

A NOTE ON ORTHOGRAPHY

There is some ongoing confusion about the appropriate name for the township that Paddy Cahill first referred to as ‘Oenpelli’. It is thought that ‘Oenpelli’ is a corruption of the original Erre name for the area, ‘Uwunbarlany’. ‘Kunbarlanja’ is the current Kunwinjku name for the community while ‘Gunbalanya’ is the English version. As we are discussing the 1925–31 time period, in this book we use its contemporary name: Oenpelli.

Today in Oenpelli, many local dialects and languages are spoken – most predominantly Kunwinjku. English ranks low on the list of languages many people speak. Maintaining Aboriginal languages is culturally important. The missionaries discussed in this book had a complicated relationship with Aboriginal languages; they both discouraged people from speaking their own languages (Dyer never learned himself), but at the same time realised that using them helped to bring people to church. So, for example, some hymns were sung in a local language while, at the same time, Aboriginal people working on the mission were expected to learn and speak English. None of the missionaries during this early era could speak any local languages and there is no indication in our sources that they were trying to learn (although Nell Harris, who arrived when she married Dick in 1933, later made great progress eventually translating the Gospel of Mark into Kunwinjku together with Hannah Mangiru and Rachel Maralngurra). During the Dyer years, local Aboriginal people simply added English to their repertoire of languages rather than swapping it for their own languages.

For more information on local Aboriginal dialects and languages visit: bininjkuwok.org.au/.

This text is taken from *The Bible in Buffalo Country: Oenpelli Mission 1925–1931*, by Sally K. May, Laura Rademaker, Donna Nadjamerrek and Julie Narndal Gumurdul, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.