

Folk Tales Podcast

Episode 3: Native Language Reclamation in the U.S.

Audio Transcript

[00:00] **Intro (spoken by several consecutive voices over upbeat music):** Every summer, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival brings voices together, honoring the traditions we carry forward. This podcast is the un-hosted open mic for the Festival's tradition bearers, creatives, and storytellers. Culture isn't preserved in glass cases—it's lived, breathed, and passed forward. Here's the story.

[00:29] **mihšiinkweemiša Michael Sekulich:** We essentially started from zero with language revitalization.

[00:33] **Mary Linn:** It's okay to have a voice, to want things and work for those changes.

[00:38] **Taiawentón:ti' Chelsea Sunday:** There's a big movement in the adult for wanting to go back and learn the language.

[00:43] **Linn:** I see language reclamation as a movement.

[00:46] **Kau'i Kawauchi-Takamine:** I am the first person in four generations in my family to speak Hawaiian.

[00:52] **Brandy Thomas:** We don't have a lot of teachers. We teach each other.

[00:55] **Linn:** I see the future bright for all of these languages.

[00:59] **Lawena Toribio:** It just feels cool to be able to speak your mother tongue.

[01:08] **Linn:** I am Mary Linn, and I'm the curator of the *Native Language Reclamation in the U.S.* program in the 2025 Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

The process of developing this program actually has its roots before I came to the Smithsonian. My former job was curator of Native American languages at the Sam Noble Museum in Oklahoma, and one of the ways that we presented languages as living languages was a two-day showcase of young people learning their languages. It also showcased the teachers who didn't get much recognition, especially in the public schools, and it recognized the elders who were working with both the teachers and the young people.

So, when I came here, one of the things I wanted to do from the start was find a way to showcase young people that were learning their languages. I was able to bring in four programs, and the first program that I really wanted to secure and make sure that they wanted to come and felt comfortable being here was the Myaamia Center at Miami University of Ohio and the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma.

They represent a lot of tribes and nations that have no fluent first-language speakers. They're often considered silent languages, but I wouldn't call them that, and they don't call them that either. They're reawakening. Their language was sleeping for a while, but it's been reawakening now for quite a long time through archival means and through really hard work.

[02:53] **Sekulich:** Hi, my name is Michael or mihšinkweemiša. That means "bur oak" in Myaamiaataweenki.

My name means a lot to me. I lived outside of all of the Myaamia communities around the country in Ohio and Indiana and in Oklahoma and Kansas, so the only thing I knew about my Myaamia identity before going to Miami University was the name of one of my ancestors, which was mihšinkweemiša. That was the start and really the only thing that I had about my Myaamia identity growing up.

As I've become a part of the community, I was named, and I was given the name of my ancestor. That connection has really come full circle with me because as I've learned about all the other things in Myaamia culture, I think I've built a good base. But the through line throughout all of that has been my connection to genealogy and to my ancestor, mihšinkweemiša.

Myaamiaataweenki is unique in that it was a dormant language. All of our native speakers passed away, so we have no first-language speakers of the language. All of our revitalization work has been done by linguists through archival work, and it is now through the Myaamia Center and their revitalization efforts working with those same linguists that has brought back the language.

To some extent, most of what I've been taught has come through the Myaamia Center as a part of the heritage program at Miami University. Over the course of the last couple months, as a part of the Akimaansa internship that I'm a part of, I've incorporated more Myaamiaataweenki into my everyday speech with other Myaamiaki, or Myaamia people.

It's a community effort to learn, and we do have a dictionary that is accessible to all of our community members, but in terms of conversationally speaking, we don't really have any

native speakers, so it makes it hard to learn that form, even though I don't think I could hold in-depth conversation in Myaamiaataweenki.

With other members in the community, I can communicate. We have certain words that we have replaced our English words with in our everyday lives. In a way, we have established our own sense of fluency, where it's used in the community.

The Miami Tribe of Oklahoma runs two summer camps, one in [Myaamiaataweenki name], or Oklahoma, and a second one, Ceenkwhatanonki, which is Fort Wayne, Indiana. Those summer programs are called Eemamwiciki, and there are different age groups: from six to nine, which is Saakaciweeta; from ten to sixteen, which is a Eewansaapita; and then from seventeen to nineteen, which is Maayaahkweeta. Those really give some of the older youth in our community an opportunity to meet with the younger generation and start teaching them Myaamiaataweenki as well as some aspects of culture that a lot of us have missed living in diaspora.

Our elders are not the knowledge base for the tribe. Those working in the Myaamia Center is where the knowledge comes from, so a lot of us going through the heritage program are some of the most knowledgeable in the tribe. We all have our strengths, we all have our weaknesses, in terms of cultural knowledge, but in general we are able to provide a good amount of cultural knowledge to the younger generation, and we hope that, as we all start to age up, we can become Myaamia elders in a way that we can continually share our knowledge that we keep growing.

Even if some of the youth currently don't see themselves in leadership positions within the tribe, culturally, at least being somebody that your relatives can go to and ask questions about 'cause I think familial ties is a key aspect of my Myaamia identity. So, asking questions within the family and having that knowledge within the family is super important, and it's what we're looking to establish.

[06:45] **[Group singing in Hawaiian language with 'ukulele]**

[07:10] **Linn:** I wanted to also showcase the Hawaiian programs. They get a lot of media attention, but I did want to show both kinds so that you have people who have had no fluent first-language speakers and people who have new generations of speakers but they've learned it through school. So very different approach.

[07:36] **Kawika Keuma-Cadaoas:** My name is Kawika Keuma. I started in kindergarten.

[07:40] **Toribio:** My name is Lawena Toribio. I am from Puna, Hawai'i. I entered the program in preschool, and I just graduated.

[07:46] **Kawauchi-Takamine:** My name is Kau'i Kawauchi-Takamine. I started in preschool, and I'm a graduate.

[07:51] **Linn:** I really wanted to showcase the immersion laboratory schools on Hilo. Not only are the kids going to school and fluent—completely bilingual, English and Hawaiian—their afterschool activities, their hula, is all in the language as well. We could talk with the students about growing up in a United States public school but that it's bilingual.

[08:14] **Toribio:** My great-grandmother, when she was going to school, she knew the Hawaiian language, but when she went to school, if she spoke the Hawaiian language, she was punished for it by her own teachers because they said, "No, this is a English school, and I want you to speak English. No Hawaiian." And because they were punished, they didn't want their children to be punished as well.

My grandmother, she knew a little bit, but very little. So, when she found out that I was in preschool and I knew the Hawaiian language, she was very proud, and she would speak to me here and there, and she regretted not learning, but she was very, before she passed away, she was very happy to see that more children, more families, were getting into the program of reviving the Hawaiian language.

[09:01] **Kawauchi-Takamine:** My family used to speak Hawaiian fluently during assimilation. It was a very difficult time in our history for Hawaiian speakers and Hawaiians in general to live the way that they were living. My very great-grandmother felt that it wasn't appropriate for children to know Hawaiian language. That's where it ended in my family line till I was born and I was placed in Hawaiian immersion.

[09:24] **Toribio:** My family, they're very proud of me because I speak the Hawaiian language, and everywhere we go, they'll ask me to do the prayer or the speech for any party or event. They always ask me to teach them a little bit.

[09:38] **Keuma-Cadaoas:** 'Ōlelo Hawai'i is really cool. When it pertains to learning, it's cool to learn, like, different words for certain things. There's so many words, for one thing, and it's very contextual.

[09:55] **Kawauchi-Takamine:** As kids are, we of course love to know the bad words. In Hawai'i, they're not very bad. We have a word in 'ōlelo Hawai'i: waha he'e. Waha means "mouth," and he'e means an "octopus," and so this is kind of a bad name we call those who have maybe a loud mouth or a big mouth or who love to spill secrets because the octopus, it crawls around, it's kind of fluid.

There's many words that have a backstory or a meaning to it. It's really interesting how different cultures have different words that makes the language more interesting and more fun to speak because it's relatable.

[10:38] **Toribio:** A lot of our words aren't literal. It's very figurative because our ancestors, the way, like, our language was brought together, nothing's really literal. It's always figurative because there's always so much meaning and knowledge behind everything we do.

In our hula and also stories that we have, a lot of, like, times during the season that could represent a type of feeling. For example, thunderstorms represent a time in the season where maybe the goddesses aren't happy.

[11:09] **Keuma-Cadaoas:** I think it was just a few days ago that we were dancing a hula about makani, which is the wind, and then it started to blow suddenly, and we could see that, oh, it was a good time to do that hula.

[11:25] **Toribio:** Like Kawika was saying, it was a very sunny day, and it felt very dry, but as soon as we started dancing in the sun and we were all feeling very hot because we're not used to the heat, a breeze started coming, and it felt very nice, and we felt that it was because of our hula, and we probably brought the wind from our island over here.

Our hula has a type of power. Towards the future, I want people from our land to be able to know what I'm saying. I want everybody to be able to speak our mother tongue.

[12:07] **[Group singing in Alutiiq language with drum]**

[12:20] **Linn:** I wanted to have a group from Alaska. I had worked with the Alutiiq people in a National Breath of Life, which is looking at archival materials and helping them to understand the archival material so they can use that in language revitalization. I felt very comfortable with that group, as a lot of language programs come through museums and archives and libraries, and dance is often a vehicle for coming into language revitalization.

They're not putting all of their money or efforts into schooling. They're not putting all of their efforts into having to start from the bottom. They had bottom-up; they had top-down; they had dance; they have summer camps. They represent a lot of tribes and nations in the United States in that they have a multi-pronged approach.

[13:22] **Thomas:** *Gui Brandy.* We are the Kodiak Alutiiq dancers.

[13:25] **Hunter “Pisuta” Simeonoff:** I am Pisuta Hunter. I haven’t had an official nickname given to me, so it’s just my name translated into Alutiiq.

[13:32] **Thomas:** My name [Alutiiq name] was given to me by elders like sixteen years ago. I actually gave my son his name. That’s what moms do now. We give our children names, and I actually gave my husband his name. His name means “daddy long leg.” He’s like 6’4”, 6’5”, so he is really tall, lengthy arms.

I work in a crystal shop, and there was a daddy long leg crawling across the floor, and one of the employees picked it up to go take it outside. It was crawling around in her hand, freaked out, and she remembered this, that happening. One time, we were talking about it, and I was like, I was like, “That’s my husband’s name right there.”

Actually, we were able to create a spider on the back of his regalia, so his name is influenced into his regalia as well.

And then my son, um, his name means “wolf.” It’s Kaganaq. He has always been obsessed with wolves since he was a baby. My mom actually comes from inland Alaska, so they have wolves up there. We do not have wolves in Kodiak, so it just kind of ties in my mom’s culture along with our culture.

We don’t really have a lot of fluent speakers. There is one person for the high school class. There is one person in the preschool who actually is more fluent, but we have a lot of helpers. A lot of us are slowly learning more and more. Us dancers will just be sitting and talking and learning. I learned from them just from them talking.

I didn’t do a lot of language actually, and that’s just how I learned is I learned from other people. I can’t sit in a classroom. I learned how to do the basics, and then I was like, “Okay, that’s it. I need to actually be immersed in talking with people.” It has been lost, our language, and we’re revitalizing it.

[15:10] **Simeonoff:** We have several songs that we use to learn Alutiiq because there’s only about twenty fluent, less than twenty fluent, speakers of Alutiiq.

[15:19] **Thomas:** I think we actually have about a hundred speakers maybe now because there’s a lot of us with the dance group that have learned a lot more through dance. And through the classes we have at home, the preschool is bringing up a lot of the kids learning it as well, but like more fluent, I think he is right—around twenty people.

When I started the dancers, we had just elders that spoke, and we were all looking at each other. We were at a big Alaska Native conference. And we're all looking around like "They can all speak. Why can't we? Like, we wanna learn." So, we had told the adults—at the time, I was a teenager—that we wanted to learn the class.

They were like, "Are you serious? Do you actually really wanna do it?" And we said, "Yeah." That's when the high school class came in. I was in the first high school class—that's where I actually got my Alutiiq name from—and we used to have elders come in, and we would sing the songs. That's how we learned a lot of the words at first.

We have a group of songs that are from when our dance group started in the 1980s. We practice them a lot regularly. We have a lot more, like, modernized songs now. They're a little bit more longer and beautiful-flowing.

We were actually able to get some of our songs back from our late elder-in-chief, our last chief, before he passed. We have, like, an academy of Alutiiq elders who gave us songs as well that they just remembered. Some elders will just start remembering songs from way back when they were really, really little. Like, they'll just start singing them, and then we're like, "Hey, this sounds like this word," and then we just make it flow, and we figure it out.

We just did a old song that we have. It is called "Unuku." We sang it in our language, Alutiiq, first, and then English, and then Russian, since we have a Russian influence from them coming to our island many years ago.

We've actually had, I think, almost thirty new dancers in the last year. They wanna learn the language. A song is really easy to start to learn the language. While we're at dance, we are actually teaching the words to the songs, and we break it down. We write it out on, like, boards so we actually know what we're singing and saying. That's why my husband loves it, because it's actually getting him immersed, and he's never been immersed until we got together, and he's always wanted to do that. And now it's an option.

[17:55] **Linn:** I had one more group to fill. I looked at several grassroots programs because all of these were top-down from the museum perspective. I wanted something that youth had established to fill a need for them. I just happened by luck to be told about the Mohawk group that we brought in, and from first contacting them to see if they were interested, it was definitely "they wanna be here; we want them." It was just a pleasure to work with them.

[18:30] **Sunday:** I didn't grow up speaking my language. I grew up speaking completely English. Wasn't until I became an adult that I applied to a two-year language program in the

community of Kahnawá:ke, which is close to Montreal. And that's where I spent two years in immersion and learned to speak my language.

Once I graduated from that program, I came back to my community called Akwesasne, and that's where both myself and one of my friends that I was in school with, we started our organization, which we call Ionkwahronkha'onhátie'.

My name is Taiawentón:ti' Chelsea Sunday.

At the time, there were no other options for someone who just wanted to continue learning their language. We had an opportunity during the summer where we would just get together, we would speak the language with each other, and we would visit with different first-language-speaking elders. We made it a point that we would use that time to invite all of our friends, other folks who are learning the language as well, to get together with us so that they too wouldn't lose the language.

The vision actually drives the work that I do, and it drives my efforts. I see myself as an eighty-year-old, ninety-year-old, a hundred-year-old woman, and I'm surrounded by all of my friends, all of my colleagues, and we've spent a lifetime doing this work. We believe that there is gonna be a point where someday we succeeded and our language is here, it's alive, it's thriving, and just, through that time, we've raised our entire family in the language.

There was a movement where our first-language speakers started to notice the decline in our language, how their children weren't speaking, and how you couldn't just go to somebody's house or go to the store or go to a restaurant and hear the language. At that time, the speakers got together to start talking about that and talking about what they will do to save the language, to record the language, to document it. For our language group in particular, and for other folks who are also doing language revitalization work, intergenerational transmission is the focus.

We are living in a time when we still have first-language-speaking elders living, which is not true for a lot of Indigenous communities, where their first-language speakers have already passed on. So, our methodology is: take advantage of the time when we're still here together and learn directly from first-language speaking elders, capture what they're saying, speak like how they speak. Because we're trying—we're not just trying to speak the language, we want it to be as close as possible as to how it originally should have been. Then, obviously, we start having children and realize we need to or we want to teach our kids how to speak as well. So now we're not just bringing elders into spaces, we're bringing our children into the spaces with elders.

[22:00] **Sekulich:** Certain aspects of our culture over remain the same as a part of revitalization, while others will change.

[22:07] **Linn:** The Festival has always celebrated the people who are carrying on traditions and creating spaces for these traditions to thrive.

[22:18] **Kawauchi-Takamine:** People who've never heard Hawaiian before can hear it through one of the most beautiful forms, which is through song and dance and chanting.

[22:26] **Linn:** It's more important for young people and for Native youth to say, "We are multilingual. That's who we are."

[22:34] **Thomas:** Our children, they're growing up learning English and Alutiiq side by side. They understand. They know.

[22:39] **Sunday:** Someday, the younger ones who are here, the tehatikonhsatatie, "the faces yet to come," they'll be able to have language.

[22:48] **Linn:** Language revitalization—it's a story of growth, of rebirth, of reawakening that is just a beautiful American story.

[23:18] **Shauri Thacker:** *Folk Tales: Youth and the Future of Culture* is a production of the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. Shauri Thacker produced this episode.

If these languages hooked you, tune in next episode for the native and heritage languages of our wordsmiths.