Spoken Here

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Patrick's Language

AN OLD MAN watches a milky ocean roll in to the shore. High above the waterline, two children are skipping barefoot along an otherwise empty beach, its contours defined and guarded by a pair of mangrove swamps. A long, low island nudges the western horizon. This could be an afternoon scene on almost any tropical coast: the heat rising off the sand, a hawk scouring the sky. In fact, the surf is brushing a remote edge of northern Australia — remote, that is, except to the old man's people, the Mati Ke, who may have lived in the area for tens of thousands of years.

One of the children pauses in her game. Among the fragments of driftwood and corrugated iron, the rusted fishing traps and crushed plastic bottles, she has found something different: a shell as long as her forearm. She looks up from the beach to the few scattered houses in the hamlet of Kuy. Then she calls to her grandmother, Mona, who is sitting as usual on a yellow foam mattress. Laid out on a verandah, the mattress gives a view of the sea.

The child uses her grandmother's language, Murrinh-Patha. It's also her own, and the daily language of a few thousand other people in the region. Most of its speakers live an hour's rough ride away, in a town called Wadeye. The trip is possible only in a four-wheel-drive vehicle down a dirt trail that slithers inland through the silver-green bush, passing the corpse of a small airplane and fording the same creek twice before it links up with a gravel road that ends or begins in town.

Somewhere along that trail, as you skirt the treacherous pools of

deep red sand or disturb a loud gathering of cockatoos, you pass a border. The border is no less real for its lack of fences, checkpoints, and customs officers. It marks the ancient division between the Murrinh-Patha land that includes the town of Wadeye and the Mati Ke land that includes the small outstation here at Kuy. In Aboriginal Australia, land and language are intimately related. Traditionally, the continent was defined and divided not only by its hills, creeks, and water holes but also by its hundreds of languages. Wadeye grew up in the 1930s as a Catholic mission, and the Mati Ke were one of several peoples who moved off their land and switched over — out of a mixture of respect, convenience, and necessity — to a daily use of Murrinh-Patha. They also learned English, so as to comprehend the noise of authority. At first, nobody realized that the Mati Ke language was slipping away.

From her home above a calm shore of the Timor Sea, Mona gives her granddaughter an encouraging shout. Then she turns to her husband, Patrick Nudjulu, to explain. Unless he is wearing his hearing aid, words are lost on Patrick. But as the old man of Kuy, he likes to know what's going on. Besides, this is his land. Its stories belong to him.

Standing there on his verandah, his beard and flowing hair the color of the snow he has never seen, his skin as dark as wild grapes, Patrick has the gravitas of a biblical patriarch — a tall one, with a sly sense of humor. Some days he doesn't bother to put on a shirt. But if there's any chance that strangers might be present, he always wears long pants and shoes. That way, it won't be obvious that one of his legs is false — the aftermath of leprosy in his youth. A slight film over his eyes betrays the arrival of cataracts. But he can still see down to the beach; he can dream; he can remember.

"I remember *all*," he says in English, his fourth or fifth language. "I was born in my own bush here. Therefore I can't forget." He sips from a tin mug of tea that Mona has brewed up on the open fire pit at the far end of the verandah. "I dream in Mati Ke. See all the past."

And maybe the future, too? "Yeah." The old man is grinning. A few of his teeth are left. "Old future, and new future."

In his dreams, the fruit of the peanut tree whose seeds are eaten raw in the wet season is *mi warzu*. That's the name of the fruit in Mati Ke. But if he mentions the dream to Mona, he reverts to her more powerful language, Murrinh-Patha, and talks about *mi kurl*. The saltwater prawns that his grandchildren find among the mangroves are *a dhan gi* in his own tongue. But to Mona and the grandchildren, they are *ku tha-*

pulinh. The delicious goanna lizard that roams the bush all year is *a wayelh* in Mati Ke. But to speak of it and make himself understood, Patrick has to call the lizard *ku yagurr*.

A wide-eyed boy about a year in age totters over from the mattress where Mona is sitting. Children no more than five or seven years old take turns looking after him, hauling him back to his grandmother for comfort if he falls. Patrick peels a mandarin orange and hands it, chunk by chunk, to the little boy. Conch shell in hand, the boy's sister arrives beaming from the beach. Slumped beside Patrick's bamboo fishing spear farther along the verandah, an older grandchild on the brink of adolescence looks on. He and his mother are visiting from their home in Wadeye. His shirt is army fatigue; his hair displays streaks of blond dye; his gaze is sullen.

Patrick too spent many years in town. His family began to give up the bush when he was a boy. Over the decades, he watched Wadeye evolve from a resting place of hunters and foragers to a sitdown community, dependent on the welfare subsidies that Australia's government, possibly with noble intentions, has chosen to give Aboriginal people. Deprived of the old habits of life, unable to embrace the new, a host of men and women forfeited their pride. Patrick did not. Twelve or fifteen years ago, when the government was promoting the growth of outstations as a way for Aboriginal people to regain a spirit of independence and self-control, he led his wife and some of their extended family away from the frustrations of town and back to his own land, the place he knew by heart. Not that they were returning to the bark-and-bough shelters of his childhood. The government built bungalows at Kuy, and erected a small water tower, and hooked up electricity. Patrick's house has solar panels in its corrugated roof. One of the other houses is equipped with a satellite dish, and the children of the outstation go there to watch TV.

The TV pours a quick, bubbling stream of English into their ears and minds; but primary school and family life take place in Murrinh-Patha. Sometimes Patrick speaks to his grandchildren in Mati Ke, and he claims they understand. Yet whether they grasp more than a few commands, a familiar phrase or two, is open to doubt. They answer him in Murrinh-Patha: the language of their parents, their friends, their doting grandmother. Words in their grandfather's tongue trip haltingly, if at all, off their lips. What Patrick Nudjulu hears only in his dreams is another fluent speaker of Mati Ke.

The lone elder, the half-comprehending family, the stealthy invasion of other languages — this scene is not unique to Kuy, or Australia, or the Southern Hemisphere. It is happening all over the planet, from the snowpeaks of the Himalayas to the humid rivers of West Africa and the shantytowns of great cities in South America. The phenomenon is not new, for languages have always been in flux; languages have always died. No one alive today can hold a conversation in Hittite or Nubian. But the sheer pace of change is unprecedented. On every inhabited continent, languages keep falling silent. New replacements are rare. Linguists believe that about six thousand languages still flow into human ears: the exact total is a matter of debate. By some estimates, a maximum of three thousand are likely to be heard at the century's end, and fewer than six hundred of those appear secure. Within our children's lifetimes, thousands of human languages seem fated to dwindle away.

They are vanishing under similar pressures. A few languages of high prestige — English is the prime but not the sole example — dominate the media and the marketplace, school systems and bureaucracies. Almost anywhere you care to go — the Cayman Islands, the Andaman Islands, the Marshall Islands, the Galápagos Islands — young people are absorbing the same music and watching the same movies, most of them from Hollywood. Local cultures, less forceful, less alluring, are swept aside. At the same time, economic patterns of migration and displacement mean that fewer and fewer small languages still have a vibrant local base, a spoken homeland they can call their own. Cities provide new opportunities; they also blur and erase old identities. A minority language can quickly come to seem a hobby for the old — a quaint refuge from ambition, knowledge, progress. A minority language always depends on popular will. It dies as its voices fade in the midst of PalmPilots, cell phones, and Walkmans. It dies as its remaining speakers find they have less and less to talk about.

The price of that loss is beyond estimation. We have grown used to giving cultural artifacts a dollar figure: so many thousand for a Yeats manuscript, so many million for a Ming porcelain. But a language is more than any artifact. You can't slap a price tag on a language, no matter how small and obscure, any more than you can pin down the financial value of an ivory-billed woodpecker or a bill of rights. Mati Ke lacks the ever burgeoning scientific terminology of English and Japanese, nor does it enjoy a written literature. But like all other human languages, it is a full and rich expression of a way of life, a culture, an identity.

Whether or not it ever makes sense to use the term "primitive society," the phrase "primitive language" is an absurdity.

Mati Ke, for example, arranges all the objects and beings in the world by means of a system of noun classes. You can't speak of an object without also classifying it. There are ten of these classes, and they reveal an enormous amount about how Patrick Nudjulu understands his daily experience. A kind of red-flowering tree, for instance, is *thawurr babarlthang* — *thawurr* being the noun class for trees, wooden items, and long rigid objects. The string made from the inner bark of that tree is *nhanjdji babarlthang*. You use *nhanjdji* in front of a broad range of substances both manufactured, like the bark string, and natural: the wind, the sand, the sun. The tree's edible seeds are *mi babarlthang*; all vegetable foods are prefaced by *mi*. And so on. Weapons go in the same class as lightning. Places go in the same class as times (Mati Ke, you might say, anticipated Einstein by several thousand years). Speech and language deserve a separate noun class of their own. This is how Mati Ke interprets the world.

Murrinh-Patha's vocabulary is very different from Mati Ke's, but the underlying syntax is similar. Its arithmetic stops at the number five. Yet without counting, a fluent speaker of Murrinh-Patha knows thirty-one different pronouns and thirty-five verb classes. The grammar and syntax of Mati Ke and Murrinh-Patha are just as elaborate, just as complex and intellectually demanding, as the grammar and syntax of any well-known European tongue. Being widely spoken does not make a language any better, more intelligent, or more perceptive than a language that has never spread beyond its birthplace. As the literary critic George Steiner once observed, "We have no sound basis on which to argue that extinct languages failed their speakers, that only the most comprehensive or those with the greatest wealth of grammatical means have endured. On the contrary: a number of dead languages are among the most obvious splendours of human intelligence."

In Aboriginal culture, human life and the rest of the natural world are bound together by a system of totems — a child grows up in the knowledge that she belongs to the totem of the bush yam, say, or the female kangaroo. The language reflects and embodies this understanding. In Mati Ke, *nhanjdji marri* is the name for the cycad — an ancient plant whose tall, palmlike fronds are a familiar sight in the northern Australian bush. The cycad's seeds, poisonous straight off the plant, can be made into a kind of flour after prolonged washing; those seeds, being

eventually edible, are *mi marri*. But *a* defines the class for animals (and people, if you mean to insult them). So what are we to make of *a marri*? That's the word, it turns out, for a kind of bush cockroach that inhabits dead cycad fronds. The class for higher beings — spirits and also people, if you're referring to them with respect — is expressed by *me*. And *me marri* defines those people whose totems are the cycad and the bush cockroach. Aboriginal languages have fewer words in them than English does. But those words are held and balanced in an intricate web of relationships. Lose the vocabulary, and you lose the relationships too.

Back in town, in a windowless room of the local museum, a ginger-haired, Queensland-born electrician named Mark Crocombe works part time as coordinator of the Wadeye Aboriginal Languages Centre. He spends most of his time on Mati Ke and a few other local languages whose numbers are severely depleted. High above the bark paintings and black-and-white photographs on the museum's walls, a gecko awaits mosquitoes. SLAYER AS GOD reads a piece of graffiti inscribed in neat capital letters outside the front door — TV shows like *Buffy* having permeated most of the human world. Once in a while, when his other jobs allow, Mark Crocombe leaves the office, fetches a camcorder from his house, puts it on the passenger seat of his beat-up minivan, and drives out to Kuy. His aim is to record Patrick speaking Mati Ke.

Thanks to their sporadic efforts, Mati Ke will experience a kind of afterlife: a partial, disembodied future. Elsewhere in Australia and in dozens of other countries, too, anthropologists, linguists, graduate students, tribal insiders, and well-meaning outsiders are hastening to record the voices of elders. Every captured story is a small victory over time. Through the electronic power of CD-ROMs or the slightly older magic of cassette tapes and the printed page, students in decades to come will be able to gain a limited knowledge of a vanished tongue. But a CD-ROM of an extinct language bears an uneasy resemblance to a stuffed dodo. A museum specimen, lovingly preserved, can give scientists all sorts of useful information except, perhaps, what is most essential: how the extinct bird behaved in the wild. Likewise, languages are social creations, constantly being tested and renewed in the mouths of their speakers. They require use, not just study. You can no more restore a vanished language from a scholarly monograph and a software pro-

gram than you can restore a population of cheetahs from a vial of frozen sperm and a National Geographic film.

Hence the loneliness of Patrick Nudjulu: the gathering silence behind the old man's eyes. Speaking to his wife, his children, and his grandchildren, he employs a language that does not come as naturally to him as breath. The grandchildren jostle around him on the verandah facing the milky sea. But occasionally he brushes them aside, looking out on the water and the powdery beach without saying a word.

The coastal outstation at Kuy was, from my perspective as a North American, the most remote place I would visit between the years 2000 and 2002. Likewise, Mati Ke and Murrinh-Patha were among the most distant languages from my own that I would hear: among the most foreign ways of exercising the mind. Living in Montreal, a city where English, French, and other languages are in daily contact — usually friendly, sometimes bitter — I had seen a good many statistics about language loss. But the statistics told little of the passions and arguments that arise from a language's disappearance. And it was the emotions, not the numbers, that I cared about: the figures of speech, not the figures on a chart. I wasn't sure I could imagine what it meant for men and women to feel the language of their childhood melting away. I wasn't sure how much sense it made for them to fight back.

Eventually I embarked on a series of journeys, investigating the fate of linguistic diversity in places as discrepant as a village in the Canadian Arctic and an island off the Australian coast, a scrub farm in Oklahoma and a medieval city in Provence. In a few of these places, minority languages appear to be settling down into a comfortable oblivion; in others, the speakers of lesser-used languages are battling, not just to preserve a language but to strengthen and extend it. The tongues I heard are by no means a representative sample of the world's endangered languages — working without the help of researchers, secretaries, or graduate students, I did not have the resources to explore countries like Papua New Guinea and Cameroon, where hundreds of small languages survive. Still, I believe that the challenges facing hundreds, even thousands of minority languages are mirrored in these pages.

In Oklahoma, for example, I spent some time among the few remaining speakers of the Yuchi language. Yuchi is what linguists call an isolate: it bears a clear relation to no other living tongue. I wanted to discover what knowledge and understanding may die with Yuchi if it

does indeed disappear. In the south of France, I hoped to see whether Provençal — one of the great literary languages of Europe — has a future as well as a past. Meeting speakers of Yiddish in several places would allow me to investigate the fate of a diaspora language. In Wales, the country where my parents were born, I was keen to discover how a Celtic language has, against all odds, remained vibrant beside the homeland of English. And so on.

Wherever I traveled, I tried to listen to the actual speakers of languages under threat — the loyalists of minority cultures. How do people who know their language is endangered bear the weight of such knowledge? I wanted to see how far their defiance could stretch, and how easily resignation could take hold. I wanted to learn what steps can be taken to sustain and strengthen a threatened tongue. Above all, I wanted to test my own hunch that the looming extinction of so many languages marks a decisive moment in human history — a turning away from vocal diversity in favor of what optimists see as a global soul and others as a soulless monoculture. In the end, should anybody care that thousands of languages are at risk?

That's the central question I will attempt to answer in this book. But I have a confession to make. I work as a journalist, poet, and editor; I am not a professional linguist. Indeed, my knowledge of the entire discipline of linguistics is patchy and often cursory. These pages do not touch on constructional homonymity and depth-first parsers; such matters lie beyond my frame of reference. My defense is one of analogy. You don't have to be a theologian to talk of God; you don't have to be a veterinarian to describe cats. Besides, this book is not just about threatened languages but about the people who speak them. I beg the forgiveness of linguists for trespassing on their territory and perpetrating whatever blunders have found a home in these pages — and I would gently remind them that their own voices are unlikely to be heard on the subject unless they speak out in terms that are lucid, intelligible, and free from jargon.

What will we lose if our abundance of languages shrinks to a fraction of what now survives? A speaker of English or Chinese might answer differently from a speaker of Mati Ke. The simplest response, perhaps, is this: we will lose languages that are astonishingly unlike any widespread tongue. Languages employ sounds and organize the mental world in ways that are natural to their speakers but can seem downright weird to other people. Nootka, one of the languages of Vancouver Island, is a

case in point. As the linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf once noted, to express the idea "He invites people to a feast" Nootka requires but a single word: *tl'imshya'isita'itlma*. Literally, "Boiling result eating those go to get somebody." Not quite so literally, "He, or somebody, goes to get eaters of cooked food." The Nootka would alter their speech — adding hissing noises or extra consonants for effect — when they were talking to or about children, fat people, short people, left-handed people, circumcised males, lame and hunchbacked people, greedy people (also ravens), and people with eye defects.

Or take Kabardian, also known as Circassian, which arises from that great hotbed of linguistic diversity, the Caucasus Mountains. It boasts forty-eight consonants — more than double the number in English — but two vowels at most. In linguistic circles, a few experts have doubted those vowels' existence, suggesting that the language has *no* regular vowels. Can this be possible? To speak Ubykh, a language that originated in the same region, you'd need to get your tongue around eighty-one consonants. Abkhaz, which also belongs to the northwestern slopes of the Caucasus, had a special "hunting language" spoken by the local nobility on their journeys into the forests. The verbs would stay the same as in everyday Abkhaz. But to ensure good luck in finding and killing animals, hunters were forbidden to call objects by their workaday names. Therefore the hunting language contained an entirely distinct array of nouns, unknown to Abkhaz peasants and tradesmen.

Even more remarkable was an Australian language called Damin, spoken only by initiated men on three small islands in the Gulf of Carpentaria, due south of New Guinea. The daily language used by most of those men was called Lardil. After puberty, boys were circumcised (without anesthetic, of course) and taught Marlda Kangka — a sign language. For a year, it alone enabled them to communicate with anyone who had attended their circumcision. Marlda Kangka was more than just a basic code: its signs allowed a boy to convey information like "Last night I saw my mother's brother and father fighting in the bush." The most succulent food around the islands was the dugong, or sea cow. And Marlda Kangka had separate signs for "large young female dugong," "small female dugong," "old male dugong," and so on.

Marlda Kangka was just the beginning. After a year or more, young men who were brave enough moved on to the second stage of initiation: penile subincision. (Don't ask.) The reward for enduring the pain was a second auxiliary language, Damin. Unlike Marlda Kangka, it was

spoken. But like Marlda Kangka — or Klingon or Elvish — Damin was a deliberate invention. Its sound system enforced a contrast with the parent language, Lardil. *M, l, r,* and a few other Lardil consonants were absent from Damin, yet Damin speakers employed eleven sounds not found in Lardil. Four of them were click consonants, otherwise used only in southern and eastern Africa. That's not all. Damin also demanded a "bilabial ejective," an "ingressive lateral fricative," and a "duplicated bilabial trill" (very roughly, *pr-pr,* with a roll for each *r*) — consonants that are found nowhere else in the world. Damin had five types of "phonetic initiation" — five ways for the vocal organs to produce sound — more than any other known language.

Ken Hale, one of the few linguists to study Damin, called it an "intellectual tour de force," for its structure was as amazing as its sound system. The language winnowed pronouns down to their essence. For any set of people including the speaker (that is, for the English terms "I," "me," "we," and "us"), Damin speakers said *n!aa* — *!* representing a nasal click. For anyone and everyone else ("you," "they," "them," "he," "she," "him," "her"), Damin speakers said *n!uu.* The language's lexicon was small: just a couple of hundred basic words. But by ingeniously manipulating those words, initiated men could express almost anything they needed to say. Suppose a Damin speaker saw a sandpiper in flight. "Sandpiper" was not in Damin's lexicon. But the watcher could evoke the bird by saying *ngaajpu wiiwi-n wuujpu:* literally, "person-burning creature." The phrase harks back to a creation story in which Sandpiper starts a lethal fire — a familiar tale to all speakers of Damin. Likewise an ax was "honey-affecting wood": a wooden object used to obtain wild honey. Because it imposed this rigorous, semi-abstract vocabulary on the familiar syntax of Lardil, Damin could be learned in a few days. Initiated men would speak it at ceremonial gatherings, but also while searching for food or just sitting around gossiping. Extreme suffering had brought a gift of sacred knowledge.

No ritual initiations have been carried out in the Gulf of Carpentaria for half a century. As a result, Marlda Kangka and Damin are extinct. Their parent language, Lardil, is endangered. Abkhaz continues to be spoken, although its hunting language does not. Nootka survives, barely, as does Kabardian. But the last fluent speaker of Ubykh died in 1992. Multiply this paragraph a few hundred times over. Such is the fate of our languages.

Mati Ke may never have had more than a thousand speakers. For

millennia, that was enough. Then, under the accumulated pressures facing Aboriginal people in the late twentieth century, the language collapsed. A 1983 study found it had about thirty fluent speakers left. Now, all evidence suggests, there are three. And one of the three — an old-timer living in Wadeye — might be annoyed to find himself on the list. For Johnny Chula knows his language not as Mati Ke but as "Magati Ge." Words have a different ring when he utters them. His dialect is heavier than Patrick's — the terms are mostly the same, but they arrive with extra syllables, chunkier in the mouth. "Johnny's the only speaker of Magati Ge," Mark Crocombe told me. "But he's too old now to work on the language."

Most of the time, whether on the sandy paths of Kuy or in the streets of some burgeoning city, a language ends with a long sequence of whimpers. Even if the language has just one fluent speaker, that speaker will often keep in touch with some younger men or women who know how to produce a few sentences, or who remember a smattering of words, or who cherish some traditional songs. So it is with Patrick's language. Near the pale waves of the Timor Sea, in lands where Mati Ke and its forerunners were probably spoken before the foundations of Sumer and Babylon were dug — and before the great myth of Babel first entered anyone's mind — not all knowledge of the language will vanish with his generation; Wadeye has a few middle-aged people who can stumble a short distance along the trails of Mati Ke. If the old man speaks with extra care, they can understand some of what he says.

Aloysius Kungul, one of Patrick's nephews, knows more than any of these other partial speakers. "Aloy, he's learning," Patrick insists. "He's learning, bit by bit." But the confidence soon dwindles from his voice. "It's difficult. I talk to him real slow." Aloysius is Mati Ke by inheritance: his totem animals are the masked plover, the mud crab, and the magpie-goose, which distinguish the land around Kuy. Meeting him in Wadeye, I found him reluctant to say much about Mati Ke. It was his father's language; therefore, in Aboriginal society, it became his language too. But his father did not pass it on. One day when Aloysius was approaching puberty, he overheard his father speaking Mati Ke. "What's that language?" he asked. "It's ours," his father replied, offhand.

Flash forward a few decades: by Aloysius's own account, "I can hear the language, but I don't speak it, just a bit." He pointed at his own head, where black hair drooped toward his eyes in unruly bangs. "I got it *there*. But it's the speaking." If he were to spend months with his un-

cle, the speaking would come. But Patrick lives at the outstation, and Aloysius in town. With every succeeding year, his chances of fluency recede.

Which leaves just one other speaker of Mati Ke: an old woman called Agatha Perdjert. "And she's not real good at it," in Mark Crocombe's frank opinion, "because she left the Mati Ke country when she was fifteen." More than half a century has elapsed since Agatha married a Murrinh-Patha man and moved to Wadeye.

The red dirt track between Kuy and Wadeye is rough even in the dry season; in the wet, it can become impassable. A whole section of road is liable to vanish beneath the spillover creek. But on occasion Patrick still makes it into town, riding high in someone else's juddering machine down the straight road past the airstrip. In Wadeye, you might think, he could look up Agatha, so that they'd have a chance to revel in a language now almost unique to them. Maybe after all these years, Agatha has forgotten certain words. The salty billygoat plum that ripens in the rainless months, *mi kulurduk* in Murrinh-Patha: what do you call that fruit in Mati Ke? Maybe Patrick has lost a phrase in a particular song, or Agatha no longer recalls the name of a headland where she camped as a girl . . . Ah yes, the plum is *mi bakulin*, of course.

But this is a fantasy, nothing more. Agatha is Patrick's sister. The culture by which they live prohibits a brother and sister from conversing after puberty. They will never forage for missing words, never share their memories of childhood; any such conversation would be taboo. They must not even pronounce each other's names. When they die, the soul of a language will die with them.