

論文

Displaced and Endangered Languages: The Tlingit of Alaska and the Okinawan Language

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Abstract

More than 7,000 languages are spoken in the world as of 2018 and a third of the languages are endangered, according to Ethnologue. Two of these are the Tlingit language of Alaska and the Okinawan language of Okinawa Prefecture. The paper includes an overview of the history of the two peoples and their languages, and focuses on the efforts made to preserve the languages. A discussion of the efforts made to ensure the survival of the Tlingit and Okinawan languages is provided to serve as a foundation for further efforts.

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I. Introduction

It is the responsibility of humankind to help dying languages to survive. A language communicates not only history and culture but also gives a unique identity to a community of people. Out of 7,097 living languages, 1,590 are “in trouble” and 922 are “dying”, according to Ethnologue. It disappears “... with little trace, typically because many of the languages we’re losing have not left written or recorded evidence behind” (Zimmerman, 2017). McWhorter further states that “... a central aspect of any culture’s existence as a coherent entity is the fact of its having its own language, regardless of what the language happens to be like” and because “... language is so central to being human, to have a language used only with certain other people is a powerful tool for connection and a sense of community” (McWhorter, 2014). The survival

Displaced and Endangered Languages: The Tlingit of Alaska and the Okinawan Language of a language is necessary to give voice to all who have inhabited the Earth, both past and present.

The Tlingit and Okinawan language revitalization efforts, both displaced and now endangered languages, will be examined and compared for this paper. Included will be an overview of each of the two languages, an examination of the problems encountered and efforts made for revitalization, a comparison of the efforts made, a discussion and implications, and a direction for future efforts.

II. The Tlingit Revitalization Effort

An Overview of the Tlingit People and Language

There were once many Native American languages spoken in North America, although the exact number is not clear. This is due to extinction of languages and the lack of data available to determine a connection to a language family. The United States uses the term “American Indian” while “First Nation” is used among Canadians to describe the indigenous peoples. The term “Native American” refers to all members of the indigenous people of the United States and Canada. One of the Native American languages still spoken today is Tlingit, the language of the Tlingit people of Alaska. Tlingit territory spreads from Alaska to the northern part of Canada. It extends from Yakutat south to Ketchikan, and includes the Alexander Archipelago, which is made up of more than a thousand islands (American Museum of Natural History). According to the American Museum of Natural History, the Tlingit population is approximately 24,000 as of 2016. However, the Tlingit population is often combined with the Haida population of Native Americans, so some might instead consider it to be around 16,000 (Tlingit).

The Tlingit language comes from the Na-Dene language phylum, which is a part of the Northwest Culture Area (Waldman, 42-43). The Tlingit are spread out over a vast territory, which has resulted in the creation of several dialects.

The Tlingit language is part of the Na-Dene language family that includes Eyak, spoken in Alaska, and Athapaskan or Dene languages spoken throughout Alaska and the Yukon. Thornton, in his book *Haa Léelk'w Hás Aaní Saax'ú* (Our Grandparents' Names on the Land), writes that there are, "...four mutually intelligible dialects or speech areas: the gulf coast, inland, northern and southern (de Laguna 1972, 15ff., <https://trt.geolive.ca/tlingit-language.html>).

The several dialects have resulted in creating "... a large vocabulary, and the phonology, or sound system, includes two dozen sounds not found in English" (Thornton 2012). It is without a writing system, similar to many other tribal languages, which means that it relies on being passed on verbally from generation to generation. There have been attempts to document the language, the earliest being in 1993, however the sounds were far from the original speech (Thornton 2012).

The Tlingit have long endured attacks on their lands and culture. They were strong fighters, and resisted attempts by Russia to take over their lands in the late 1700s. This helped to prevent Russia's expansion in the West, which eventually led to Russia selling Alaska to the U.S. in 1867 (Waldman, 108, 147). The Tlingit also suffered from the coming of the European settlers and missionaries, which brought exposure to new cultures, languages, religions, and traditions. Over time,

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one of the results of this incursion was that the use of Tlingit language was restricted, and in fact, they were punished when they spoke their own language (Benson).

The Tlingit in the United States today do not live on what are traditionally known as “reservations”. They live in what are called “Native villages”. Native villages “... do not have the same sovereignty rights that Indian nations in other US states do” (Tlingit Indian Fact Sheet). They are part of “... the Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, a tribal government that represents thousands of Tlingit and Haida Indians throughout the world” (Tlingit Indians Facts). Most of those who live in the Native villages only speak English because the children have not learned to speak it. The elders, though, may use Tlingit language.

Like many other minor languages, Tlingit is considered to be an endangered language. In fact, the Tlingit language is critically endangered, as there are only 200 speakers left within an ethnic population of 25,000 (Endangered Languages)¹. According to Sealaska Heritage Institute estimates, there are 200 to 400 speakers in the United States and about a hundred in Canada. A report from Ethnologue says that the youngest speakers of Tlingit are sixty and sixty-five years old and older.

Problems and Efforts for Revitalization

Steps have been taken to preserve Tlingit language. One has been the establishment of a private organization, the Sealaska Heritage Institute. It is “... a private nonprofit founded in 1980 to perpetuate and

1 There were 300 speakers in 2000 according to Atlas, UNESCO.

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enhance Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian cultures of Southeast Alaska” (Sealaska Heritage Institute). The institute helps with promoting “... cultural diversity and cross-cultural understanding through public services and events” and also “...conducts social, scientific and public policy research that promotes Alaska Native arts, cultures, history and education statewide” (Sealaska Heritage Institute). This organization has done much to save and revitalize the Tlingit language.

In 2005, the National Science Foundation (NSF), a federal government agency, provided \$266,244 for work on the Tlingit language. The funds were made available to the Sealaska Heritage Institute. In connection with this, the institute has published books, CDs, and a dictionary to help preserve the language, all of which are available on the Internet. The very first children’s book translated to Tlingit language is *The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse* in 2011 (Flood, 2011). The book was given free to Tlingit language teachers and students in southeast Alaska. It was funded by the government. The Sealaska Heritage Institute also revised the writings of an elder and a linguist² in 1993, which is now being used among the tribal members (TRTFN Elders Council, January 2006, <https://trt.geolive.ca/tlingit-language.html>). These materials are a source of information for use in schools and as references for Tlingit language education purposes.

Over the years efforts have been made to save native languages, but it has been difficult for tribes to get government recognition. Government recognition is necessary before tribes can receive funds to use for the projects they undertake. The Tlingit language has received

2 Elizabeth Nyman and linguist Jeff Leer, Gagiwdul.at, Brought Forth to Reconfirm: The Legacy of a *Taku River Tlingit Clan*, 1993, trt.geolive.ca/tlingit-language.html.

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recognition from the state of Alaska and the federal government. The CEO of an organization that builds houses for the indigenous people in Alaska stated in an interview in 2007, “A reservation is a legal area managed by tribes federally recognized by the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs. They determine tribal membership based upon a corporate structure. There are 229 federally recognized tribes in Alaska. That’s about half the tribes in the United States.” From this it can be seen that a large number of tribes in the United States are in Alaska and their federal recognition gives them some status.

It is still a fact though, that many tribes have not been able to receive funds to use for language preservation. According to the Administration for Native Americans (ANA), the grants that the tribes received in year 2007 were minimal³. Despite the increase in funding in 2009, it is still difficult for some to stay afloat, and it is especially difficult for those that do not have government recognition. Some tribes do not receive any grants and those that do get very little, which is not helpful in the efforts to maintain or preserve a language.

A private Tlingit group has been working to establish an immersion school for four years and it is now set to begin in February 2019. The exact date has yet to be finalized by the government of Alaska. It will start at the preschool level, from the age of three to five. Sixteen applicants have applied for ten openings, according to Hohenstatt (2019). The school envisions teaching typical school subjects in Tlingit along with study about Tlingit culture.

Tribes are also trying to begin or maintain language education

3 However on December 14, 2009, President Obama signed Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act of 2006, granting \$12 million in increased funds (H.R. 4766 - 109th Congress).

in schools. This is a way to establish a younger generation of Tlingit speakers. For many schools, putting Native American language instruction into a curriculum is very difficult, but there are some that provide it. The Sealaska Heritage Institute has been successful in getting Tlingit language instruction into a regular school curriculum, gaining acceptance from all of the district schools in Southeast Alaska in 2007. This three-year project was funded by the U.S. Department of Education, offered through two grants (Sit News).

Some schools cannot introduce the Native American language into a curriculum because there are not enough qualified teachers who can teach the language. Another reason is that some schools do not want to become a bilingual or multilingual school but want to remain monolingual, which means, "English only."

There are instances where the young have been making efforts on their own. A young Tlingit woman has taught the Tlingit language to kindergarteners (Belarde-Lewis). She used books, games, art, and interacted with the children in Tlingit. Another example is about a boy who is living in Alaska (Hoyt-Goldsmith). He has learned the language through experiencing cultural aspects such as dance, music, and traditional ceremonies.

Some elders were reluctant to speak or teach the language because of lingering experiences from childhood, during the time Tlingit was displaced. It was sometimes difficult to get them to teach, document, and help to aid in saving the language because of these past historical events. The negative attitude toward their own language did nothing to encourage others, including the younger generation, to keep their language.

The Sealaska Heritage Institute has conducted other programs

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to help sustain the language. One example is immersion retreats, which give people a place to speak the Tlingit language. These retreats are in a camp-like setting in which participants must speak only the Native language.

In order to motivate the younger people to learn and speak the language, Tlingit tribes conduct traditional cultural events. There are events such as the “potlatch,” where people can learn about native history, traditions, and their Native American identity. The members of many tribes gather to eat, dance, communicate with others, and socialize. At these events, the Tlingit language is used. Unfortunately, many of the people are not fluent in the language so English is sometimes used instead.

As can be seen, various efforts have been made to try to save and revitalize the Tlingit language. Work has been done at several levels. It has involved the efforts of private organizations, state and federal governments, the tribes, and private individuals.

III. The Okinawan Revitalization Effort

An Overview of the Okinawan People and Language

The Okinawan language, also known as the Ryukyu language, Okinawan dialect, or Uchinaaguchi, was spoken as a first language in the Ryukyu Kingdom from 1450 years to 1700 years ago⁴. The Okinawan

4 It is said that the separation of Ryukyu language (Ryukyu dialect) and Japanese (Mainland dialect) could go back to the Nara Period. Shuri dialect was created when the Ryukyu Kingdom was established. It became the standard language for speaking and for writing. However, people were not forced to use it. Therefore people continued to use other dialects that had already been present for many years.

language has a variety of dialects. When the Ryukyu Kingdom was established, the Shuri dialect became the standard dialect for the upper class⁵. However, the kings did not enforce its use among all the people. Therefore, local dialects remained in use in some parts of the islands of Ryukyu. After the fall of the Ryukyu Kingdom, some dialects disappeared while others continued to be spoken only as a minor language.

When the Ryukyu Kingdom became Okinawa Prefecture in 1879, a prefecture of Japan, Okinawan language was completely prohibited from being used. If a person spoke in Okinawan, he or she was shamed publicly by having a *Hogen-fuda*⁶ hung around his or her neck. However, it was not only the mainland Japanese who pressured the Okinawans to abandon their language. In fact, the Okinawans themselves tried to become more “Japanese” by using the Japanese language instead of Okinawan for daily communication. Assimilation to the Japanese culture soon became a priority in order to avoid being seen as inferior to the mainland Japanese. Even though some Okinawans kept using the language secretly, its usage decreased significantly, and Japanese became the dominant language over Okinawan. It was no longer necessary to learn for success in life.

Okinawan language⁷ that is spoken in the southern part of Japan is trying to keep its presence within Okinawan communities.

5 Shuri dialect became the standard language during Sho Shin (尚真) period, which is between 1476 to 1526. The language was used in official documents poems, songs, dance, and literature.

6 *Hogen-fuda* (方言札) was used to promote the use of Japanese in rural areas, such as Okinawa. It was used as a means of punishment whenever a student, often a child, spoke a language other than standard Japanese. The child had to wear it around his or her neck.

7 There are many dialects in the Okinawan language. “Okinawan language” is used as a general term, combining all dialects as one.

According to UNESCO Atlas World's Languages in Danger, Amami, Kunigami, Okinawa and Miyako languages are “definitely endangered” and the Yaeyama and Yonaguni languages are “severely endangered”. The UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger categorizes the Okinawan language as “Definitely endangered,” second in place from the entry level “vulnerable” in their evaluation system⁸.

Problems and Efforts for Revitalization

Ever since the Okinawan language was labeled as “Definitely endangered” by UNESCO, Okinawa Prefecture has put much effort into improving its status. The Okinawa prefectural government has become much involved in trying to reverse the “endangered” Okinawan language status. One thing the government has done is to give Okinawan language official recognition.

The government of Okinawa has begun a ten-year project⁹ to promote the use of the language. It is encouraging people to use the Okinawan language in events or in their daily lives, considering a simple greeting of “hello” in Okinawan as a way to help maintain the language. It also has designated September 18 “Shima-ku-thu-ba-no-hi,” the day of Okinawan language. Unfortunately, even after this designation was made in 2006, the number of speakers has decreased.

The Okinawan government is currently taking applications from local communities that are voluntarily making an effort to save their

8 UNESCO evaluation: vulnerable, definitely endangered, severely endangered, critically endangered, extinct.

9 しまくとぅば普及推進計画（平成25年度～平成34年度）

<<http://www.pref.okinawa.lg.jp/site/bunka-sports/bunka/shinko/simakutuba/keikaku.html>>

local dialects. The project involves the national Japanese government as well. The maximum amount of funds provided by the national Japanese government is one million yen¹⁰.

Print and other media have been used in the effort. Some communities have published children's books that can be read or listened to. Many of these projects, including the children's books, are done voluntarily. As an example, there is an original storybook for Okinawan language that was published at private expense (Okinawa Times Plus). A husband and wife wrote it, and they go to kindergartens and nursery schools to read the story to the children. Another project uses local TV stations to broadcast language lessons.

Efforts also are being made on a smaller scale in local areas. The Naha City Cultural Association¹¹ provides a language class. They established the Uchinaaguchi Club in 2011, with a philosophy of "Words are soul. Language is culture gene¹²." There are twenty members, and they meet once a month, according to their website. They work with the Naha City Newsletter to introduce some vocabulary every month. There are two NPOs and a notice for one conference posted on their website, however they do not appear to be active since there are no additional notices. There are community based clubs and workshops other than the Naha City Cultural Association, with participants who are mostly in their 80s.

The Okinawan language is used in tourism, in traditional

10 The information was updated in March 16, 2018. The purpose of this project is to pass down the language to the next generation and to popularize Okinawan language/ dialects. <<http://www.pref.okinawa.lg.jp/site/bunka-sports/bunka/shinko/josei/shimakutulubahojyokin201803.html>>.

11 那覇市文化協会

12 「ことばは魂である。言語は文化遺伝子である。」那覇市文化協会より引用。

Displaced and Endangered Languages: The Tlingit of Alaska and the Okinawan Language songs and dances, and in contemporary songs. It is used at the airport in Okinawa, with greetings in Okinawan in person or on greeting signs. At tourist stops, “hello” and “thank you” are spoken in Okinawan dialect as well. This is done to attract tourists and to promote an exotic atmosphere, with the added effect of promoting Okinawan language.

Kumiodori, which includes Okinawan language, is a traditional Ryukyu dance which is registered as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. The Traditional Kumiodori Preservation Society¹³ puts on performances around Japan that help to introduce and preserve a part of the Okinawan culture. There are also dance lesson classes for children in Okinawa, where they are exposed to the language and the sounds of Okinawan instruments from an early age.

It is sometimes difficult to attract the younger generation to the *Kumiodori*, so pop music singers and bands help raise awareness of the language. Singers from Okinawa such as Rimi Natsukawa, Begin, and HY bring Okinawan sounds to their music by using *sanshin*, an Okinawan three string instrument, and combine it with Okinawan lyrics.

Members of the older generation use Okinawan language when speaking to those of the younger generation. Grandparents that live together with members of the younger generation use Okinawan words in conversation. As a result, even without any formal schooling, members of the younger generation may be able to understand spoken Okinawan, though they may not be able to speak it themselves.

The National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics published an Okinawan language dictionary in 1963, which they have

13 Web page for the Traditional Kumiodori Preservation Society. <http://kumiodori.jp>

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continued to revise. The latest dictionary was revised in 2001 (National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics). It is now digitized and can be accessed easily, however it does not cover the many different Okinawan dialects.

There have been efforts that have the effect of raising awareness in the Okinawan culture and language from outside of Okinawa. A foreign-based Hawaii effort includes cultural events such as the Okinawan Festival, which attracts local residents as well as people from Okinawa. Local Hawaii organizations also provide Okinawa language and sanshin lessons.

Since being designated as an endangered language, the government and people of Okinawa have tried to revive the language. Various efforts have been made, both public and private.

IV. Comparison of the Tlingit and Okinawan Language Efforts

A summary and comparison of the efforts to save and revitalize the Tlingit and Okinawan languages is provided in the chart below.

	Tlingit	Okinawan
Private organizations	✓	
Government recognition (National and state level)	✓	✓
Government funding	✓	✓
Government involvement	✓	✓
Establishment of immersion school	✓	
Language class in public school curriculum	✓	
Elder use and teaching	✓	✓
Use in communities	✓	✓
Use of camps and retreats	✓	
Publications (i.e. children’s book)	✓	✓
Use of local media		✓
Outside Efforts		✓

V. Discussion and Implications

It can be seen from the listings in the chart that efforts can be made in various ways, both public and private, to help endangered languages survive. It has been found that these efforts have been made through private organizations, with government recognition and funding,

through education, through use in communities, through establishment of cultural programs, and through books and local media. The efforts are many and varied, but not all have been used in the efforts of either the Tlingit or Okinawan languages.

It can be seen that a private organization has not been a part of the revitalization process for the Okinawan language. It could be said that the Sealaska Heritage Institute, as a private organization, has been an important part of the Tlingit revitalization effort, having developed a plan for the Tlingit language. It is shown clearly that the Okinawan effort has not included some of those tried by the Tlingit. If an organization similar to the Sealaska Heritage Institute can be established for the Okinawan language, then a revitalization plan could be formulated that could include creation of an immersion school, inclusion in school curriculums, encourage increased use in communities, and programs for camps and retreats. Inclusion of these into a well thought out plan could make for a better Okinawan language revitalization effort.

Both Tlingit and Okinawan languages have received government recognition and funding. The major difference between the two is that Tlingit has national and state recognition, whereas Okinawa only has Prefectural recognition. With government recognition has come government funding. That funding has been minimal, at best. It is necessary to attract more funds in order to put into action more effective programs. The existence of an organization, whether private or public, could be an effective lobby for more funds.

A difference between the revitalization efforts for the Tlingit language and the Okinawan language is in the kind of government involvement. The prefectural government and town government organizations of Okinawa have been actively involved in the revitalization

Displaced and Endangered Languages: The Tlingit of Alaska and the Okinawan Language of Okinawan language in areas other than recognition and funding, which is what the U.S. government has provided for Tlingit.

The Tlingit are in the process of starting up an immersion school, and it has already gained acceptance into a regular school curriculum as well. A major problem for the Okinawan language is that formal educational opportunities have not been provided. An immersion school, which provides instruction in the target language, has not been planned or established. It also is not included in the regular school curriculum. One of the concerns of Japanese school curriculum planners is how an additional subject will affect students in the future since public schools follow teaching guidelines provided by the Japanese government. The Tlingit have conducted research for their situation, the results of which indicates that introducing another language into the curriculum would not affect the students academically. Without the immersion school and regular curriculum study options, basic language instruction is not afforded a younger generation of learners, which brings into question the future success of any revitalization or sustainment program for Okinawan language.

Important for the survival of a displaced language is the attitude of the participants toward the language. This was once a problem for Tlingit, as some elders were reluctant to use or teach it because of experiences from their historical past. For the Okinawa language, Okinawa Prefecture officials conducted a survey in 2016, which revealed that although the people of Okinawa are familiar with the language and can understand most of the spoken words, more than half are not teaching it to the younger generation¹⁴. In spite of this, it seems that

14 78.4% of the population answered that they are familiar with the Okinawan

people have a positive image towards the language. They strongly feel that the language should be used in public more often, for example in government and in school. A positive attitude toward an endangered language can only have a positive effect for its survival.

The Tlingit live in areas similar to reservations, which are in essence enclosed communities. At the present time, the English language is used for daily life there. These communities can be used as places that encourage the use of Tlingit instead of English. For the small remaining population of Tlingit, this may be a good way to develop a large number of people fluent in the Tlingit language.

The Okinawans do not live in such enclosed communities. They are spread over a large area with many dialects. The question is whether the dialects will survive within the smaller areas. There is a larger population of Okinawans than Tlingit, which may indicate a better chance of survival, but it is broken down into smaller groups with different dialects. This may be a problem for the revitalization of Okinawan language overall.

For survival, a language needs to be seen as important for daily life. Local community based groups for both the Tlingit and Okinawan languages have been active in trying to provide opportunities for their use. The Tlingit have organized community events in which speaking in Tlingit is encouraged.

Okinawan groups have asked Naha City to establish an official center where speakers of the language can train people to become

language. 63.8% answered they either understand the language very well or mostly. 53.6% said that they do not teach the language to their children. <<http://www.pref.okinawa.lg.jp/site/bunka-sports/bunka/shinko/simakutuba/documents/kenminishiki.pdf>>

Displaced and Endangered Languages: The Tlingit of Alaska and the Okinawan Language teachers so that it can be taught in schools. In addition, people are asking Okinawa Prefecture to use the language in their meetings, make Okinawan language class a part of the school curriculum, and create events where people can use the language. Unlike Tlingit community efforts, these have only been proposals, without action.

It is important for a language to be documented through publications and other media. These can be used as references or teaching materials. Both the Tlingit and Okinawan languages have samples of this documentation. Along with the current use of TV programs, local radio stations can broadcast language lessons or can use the language when they speak to the listeners. Local news stations can also use the language so that the public can be exposed to the language.

It is interesting that efforts to promote and help perpetuate Okinawan language and culture have also come from outside of Okinawa and Japan. The Hawaii Okinawan community has done much to maintain ties to their Okinawan heritage through special events and other activities. For the Okinawan language, an external source has become part of the effort to maintain it.

It can be discerned from the list of efforts shown in the chart above that much more can be done to assist the revitalization efforts. Second language teaching professionals can be included to assist in the development of curriculum or training of teachers. Linguists can document the displaced languages or train those proficient in the language proper techniques to use for documentation.

There is always room for increased government funding. A further step would be for governments to recognize the two displaced languages as official second languages. In this way, the language could be required for all government functions, raising its status, and making it

important to know.

Much more can be accomplished in government and private sectors, as well as at the national and local levels for the Tlingit and Okinawan languages, if basic plans are developed by government or private organizations. These plans could lead to an improved coordinated effort by all concerned for both languages.

Planning is an important part of developing and maintaining a successful revitalization program. In Saving Languages (chapter 7), the authors describe how a program should be organized, with each tribe deciding on a goal, understanding of problems from outside and inside that people might face when making plans or running an organization, and what can be expected when conducting a revitalization program. The Tlingit have some efforts coordinated by a private organization. It would be advantageous for the Okinawan effort to have a plan developed by either a private or government organization as well. It is only in this way that a coordinated effort can be made to continue the revitalization efforts of the Okinawan language.

VI. A Future for Endangered Languages

Many efforts to revitalize the endangered languages of the Tlingit and Okinawans have been made. The people to whom these languages belong have realized the importance of keeping their languages alive for their communities. They have taken important steps necessary for saving their languages for future generations, and more are necessary to insure their future survival as part of the world community.

It is important to prevent the extinction of a language. From

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the beginning of life and communication between people up until the present, languages collectively help to represent the cultures and are part of the identity of all who have inhabited the Earth. It is true that some languages have become extinct, as the people who once used them have died out or become assimilated into other groups. Hopefully these languages are at least still objects of study, and the cultural and historical information available through them readily accessible. With a concerted effort at all levels, similar to that made with the Tlingit and Okinawan languages, more languages can be saved, ensuring that all peoples are represented in the history of the Earth for now and forever into the future.

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