learn new ones like butterflies and scorpions and centipedes. But they knew grasshopper, they know fly and other things". So it was a matter of adding to what knowledge they already had, and doing so in language appropriate for their learning level: "we need to put it in a way more or less how they talk." The learning is sequential in the sense that: "... you need to more or less slowly take it on, bring it to them and get them first to understand the stories. They are told the stories before they are taught the songs. So that then the kids have got an actual feeling what a song is about."

One positive end result Kapua notes from the school's teaching methodology is that the teachers found that students "from the baby ones to the big ones" now know more *Meriam Mir* names for the island's insects and wildlife. He also hopes that the song could provide a model for the nearby island of Ugar (Stephen Island) where language use is also limited, whereas at Mer (Murray Island) children may have more access to *Meriam Mir* use within the community. Kapua's song, *Kiraro*, is an instructive example of how to combine music, languages and a sense of place into a coherent educational resource. The song may be simple but it is effective as a homegrown, community-based tool for teaching and learning.

Caveat on the role of cultural practices in education

The place of cultural practices in education is a complex one. Chris Sarra (2010, p. 18), educator and Director of the Stronger Smarter Institute, calls for a "quality education" for Indigenous peoples; however, it should also enhance a "sense of cultural identity". Education is also a political issue. Torres Strait Islander academic Martin Nakata (2007, p. 169) argues that education is important for Torres Strait Islanders to enable them to "appropriate a better position for ourselves – to cut better deals for ourselves and our traditional heritage in changing times". Nevertheless, he adds that this should not be at the "risk of submerging or erasing those elements of our own lifeworlds that define us as a distinct group – the Torres Strait Islanders" (Nakata, 2007, p. 9). Kapua sees the value of cultural practices as one way of instilling a sense of 'Islanderness', but he also knows that is only part of the role of education, especially in an Outer Island community where children will all have to go off-island for secondary study, usually either to Thursday Island or to the mainland. He states: "you don't want a whole lot of kids with [only] island [cultural knowledge] and [when] they go down south [and] they can't compete with the other kids at school...and they're not learning their Maths and English they need to do in high school."

Learning cultural practices is also a long-term process: "You get their interest going because after they [are interested], get them to

understand how important their culture is. When they complete all their schooling in the south they can always come back to learn more cultural things after. But first you've got to get them to have the love for it." He is concerned about cultural transmission because he has observed what can happen to Islander children living on the mainland and does not want his home-island students "lost like [some of] them urbanised kids down south that have to really work their way to look for their roots and their cultural things because of all the other challenges down south". Consequently, engaging students when they are young is critical because: "I believe that when they leave school if there is an interest for them to pursue [their cultural roots] more, that's where we catch them at the right time [here in the island primary schools]."

Conclusion

The "connection between self and place, the flow between people, seascape and landscape" is intricately linked to Torres Strait Islander identity (Fuary, 2009, p. 32) and this connection is strengthened through cultural practices. Cultural practices are not only an integral part of the socio-cultural and communal life in the Torres Strait; they also play an important role in education. This article has discussed how one community member and cultural teacher has incorporated music, dance and language into the curriculum via a community cultural project initiated and funded by a regional Indigenous organisation, the Torres Strait Regional Authority. It is urged that any research or projects in Indigenous communities be driven as much as possible by those communities. Kapua Gutchen composed, authored and choreographed songs and dances for the community CD/DVD *Erub Era Kodo Mer: Traditional and contemporary music and dance from Erub (Darnley Island) Torres Strait*. The impetus was to pass on his knowledge of cultural practices and language to younger generations. However, Kapua also ensured they addressed contemporary issues and were not taught in isolation but rather in relevant socio-cultural and environmental contexts. Cultural protocols and intellectual property rights and issues of ownership are a crucial issue with Indigenous artists and communities, and appropriate permission was sought to use the songs and dances. Overall, Kapua Gutchen states that when cultural practices are integrated into the curriculum they can "play a very good role now. Some of the kids in the school now actually know more traditional language than their parents, the young parents of today. Because [the teachers and community] bring this cultural lesson into the school curriculum, I'm very happy".

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