

Nurturing Native Languages

by Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley

Sharing Our Pathways, Vol. 7, Issue 1

Many Americans are intolerant of diversity, be it cultural with its concomitant languages, or biodiversity in an ecological system. Instead, we see notions of human and cultural superiority with designs for a monolingual and monocultural society in which the English language and its associated culture presumes to become the language and culture of the world. Thus indigenous cultures have to contend with a language and its ways that has a very “voracious appetite,” as phrased by Richard Little Bear. We, indeed, have a formidable enemy which absorbs our Native languages and cultures very readily, unless we are cognizant of its hunger and take protective steps. This mass culture can be most appealing to young people. Its behaviorisms, codes of dress, languages and sometimes destructive proclivities inveigle young people to its world.

We know ourselves to be made from this earth.

We know this earth is made from our bodies.

For we see ourselves. And we are nature.

We are nature seeing nature.

We are nature with a concept of nature.

Nature weeping. Nature speaking of nature to nature.

—Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature*

Griffin’s observations ring true to me because my Yupiaq language is nature-mediated, and thus it is wholesome and healing. It contains the creatures, plants and elements of nature that have named and defined themselves to my ancestors and are naming and defining themselves to me. My ancestors made my language from nature. When I speak Yupiaq, I am thrust into the thought world of my ancestors.

Let me cite two examples of the elements of nature naming and defining themselves. The first is anuqa—the wind. It is telling its name and telling me what it is. It is the moving air which is needed for life. The other is lagiq—the Canadian goose. It's call is “lak, lak, lak” giving its name to us and by its behavior telling us its habitat and its niche in the ecological system. “We are nature with a concept of nature.” Truly!

We, as Native people, have seen our languages become impoverished in the last several centuries. Many of us now speak our Native languages at the fourth and fifth grade levels (if such a grading system existed for us). We look at the wounds in our minds and we see that the wounds also exist in nature itself. “We know ourselves to be made from this earth” and it makes us weep when we see the destruction and pollution around us. We realize that the relationship between ourselves and our places is a “unity of process” (Joan Halifax). We know that there cannot be a separation between the two.

As we lose our Native languages, more and more of us begin to take part in the misuse and abuse of nature. We use English predominately in our everyday lives today. We don't realize that English is a language contrived by the clever rational mind of the human being. The letters were derived by the human mind. The words are a product of a mindset that is given to individualism and materialism in a techno-mechanistic world. For us to think that we can reconstruct a new world by using English and its ways will not work. We need to return to a language that is given to health and healing. To try to make a paradigmatic shift by using the consciousness that constructed this modern world is bound for failure. Albert Einstein stated something to the effect that “you cannot make change in a system using the same consciousness used to construct it.” This should be very clear to us as a Native people.

In my Yupiaq ancestral world egalitarianism was practiced. In this form of governance no creature, plant or element becomes more important than another. All are equal. In the great state of Alaska, I can incontrovertibly state that racism is alive and seems to be gaining strength. This is a circumstance which is unconscionable and reflects a very destructive and alienated stance in the larger society.

How is it that we “stabilize indigenous languages”? I think that we must once again speak the Native languages in the home a majority of the time. If we expect only the school to do it, it will surely fail. The school must become a reflection of a Native speaking family, home and community. During the waking hours of the day, the children must hear the Native language being spoken—in the home and in school. The one-to-one and family conversation in the local language must be the standard of the day. The community,

family, parents and especially the children must begin to know place. How is this to be done? By the Elders, parents and community members speaking to one another in their own language and from the Yupiaq perspective.

To know self, one must learn of place. How does one learn of place? You begin by telling *quliraat*, the mythology, stories of distant time, which are powerful teaching tools still applicable to the present. You learn of the times when our ancestors were truly shape-shifters. It was easy to change from one form to another, and one was in control of self. Values and traditions are taught by these stories which are so ancient that we call them myths. From these you can tease out problem-solving tools and discern characteristics that make for a healthy and stable person living in a healthy and sustainable place. Told by an Elder whose inflections, facial and body language add to the words, these myths teach not only discipline for the members but more importantly self-discipline. We must re-inculcate self-discipline in our people as a matter of survival.

The *qalumcit* must be told, as they are the stories of us as a Native peoples. They tell us how we got to be at this place, our movements, problems encountered and resolved, years of plenty and scarcity and how to read the signs foretelling events, how we made sense of time and space, how trade and exchange of goods and services was accomplished and how genetic diversity in the community was maintained.

The rituals and ceremonies must be relearned and practiced. The loss of these have developed schisms in our lives. We have become fractured people. These rituals represent revival, regeneration and revitalization of our Native people.

The *yuyaryarat*—the art and skills of singing, dancing and drumming—brings one to a spiritual level. Our word, *yuyaq*, means to emerge into a higher plain, a higher consciousness through concentration on the movements when singing and drumming.

We must also seek to relearn the Native names of places. It is incomplete knowledge for us to know the distance between two places in miles. It is also important to be able to “guesstimate” the time it will take to go from point A to point B and to know the history and place names between the two points. Then it becomes whole and useful knowledge.

I just recently returned from Hilo, Hawaii where I was a participant in a planning meeting for revitalizing the Hawaiian language and culture. One interesting side trip was a visit to a Native Hawaiian charter school a few minutes from Hilo. I learned that the local Native people had begun landscaping unkempt property and refurbishing dilapidated buildings. This was initiated even before grant funds were made available for the project. This is

true determination and motivation to reconstruct education which is meaningful and effective for the Native people. When my hosts and I arrived, we were met by the students at the entrance to their school. They sang in their own language and several students made welcoming remarks again in their own language. When protocol called for my response, I responded in my Yupiaq language. To see and hear the protocol that had been practiced for millennia by their people made my heart feel good. This happening after hundreds of years of barrage to change their language and culture gave me hope that we, too, can save our Alaska Native languages.

It was refreshing and energizing of spirit to look at the landscape and see the work that had been done. The best part was a plot of land where only the original flora of Hawaii had been planted—a very ambitious endeavor which required research and feedback from the few Elders still with them to determine which plants are native to the land. One building had photovoltaic panels on its roof to power some of their computers and filter pumps for their fish hatchery tanks. At another location, young men were preparing food in the traditional manner of heating rocks with the ingredients placed in baskets on top and covered over with banana leaves and canvas. The food was eaten prior to the graduation exercises.

If you find yourself in a situation where there is a minimal number of myths, stories, rituals and ceremonies available, then I would suggest that you find sources that are well written and your Elders deem to be true. Translate these into your own language with the help of Elders and knowledgeable community members that may be familiar with the technical language contained in that treatise. When satisfied with the final translation, read it to the group for approval. Then it would behoove us to read it to the youngsters who will become the historians of the community—the future keepers and practitioners of sacred knowledge.

To bring the above back into practice is to know who you are and where you are. This would contribute broadly to the important notion that it is alright to be Native, to speak the Native language and to use Native tools and implements in play and work. After all, our technology was made by our ancestors to edify our Native worldviews. Please, whatever you do, do NOT give to the youngsters the idea that modern technology has an answer for everything. It does not. Use it merely as a tool and use it minimally and judiciously. Remind the students that technological tools are intensive in the use of natural resources and energy. To accept technology blindly is to negate the painful works to revitalize our Native languages and cultures. I wish you all the wisdom of the Ellam Yua, the Great Mystery in your continuing efforts. “We are nature.” *Quyana*

References

Russell, Peter. *The White Hole In Time: Our future evolution and the meaning of the now*. Harper: San Francisco. 1992.

Halifax, Joan. *The Fruitful Darkness: Reconnecting with the body of the earth*. Harper: San Francisco. 1993.

Griffin, Susan. *Woman and Nature*. Harper Collins Publishers. San Francisco. 1978.

Richard Littlebear speech delivered to the Fourth Annual Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium. Flagstaff, Arizona, May 1997.