

# **T-Ni'ok c T-himdag 'o wud T-Gewkdag "Our language and Our Way of Life is Our Strength"**

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It is in our strength as a unique people that we are able to persevere against tremendous odds on behalf of language. My points in this brief reflective paper acknowledge the many contributions people have made in efforts to maintain and promote their languages. Among these many efforts The American Indian Language Development Institute (AILDI) and its faculty, participants, supporters and friends have been important figures.

One of my favorite quotes is from a Cheyenne elder. It states: "How much does the Cheyenne language weigh? How much does the Cheyenne language cost? How much room does the Cheyenne language occupy? How does the Cheyenne language feel, taste, or smell? What does it look like? If the Cheyenne language can be put in those quantifiable terms, then the more prevalent white society may understand the total impact of what it means to be losing the Cheyenne language. But we [Cheyenne people] will never be able to weigh the Cheyenne language." This quote is a favorite because it is one of the early instances where a Native person was either put in a position to explain the value, the worth of their language; or maybe they simply felt compelled to say...this is why you will never understand.

I know what all Native people know about their language. I know that when the languages were not endangered, when it was the only form of communication for so many, that the languages were important, they were special, they were worth consideration. Back then; as it still is today, our languages are signifiers for who we are. Our names, for instance are those important markers of geography, or our history. In southwestern Arizona, for example we are Akimel O'odham, Onk Akimel O'odham, Tohono O'odham, Hia ced O'odham--- these names carry our identity within them and all that a people require to be a distinct people. We are the river people, the salt river people, the desert people, people of the sand. These names, names that were our original identifying markers, are still vibrant today to all those who claim these names. They or names like them have likely always been around.

As people with a distinct language we know that our languages are critical in all realms of the sacred. In many Native languages the words are held in high regard for important ritual and events. Words are changed into some of the most sophisticated phonological forms in order to be sung so that it can do the job they must do. Speakers of many Indigenous languages are masters of figurative and metaphorical forms used to address the important sacred beings in their world. The people understand this of their world; they understand that language has very important roles. This, I believe, is part of the reason that our languages continue to persist today. We know that language is meant to do more than simply communicate with humans. In my poem *Birth Witness* (2008), I count for myself some of those significant uses of language.

It is a language useful for pulling memory from the depths of the earth.  
It is useful for praying with the earth and sky.  
It is useful for singing songs that pull down the clouds.  
It is useful for calling rain.  
It is useful for speeches and incantations  
that pull sickness from the minds and bodies of believers

The Cheyenne elder and I, and so many others know this about our language. We know that this is the way that it has always been and for many of us it is still that way. That language is the vehicle for the sacred--- for this we must be grateful. And, again, it is one of the reasons our languages continue to survive. Rightfully, we must acknowledge the speakers, the spiritual leaders, singers, and orators who have continued their walk

from one generation to the next carrying all our oral practices.

With contact and the pain filled history that ensued, a history of genocide, colonization, slavery, forced removal, forced religion and forced education, we must acknowledge the many unsung speakers who escaped these travesties. We must acknowledge those first boys who ran away from boarding schools, those students who endured the physical and psychological abuse and lived to tell the truth about their defiance. We must acknowledge them and pray for them and their bravery. We are their collective legacy. At the same time we must acknowledge those who did not defy but knelt and accepted what was handed them. We cannot speak of what happened to them because we were not there. We cannot hold them in blame; they were only children without guidance of a mother, father or grandmother. In the same way we are also their collective legacy. We, on so many levels carry the burden of their acts. We acknowledge these people in our history and pray for them and remember that they are not to be held in blame.

With these prefatory observations I would like to then focus a few vignettes that serve to acknowledge the contributions of so many in their efforts to promote and maintain the Indigenous languages of this country. I am not restricting the examples to the U.S., which is not to say that the efforts here did not have an effect in other parts of the world nor does it in any way diminish the efforts of Indigenous people of the world who continue their own struggles.

### **Vignette I: 1960's to the present**

This vignette acknowledges the loud roar of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's. This movement allowed for new voices and ideas to begin moving to the forefront. People found their voice and used them to speak for the countless number of powerless individuals, especially children who were served unequally for the first part of our American history. One of the most significant results of the movement was equal access to education. "When children arrive in school with little or no English speaking ability, "sink or swim" instruction is in violation of their civil rights," according to the 1974 Supreme Court decision, *Lau vs. Nichol*. In the 1960's and 1970's many Native children were impacted by this landmark decision. "In recognition of special education needs of the large number of students in the U.S. whose mother tongue is Spanish and to whom English is a foreign language, Congress hereby declares to be the policy of the United States to provide financial assistance to local educational agencies to develop and carry our new and imaginative elementary and secondary school programs designed to meet these educational needs" (Jimenez, 1992).

Additionally, a number of now well-known Native educators were emerging from our universities returning to their communities to take the helm of bilingual programs and projects. Many of these individuals established those first stepping stones allowing the safe integration of the Native language and appropriate cultural content in a classroom---even though the ultimate goal was to support students whose first language was not English. Nonetheless these simultaneous efforts of integrating and using the Native language in a school setting while supporting the use of English were new and innovative efforts that were extremely successful for so many children. The idea of having linguistically and culturally appropriate content in a classroom was a welcome change. Studies continue to support the benefits of bilingual education and bilingualism to this day.

Those early "modern" Native speaking teachers and administrators (Native and non-native) must be recognized for their efforts, their creativity and their stamina. We must acknowledge their diligence in working with the federal government throughout the many funding cycles under federal and state bilingual programs. And we must praise them for caring about the children and their education. Many were shaped early on by them and their tireless efforts.

### **Vignette II: 1980's to the present**

The 1980's was the beginning of the era of English Only legislation. The political and social efforts on behalf of the English language initiated then still continue today. In 1981 the US Congress considered one of first modern English Only Legislations for the country attempting to make English the official language of the U.S. (to this day, the U.S. does not have an official language).

With limited success at the national level the English Only laws took hold at the state level very successfully. Arizona, for instance, continues to be impacted by the long-term affects of such legislation. With state level English Only success, the reaction from tribal communities was a movement to codify their own languages. Such efforts are documented in the various tribal language policies now in place for many; others codified educational policies with language at the forefront.

These pieces of tribal laws although often times little recognized are important political reactions and clearly represent practices of tribal sovereignty. These language policies directed tribes to support their writing systems, develop training for their own language teachers, and for many, to control and offer input on the activity by external researchers in all areas of language and culture. We continue to be the beneficiaries of such tribal policies. We must acknowledge those who agreed to sit and began to talk about their languages in ways they had never done before. These individuals had the foresight to consider their tribe's responsibility in planning for the future of their language. No small task and one with challenges from both in and outside the tribe, challenges that persist today. These planners and language activists are building a legacy for many yet to be born.

### **Vignette III: 1990's to the present**

The beginning of the 1990's saw the impacts of the continued effort to legislate the English language state by state. One of the most significant reactions to this was resulted in the now famous, Native American Language Act 1990 Public Law 101-477. This piece of seminal legislation had its birth some 20 years ago at one of the annual meetings of the American Indian Language Development Institute (AILDI) and the Native American Language Issues Institutes (NALI) (formerly located in Oklahoma and was one of the first Native American language organizations holding annual conferences around the country). On that one summer Native language educators, linguists, language advocates met to consider how to respond to the English Only movement. It was decided the effort had to be a national push. That meeting allowed opportunity for this small group of people to draft the initial text for this piece of important legislation that would initiate a whole different perspective and evolve into a new dialog on the status of American Indian languages. The players included Native language educators, linguistics and advocates from Hawai'i, Arizona, Alaska, Montana, Kansas, Oklahoma--just to mention a few. This multi-state effort was carried on without benefit of the Internet and email, it was fax and phone and real letters (See Larry Kimura's and Akira Yamamoto's paper in this collection).

We are all the beneficiaries of this legislation; we all continue to be the players. If we've had an Administration for Native Americans (ANA) grant for language maintenance and revitalization we were a part of it. The Native American Languages Act or NALA 1990 reauthorization resulted in NALA 1992 Public Law 102-524 which now included funding for competitive grants through the ANA's granting program. After the year 2000 one of the most recent outcomes at the national level was the Esther Martinez Language Act 2006, HR 4766 supporting language survival schools. There are important people who must be acknowledged for their efforts in so many of these critical pieces of legislation.

During the 1990's and into 2000 many of us began to acknowledge the state of our languages and the reality that speaker populations were diminishing. The early 1990's added the words "endangered language," "revitalization," and "maintenance" with a different weight to our vocabulary. These were simply not just words but were personal or collective missions to begin to address the massive shift to the English language by whole groups of people, in particular young people. This is not to say that we are placing the entire burden of the language situation on their shoulders, but to say that it takes all of us to respond to the situation, no matter what age. We want today's youth to be partners in what will be our language legacy.

During 1992-1995, linguist Michael Krauss made his famous prediction that languages spoken by only the very elderly will be lost by the year 2010 if nothing is done. If his prediction comes to pass then we will all be there when these languages become quiet. If this should occur we are fairly certain that the national or local media will pay little attention. We will know though. But we must be heartened to know the goal of languages that fit the category of having "only the most elderly as speakers" is to prevent such a tragedy from occurring. These few speakers and those who may be learning their language as a second language know that their languages, even with just a handful of speakers, were put here for more than just communication.

Finally, I'd like to end with a short poem that describes some of us as we walk through our lives in all manner with language.

**Walking with Language** (Zepeda, 2008)

Some have carried it, held it close protected.  
Others have pulled it along like a reluctant child.  
Still others have waived it like a flag, a signal to others.  
And some have filled it with rage  
and dare others to come close.  
And there are those who find their language  
a burdensome shackle.  
They continually pick at the lock.

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