

ONE WORLD, MANY VOICES

ENDANGERED LANGUAGES AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

By K. David Harrison

From the rugged Oregon coast, to the Himalayan foothills, to the Bolivian Andes, languages are struggling to survive. Of the more than 7,000 languages spoken in the world today—many of them unrecorded, and with small numbers of speakers—up to half may disappear in this century.

Languages are humankind's principal way of interacting and of communicating ideas, knowledge, values, memories, and history. As primary vehicles of cultural expressions such as poetry, songs, textile weaving, basket making, and foodways—they are essential to the identity of individuals and communities. Languages also embody the accumulation of thousands of years of a people's science and art—from observations of wind and weather patterns to creation stories. Much of what humans know about the natural world is encoded in oral languages. Safeguarding endangered languages is crucial to preserving cultural and intellectual diversity worldwide.

As languages vanish, communities lose a wealth of knowledge about history, culture, the natural environment, and the human mind. Against this threat, a global cohort of language warriors is mobilizing. They are speaking, texting, and publishing in Hawaiian, Koro, Siletz, and Garifuna. A thousand tongues previously heard only locally are now—via the internet—raising their voices to a global audience. A positive effect of globalization, this benefits us all.

This design displays the word "voice" in several different languages spoken at the Festival. The shape in the center is from the Cherokee syllabary.



*“If there’s a hula dancer, there’s words...we can’t dance without narrative.
The language is how we communicate to our universe.”*

In June and July 2013, an unprecedented gathering of language experts, all champions for their little-known tongues, are gathering on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Speakers of far-flung languages like Kallawaya, Koro, and Siletz have never met each other, and they have seldom spoken their mother tongues so proudly in such a public space and for all to hear. Let’s listen, while we still can, and learn things we never knew we didn’t know.

SILETZ—FROM BASKETS TO CELLPHONES

Alfred “Bud” Lane III of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians in Oregon is one of the only fluent speakers of Siletz Dee-ni, a Native American language of stunning complexity and beauty. He recalls how the Siletz tribal council were outraged when linguists classified their tongue as “moribund” and destined for the dust-heap of history. But the Siletz resolved that extinction was not inevitable and began a painstaking revitalization.

With patience and perfect pronunciation, Bud recorded nearly 14,000 words for the Siletz Dee-ni Talking Dictionary. This was no small feat, since the language packs entire sentences, phrases, and ways of knowing into single words, including many specialized words for basket designs, materials, and types, like *mvlh-ch’vt-dghat*, meaning “acorn sifter basket.” Once endangered, both Siletz basketry and Siletz words are now getting a second wind.

From cradle to cellphone, Siletz continues its journey into the digital age. A young Siletz man remarked, “Sometimes I think I text in the language more than I talk in it.” It’s a struggle, he continued, to find a balance between cultural authenticity for this tongue, considered by the Siletz “as old as time itself,” and modern technology. Savvy language survivors see technology as an opportunity, not a threat. Texting “makes the language cool,” a young speaker mused, and indeed may help save it. But as Bud Lane observed, digital recordings, no matter how popular on YouTube, can never replace a community of speakers.

UNUKUPUKUPU is the name of the rigorous hula curricula of Dr. Taupōuri Tangarō at Hawai’i Community College in Hilo, Hawai’i. Dr. Tangarō, a *kumu hula* (master hula teacher), presents a *Hula Kōlani*, a sitting dance of the highest order. Items of ritual regalia are given specific names: the name of his *pā’ū* (ritual skirt) is *Paliolaumeipā’ū*, or Turtle-cliff-skirt. Photo by Maria Andaya



Alfred "Bud" Lane III of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians in Oregon dances the traditional Feather Dance with his six-year-old granddaughter Halli Chaabayu Lane-Skauge and other members of the Siletz tribe. A tribal leader, basket maker, language educator, and cultural expert, Lane is one of the few fluent speakers of Siletz Dee-ni. Photo by Ernest Amoroso, courtesy of National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution

HAWAIIAN—BACK FROM THE BRINK

Hawaiian is a success story in bringing a language back from the brink of extinction. It now boasts over 10,000 speakers, five times more than in the 1970s. This was done with great effort, and through the introduction of immersion schools that raised a new generation in the language and traditional arts: celestial navigation, poi pounding, canoe building, storytelling, and hula.

Hawaiians are also heirs to an ancient knowledge base. Their ancestors traversed the vast Pacific Ocean without compasses or maps. Memorizing star paths, sensing subtle wave interference patterns, and using their language, they could plot a true course to distant unseen islands. Is Hawaiian still useful in the modern world? Skeptics may assert that it lacks words like "byte" and "hard drive." But like any language, Hawaiian adapts quickly and has coined new words for technologies. A new generation, educated entirely in the heritage language, bridges the gap between older and future technologies.



Virtuoso musicians Dmitriy Sharayev and Viktor Batyrovich Okchayev are among the many young people who are leading a revival of the Kalmyk language and culture in the Republic of Kalmykia in the Russian Federation.

Photo by Chris Rainier, courtesy of National Geographic Society's Enduring Voices Project

Driving them onward into the internet age is an unbroken tradition of hula. It's far more than a dance style. As hula master Taupōuri Tangarō notes: "If there's a hula dancer, there's words...we can't dance without narrative. The language is how we communicate to our universe."

KALMYKS—LANGUAGE AND DANCE

The Republic of Kalmykia lies in Russia, at the southeastern corner of Europe. It is home to the continent's only Buddhist indigenous people, the Kalmyks, who speak an endangered Mongolic language.

In many ways, it is a miracle that the Kalmyk exist at all, considering the genocide they suffered at the hands of Stalin's dictatorship. One night in December 1943, Stalin had the entire Kalmyk ethnic group rounded up and sent to some of the most remote and inhospitable parts of Siberia and Kazakhstan. Many died from the hardships, while the rest, allowed to return only fifteen years later, struggled to reclaim their land and language.



TOP Lola Palluca de Quispe is a Kallawayaya textile weaver and traditional medicine practitioner from the Upinguaya community of the Bautista Saavedra Province in Bolivia. She learned her medicinal knowledge and weaving skills from her mother and grandmother, and has been involved in the care of plants and animals since childhood.
Photo by Beatriz Loza

MIDDLE Abamu Degio and Anthony Degio watch the playback of a Koro song, accompanied by linguist David Harrison, East Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh, India.
Photo by Jeremy Fahringer

BOTTOM Yaro Richo watches a video recording of a Koro song with children in Kajō village, East Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh, India.
Photo by Sange Degio



Despite considerable odds, the Kalmyk language, culture, and religion—all intimately connected within the Kalmyk's sense of self-identity—have endured. A fascinating process of cultural renewal and linguistic revival is taking place today in Kalmykia. This grassroots movement is spearheaded by the generation of teenagers and young adults. The Kalmyk have a highly developed oral, musical, and dance culture, centered around the epic tale *Jangar*, which celebrates the conquests of Kalmyk leaders of four hundred years ago, who created an empire that dominated the region stretching from western Mongolia across to eastern Europe.

Kalmyk, once in steep decline, now shows a genuine revitalization, led by the younger generations, and tied explicitly with the renewal of Kalmyk song, dance, and expression.





Kallawayan medicinal experts Walter Álvarez and Ramon Álvarez prepare a ritual table in a sacred place in Bolivia called Cantlaya. The preparation of the offering is a moment of happiness because it connects the participants with the land, with the spirits of the mountains, and with the messengers of the wind. UNESCO proclaimed the Andean Cosmovision of the Kallawayan a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2003. Photo by Patricio Crooker

KALLAWAYA—HEALING WITH PLANTS

High in the Bolivian Andes, Kallawayan healer Max Chura whispers incantations in a secret language with fewer than one hundred speakers. He and his fellow *curanderos* (healers) call upon their knowledge of medicinal plants, combined with rituals of fire, coca leaves, and animal sacrifice to foretell the future, cleanse, restore, and heal body and spirit. Yet their real power lies in their words, understood by few, yet wielded with confidence and power. Kallawayan healers derive their powers from Mount Kaata, which they believe is a living being, whom they ritually feed by pouring blood and fat into the earth during ceremonies.

The Kallawayan tongue has survived by being passed down within families and kept mostly secret, known only to the initiated few. Another language, Quechua, is used by the community for everyday talk. Kallawayan serves as a vessel carrying something of value to all of humanity, knowledge of how plants can heal us, and of how to maintain spiritual and ecological balance in a challenging high-altitude environment. As many as

one-fifth of Kallawayan men and women know how to perform coca-leaf divination, and the entire Kallawayan community relies on their rituals to sustain their environment, social relations, and subsistence.

LANGUAGE AND HUMAN GENIUS

The world's endangered languages are speaking up, finding their global voice. No culture has a monopoly on genius, and we never know where the next great idea will come from. Languages provide different pathways of thought, leading us to different places. They are the seedbeds for new ideas. They support identity, creativity, and self-worth.

From an indigenous perspective, Alaskan Yup'ik writer Harold Napoleon concurs: "Many villages have expressed interest in reviving...Native language use in their schools, because it has become evident that practicing one's cultural heritage and speaking one's heritage language promotes self-esteem in young people."



Wayuu dancers from a village in La Guajira Province, Colombia, perform a traditional dance. In the Wayuu community, orators called *pütchipüüi* (in Spanish, *palabrer*) are experts in using words and dialogue as a peaceful way to resolve disputes. UNESCO proclaimed the Wayuu Normative System, applied by the *pütchipüüi*, a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2010.

Photo by Daniel Sheehy



The Wanaragua dance narrates the history of Garifuna resistance to colonial forces. On Christmas and New Year's Day in Los Angeles, Garifuna performers continue this tradition by traveling house to house dancing Wanaragua. UNESCO proclaimed the Language, Dance, and Music of the Garifuna People a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2001.

Photo by Michele Goldwasser

Linguist Joshua Fishman, who championed Yiddish—a High German language of Ashkenazi Jewish origin—wrote: “The entire world needs a diversity of ethnolinguistic entities...for fostering greater esthetic, intellectual and emotional capacities for humanity as a whole, indeed, for arriving at a higher state of human functioning.”

When a language disappears, unique ways of knowing, understanding, and experiencing the world are lost forever. When a language survives, along with the stories and knowledge it contains, we all gain a deeper connection to our common cultural heritage. The Smithsonian Folklife Festival celebrates the survival of languages, and the wondrous art and knowledge they contain.



Capsey Api carves the name “Delta Queen” into the side of a new canoe along the Pie River, Purari Delta, Papua, New Guinea. Photo by Joshua A. Bell, September 2001

K. David Harrison is the co-curator, with Marjorie Hunt, of the 2013 Smithsonian Folklife Festival program *One World, Many Voices: Endangered Languages and Cultural Heritage*. He is a linguist and advocate for endangered and minority languages and co-founder with Gregory Anderson of the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages. He also co-leads the National Geographic Society's Enduring Voices Project. When not in the field in places like Siberia, India, or Chile, he teaches linguistics at Swarthmore College, and resides in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

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Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages documents, preserves, and revitalizes endangered languages worldwide through linguist-aided, community-driven multi-media language documentation projects and the development of talking dictionaries. <http://www.livingtongues.org>

National Geographic Society's Enduring Voices is a joint project with the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages that documents languages and prevents their extinction by identifying crucial areas where languages are endangered. <http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/enduring-voices>

Smithsonian's Recovering Voices Initiative, led by the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in partnership with National Museum of the American Indian and Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, promotes the documentation and revitalization of the world's endangered languages through research, collaboration, and resources. http://anthropology.si.edu/recovering_voices/index.htm

UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger is an interactive atlas enabling viewers to browse through the world's endangered languages using various search criteria or by clicking on a world map. <http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas>

UNESCO Endangered Languages Programme monitors and assesses the status and trends in linguistic diversity, and supports advocacy, technical expertise, and training. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages>

