

# Sunyeskador Famosa

## Reflecting on Noel Felix's practice of dreamfishing as documented by Margaret Sarkissian

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### 1. Introduction

Sarkissian (2000, pp. 103-105) appears to be the first and so far only non-Kristang researcher to document the process of creolisation-creation of new vocabulary in Kristang, which today is called sunyeskah or dreamfishing (Wong, 2022), in substantial detail in her academic volume *D'Albuquerque's Children: Performing Tradition in Malaysia's Portuguese Settlement*. Sarkissian's particular collaborator who is shown practicing dreamfishing, Noel Felix, was also a respected elder in the Malacca Kristang community until his passing in 2018, and was generally recognised as a key source of cultural knowledge and understanding of what it means to be Kristang (Pires, 2013; Caldeira, 2018). His example as it appears in Sarkissian (2000) is therefore serendipitous, and arguably essential in understanding the factors that might be involved in the successful 'Kristangization' or acceptance as Kristang of new creolised vocabulary emerging from dreamfishing.

### 2. Summary of Sarkissian's documentation of Felix

Sarkissian documents Felix creating new vocabulary toward showing how Kristang oral traditions are passed down and creolised and evolved in the process, noting that

As is common in orally transmitted traditions, texts learned by ear and committed to memory are gradually transformed over time. This form of domestication is particularly common when, as is the case in the Portuguese Settlement, texts originally existed in an unfamiliar language. ... Unable to make complete sense of the Portuguese lyrics, singers generally employ one of two strategies: approximation or substitution (p. 103).

She goes on to demonstrate Felix using both strategies in his version of the Kristang song 'Ti' Anika' (p. 103), and also records Felix himself commenting on and providing the meaning of the new vocabulary generated as a result:

*Agienda* is something to do with the tide, a flood. *Agienda ira ela, azianda bara preta* — there’s a flood on the east side. *Engsabida nus toma* means “whose name we take.” *Kashiné* is “don’t bother at all.” *Azianda bara preta, abaranda kashineh* — even though there’s a flood on the east side, we don’t have to bother anything.

(Felix, November 14, 1990, cited in Sarkissian, 2000, pp. 104-105)

Sarkissian finally observes that this practice, which today is called dreamfishing but which she, with a more ethnomusicological-anthropological focus, identifies instead as part of the wider process of “textual domestication” (p. 105), is something that

began as a practical response to the unfamiliar vocabulary of an imported repertoire. Over the years, however, it has become an organic part of the now-local traditions. Although Kristang dominant singers (e.g. Noel Felix) began the process of “smoothing out” the words, other singers...have also introduced their own personal idiosyncracies. Today, each singer has his or her own unique version of core-repertoire Portuguese texts. These texts continue to diverge as second- and third-generation singers pick them up orally (p. 105).

As an example of this divergence, Sarkissian concludes the section with a discussion of the dreamfishing of Gerard de Costa, a protégé of Felix, whose version of the same song, ‘Ti Anika’, “has been so thoroughly domesticated...not even Gerard himself could identify the words he used in the line and a half of text marked “unclear”. (pp. 105-106).

### 3. Reflection on Felix’s work

As leader of the community in Singapore and its revitalisation effort and also as its main researcher, prior to my encounter with Sarkissian’s work in late 2022, the revitalisation effort for Kristang in Singapore had relied on a community voting space and process toward the creation of new words known as *Jardinggu* (‘language garden’), similar to that recommended by Kimura & Counciller (2009) and other revitalisation efforts, but which had gradually disappeared during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sarkissian’s work thus effectively not only ‘licensed’ a far more expansive and arguably relatively unique approach (when compared to other language revitalisation efforts around the world already known to academia) to new word creation, but highlighted that this practice was quite fundamental to Kristang culture itself, to the extent that recursively finally giving the process its own name in Kristang, *sunyeskah* (a calque of *sunyah* ‘to dream’ and *peskah* ‘to fish’) was also acceptable and easily unconsciously understood by the community.

However, my initial, instinctual reaction to what I was reading was a split one, which can be retroactively understood through the Kristang four-way structure of the inner metacognitive experience into *korpu* (body), *mulera* (mind), *korsang* (heart) and *alma* (soul). Felix’s work essentially matched a personal intuition or vibe in my *korpu*, *korsang* and *alma* arising from my own observations of the openness and ease which many older community members had had with *Jardinggu* about how Kristang actually functioned as both a culture and as a linguistic entity, which I had yet otherwise up till that point never been able to find documentary evidence in academia for. Yet in my *mulera*, my Western-paradigm-framed reaction to Felix’s dreamfishing (and also informed by my academic training in linguistics up to that point) was that he was making these new words up out of thin air,

especially considering that from the morphosyntax he had generated, I could find very little that corresponded to the Kristang I knew besides *nus toma* and the verb-signalling morphology on *kashiné* / *kashineh*, even after a pronounced scan of the lexemes that were new to me.

This split reflexivity, nonetheless, appears to be a very Kristang reaction to most complex and unknown phenomena in the world; other, older Kristang have privately compared this to ‘holding many truths as all true at once’, and which I have glossed in my own work as *lembransa Krismatra* or a privileging and an ability to work with epistemic uncertainty as certain or to be taken for granted as likely to be encountered. Because of my work with the community in this way, and my earlier research on Kristang, I already thus had the ‘psychoemotional provisions’, so to speak, to also take a ‘higher’ stance when encountering the split and seek one of the following possible resolutions of it:

1. my *korpu*, *korsang* and *alma* are correct
2. my *mulera* is correct
3. none of the four constituents are correct
4. there is insufficient data present to make a judgement as to which option 1, 2 or 3 is correct

In exploring these possible resolutions, I was thus able to find that my *mulera* was also applying the same reaction – that such words were being made up out of thin air and were not Kristang – *even to my own words that had also been voted on in Jardinggu meetings years prior*. This, to me, was excessively harsh behaviour on the part of my *mulera*, since while words that were created in isolation could arguably be subject to such criticism, words that had already been subjected to community scrutiny through a voting process did not seem to merit such judgement. I thus uncovered a hidden, fossilised belief that ran counter to other parts of my psychoemotional schema for what it meant to be Kristang in my *mulera*, and identified it as *xaitanza*, or psychoemotional projection (Wong, 2023b, p. 2084), that was affecting my overall understanding of dreamfishing. From there, it was a further straightforward process to evaluate that, as a Kristang person, I was not giving Felix enough respect in my mind if I were to apply the criticism from my *mulera* to his work, and delegitimising his experience and performance of Kristang identity; as a researcher, I was not holding or creating space for inquiry and investigation of phenomena that were relatively unusual compared to other languages and cultures.

With these considerations, retrospectively, therefore, I was hence thereafter able to understand why, as mentioned, many of the older Kristang could appreciate, in arguably more unified fashion, not just work like Felix’s, but other material and practices that play with and query the boundaries of Kristang identity and culture: instead of dismissing such ‘transgressions’ or ‘inventions’ as such, the *lembransa Krismatra* or an open-minded / epistemic uncertainty-minded approach that is underwritten by a respect for someone else’s performance of our identity and culture is what seems to support and underpin dreamfishing as a particular form of creolisation unique to Kristang, and therefore to also acknowledge that our culture (and culture in general) is something that evolves and changes in various forms over space and time. Sarkissian further reflects this in her closing discussion of Padri sa Chang / the Portuguese Settlement in Melaka, supposedly the last place in the world where one can find a geographic concentration of Kristang speakers, where she argues that “in effect, the Settlement becomes a forum within which diverse messages can compete and speak simultaneously to different audiences” (p. 158). I would argue that the same can be said on a deeper level for Kristang as a language and culture itself.

#### 4. Conclusion: Directions for further investigation

A further metacognitive exploration of why I had that *xaitanza* in my *mulera* revealed that perhaps one of the major factors limiting my original inability to accept Felix's work as valid was that I could not understand how Felix had arrived at some of the choices he had made in terms of what he had creolised in 'Ti Anika, where the words I have dreamfished tend to align with or at least are supported by their existing semantic meanings or morphosyntactic functions in other languages. Notwithstanding the other important factor that Felix was speaking in November 1990, before the advent of technology that supports much more informed dreamfishing through the provision of lexical resources from other languages, what is eminently derivable from both Felix's report on his own work, and Sarkissian's documentation of it, is that Felix appears to be quite comfortable with the fact that the semantic meanings he arrived at for the new Kristang words were generally unconsciously derived and articulated. Considering Sarkissian's further observations of our spontaneity, our interest in performance, and that de Costa was unable to explain the meaning of some of his own derived lexemes *and did not generally* (from Sarkissian's description) *seem to be bothered by his inability to do so*, what can be generally derived as a hypothesis is that we not only tend to be fairly comfortable with the unconscious and the spontaneous, but, in recognising that both Felix and Costa have produced new legitimate Kristang lexemes, therefore also seem to acknowledge that there is some sort of rationalisable system or structure to the unconscious and spontaneous for that recognition to be valid, since there would be no way to determine what was legitimately Kristang or not if no such system or structure existed as a sort of unconscious checklist or criteria set. Sarkissian's documentation, and its parallels with my own lived experience, are thus how the premise of this independent study was arrived at; subsequent work will consider how the principles underpinning dreamfishing were excavated and codified as an indigenous methodology unique to Kristang (Wong, 2023a) and usable more universally.

#### References

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**Note**

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