

Filming a dying language



Esther Hoerler and Veronica Zander from the mixed-race community who now live in Australia, Michael Chan (Sir Julius Chan's brother) and Maltz (right).

Right: Esther Hoerler and Veronica Zander in action.

Below: Peter Maltz and a "cute liklik piklini" at Vunapope during a filming break.



WHAT IS A CREOLE LANGUAGE?

A creole language, or simply a creole, is a stable natural language that has developed from a pidgin, i.e. a simplified version of a language. Creoles differ from pidgins because creoles have been nativized by children as their primary language, with the result that they have features of natural languages that are normally missing from pidgins, which are not anyone's first language. Wikipedia

“This is important as the country is virtually unknown for the German public. Also widely forgotten in Germany is the fact that parts of PNG used to be a German colony”

By ELLEN TIAMU

A FILM is being made to help to document a dying language once popular with Vunapope's mixed-race German community in East New Britain. Rabaul Creole German or Unserdeutsch is thought to be the only German-based creole language in the world. It was spoken mainly among children who grew up at the Vunapope catholic mission around the time of World War 1. Nowadays, only a very few elderly people still speak the creole language.

Prof Péter Maltz, from Germany, who is leading the Unserdeutsch Documentation Project, was in Rabaul last week with a German TV crew making a film about the history of this community of isolated Germans and about early German involvement in PNG.

The film is made for ARD, the joint organisation of Germany's regional public-service broadcasters, the world's largest public broadcaster. It is about PNG today with a special focus on the German heritage, especially the Vunapope mixed-race German community that used to live in Gazelle at and around the mission of the Sacred Heart Missionaries in Vunapope near Kokopo. The film introduces - among other topics - the mixed-race German community and the mission itself, the international research project on documenting Unserdeutsch (Rabaul Creole German), the unique and dying tok ples of the community which is the only German-based creole language of the world, the linguistic fieldwork with the last speakers of Unserdeutsch as well as different other places in East New Britain and other parts of PNG.

According to Maltz, the film will help to introduce PNG to a wider public in Germany.

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Germany is the fact that parts of PNG used to be a German colony."

"Especially unknown is the fact that in former German New Guinea, close to the German colonial administration in Herbertshöhe (Kokopo), at the catholic mission in Vunapope the one and only German-based creole language of the world (Unserdeutsch) emerged among mixed-race children," Maltz said.

The Vunapope mixed-race community left PNG shortly before and after PNG independence and settled down in the urban areas of Eastern Australia and later spread out.

Maltz said finding and getting in touch with people was, for this reason, not easy and took some time.

"But as they understand the importance of the project in documenting and preserving the German heritage of the community for future generations, members of the community are very supportive and they helped to get in touch with other families as well.

"Even though the community spread out, the close ties between the families are still there, that helped as well.

Very few of them have ever been to

Germany. Nevertheless, the German cultural and linguistic heritage is still an important part of the identity of the members of the community.

The film is not only aimed at the wider public in the Germany only but includes other German-speaking countries in Europe.

In PNG, the crew took 10 days to film in Rabaul, Kokopo, Vunapope and New Ireland.

The film crew includes three professionals, two members of the Vunapope mixed-race community, and two Germans whose ancestors used to work for the German colonial administration during the German colonial period. Prof Maltz is leading the Augsburg project on the documentation of Unserdeutsch.

Maltz, who is based at the University of Augsburg in Southern Bavaria, near Munich, Germany, co-worked with former Divine Word Linguistics professor Craig Volker on the project starting in September 2015.

The research journey began in PNG and in Queensland, Australia with the first part of the project to be completed soon. Once that is done, it will take another three years for work to be conducted language description.

In an interview last year, Maltz said, "later on we want to write and publish the grammar of the language as well as the history of the language."

Below: The Unserdeutsch community in Brisbane, Australia. The picture was taken by Peter Maltz during his fieldwork in March last year.

