

Aborigines have a word for it too!

The aborigines may be a primitive people with a primitive culture—but there is certainly nothing primitive about their language, says Miss Beulah Lowe, a Methodist missionary.

Miss Lowe is in Sydney completing a 4,000-word dictionary of the Gubabuingu language, which is spoken by a clan in the north-east corner of the Northern Territory.

She has found grammatical construction of the language quite complicated, with verbs conjugated much like those in Latin.

Also there are four different pronunciations for the consonants d, t and n, and two for l and r. There is no f, h, s, x or z.

Until missionaries went to the area the Gubabuingu language was not written; it had been passed on by word of mouth for centuries.

Here to help Miss Lowe is her task is Mr. Barajla, a member of the tribe, who also speaks English.

Miss Lowe says there are roughly 15 sounds in Gubabuingu which are not used in English. Also there is a glottal stop—a break between two sounds—which might change the meaning of the word if the sounds were run together.

There are a few Malayan words in the north coast languages, taken there by Malaysians before the time of the missionaries.

Miss Lowe's work eventually will be published when a more complete listing of as yet unknown words has been added.

"There are thousands of words in the Gubabuingu language," she said. "We are learning more all the time."

TWENTY-SEVEN DIALECTS

Primary purpose of the dictionary is to help new missionaries in learning to speak the tribal language.

The dialect is one of about 36 spoken on the north-eastern coast of the Northern Territory.

On Millingimbi Island, where Miss Lowe has been working for 10 years, there are 27 different dialects—each clan having its own.

Although the dialects are different, the clans in this coastal area understand each other.

"In fact," said Miss Lowe, "young men and women of the same clan are not permitted to marry; they must come from different clans."

However, the languages of the clans to the west and south are entirely different.

The first problem in writing the Gubabuingu language, Miss Lowe said, was to find out how many sounds have to be represented, then choose a symbol for each sound.

As far as possible, English symbols were used.

Miss Lowe, who was trained at the Teachers' College in Sydney, has been teaching eight years at Millingimbi, and for the last two years has been doing language work.

Already she has translated favourite passages from the Bible for the 1,800 people in the Gubabuingu dialect group and the missionaries who teach them, and plans to translate the complete Bible.

Miss Lowe is on leave at her home, 13 Battle Boulevard, Seaforth, and expects to return to her missionary work in five to seven weeks.

—Maureen Brogan.



When the cameraman caught up with Bill Rainbow he was a bit undecided about smiling