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2015 TORRES STRAIT LANGUAGE SYMPOSIUM

The inaugural Torres Strait Language Symposium was recently held at the Gab Titui Cultural Centre with the theme: *Empowering our language, in our culture, for our future.*

The event was presented by the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) Culture, Art and Heritage Programme in partnership with Tagai State College and brought together traditional language speakers and specialists from across the region to celebrate and plan for the future of the rich languages of the Torres Strait.

Presentations, workshops and demonstrations by key representatives working in the area of language preservation addressed topics including language transmission, documentation and technology; standardisation of the written language; and community and school-based language programs.

The TSRA Chairperson, Mr Joseph Elu, said the TSRA presented the symposium to honour its commitment to contributing to the revitalisation and maintenance of traditional cultural practices among communities.

“It has been widely accepted throughout the TSRA that culture is an essential factor to consider in the development of projects and programs designed to improve outcomes for Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginal people,” Mr Elu said.

“For Indigenous cultures to survive, traditional languages, along with storytelling, song and dance, must be revived, maintained, developed and promoted.”

Mr Elu described the symposium as an important milestone in addressing the critical status of traditional languages of the Torres Strait.

“The National Indigenous Languages Survey reports of 2005 and 2013 identified that the two main Torres Strait traditional languages, Kala Lagaw Ya and Meriam Mir, were in critical danger of being lost,” Mr Elu said.

“It is clear to us in the Torres Strait region, that if the remaining traditional language speakers pass away without a clear and practical strategy to maintain these languages, we will have lost the bedrock of our Torres Strait cultural identity.”

The language symposium was a key initiative of the TSRA’s Culture, Art and Heritage Programme (CAH) and was supported by the Miromaa Aboriginal Language and Technology Centre – developers

of the award-winning Miromaa Language Technology Programme, and Puliima National Indigenous Language and Technology Forum.

The Miromaa team has brought a wealth of knowledge and experience to this process, having assisted over 150 communities in Australia and worldwide in the implementation of technology-based language documentation.

Mr Elu said the three-day symposium culminated in the creation of a reference group to lead the development of the Torres Strait Language Action Plan.

“The formation of a reference group is an important step in ensuring a strategic and community-driven response to language preservation,” Mr Elu said.

“It is made up of representatives from each of the five island clusters of the Torres Strait, who will act as a conduit for participation from members of those communities.”

The first meeting of the group has already taken place, facilitated by Sandra Fields of Fieldworx, using notes collected over the course of the symposium to bring contributions from each of the participating delegates into focus for incorporation into the Action Plan.

For more information on the Torres Strait Language Symposium, reference group or Language Action Plan; community members should contact Mary Bani, the Programme Manager for the TSRA’s Culture, Art and Heritage Programme.

ENDS

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Members of the Tagai State College Language and Culture Unit presented on topics of significance, including Mr Dana Ober (pictured)



The language symposium was chaired by Councillor Phillemon, a Kulkalgaw Ya language representative



Mr Benny Mabo Jr presenting on the topic of *Language Transmission in the Family Context*, at the 2015 Torres Strait Language Symposium



Delegates at the 2015 Torres Strait Language Symposium participated in presentations and workshops, including a demonstration of the immersion method of language teaching, in Kala Kawaw Ya.



There was much rejoicing at the opening of the 2015 Torres Strait Language Symposium at the Gab Titui Cultural Centre 11th-13th March.



Delegates from across the Torres Strait at the inaugural Torres Strait Language Symposium



The Torres Strait Language Action Plan Reference Group (front L-R: Louise Manas, Leonora Adidi, Mariana Babia, Maria Tapim, Leitha Assan back L-R: Bobby Kaigey, Billy Bourne, Dana Ober, Dick Williams, Cygnet Repu, Phillemon Mosby)