



Honour for her struggle

In 2014, Katrina Esau was awarded the Order of the Baobab in Silver by the then president Jacob Zuma for her services to language. This picture was taken on Heritage Day last year, when President Cyril Ramaphosa visited her in Upington.

The ancient, indigenous language of N/uu is in danger of dying out forever, write **Elinor Sisulu** and **Lorato Trok**. One of the two people still alive who learnt it at their mother's knee is Katrina Esau, now in her late 80s, who deserves to be granted the status and benefits of a university professor



Katrina Esau at her home in Upington in 2017. Esau, known as Ouma Katrina, was born on a farm near Olifantshoek in the Northern Cape in 1933 and is fighting to ensure her language, N/uu, survives into the next generation. Picture: Alon Skuy

On the brink of extinction

The more endangered a language and heritage are, the more firmly people cling to them, but if the Covid-19 pandemic has taught us anything, it is that time is not on our side and that those involved in heritage work need to be supported with more urgency than ever.

This year, the Puku Children's Literature Foundation has declared acclaimed language activist Katrina Esau our "heritage hero", to highlight the urgency of her quest to ensure the survival of her mother tongue, the N/uu language, one of the oldest and most endangered in the world.

Puku became involved with Esau, affectionately known as Ouma Katrina or Ouma Geelmeid, through Lorato Trok, Puku's specialist multilingual editor, who met her while running mother-tongue story creation workshops in the Northern Cape.

Trok was fascinated by the then 85-year-old woman who, with her three siblings, were the last fluent speakers of the ancient N/uu language. She visited Ouma Katrina at her home in Rosedale, a township on the outskirts of Upington, where she learnt about her fascinating life.

Esau was born in 1933 on a farm in Olifantshoek, Northern Cape, one of eight sisters and three brothers. Her Motswana father and Khoisan mother were farm workers who spoke N/uu, Setswana and Afrikaans.

One of Esau's early memories is of the farmer who employed her parents telling them that their native tongue sounded terrible and should never be spoken around white children on the farm. He threatened to shoot them if they spoke the N/uu language, but Katrina and her siblings found a way to defy the farmer and continued to speak in their language whenever they could.

Her mother told Esau that the farmer had been angry that she was given a "proper" name and said: "Katrina for what? Don't you see how yellow this baby is? We'll call her Geelmeid."

Esau's mother taught her children to speak Afrikaans to prepare them for jobs on the farm when they were old enough to work. None of the Khoisan children on the farm were allowed to go to school.

At the age of 16, Esau started work on the same farm as her parents.

Although she never went to school or learnt to read and write, she was educated in the cultural and environmental knowledge of her people. She and her siblings learnt about medicinal plants, how to hunt and how to make fire.

The family had to walk more than 100km after Esau's parents had an argument with the farmer and had to leave the farm. Esau believes they would have died of hunger and thirst had they not been armed

with the survival skills they learnt in childhood.

It is this indigenous knowledge that fuelled her determination to fight for the survival of her mother tongue, which she describes as "the language of my soul".

Esau's family settled in Upington, where her parents died in the 1970s. She has had to endure much hardship in her life, losing six of her 10 children and being widowed at a young age.

She believes her faith enabled her to overcome adversity and find her true calling: "I thought I was going to die from the heartache of losing my six children and suffering a miscarriage. The pain was too deep, but the Lord had other plans for me. He wanted me to do what I am doing."

Growing up in an Afrikaans-speaking community, it bothered her that she had not passed on her mother

Their native tongue sounded terrible and should never be spoken around white children on the farm

tongue to her four children. To try to rectify this, and with a renewed determination to ensure the survival of her language, Katrina taught the N/uu language to her granddaughter Claudia du Plessis and to David van Wyk, a member of the Royal Khoisan Heritage Council.

She also runs a storytelling and language after-school for children and teenagers in her community. She has been assisted by the Centre for African Language Diversity (Caldi) at the University of Cape Town, which developed an orthography and teaching materials for N/uu.

Sheena Shah, a postdoctoral fellow and director of Caldi's N/uu language project, describes the process.

"Based on existing documentation, we worked closely with Ouma Geelmeid to identify the distinctive sounds of this language. The practical orthography consists of 112 speech sounds, of which 45 are clicks. Ouma Geelmeid, assisted by her granddaughter Claudia, is using the alphabet charts and teaching materials developed in the Caldi project," Shah says.

"Ouma Geelmeid teaches the language in a fun and interactive way, and has developed many songs and games to teach the children the N/uu language. The children enjoy seeing themselves featured in the educational materials produced in the Caldi project.

They sing the N/uu songs and play the games even outside class."

In 2016, Van Wyk became involved in the teaching of the language and was instrumental in the establishment of the N/uu language committee in December 2017.

Trok's engagement with Ouma Katrina and with Pheno Modise, director of the Northern Cape department of sports, arts & culture, inspired Puku to produce books and digital content for children in the languages of the Northern Cape province, especially the endangered languages.

The project was informed by Puku's conviction that the oral storytelling traditions in indigenous languages are not reflected in print and there is almost no content for children in the endangered languages.

Two writing workshops were designed to produce books in Setswana, Nama and N/uu. Participants were selected from a pool of authors from Kuruman, Namaqualand, Kimberley and Upington. The original intention was to have a workshop in Upington specifically for N/uu but that was not possible for various logistical and administrative reasons. We finally settled on a workshop in Johannesburg to which we invited Ouma Katrina, not really expecting that she would make it.

There was great excitement when not only did she attend herself, but arrived with her daughter Lena Snyman and Du Plessis. Du Plessis brought her own delightful two-year-old daughter, N/aungkusi.

With an energy that belied her age, Ouma Katrina participated fully in the intense three-day workshop in which the young authors and illustrators spent hours perfecting the stories in Nama, Setswana and

Endangered tongues

According to Unesco's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, 230 languages went extinct between 1950 and 2010. Further research by National Geographic and the nonprofit organisation Wikitongues estimates that up to a third of the world's languages in existence today have fewer than 1,000 speakers left. On average, a language disappears every two weeks, when its last remaining speaker dies.

Afrikaans that they had submitted prior to the workshop.

N/uu was the only language in which a story was created at the workshop by Esau and Du Plessis, who live in different cities. Ouma Katrina narrated the story in both N/uu and Afrikaans and Du Plessis wrote it down. They then worked with young Soweto illustrator Terence Maluleke to develop the first draft of the manuscript of the first-ever picture book in N/uu.

After spending time with Ouma Katrina, it is easy to understand the accolades she has received over the years. She has a rare combination of assurance and humility. Her calm, serene presence gave a sense of gravitas to the proceedings and there was hardly a dry eye in the room when she related her life story.

Esau's devotion to her calling to save her language

This does not translate into financial reward that can ease her economically strained circumstances

from extinction has garnered her national and international accolades. In 2014 she earned recognition in the presidential national orders when she was awarded the Order of the Baobab in Silver.

The Lost Tongue, a documentary by filmmakers Davison Mudzingwa and Themba Vilakazi on the efforts to save the N/uu language through the eyes of a young San woman learning from Ouma Katrina and her siblings, premiered at the Socially Relevant Film Festival in New York in 2017. It was subsequently screened at 15 film festivals around the world and won three awards.

In 2018, composer Coenie de Villiers and the late dancer-choreographer Kevin Fortuin produced a play portraying Esau's life through an interpretive dance piece at the Artscape Theatre, titled *Katrina: The Dancing Language*.

Last year, President Cyril Ramaphosa paid homage to her when he spent Heritage Day in Upington. He visited the Sandile Present Community library to listen to stories read by children in the indigenous languages of the area. Referencing the UN year of indigenous languages, the president emphasised the government's commitment to preserving all of SA's indigenous languages, especially the endangered N/uu, Nama and Khwe tongues.

This year, as we celebrate Heritage Day under the

cloud of the Covid-19 pandemic, we ask ourselves what progress has been made in efforts to ensure the survival of the ancient N/uu language? If anything, it seems that the language is more endangered than ever, following the death of Ouma Katrina's sisters Hanna Koper in March and Griet Seekoei in May. Du Plessis says the death of Ouma Griet is a huge setback to the survival of the language as she was very active in supporting Ouma Katrina's work.

At Puku we are convinced that for N/uu to survive it needs a vibrant children's literature. Our contribution to helping Ouma Katrina in her mission will be to publish her story in N/uu, Afrikaans and English. The manuscript is currently being edited and will be published as a children's picture book before the end of the year, with the support of a grant from the International Publishers Association's Africa publishing innovation fund, sponsored by Dubai Cares.

Ouma Katrina is not short of recognition for her efforts but this does not translate into financial reward that can ease her economically strained circumstances and enable her to increase her ever-more urgent efforts.

Du Plessis laments the fact that apart from her government pension, Ouma Katrina does not receive much else by way of financial compensation. If resources were a problem before, they will be an even greater problem in the post-Covid era.

What is the solution? In Puku's view, Esau's situation should be part of a broader conversation about our Western academic paradigm that fails to validate indigenous knowledge.

Ouma Katrina is the world expert in the N/uu language and the culture of her people. No-one knows more than she does. As such, she should be given the status of professor of the N/uu language and paid a professor's salary, which would make it easier to spend the rest of her days teaching N/uu. Her school should be supported with the books and learning materials needed to produce the next generation of N/uu speakers.

If she is economically empowered through the recognition of her role as a repository of knowledge, an activist, a storyteller and an organic intellectual, it would be an enormous boost to the efforts to save the N/uu language. The conversation must be carried forward beyond Heritage Day or Heritage Month. Time is not on our side.

* Sisulu and Trok work at the Puku Children's Literature Foundation, based in Johannesburg. As part of its 2020 heritage project, Puku will publish Ouma Katrina Esau's book — the first children's book written in N/uu — later this year, alongside English and Afrikaans versions. All proceeds will go to Ouma Katrina.