

Language Documentation and Description

ISSN 1740-6234

This article appears in: *Language Documentation and Description*,
vol 20. Editor: Peter K. Austin

Kalaw Kawaw Ya (Saibai Island, Western Torres Strait Islands, Australia) - Language Snapshot

ALISTAIR HARVEY

Cite this article: Harvey, Alistair. 2021. Kalaw Kawaw Ya (Saibai Island, Western Torres Strait Islands, Australia) - Language Snapshot. *Language Documentation and Description* 20, 75-85.

Link to this article: <http://www.elpublishing.org/PID/218>

This electronic version first published: June 2021



This article is published under a Creative Commons License CC-BY-NC (Attribution-NonCommercial). The licence permits users to use, reproduce, disseminate or display the article provided that the author is attributed as the original creator and that the reuse is restricted to non-commercial purposes i.e. research or educational use. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

EL Publishing

For more EL Publishing articles and services:

Website: <http://www.elpublishing.org>
Submissions: <http://www.elpublishing.org/submissions>

Kalaw Kawaw Ya (Saibai Island, Western Torres Strait Islands, Australia) – Language Snapshot

Alistair Harvey
The University of Queensland

Dialect Name:	Kalaw Kawaw Ya (Saibai dialect)
Language Family:	Kala Lagaw Ya
Other Dialects:	Mabuyag, Kulkalgau Ya, Kawrareg
ISO 639-3 Code:	mwp (Kala Lagaw Ya)
Glottolog Code:	kala1378
Number of speakers:	approximately 900
Location:	top Western Torres Strait Islands, Northern Cape York Peninsula, Australia
Vitality rating:	EGIDS 5

Summary

Kalaw Kawaw Ya is spoken on the three most northerly Western Torres Strait Islands of Saibai, Boigu, and Dauan, as well as the Saibai Island satellite communities of Bamaga and Seisia which are situated on the Australian mainland Northern Cape York Peninsula Area. The majority of Saibai Islanders (Watkin-Lui 2012 suggests 85% of Torres Strait Islanders) live on the Australian mainland, with approximately 300 living on Saibai, and around 1,000 living between the communities of Bamaga and Seisia. Kalaw Kawaw Ya (KKY) is strongest amongst senior Saibaian with young people now speaking either the Torres Strait Creole language of Yumplatok and/or English. There are continuing efforts to revitalise KKY.

Summary (KKY)

Kalaw Kawaw Ya thoeri Torres Strait kalaw kawanu thabi yoedu umamoeypa Saibai, Boigu a Dauan. Wara Bamaga a Seisianu, NPAAnu. Koeyma Saibailgal Australiaw dhawdhaynu mamayipa (85%), 300 Saibainu a sey kedha 1,000 Bamaga Seisia mudhaw loegoenu. Kayn mabaygal sitha kedha piziniya a lawnga markaydh umamoeypa. Moegaw matha gasampa yapa lak bibirpoelaypa.

1. Overview

Saibai Kawa na woezipa gima dhoegamunu Torres Straitunu, 4 km PNG dhawdhayngu. Na Torres Straitaw dhadhabuth, na mopa Cape Yorkanu, Queenslandanu, Australianu. Na senabi dhadhabuthanu, Torres Strait mopa Cape Yorkangu luwoeyayinga karaypa dhawdhaypa kuniya matha mura seykedha 48,000 sq km.

Nadh senabi dhadhabuthan dhadhpoelamoeyn Pama-Nguyngan a Eastern Trans-Fly yadayl, setha amadhan doegam dhawdhaya yaday sipa ETFpa amadhan. Meriam Mir, nabi yoedu paru kawiyu umamoeypa mabaygal. Nabiyu muynu ukasar dialect, Erub a Mer. Kala Lagaw Yadu Kalaw Kawaw mabaygal umaoyepa. Kala Lagaw Ya 4 dialectal, thana itha kedha Kalaw Kawaw Ya, Mabuyag, Kulkalgaw Ya a Kawrareg. Mura Torres Straitaw yadayl imayzimayl UNESCO kedha thana minakay gegeyadh. Kayb okey ya mura Torres Straitaw, pizin.

Kalaw Kawaw Yadu umamoeypa 3 gima kalaw kawaw kawanu Saibai, Dauan a Boigu. Wara dhuray koeyoersar koey mabaygal umamoeypa Bamaganu a Seisianu NPAAnu, Australiaw dhawdhaynu. Palay Saibailgal mudh aymoemoedhin 1940 kuthapa, adhabadhaw woeray na wayemipu mura muythoeyaypu goegathiya. Saibai dhadhiyamiyaydhin, war mabaygan thamadhin, thanamun muruygaw lagal wadgam wadgam doegamunu Saibainu. Thamadhin thana gima lagoepa a apaw loegoepa mina boeradhoerapa a ngukilnga mura thunara. Setha a mi Saibailgal wanaydhin, kacha thana muwasidhin thamamidhin wadgam wadgam doegamungu urapun goegath aymoedhin Saibainu. Thana kedha, thanamul buwaypa lak thoemaypa lawnga.

Saibai na apanuguy a migina koey kawa. Na kawa aymaydhin thonariya mina kulkub ngapa. Na aymaydhin koesiya ngapa mulupa say kapu boeradhoerangu pungaypu PNG dhawdhayngu sitha thayamoeypu. Na kawa sey kedha 22 km kukuthalnga a 5 km bal. Na apiya dhugudhug. Nanu mina gima dhoegam malungu 1.7m. Naibya thagal mura dhoedamiya, pupul muya gima kawal, a koesal.

1871, Saibaipa na kulba thunarpa minakay wath. Sethabi woethoenu LMSal mangemidhin kalmel Pacipikaw misnarel. Buya mangadhin. Nubi goeyga watha wathiya ika aympa. Wagel buya mangaydhin, mabaygal mura

buway boeradhoeriya niparuy. Ait a Saibai palan mudhaw lag memamer. Thagaynu mabaygal amadhan papaw logoegunu niparuy. Ariw thunara thana gima boeradhoeriya niparuy.

Misnarel na mangemidhin, koey buway a migi buway gar woeydhamoeydhin a urapun goegath aymoedhin Saibainu.

Buwayl mura kuyk wakayan karaypa gasaman mopa kuyk, Muruyg. Mura buwayl thanamun geth adhil thanamun muruygoepa. In kedha dhiya nuyn nuyn ngulayg mulupa maykuykuya buwaynu muynu pawpa gethawoeyaypa.

In nubi thunara na koey mabayg na mulupa. Sena sepa kedha, ngulayg a igililmay pawal mura thanamuniya mulup a mura guythayamoeyn.

Wara in kedha, gimal 85% Torres Straitalgal Australiaw dhawdhaynu nipa. Saibailgal koeyma Cairnsuenu a wara Townsvillanu nipa. Dhuray Brisbaneninu. Saibaigal Saibainu, Bamaganu, Seisianu a Australiaw dhawdhaynu thana yapa ridhpoelaypa moegaw gasampa.



Figure 1: Torres Strait Islands situated between Papua New Guinea and Australia

Source: By Kelisi at the English language Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0, accessed 2021-02-02

2. Overview

Saibai Island is located in the Top Western region of the Torres Strait Islands of Australia situated 4 km off the Papua New Guinea mainland (see Figure 1). As a region, the Torres Strait stretches from the tip of Cape York Peninsula in Queensland, Australia, to the southwest coast of Papua New Guinea (PNG), covering an area of approximately 48,000 km² (Green et al. 2010).

The region intersects the Pama-Nyungan and Eastern Trans-Fly language families. Meriam Mir, spoken in the Eastern Torres Strait (see Figure 2), is classified as an Eastern Trans-Fly language, whose nearest relatives are spoken in southern New Guinea.¹ It has two dialects: Erub and Mer. Kala Lagaw Ya, spoken in the Western Torres Strait (see Figure 2), is classified as a Pama-Nyungan language, whose nearest relatives are spoken in Cape York² (Dixon 2002 disputes this, but see Hunter, Bownern & Round 2011). The four dialects of Kala Lagaw Ya are Kalaw Kawaw Ya, Mabuyag, Kulkalgau Ya, and Kawrereg. All Torres Strait dialects are recognized by UNESCO as being either severely or critically endangered (Moseley 2010). Today the main language spoken across the Torres Strait Islands is Torres Strait Creole, otherwise known as Ailan Tok or Yumplatok (Shnukal 2004).

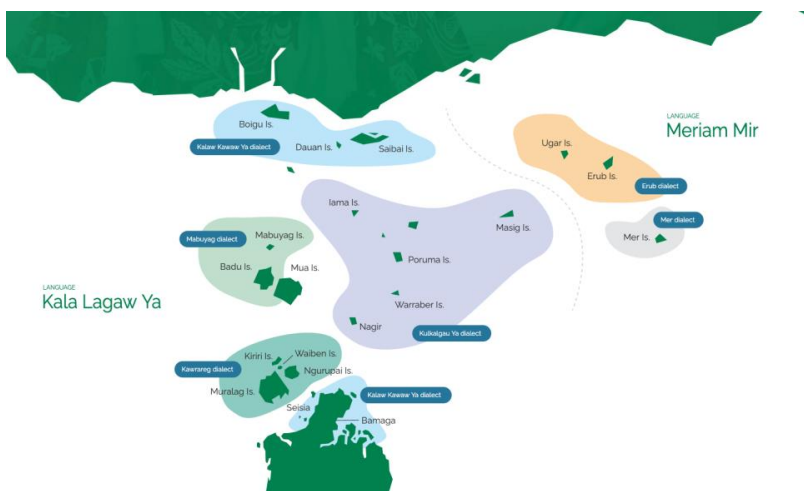


Figure 2: Torres Strait Islands languages and dialects

Source: tstlanguages.org, accessed 2021-01-28 (The dotted line represents the Pama-Nyungan/ Eastern Trans-Fly language family division)

¹ <https://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/meri1244> (accessed 2021-02-01)

² <https://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/kala1377> (accessed 2021-02-01)

Kalaw Kawaw Ya (KKY) is spoken on the three most northerly Western Torres Strait Islands of Saibai, Boigu, and Dauan. There is also a larger population of senior KKY speakers in the Saibai Island satellite communities of Bamaga and Seisia situated within the Australian mainland Northern Cape York Peninsula Area. These Saibaian communities were established during the late 1940s, following a series of tidal inundations on Saibai Island that forced half of the island's population to leave their ancestral lands for higher, more fertile gardening lands, and more consistent water supply (Ober et al. 2000). The remaining Saibai Islanders, having already moved from their ancestral lands within Central and Eastern Saibai to the main Saibai Island village, decided that another move was not what was best for their clan members.

Saibai Island is a relatively large low-lying island formed over time by rich fertile soil deposits washed out of Papua New Guinean rivers. The island is approximately 22 km long and 5 km wide, flat, and with its highest point being 1.7m above sea level. It is predominantly covered by mangrove swamplands, internal creek systems, and clay pans in the dry season which transform to inland swamps housing islands within the island in the wet season.

The year 1871 is seen as a significant date in Saibai history because this is when the London Missionary Society (LMS), comprising a number of Pacific Islander missionaries, arrived, an event commemorated annually throughout the Torres Strait as the 'Coming of the Light'. Before the 'Coming of the Light', Saibaians lived a semi-permanent lifestyle at various locations on the island, depending on seasons. During planting and harvesting seasons people would live near their gardens, and during the wet season they would reside on higher grounds. There were at least two major living sites on Saibai, one at the site of the current village of Saibai, and another at the eastern inland island of Ait. These sites reflect the two major clans of *Koey Buway* and *Moegi Buway*. With the arrival of Christianity, *Moegi Buway* clans relocated to the site of *Koey Buway* clans at Saibai village (Davis 1994).

The history of clans and sub-clans of Saibai can be traced to an apical ancestor for each. Each clan has stories of how their apical ancestor arrived and lived on Saibai. When a Saibaian speaks of the clan to which they belong, they are effectively connecting themselves to an apical ancestor via family tree networks. It is through these family tree networks that stories and knowledge are owned and passed on (Walter Waia, Saibai Islander, living in Brisbane, Australia, personal communication, December 2020). Cultural stories and songs are predominately transmitted in KKY.

It is a generally-held belief and understanding, particularly amongst older Saibaians, that the passing of many elders over recent decades has

meant a loss of much knowledge and wisdom of Saibaiian ways and customs. This, coupled with the diasporic nature of Torres Strait Islanders, has served to weaken Saibai Island language and culture. Over 85% of the total Torres Strait Islander population now lives on the mainland (Watkin-Lui 2012); the majority of Saibai Islanders live in Cairns and Townsville, with ‘a sizable ex-pat community in Brisbane’ (Bowern 2011). There are, however, language revitalisation efforts being undertaken by Saibaiians living on Saibai, Bamaga, Seisia, and the Australian mainland.

Table 1 presents the cumulative Kalaw Kawaw Ya speaker numbers for 2001-2016 from the Austlang website.³ Note that no differentiation is made between descendant speaker numbers⁴ for the three KKY islands of Saibai, Boigu, and Dauan.

Table 1: Kalaw Kawaw Ya speaker numbers

Year	Speaker numbers	Source
2001	816	Census
2004	-	NILS
2005	800	Estimate
2006	1,216	Census
2011	985	Census
2016	957	Census

³ <https://collection.aiatsis.gov.au/austlang/language/y2> (accessed 2021-02-01)

⁴ Speaker numbers were measured differently across the censuses and various other sources listed in Austlang.

3. Archival Research

There are many published and unpublished wordlists, hymns, gospels, and parables in Torres Strait languages, as well as multiple unpublished manuscripts and recordings (Shnukal 1998). The earliest sources are MacGregor (1889-1890), and Haddon & Ray (1897); the latter includes vocabularies and grammatical notes.

KKY publications include the Book of Genesis *Minar Poelayzimayl* by the Bible Society of Australia (1993). Mitchell, Ober & Whop (1992) is a KKY- English dictionary, with an English-KKY supplement. Various KKY books and booklets, including stories and songs from Saibai Island, have been developed by Saibai Islanders undertaking linguistics studies, as well as by secondary school students within the Torres Strait (Ober & Akiba 1980; Babia & Singe 1990; Edwards 2000). Many of these publications are located at Tagai College on Thursday Island, the AIATSIS library in Canberra, and the Batchelor Institute CALL collection.

Linguistic descriptive work includes Ford & Ober (1991), who provide a brief sketch of KKY, including its phonology and orthography, morphology and syntax. Laade & Biedermann (1970) provide some notes on the position of the Saibai language within the Torres Strait, based on their ethnographic and musicological fieldwork in 1963-1965. Comrie (1981) is on ergativity and grammatical relations in KKY; Kennedy (1984) discusses semantic roles in KKY; Stirling (2012) is on tense and aspect shifts in KLY, and Round & Stirling (2015) discusses split argument coding and morphology. It is worth noting that the Mabuyag and KKY dialect of KLY are mutually intelligible and that a number of substantial published and archived research on KLY focuses on the Mabuyag dialect (Bani 1976, 1987, 2001; Bani & Klokeid 1971, 1976).

Saibai Island has a rich corpus of audio recordings, dating from the multi-disciplinary Haddon expedition of the late 1890s made on wax cylinders through to the recent compilation of high-quality video recordings by the author under the guidance of senior Saibai Islander linguist and knowledge custodians Mr Dana Ober and Mr Walter Waia. Recordings are, however, spaced in temporal blocks. Following the Haddon expedition, there was a hiatus until Jeremy Beckett recorded traditional music in 1960. The ensuing 20-25 years represents an accelerated period of recording Saibai Island KKY narratives, songs, and chants (see Table 2).

Table 2: Saibai Island Kalaw Kawaw Ya audio and video recording collections

Year	Collector	Field of Study	Genre
1898	Haddon expedition	Anthropology, Linguistics, Physiology, Psychology	songs/chants, narratives
1958-1961	Jeremy Beckett	Anthropology	songs/chants
1963-1965	Wolfgang Laade	Ethnomusicology	songs/chants
1963-1965	Lamont West	Anthropology	sign language
1965-1971	Margaret Lawrie	History	songs/chants, narratives
1973-1975	Ross Wilson	Not identified	songs/ chants, narratives, oral history
1977	Harriet Ober	Saibai Islander	narratives, oral history
1979 – 1980	Rod Kennedy	Anthropology, Linguistics	songs/chants, narratives, oral history, conversation
1980-1981	Vincent Genova	Ethnomusicology	songs/chants
1985-1987	Rodney Mitchell	Linguistic archaeology	songs/chants
1982	Dana Ober	Saibai Islander, Linguistics	songs/chants, narratives, oral history
1982	Samuel Akiba	Saibai Islander, Linguistics	songs/chants, narratives, oral history
1982	Gloria Kabai	Saibai Islander, Linguistics	songs/chants, narratives, oral history
1982	Frank Ger	Saibai Islander, Linguistics	songs/chants, narratives, oral history
2018-present	Alistair Harvey, Dana Ober, Walter Waia	Saibai Islanders, Linguistics	songs/chants, narratives, oral history

4. Current research

I am of Saibai Island descent and currently enrolled as a PhD candidate in the School of Languages and Cultures, University of Queensland. I am Lead Investigator on the Australian Research Council (Discovery Indigenous) project *Saibai Island Language and Cultural Knowledge* where I work closely with senior Saibai Island linguist and knowledge custodian Dana Ober and Senior Saibai Island knowledge custodian Walter Waia. Both were the claimants of the successful Saibai Island Native Title determination of 1999.⁵ The goal of the project is to develop and utilise a Saibai Island methodology to record and document language, oral histories, and cultural knowledge, as well as to add to existing corpora by utilising recent advances in recording technology and digital analysis of Saibai Island KKY data. My PhD studies aim to build on the outcomes of my research project by developing a corpus in which archival and future Saibai Island language and cultural resources will be situated. Archival material will be organised within the corpus to reflect the cultural framework of Saibai Islanders.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Mr Dana Ober for the Kala Kawaw Ya translations of the Summary and Section 1.

References

- Babia, Marina. & Singe, Lency. & Thursday Island State High School 1990, *Kalaw Kawaw gidhal*, Thursday Island State High School, Thursday Island, Qld
- Bani, Ephraim. 1976. The language situation in Western Torres Strait. In Peter Sutton (ed.) *Languages of Cape York*, 3-6. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.
- Bani, Ephraim. 1987. Garka a ipika [man and woman]: masculine and feminine grammatical gender in Kala Lagaw Ya. *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 7(2), 189-201.
- Bani, Ephraim. 2001. The morphodirectional sphere. In Jane Simpson, David Nash, Mary Laughren, Peter K. Austin & Barry Alpher (eds.) *Forty Years On: Ken Hale and Australian languages*, 477-480. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.

⁵http://www.nntt.gov.au/searchRegApps/NativeTitleClaims/Pages/Determination_details.aspx?NNTT_Fileno=QCD1999/001 (accessed 2021-05-10)

- Bani, Ephraim & Terry J. Klokeid (eds.) 1971. *Papers on the Western Island Language of Torres Strait*. Submitted as a final report to AIAS, June 1971. Copy held in AIATSIS Library (XX(245678.1)).
- Bani, Ephraim & Terry J. Klokeid. 1976. Ergative switching in Kala Lagau Languus. In Peter Sutton (ed.) *Languages of Cape York*, 269-283. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.
- Bible Society in Australia 1993, *Minar Poelayzimayl*, The Bible Society in Australia, Canberra
- Comrie, Bernard. 1981. Ergativity and grammatical relations in kalaw lagaw ya (Saibai dialect). *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 1(1), 1-42.
- Davis, Richard. 1994. *Gubal, Malu, Boeradar, Daparaw Thithuyl (Winds, Sea, Land, Heavenly Stars): Property Ownership on Saibai Island*. Saibai Island Council.
- Dixon, Robert M.W. 2002. *Australian Languages: their Nature and Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Edwards, Ron., 2000. *Songs from Saibai*. [Kuranda, Qld]: Rams Skull Press.
- Ford, Kevin & Dana Ober. 1991. A Sketch of Kalaw Kawaw Ya. In Suzanne Romaine (ed.) *Language in Australia*, 118-142. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Green, Donna et al. 2010. An assessment of climate change impacts and adaptation for the Torres Strait Islands, Australia. *Climatic change* 102(3), 405-433.
- Hunter, Jessica, Claire Bowern & Eric R. Round. 2011. Reappraising the effects of language contact in the Torres Strait. *Journal of Language Contact* 4, 106-140.
- Kennedy, Rod. 1984. Semantic roles - the language speaker's categories (in Kala Lagaw Ya). *Pacific linguistics. Series A* (68), 153-169. <http://sealang.net/archives/pl/pdf/PL-A68.153.pdf> (accessed 2021-04-30)
- Laade, Wolfgang & Hans Biedermann. 1970. Examples of the Language of Saibai Island, Torres Straits. *Anthropos* 65(1/2), 271-277.
- MacGregor, William. 1891. Aboriginal vocabulary of Saibai. *Annual Report of British New Guinea* 1889-1890, 121-124.
- Mitchell, Rodney John Allwynn, John Ngailu Whop & Dana Ober. 1992. Concise Kalaw Kawaw Ya dictionary : Kalaw Kawaw Ya-English with English-Kalaw Kawaw Ya supplement. Townsville: D. Ober. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/version/43604421> (accessed 2020-05-26).
- Moseley, Chris. 2010. *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*. 3rd edition. Paris: Unesco.
- Ober, Dana & Ialaiti Akiba. 1980. *Moeleria kikiriw ya*. Darwin: Summer Institute of Linguistics.
- Ober, Dana, Joe Sproats & Rik Mitchell. 2000. *Saibai to Bamaga: the migration from Saibai to Bamaga on the Cape York Peninsula*. Townsville: Joe Sproats & Associates.

- Ray, Sidney H. & Alfred C. Haddon. 1893. *A study of the languages of Torres Straits, with vocabularies and grammatical notes*. Dublin: Ponsonby and Weldrick.
- Round, Erich & Lesley Stirling. 2015. Universals of Split Argument Coding and Morphological Neutralization: Why Kala Lagaw Ya Is Not as Bizarre as We Thought. *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 35(3), 251-281.
- Shnukal, Anna. 1998. A selected bibliography of the traditional languages of Torres Strait. *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1998(2), 71-77.
- Shnukal, Anna. 2004. Language diversity, pan-Islander identity and ‘national’ identity in Torres Strait. In Richard Davis (ed.) *Woven Histories, Dancing Lives: Torres Strait Islander Identity, Culture and History*, 107-123. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Stirling, Lesley. 2012. Tense/Aspect Shifting in Kala Lagaw Ya Oral Narratives. *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 32(1), 157-190.
- Torres Strait Island Traditional Languages - Torres Strait Traditional Languages Plan* (no date). <https://www.tsllanguages.org/our-languages> (accessed 29 January 2021).
- Watkin Lui, Felecia. 2012. My island home: re-presenting identities for Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait. *Journal of Australian Studies* 36(2), 141-153.