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MEMORIES OF THE MISSION DAYS – ESTHER MANAKGU



Figure 6.1: Esther Manakgu, 2012.

Source: Sally K. May.

In 2012, Esther Manakgu sat down with Sally K. May and talked about her memories of the mission as a little girl. What follows are selected words from her oral history.

Esther's story

Gunbalanya that is this country name. Oenpelli. That *balanda* English, they say Oenpelli name. Gunbalanya. All the *balanda* mob they call the name Oenpelli but all the *bininj* they call Gunbalanya, in our language.

My father used to be named Nowenyako, that's native name. My mother used to be named Wayaliba.

My country name Wajapin Pujapin. That my country, where I been born... My father's country. My mother's country's name Kunburray.

Kunwinjku is my language, our language.

They used to call my name Jessie, out in the bush... They been call my name Jessie – they used to call my name Jessie for a while [laughs] out in the bush. Esther, that Oenpelli name, Christian name from Bible.

No, the white people was here when I was little girl. When all that people, the white people came here, but they went back, Paddy Cahill and Mr Campbell they went back...

My father and my mother, my grandmother, they used to live in bush. My father he brought me here because my father said, 'Come on children I'll take you. You got to learn for school so you can go to school so you can speak and understand little English, so you speak'. That was what my father say when he was alive.

I was born in bush with my father, my mother and my grandmother. And my father, he brought me here when I was a little girl, little bit, he brought me here at Oenpelli.

They were starving for smoke and my father said, 'Oh children we go down and you can go to school at Oenpelli'.

We came down from bush and my father used to brought me here not only myself – my brother too, all my brothers, but they died.

We used to camp here, just near that Arrkuluk Hill. But bottom part on the hill, we used to live there, they have little humpie. They used to build that humpie, we didn't have more house. Now we used to live there father and mother, not only my father but more people, they were coming from Liverpool [River] and some from Tin Camp, some people and some

people from every country. They used to come and live with us. From Maningrida people they used to come walking. They used to come and visit us.

We didn't have any house here. We used to live in a cave, on Injalak, they got nice cave there. And Arrkuluk, bottom part, you got cave other side, bottom part you got cave, we used to live there, with my father. They used to make little humpie. We didn't have any house and after that when all the white people they came.

The beginning of the mission

Mr Dyer he came and brought Bible. No. Paddy Cahill, Mr Campbell they went back. Gone back to their country.

Reverend Dyer [he was the] Minister. He came here and brought the Bible here. And everyone came Christian to church, minister here. And all the Mandjurlngunj people, some they died and some people they was still alive when I came and I saw them.

Mr Dyer, after he brought the Bible. Reverend Dyer used to be minister, but he put the cross on that hill there. Arrkuluk, he put a cross there, another cross he put at Injalak. Mr Dyer used to be minister. Mr Dyer and this way Nimbabirr. Only two hills they had a cross, but we used to walk there, all there walk there on top of that hill there, and all the people, the first people their own country here.

The dormitory

We used to live in dormitory. They locked up door with a key until six o'clock. Seven o'clock they didn't opened the door for us. Some children ... my brother and my sister and some boys they used to live there, other dormitory, they will lock them up. Because missionary people they save the people, the children, they save us, children walking alone. They wouldn't let us go walking alone. We sleep safe. We got a bucket inside dormitory. We used to sleep until six o'clock, then they opened the door and let us out go to school. We had our breakfast and go to school. They wouldn't let us to get running around for anything. First missionary came they wouldn't let us go walking around: go to church, good, go to school. We couldn't get baby early. We got to baby little bit later! They wouldn't let us smoking too. No.



Figure 6.2: Girls outside dormitory (date unknown).

Source: NTRS 693 P1 Item 21.

Mummy and Daddy they been staying outside camping. Out in the camp, but all this we are children, used to camp inside the dormitory.

Some people they let children out they can stay with their mother and father, they take us out. And leave the dormitory... And they said 'Alright'. 'If you take your children, I can't give you smoke. If you leave all children, stay in the dormitory, alright! If you take them out you won't get any smoke!'

Some girls they were smoking, starving for a smoke. I didn't smoke. That was what *balanda* say, 'I can't give you any smoke if you taking your child out into camp. I can leave it for you. You boss. You can looking up to them'. Alright other, I don't know who that man came and say, 'You don't lock them up – let them out and stay with mother and father', and they say, 'Alright, we will let them out'. They went to mother and father [laughs].

We used to sleep alright, say the prayer, and we sleep at night. We had a prayer. We sleep. We had a nice sister. We had a prayer and good. We wouldn't worry. We just sleep. Some big girls, some little girls, like some big boys and little boys, other dormitory, staying other house away from girls. But no smoking! They can starve people. They wouldn't let us

meet with girls and boys now. We just went to the school that's all, and come back and stay in the dormitory and some of the people might be all sorry to us and they say, might be they say to the missionary, 'Alright, you can let the children out and stay with their mother and father' and they said, 'Alright, we will stay with our father and mother' and everybody was happy and some children, they got big and they got married in the church like me. I got married in the church.

Signs from heaven

When I used to [be a] little girl I got lost I went out to school and I been walking. I was walking along on that Red Lily road. I ran away. I was thinking [about] my mother and my father. They went hunting on that rock there what you call Nambatu waterfall [the small waterfall near the road]. I went there. Just walking along there. I was thinking myself 'Ah I have to go after my mother and father. Where they gone?' I been walking along there and I climbed up big tree on Red Lily road and I was yell out there calling to my father and my mother. I said, 'MUMMY! DADDY! Where are you?' And no one answer my voice. And this one I saw dingo. One dingo he was sitting down there with the eyeglass [glasses]. Big dog. It wasn't dingo but something else. Something else. Maybe bad Satan. And I went back and I came back I was standing there crying, calling, calling my father but no answer. I have to go back and I came back from bush. Still coming back from bush on that road, same road. We used to sing, camping near that, in the funeral. We used to camp there [near the cemetery] and I came back and I sleep myself there covered up with my blanket and went to sleep. And it got dark, dark night and I had a bad dream. I had a bad dream and cry and something will come. Make me jump and cry. And that minister he came, Reverend Dyer. Mr Dyer he made that cross and he helped me, that man. He put a cross there and he gave me wine. Was drinking and he killed all the bad things. Jesus came and they went away. I always go church...

Long time ago, I dunno what number today, I know what year, I had a good dream from heaven. Two years, I had a good dream from heaven. All the angels they been singing for me. I was sleeping that night and I heard this people, angels, they been singing for me. Last one. My country they used to sing, all the angels. Oh, second they been singing Marwamara, my son's

country. I used to take them and listen that people they would sing again. I'm still here. I won't forget. I got my Bible, prayer books, hymn books. I still got it.

The school

We like to learn how to speak little bit English so we understand. That what my father said. I came here, my father brought me here. And they teach us at school that's why I am speaking little bit English. My father brought me from bush.

I, we went to school here and we used to learn little bit how to speak English, even understand.

[They would teach me] learning how to little bit read. Reading. But I like to learn more about reading. Some long words I don't know much about, but I only know short words.

They teach me about the sums, sums and lessons, ABC start. ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPRSTUVWDXYZ for start and all the sums, Twice times table 3 times table, 4 times table a little bit of... But I forgot other time.

The mission songs

Everybody was clap hands. All the ladies, children they came over there. And they went back, I used to sing for them... All my sisters, they used to play for dancing. We used to live in dormitory and they been singing that song:

O Miss Maree when you go to your home

I will never forget you.

Good bye my teacher I do love you

O Miss Maree when you go to your home

I will never forget you.

Goodbye my teacher I do love you

When you go home, like I can sing, you can sing to somebody, you say good bye... I got lotta song but my throat no good. Blackfella song and English song from church.

I can sing *yuwadi* song. *Yuwa* that means Christian song.

Flowers are baby... Take each one is coming – take from God to you. Telling one secret of his paradise. Baby ... of the home above. All these flowers of summer – angel like a ... Listen to the message which they bring today. They said all the message which they bring today.

My sister son she made that song. From Bible, she make it, but he died, was minister.

Jesus set me free

– I love – Jesus

Jesus coming to you –

Jesus. Remember me my Lord. As I pray to you.

Thank you Jesus you save me please.

Thank you Jesus You set me free

My ... Where down we were ...

On the cross. Jesus bugandaken.

Thank you Jesus bugandaken.

Praise god Hallenehlu

Mission Christmas

We used to dance every Christmas and my father used to be dance too... One Christmas time used to be old people used to dance. They had a big tree, Christmas tree all tied up. All kinds of things every time, material, all kinds. Every time up in the tree, one big tree. Only saw trees about that high. They used to make that trees turn. Then you had happy Christmas.

And Christmas time they used to dance, make the people happy. And they used to making big tree and cover that tree with branches. They tied up everything like clothes, smoke all kinds. They been sending up that tree on Christmas time. Make the people happy, they used to be smoke every time up in smoke. All kinds of material they tie him up with the branch. Some branches they cutting that tree make it small. And everybody was sitting right down and watch people dancing and some races, people racing, some young boys little boys, some girls, little girls too. They used to dance. Now we had Christmas party. There used to be races and this was the first time we didn't know this country.

Christmas time there used to be dancing make themselves happy, play football and dancing. Women dancing, all the ladies would be dancing... [I] was dancing.

Living conditions in the mission days

We used to camp there... We had a cottage lying there and we had a garden patch here. We had potatoes, banana, cassava, peanuts, all kinds sugar cane. We had a little garden right along, right along there. We had another garden. We had one farmer, farmer man used to teach us to grow the garden, planting garden, right along over there. We had garden. Potatoes... Each woman, each lady, one lady she had five row potatoes. Like me I had five rows potatoes. They were nice potatoes, planted there right along. And this one, after them, plenty mango. This one, other side, we call that corner there, that corner there can you see that big mountain there? On your back. We call that Kunnanj; Fish Creek. Great Mum, Great mother used to be. Great Mummy country but she died. And the Father, old man. They died. We call that place Kunnanj; Fish Creek.

Building one [line of] house straight down, one house for hospital wife and the children, one house other house for husband and wife and the children each one they been built that cottage... They been building one house each. First time. And after this when other people they came this mob all the *balanda*. All the staff they came after and built new houses and big houses, built shop.

Work outside the mission

We had a big road there, been walking right up to crossing, bit of foot walk all the way right up to Madjinbardi. They been skinning; all the boys, they had big contract here. Other man from that time Doyle and son is Maden [Gaden]. Doyle used to be Boss Jack Mays. All that there, ah, everybody said from Oenpelli people, 'Where are we going... we all going, all my people. Come on we go! We go and look like smoke!' And other people got smoke at Madjinbardi! [laughs]

Alright, we been walk now carrying the suede. Still walking right up to crossing, right past, kept on walking, never name there... We went this way. Madjinbardi way. People look for baccy, smoke. But other people

got smoke at the station. They been working other contract. Went there. And skinned, cleaning all that hide, put the salt. I used to clean hide too. Put the salt and make it dry like blanket. But we didn't get paid money. We been hard work. It was very hard work we women all the ladies. We couldn't get paid money. We didn't get money it was very hard work. We used to work morning, dinner time, afternoon.

'All you ladies I only give you food when you knock off. When you finished going back to your homes at Oenpelli I give you baking flour, baking sugar, all kinds of food you can take it back with you.' All that used up ah! They been carry the most because we was walking back with a load – no car [laughs]. We used to camp halfway at Needen crossing there but bit farther up.

When we were at Madjinbardi we used to camp there. Camp there one week, two weeks. We used to camp there. Work with that hide. Alright, we can lift that hide there. There two men, three men there who had a car there. They brought a big truck. They been loading, taking all that hides and they all came there from Madjinbardi, right along there. We used to work there and that man said, 'Alright. Alright all the people, you can go back home now we got enough hides'.

'Alright you can smoke now, baccy.' They been smoking, some people they been smoking, give them smoke, black one, long one.

We roll them with the paper. Some cigarette they been using. They been making that pipe with a stick with a hole and smoke him. Sometime make him like pipe. We call that pipe, used to smoke with that tin now.

Nobody get paid. They wouldn't get paid from that food at all. When we came back no money. All the ladies wouldn't get paid... You couldn't get money. And all the men they didn't get paid. All the men they been walking along and they been showing him all the buffalo and they been skinning and bringing all the hides back in the camp. Tomorrow, 'Come on all you ladies – you are cleaning the hides! Wash it, put on salt – make it dry!' We wouldn't get paid.

And I said, 'No, we only give you pay'. Oh! That's right, I forgot. We wouldn't get paid. No money but only get alcohol. They been bringing carton with a boat. On that Cannon Hill way. Cannon Hill way on that river, they brought the alcohol with a boat.

And I saw these people they been drink. Ah they had a drink there. They been drunk. And I say, 'What these people doing?' There was a meal here and I walk back with my mum. Some other people turn back we came back we brought the meal back here. Ah Graeme Bardon he was here, army man, used to work here. I went back, we went back and I found these people they was drunk. And I said, 'What are you doing? How come they are all drunk and what do you have to do?' 'Nah, you can have a drink little bit', 'What's that!?' We didn't know, some church people, my family.

My sister-in-law Elizabeth, her name Elizabeth, Heather, myself and Deborah – old Deborah, Rachel, we weren't do that, that country. Or Trudy. That being the men, clean the hide and we saw these people they been get paid in alcohol and everybody was drunk in afternoon time night time. And I said, 'What are they doing? What these people doing?'

'Oh, they all drunk, all that mob, but I give you little bit one to taste.'

And I said, 'No, I might die'. I said no.

'Come on all you church people! Little taste!'

And I said, 'No, we don't taste, no good. We only drinking wine that's all, port wine'.

'Now you can taste! All you men you can have a drink, not only ladies. You can take all that carton of beer, bottled wine and all kinds of names.'

I been telling that Boss one, 'You can take it back please! We can't have that all the carton, you know, the people might get mad'. You know I been telling the boss one Jim Doyle and Geoff Mace.

'You can take it back please', I said. 'You can give them little bit of liquor, ah, not too much', but I can tell they got gun. 'I'm frightened all these people they might get murdered, they shoot themselves!' And this time I had good mind to think.

'Alright!' that boss man said, 'I take it back with the boat.'

'With the carton, carton. Carton had to go home. Take it back!' 'Alright, Aunt Esther we take it back. Can't have too much. Very dangerous they might kill themselves, and they will take it back in Darwin.'

And I been thinking all these people there got gun. They always go hunting shooting buffalo and I say, 'they might get murdered. They shoot themselves!' That's what I been tell that man, that boss one. And he was standing there and think, 'But you can send him back with the carton. It very dangerous for all these people might kill themselves because they got gun, all of them'. And then he said, 'Alright! Alright Jessie!'

Ceremony and ancestral beings

Bininj ceremony... I can't go near, I stay away. They tell me we had it before, that other one. One, two, three: we had three ceremony in here at Oenpelli. But after that, Jesus he taught me other way. Well, I forgot everything, but all my people they been teaching me that other way. This time I am finished with ceremony anything. No anything.

I been the ground there. You know you been seen the people – where they live? That's the place we had the ceremony. I went there with my sister, she died, I saw her. She was boss of that ceremony, my big sister, other one. And two, one more, three ceremony, we had ceremony here and all the people, all the boys, I saw them. They brought that ceremony maybe from Pine Creek way. This way they didn't know what that ceremony for Pine Creek way. And then the places what they call? Menburu [Mainoru]. Pine Creek way, but Katherine way but other place [Burrumbin?]. Maybe that place now, they put the ceremony. We didn't know, and we saw them, them dancing there. And all the people there used to dance only corroboree here. That bishop, Philip used to sing and other one – old man Philip and Umbalang.

I used to camp [on Injalak Hill] with my husband. And... my son. He's still there. He is staying in his country Kabbari. That country's name Kabbari – my son's country name. That Rainbow [Serpent] there Rainbow dreaming. And that little boy was crying. Was crying long time ago, they didn't tell him now, but my grandmother was telling me too. And my son he know, was crying that little boy. This Rainbow he came from sea. He came from blue sea. He was crawling under the ground and all the people they used to live there at Kabbari. I say country, my son's country. He got red cliff there. Rainbow was vomiting. From all the people, he was eating all the people. He ate all the people. And two little boys they sit there on the rock. They turned to rock. They turned to stone.

That place name. Undupulun next Arrmarnda, near airport, we call that place Arrmarnda. They have a story. The dog was running there. They reckon that dog been turned to dingo ground and didn't know everybody. But telling you about a dream. Baby dog, girl dog and boy one, in the ground. Water did come up. We call that place 'Brokdanakpom' on that corner, airport but that corner that side, we call that place. At that place two dog came and dig the ground. Now the ground was very dry and that two dogs they been dig. They been dig, they reckon, that man reckon, that old man reckon, he was telling us, Old Nipper. They dig the ground and water can come up now. They been drink and before they went to the waterfall that two dogs. That two dogs name: Arrkuluk, Omwarl. Girl one Omwarl. Arrkuluk boy one, like the hill. Their names. They went to the waterfall now and they lived there. They been stay there too long to the waterfall... [Those two dogs] they been turned to rock. Like my son's country. That two little boys. Two brother: first brother and second brother, they been turned to rock. They ended up top hill; they been turned to rock, those two boys. They still there. They been turned to rock, still there. My son country. 'Kabbari' we call that place, 'Kabbari'. There my son's country. They are still there.



Figure 6.3: Esther Manakgu, 2012.

Source: Sally K. May.

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