**56 | This Is Who We Are**

**Brooklyn, USA | February 9, 2022**

**[INTRO]**

**[MUSIC BED: Alsarah & The Nubatones live performance on B-Side, produced by BRIC TV]**

**KHYRIEL PALMER:** You're listening to the Brooklyn USA podcast - an occasional audio love letter from Brooklyn to the world. In a way, languages are just like animals. They mutate, evolve, spread into different niches, and sadly, often go extinct. At the same time, languages can survive for thousands of years, resisting total annihilation, finding safe pockets where they can thrive. Coming up, we'll explore one such language, which thousands of years ago was a common tongue spoken in an empire spanning across continents. Through the millennia, small communities have kept it alive, both in its original lands and in pockets around the world as its speakers have left their homelands. One such pocket happens to be in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, where a congregation comes together to worship and converse in the language of their ancestors. **[FADE OUT MUSIC]**

**Unidentified:** [*Aramaic speaking*]

**CHARLIE HOXIE:** The language you are listening to comes from the area of the world known as the cradle of civilization- that fertile crescent stretching from northern Egypt to western Iran through modern day Iraq, Turkey and Syria, where agriculture took hold and large cities sprang up over 10,000 years ago.

**UNIDENTIFIED:** [*Aramaic speaking*]

**CHARLIE:** The language Aramaic is at least 3,000 years old, and these words were recorded by Jeffrey Kahn - a linguist who we'll meet in a moment - who has made it his life's work to document the various living incarnations of Aramaic before they disappear. War and displacement in the birthplace of Aramaic has dispersed most of its speakers, who relocate and adopt the customs and languages of their new homes. But as you will hear, as they scatter around the globe, some Aramaic speakers hold on to their ancient mother tongue to remain connected to their homeland and to each other.

**[ARAMAIC STORY]**

**Unidentified:** [*Aramaic speaking*]

**[ETHEREAL MUSIC PLAYS]**

**GEOFFREY KHAN:** I'm not a native speaker of these dialects, I grew up in the north east of England where, you know, you know, I've never heard of Aramaic when I was a child, but I somehow feel that to preserve some aspects of linguistic or cultural diversity of humanity is a very important thing to do. Otherwise, you know, we become impoverished in some sort of way. The human race becomes impoverished if it loses a lot of its cultural diversity.

**[ETHEREAL MUSIC PLAYS]**

**GEOFFREY KHAN:** My name's Jeffrey Kahn. I'm a professor of Semitic languages at the University of Cambridge. And for many years, I've been working on the Aramaic dialects that are still spoken today. Aramaic is a Semitic language, that means to say it belongs to the Semitic family, so it's related genetically to Hebrew and Arabic, for example. And Aramaic is first attested historically about 1000 BCE in inscriptions in the Middle East. So we have about 3000 years of attestation of written Aramaic as a language. In terms of its origin, it appears to have originated in communities in Syria and Mesopotamia somewhere in the first millennium BCE. It became this sort of widely used vernacular language. Therefore, you know, Jesus in Palestine would have been speaking Aramaic because it's just the natural language of the area. But I mean, at the same time Aramaic was spoken right across Mesopotamia. It was, in fact, during the so-called Achaemenid Empire, this is the Persian Empire, you know, Aramaic became an administrative language, a lingua franca of the administration across the whole empire, which stretched right across from Egypt all the way to northern India, essentially. So in parallel with these written records, there was always a vernacular language, a living spoken language that people used every day in homes and for day to day conversation. And these vernacular forms of Aramaic have survived down to modern times. But after the Islamic conquest, there was a gradual Arabization of the whole region, particularly after conversion to Islam. So this is why, you know, the surviving communities tend not to be Muslim. Aramaic has become a kind of a community identity of people. I mean, this is often the case with languages that you maintain a sort of distinction from the rest of society through the language you speak.

**SAFAA JALOU:** *[SINGING IN ARAMAIC]*

**SAFAA:** This says, holy holy lord is holy. He has the heavens and earth filled with his glory, and we are pleased that God came to us, glorified be the name of our lord. My name is Safaa Jalou, I am the board secretary of St George Syriac Orthodox Church. We are in Brookland, Bay Ridge. We have like 40 families originally from Syria and Lebanon, and we established this community church. We come here every Sunday to celebrate mass. And this is who we are.

**Unidentified:** *[ARAMAIC CHANTING]*

**GABRIEL ADDE:** My name is Father Gabriel Adde. I'm originally from Syria. And here in our church, we still try and we struggle to keep our traditions. We use the language, we call it the Aramaic, and we believe it was the same language that was used by our Lord Jesus Christ. Because when Christ came, the Jews in Palestine had just returned from the captivity of the

Assyrians. They lived there for about three or four hundred years. Their language, even their dialect, became just like the Assyrian dialect that we speak. And that is the language, of course, the Lord spoke because he came among them. He spoke the language of the people, which was at that time what they called the eastern dialect, which now is spoken in the northern part of Iraq. Our dialect is what they call the western dialect, that's been spoken in the area of what you call Turkey now and Syria.

*[PRIEST READING ARAMAIC]*

**SAFAA:** I'm from Syria. I came here like nine years ago. We used to speak Aramaic in our house with Arabic, of course, because Arabic is the official language of Syria. But we still speak Aramaic at home and in church. In the United States, in Canada, in Europe, we go there, but we don't lose our identity, we find the church. We come together and we pray in the same language of our fathers. I can speak Aramaic with my family, with my friends, with father. Few people will understand me and some people will say, Oh, teach us some of the language. It's our identity, and we don't want to lose it. And when we find somebody interested in our language, we be excited like, Oh my God, somebody recognize us. Even though we are a minority, we are shattered, we are in diaspora here in the United States, when I see somebody speaks or read or write Aramaic, I get excited. I hope like more spotlight will be given to the history, to the real history. Because, you know, history is written by the winners, not by the people themselves, but we still exist and we are proof that we were in history.

**Unidentified:** *[ARAMAIC CHANTING]*

**SAFAA:** There is difficulties everywhere, you face difficulties in every community, it's even in every family. Fathers would love, their parents were loved, that their children will stick around, will come and visit. So this is the human nature we have to accept. And it's our duty to teach the coming generations that we are different in a beautiful way that we want to keep it and preserve it to the humanity. Because it's good to belong to a bigger group and it's good to be special in something. So we have both. We belong to Syria, we belong to the United States, we belong to humanity and we have the test of history with us. We speak in ancient language that few people can understand and speak. So this will make you feel like I'm special. Yes. So it's the duty of the family, how much you put efforts to teach your children the language. I mean, you have to tell them that this is something special about us and it's beautiful. And if you go to a museum and you, you see some symbols on the wall, you say, Oh, I can recognize this is Aramaic. And this is how I teach my niece - that we can speak different language than all these people that they speak; not English, not Arabic, it's Aramaic. My niece is American, she's nine years old. She prays and I'm sure she doesn't understand what she's saying, it's gibberish for her, but with time she will be able to read that translation and connect. So for me now it's just to get her ears used to the rhythms, to the language, and then with time, she will be understanding what she's praying. And I tell her we are coming from a different place and we belong to a different civilization, but that doesn't mean that we are different than the people here because we live

here as well. So we respect this place and we respect that place too. We don't forget our past and we live our future here.

**Unidentified:** *[ARAMAIC CHANTING]*

**[VOICE MEMO]**
**[BEEP] [voicemail audio] NADEGE FLEURIMOND:** Hello, my name is Nadege Fleurimond, and I am from East Flatbush, Brooklyn. One of my favorite songs in Haitian Creole is actually a lullaby titled Do Do Petit de Mama, which translates to Sleep Mommy's Little One. And it goes *[SINGING IN HAITIAN CREOLE]*. I love this lullaby because of course you're trying to get the child to sleep. But of course, the words are very terrorizing because the child, if they don't go to sleep, a big crab will keep them. And then the other aspect of this that I love is the fact that you get a peek into the society in terms of the household. Because whoever is rocking the baby to sleep is not the mother, because “mama pa la, li ye nan marché” translates to “Your mom is not here, she is at the market.” And the other chorus with “Papa pa la, li ye nan rive. Your dad is not here. He has gone to the river. So basically the person rocking the baby to sleep is not the mom or dad dad. But perhaps a caretaker or a family member, and I think that is very, you know, that provides us the clear insight to the culture in terms of the household, how things are managed.

**[BEEP]**

**[CREDITS]**
**[MUSIC BED: Jomion & The Uklos live performance on B-Side, produced by BRIC TV]**

**KHYRIEL:** Brooklyn USA is produced by me, Khyriel Palmer.

**EMILY BOGHOSSIAN**: And me, Emily Boghossian

**SHIRIN BARGHI**: And me, Shirin Barghi

**CHARLIE HOXIE:** And me, Charlie Hoxie.

**MAYUMI SATO:** And me, Mayumi Sato.

**KHYRIEL:** Thank you to Nadege Fleurimond for leaving a message.

**KHYRIEL:** Check the show notes for a link to Jeffrey Kahn’s work documenting Neo-Aramaic dialects. If you want to tell us a story or somehow end up on our podcast, check the show notes for a link to our guide on recording the voice memo on your mobile phone and sending it to us on the internet.

**KHYRIEL:** And if you like what you hear or think that we missed something, comment like share and subscribe and follow BRIC TV on Twitter and Instagram for updates. For more information on this and all BRIC Radio podcasts, visit www.bricartsmedia.org/radio.

**KHYRIEL:** We are on the unceded territory of the Lenni Lenape, the Canarsie, the Shinnecock, and Munsee People. We acknowledge the many indigenous nations with ties to this land, and we recognize that the Lenape still called Manahatta home.