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BREATHING LIFE INTO *Pá'enesily* WITH SONGS

By Jeanné Ferris



Entrance to Cupa cemetery.
All photos courtesy of Jeanné Ferris.

ANNA LILIA RAMESHWAR may be traditionally considered an outsider of the Pala tribe in San Diego, but she has been a lifelong linguistic student of American Sign Language and Spanish and now adds to her Native American language goals Pá'enesily, the Cupeño language. Rameshwar teaches Pá'enesily through music that she has written specifically for preschoolers. Toddlers are learning colors, letters, and numbers by singing in Pá'enesily. She cares. Passionately.

"In Pala, at the Little Feathers preschool, I noticed that both the little boys and girls are picking up on the language. There tends to be an even balance in every class of both genders. Some children are a little more articulate than others. Although, it does seem like the girls are a little more advanced than the boys," Rameshwar said. "I also try and reach out [to] the children that attend the youth center (6–14). This group is a little more difficult to engage because I have to compete with sports, arts, computers, and other activities. I do get more girls coming around to learn with me."

When asked if she had ever dreamed in Pá'enexily, Rameshwar said, "I often fall asleep listening to the old recordings that are available. I [once] dreamt that Roscinda Nolasquez [the last Pala elder] was telling me how to correctly pronounce a phrase. She told me, 'No, that is not how you say it. You say it like this' and then she [says], '*me she hish 'icháaywique*'?"

Dreams can be powerful motivators and may portend spiritual growth, be prophetic, or simply absorb reality. In a July 2014 post on The Babel Blog, "A Link Between Dreaming and Language Learning," James Lane wrote, "You've probably heard people talk about the moment when they started to dream in a foreign language. It's often considered a sign of fluency. In the 1980s, Canadian psychologist Joseph De Koninck observed that students of French who spoke French in their dreams earlier made progress faster than other students."

Admittedly, according to Lane, "Partly because science struggles to explain dreams, they remain a glimpse into the numinous. They perform important culturally specific functions: think of shamans using dreams to heal people or predict the future, and the continuing pull of New Age mysticism. Maybe dreaming in another language is an expression of our desire for linguistic and cultural 'insiderness,' tapping into the sense of belonging that a new language can bring. Whether you consider it a linguistic milestone or not, it definitely indicates a strong awareness of and engagement with new language."

Regardless of one's personal dream beliefs, the Pala community cares and is carefully nurturing and breathing life into Pá'enexily through songs by allowing outsiders to learn and, in return, teach the Kúpayim about the Kúpayim (Cupeño people).

Ethnologue, a US organization owned by Christian group SIL International, compiles a comprehensive global database of seven thousand languages and reports that "473 languages are currently classified as endangered and [of these], 133 languages are spoken by fewer than 10 people." Safe to say, Pá'enexily is endangered but Ethnologue categorizes it as dying because "the language serves as a reminder of heritage identity for an ethnic community, but no one has more than

symbolic proficiency. The only fluent users (if any) are older than child-bearing age, so it is too late to restore natural intergenerational transmission through the home; a mechanism outside the home would need to be developed."

So the following questions remain for the First People of California: How realistic is it to teach children a cultural heritage in a small community that is, at the same time, working to create a foothold in a society whose business language is English? Do tribal languages have a future? Now that most of the Pala elders who were the champions of oral tradition are gone, is it only linguists who care about the pending extinction of tribal cultures and languages?

Roscinda Nolasquez is the most famous and the last documented native speaker of Pá'enexily. A Kúpangaxwish (Cupeño) from Warner Springs, she spent most of her life dedicated to preserving the Cupeño language and culture in collaboration with world-class authorities in every scientific field. Mrs. Nolasquez cared.

When she passed on in 1987 at the age of ninety-four, she left behind a legacy of precious words collected, written, and edited with Jane H. Hill entitled *Mulu'Wetam: The First People*, first published in 1973. This dictionary now serves as an invaluable resource for and about the Kúpayim.

Eric Ortega cares as well. Ortega is a member of the Pala Band of Mission Indians (Cupeño, Luiseño, and Diegueño) and assistant station manager of Pala Rez Radio, 91.3 FM. He says, "I was seven years old when I started learning Cupeño. It was only a half hour and I loved it because it was a social activity. I remember Thomas Torilla [a friend] being a real skeptic because an outsider was teaching the language. Now my granddaughter is learning it."

"Parents should be patient. Music is a good way to teach language. My goal is to make nice clean-cut recordings with additional musicians so that the teachers could have a CD with all these various songs," Rameshwar said. "The teacher for the two-year-old class is already playing the color song for the kids. She has one student stand up and touch the colors on the wall as the song is being played on the CD. Imagine if the parents would listen to these songs. They too, could learn these basics."



Students enthusiastically join Anne in singing in Pá'enexily in the classroom.

NE'EN HAWIQE'EYIK

(Number/Vocabulary Song)

By Anna Lilia Rameshwar

FIRST VERSE

Né'en háwiqe 'éyik,

I am singing to you

[Repeat line 4 times]

Háni yáwi,

Come on sing

[Repeat line 4 times]

NUMBER PART 1

Súplewet, wih, páh,

one, two, three,

Wichiw, nemekwánege,

four five

[Repeat this number part one more time]

NUMBER PART 2

[While strumming the guitar, I let the children know that the numbers words for five through ten are a lot longer and that they should recognize part of the word already.]

Kwensúplewet,

six

Kwenwih,

seven

Kwenpáh,

eight

Kwenwichiw,

nine

Nemetúlwenet,

ten,

Nemetúlwenet

ten,

Nemetúlwenet

ten,

Nemetúlwenet

ten

"THE WIND AND THE DUCKS"

Collected by Jane H. Hill, June 1962

Told by Rosinda Nolasquez

sevel ku'ut xeeppen.

The wind was blowing.

*sevel ku'ut etire xalewpeyax ivawet, puchi
ku'ut peta'emay iviy wichaxwichaxpen ishmiyiy,
muku'ut temal muypeyaqal, puchi ku'ut paatu'um
pe'mi'awlu.*

The wind was coming down real strong, it was throwing things down, dust was rising up, then the ducks arrived.

*axweshmi ku'ut sevel miwichaxwichaxpen iviyka
ayka, wiyika pem paatu'um pemsheshemwen ku'ut,
pemsheshemwen ku'ut kengpemyingiy.*

The wind threw them around here and there, the ducks were laughing around, they were laughing, they went flying.

*wuchaxqa ku'ut iviyka ayka, pukevpukevpen peta'amy
ku'ut iviyka ayka wichaxpen.*

He threw them here and there, he made a whirlwind, he threw them all here and there.

*axwechi ku'ut paatu'um peta'anim pish'emay axwanga
tangpemyax temat'a.*

Those ducks were suddenly all piled up there on the ground.

*muku'ut axwa'aw pemqal piyama, muku'ut
pemsheshemwen, pemsheshewen ku'ut.*

And there they all were still, they were laughing, they were laughing.

*pe'sevel pechangnu ku'ut, chaymal ay'anish
pipukush, muku'ut pechi mihameshpen ku'ut.*

The wind got mad, he got a big basket, and he covered them up with it.

pem piyama pemsheshemwen.

They kept on laughing.

*muku'ut sevel pechangnu ku'ut, axwechi chaymali
piwetpelu, muku'ut paatu'um kengpemyingiy.*

And the wind got mad, he threw away that basket, and the ducks flew away.