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**Indigenous Youth in North America and Identity: Honouring Our Oral Tradition**

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The assimilation processes that have been systematically implemented on Indigenous peoples in North America specifically, attempted to redefine the concept of identity for Indigenous peoples. The identity of the youth generations within Indigenous peoples in North America is continuously redefined through judicial, political, and community based ideologies. Yet in North American Indigenous cultures specifically, ceremonial, land-based foundations, and language revitalization dominantly constructs identity. With the interweavement and distinction of Indigenous languages with identity, young people gain an understanding of who they are as Indigenous peoples within North America. It is through this establishment that the diversity of Indigenous languages can be influential and highly impact the environment of identity in Indigenous youth in North America. The historical constructs revolving around Indigenous languages in North America, the reality of Indigenous language extinction and the revolution of revitalization of Indigenous languages will be viewed, alongside the parallels with identity in Indigenous peoples.

### **Historical Deconstruction of North American Indigenous Languages**

Statistically speaking, it is estimated in Canada that a total of 1,172,790 people identified themselves as an Aboriginal person, that is, North American Indian, Métis or Inuit in the 2006 Census of Population. The census counted 976,305 Aboriginal people in 2001 and 799,010 in 1996. There were nearly 700,000 First Nations people identified in 2006 as well as approximately 390,000 Métis and just over 50,00 Inuit<sup>2</sup>. These numbers combine into approximately 4% of the Canadian population. In comparison, the United States statistics states that in 2010, a total of 2,553,566 identified themselves as American Indian or Alaskan Native. Furthermore, 18-25 year old create 12.2% of that population, and 25-34 years old create 14.1% of that population<sup>3</sup>. As the populations continue to grow, the transference of traditional knowledge, under the realm of language specifically, becomes highly under-utilized. This evolvement of under-utilization compounds the gradual deconstruction of identity within Indigenous youth in North America. This pertains to the historical component surrounding the desecration of Indigenous languages and genocidal legislation in North America against Indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples in North America have historically been transformed by deliberate indoctrination processes stemming from contact by European settlers and the process of colonization. Assimilative and racially discriminate processes that have been subjugated against Indigenous peoples in North America have had a predominantly adverse effect on the well-being of Indigenous peoples, specifically on languages. With the historical deconstruction, and a deeply entrenched foundation of the desecration of North American Indigenous languages, barriers were a significant daily reality of fluent speakers. The most shocking comparison was the historical percentages of Aboriginal people who had an Aboriginal language as their mother

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<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada. (2006). *Aboriginal Peoples in Canada in 2006: Inuit, Metis, and First Nations, 2006 Census*. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-645-x/89-645-x2010001-eng.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Census America. (2011). *Aboriginal Population*.

tongue. In 1951 it was 87.4 per cent, but in 1981 it was just 29.3 per cent<sup>4</sup>. This reveals the detrimental level of the one-sided, or hegemonic, reality in which Indigenous peoples in North America are living in; the hegemonic reality of attempting to walk in two worlds: traditionally and in western society. The truth is that our Native American languages have only been oral since time immemorial. Some of them have been written only in the last three centuries. We must remember this oral tradition when we teach our languages<sup>5</sup>, particularly when it comes to the youth generations. The transference of traditional and Indigenous knowledge, with a strong hold on linguistics, defines the traditional reality in which Indigenous peoples in North America live in. This traditional reality holds immense ties with the formulation of identity and personal development within Indigenous youth. Without traditional teachings and oral history being taught, the connection to ones roots and self slowly begins to diminish. With a more thorough historical analysis of Indigenous language preservation and sovereignty, is it recognized that well over a third of the languages spoken at contact have already disappeared. Another quarter are now remembered by only a small number of elderly speakers. Nearly all are likely to be gone by the end of the twenty-first century.<sup>6</sup> With shocking accounts of the past, and the reality of colonial power filtering into the North American Indigenous language systems, it becomes difficult for traditional linguistic structures to gain momentum within a racial societal discourse in North America. The reality is that language spoken only by people ages 60 years or older may no longer be viable within a language immersion program. The reason is that the stamina required to teach the language may be too much for this age group.<sup>7</sup> Assimilative policies and legislation plagued North American Indigenous languages through governmentally supported education<sup>8</sup> and this became the means to accomplish the eradication of Indian languages. Indigenous children were taken away from their families and put in government funded boarding schools. Once there, they were kept away from their families for years at a time and punished in a variety of ways if they used their mother-tongue.<sup>9</sup> In Canada and the United States governmental systems attempted to desecrate North American Indigenous languages with a strong assimilative determinism unilaterally partnering with the Western societal hegemonic mind-frame. Under Secretary of the Interior, the Indian Bureau issued regulations in 1880 that all instruction must be in English in both mission and government schools under threat of loss of government funding. In 1885, the Indian school superintendent for the Bureau of Indian Affairs

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<sup>4</sup> Burnaby, B. (1996). Aboriginal Language, Maintenance, Development, and Enhancement. *Stabilizing Indigenous Languages, Special issue* (21-36). Toronto. Northern Arizona University Press

<sup>5</sup> Littlebear, R. (2007). Preface. In Cantoni, G. *Stabilizing indigenous languages* (xi-xiii). Northern Arizona University.

<sup>6</sup> Littlebear, R. (2007).

<sup>7</sup> Littlebear, R. (2007).

<sup>8</sup> Reynher, J. (2007). November Roundtable: Needs and Rationale Group Abstract Rationale and Needs for Stabilizing Indigenous Languages. *Stabilizing indigenous languages* (2-3). Northern Arizona University.

<sup>9</sup> Reynher, J. (2007).

(BIA) optimistically predicted if there were a sufficient number of reservation boarding-school-buildings to accommodate all the Indian children of school age, and these building could be filled and kept filled with Indian pupils, the Indian problem would be solved within the school age of the Indian child now six years old.<sup>10</sup> With this political agenda attempting to redefine Indigenous peoples in North America, and mass legislation changes implemented without consultation processes aligned with Indigenous populations, the language extinction epidemic began, and it is still seen today with Indigenous youth. Without the connection to the livelihood of Indigenous languages, identity becomes quite difficult to recognize. The historical logistics behind desecrating North American Indigenous languages generationally passed on to present day learning, and through this comes a disconnect from self and culture within Indigenous youth in North America. Without language, there is no backbone, or platform for oral tradition. The language epidemic was partnered with an inhumane perspective being built by colonialist-driven agendas revolving around imperialistic economic power and control. It was through these policy changes that traditional language speakers began to experience a linguistic assault on their hereditary knowledge. The historical attack on the fundamental well-being of linguistic realities in North American Indigenous communities is not only an issue affecting Indigenous youth identity; it's a human rights issue. It is constantly stated and known that through a mother tongue, one can come to know, represent, name, and act upon the world. Humans do not naturally or easily relinquish this birthright. Rather, the loss of a language reflects the exercise of power by the dominant over the disenfranchised.<sup>11</sup> Linguistic extinction of Indigenous languages in North America risks loss of identity, specifically for youth and future generations. This loss is partnered with the societal factors that often contribute to the decline of languages. Without doubt, the forces of dominant languages and modernization exert a strong influence on any minority language. In the case of Aboriginal languages, historical events such as the prohibition of Indigenous language use in residential schools have also contributed to this process. In addition, the fact that most Aboriginal languages were predominantly oral may also have diminished their chances of survival. As of 1996, only 3 out of Canada's 50 Aboriginal languages had large enough populations to be considered truly secure from the threat of extinction in the long run. This is not surprising in light of the fact that only a small proportion of the Aboriginal population speaks an Aboriginal language. Of some 800,000 persons who claimed an Aboriginal identity in 1996, only 26% said an Aboriginal language was their mother tongue and even fewer spoke it at home.<sup>12</sup> The indoctrination processes specifically hit linguistic efficiency within North American Indigenous groups, and it was through this that the rampant loss truly began. This loss was also evident within the sufficiency of self-identity in the younger generations as they lost Creation stories spoken in their mother-tongues. While smaller percentages are adequately gaining traditional languages through the form of basic education, the

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<sup>10</sup> Reynher, J. (2007).

<sup>11</sup> McCarty, T. (2007). Revitalising indigenous languages in homogenising times. In Baker, C., & Garcia, O. *Bilingual education: An introductory reader. USA.*

<sup>12</sup> Norris, M. (1998). Canada's Aboriginal Languages. *Canadian Social Trends*, 11(008), 8-16.

natural decline of language preservation and the passing on of traditional verbal knowledge is a major issue affecting the majority of Indigenous youth.

### **Indigenous Language Extinction – The Impacts on Indigenous Youth in North America**

Through the roles of being traditional guardians, linguistic sovereignty and specific ceremony is garnered, and generationally passed down. Yet, when the mother tongue of an Indigenous language in a community becomes extinct, the impact becomes insurmountable to the future of the community, most evidently the youth. Simply put, when a language disappears, the most intimate aspects of culture can disappear as well: fundamental ways of organizing experience into concepts; relating ideas to each other; and, interacting with other people. The more conscious genres of verbal art are usually lost: traditional ritual, oratory, myth, legends, and even humour.<sup>13</sup> Through these cultural and spiritual losses, future generations lose sight of linguistic sovereignty that was easily associated with cultural connections. This loss becomes a generationally passed on tradition, allowing the linguistic extinction to become normalized. With the reality of well over a third of the languages spoken at contact already disappearing, and another quarter now remembered by only a small number of elderly speakers, the truth is that nearly all are likely to be gone by the end of the twenty-first century.<sup>14</sup> The commitment to language education within North American Indigenous nations becomes quite difficult to achieve as assimilative policies stream through the blood line of fluent speakers and further generations. Through a statistical analysis of Indigenous language loss in North America, the truth of how fast the numbers of languages are declining becomes a reality. Out of over three hundred languages; two hundred and ten are left. About 175 of the 210 languages are spoken in the United States; the other 35 are in only Canada. Out of those 175 languages in the United States, only about 20, or eleven percent, are still being learned by children from their parents and elders in the traditional way.<sup>15</sup> With only eleven percent of languages being learned by children, the assimilative process of language loss is exemplified in present day. It is through these languages, alongside the oral traditions and stories, that younger generations understand their roles in traditional societies. Without the language, it becomes quite difficult for youth to truly understand the concepts behind their ancestor's stories, and the linkage behind tradition becomes challenging to grasp. Presently, almost all of the languages still in use are endangered. Fewer children are learning languages every year, as in the case of the Navajo, or children are no longer learning them every year.<sup>16</sup> This direct influence on future generations only shows how wide the gap can become, and how it gravely impacts all spheres of a community. The authenticity behind the wealth of our

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<sup>13</sup> Mithun, M. (1999). *The languages of Native North America*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>14</sup> Mithun, M. (1999).

<sup>15</sup> Krauss, M. (2007). Status of Native American language endangerment. In Cantoni, G. *Stabilizing indigenous languages* (15-21). Northern Arizona University.

<sup>16</sup> Mithun, M. (1999).

nations not thriving on economic gain, but traditional and linguistic sovereignty holds true to the nationhood of all generations. The languages of North American Indigenous groups hold precedent when it comes to the linkages to identity. The fact that there is an uneven balance between Canada's Aboriginal languages which are flourishing and which are in danger of disappearing coincides with the relationship of North American Indigenous youth and their linkages to language revitalization and identity. It is important to note what happened, and what is happening, to Aboriginal languages over the years and what the future may hold for them.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Canada's Aboriginal languages are many and diverse, and their importance to Indigenous people's identity is immense. Language is one of the most tangible symbols of culture and group identity. It is not only a means of communication, but a link which connects people with their past and grounds their social, emotional and spiritual vitality. Although loss of language doesn't necessarily lead to the death of a culture, it can severely handicap transmission of that culture. For Aboriginal people, great losses have already occurred. During the past 100 years or more, nearly ten once flourishing languages have become extinct and at least a dozen are on the brink of extinction. When these languages vanish, they take with them unique ways of looking at the world, explaining the unknown and making sense of life.<sup>18</sup> This brink of extinction and apprehension towards implementing North American Indigenous Languages as official languages has only implementation of minimal measures in regards to keeping the languages alive. Without the language, and without notice of historical connotations revolving around ensuring North American Indigenous languages are kept alive, a discourse of apathy can develop within western society. This can then lead to a form of identity extinction within a mass group of Indigenous youth. Revitalization is essential for the growth and development of North American Indigenous youth in regards to languages.

### **Language Revitalization and Gaining Identity**

Language revitalization dominates extinction in the North American Indigenous language groups, which specifically parallels to the concept of Indigenous identity. The Congress of the United States in the Native American Languages Act of 1990 confirmed these aspirations by recognizing that the status of the cultures and languages of Native Americans is unique and the United States has the responsibility to act together with Native Americans to ensure the survival of these unique cultures and languages. It accorded special status to Native Americans in the United States, a status that recognizes distinct cultural and political rights, including the right to continue separate identities.<sup>19</sup> With this recognition formally expressed in the Congress of the United States, comes the ideology that this reality can only be held true if written on the papers of governmental structures. This reality is legislated in the words of ancestors since time immemorial, as a reality of the relationship between North American Indigenous languages and identity being founded in creation stories hundreds of years ago. Also, Congress found the

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<sup>17</sup> Norris, M. (1998).

<sup>18</sup> Norris, M. (1998).

<sup>19</sup> Reynher, J. (2007).

traditional languages of Native Americans to be an integral part of their (Indigenous) cultures and identities and form the basic medium for the transmission, and thus survival, of Native American cultures, literatures, Congress histories, religions, political institutions, and values. Congress, furthermore, found convincing evidence that student achievement and performance, community and school pride, and educational opportunity are clearly and directly tied to respect for, and support of, the first language of the child. Languages are the means of communication for the full range of human experiences and are critical to the survival of cultural and political integrity of any people. Congress thus declared it is the policy of the United States to preserve, protect, and promote the rights and freedom of Native Americans to use, practice, and develop Native American languages.<sup>20</sup> It is through this preservation that the reversal of assimilative political agendas, nationally, began to materialize. The recognition by US Congress on the impacts that Indigenous languages had on identity eventually influenced assimilative ideologies to shift into a new way of thinking in the US's societal discourse. International frameworks have predominantly been effective in transforming national ideologies in accordance to Indigenous language rights and linguistic sovereignty. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) fundamentally recognizes the key influence that Indigenous languages have on Indigenous peoples. The UNDRIP states in Articles thirteen to sixteen that:

#### **Article 13**

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.
2. States shall take effective measures to ensure that this right is protected and also to ensure that indigenous peoples can understand and be understood in political, legal and administrative proceedings, where necessary through the provision of interpretation or by other appropriate means.

#### **Article 14**

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.
2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.
3. States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

#### **Article 15**

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public

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<sup>20</sup> Reynher, J. (2007).

information.

2. States shall take effective measures, in consultation and cooperation with the indigenous peoples concerned, to combat prejudice and eliminate discrimination and to promote tolerance, understanding and good relations among indigenous peoples and all other segments of society.

#### **Article 16**

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish their own media in their own languages and to have access to all forms of non-indigenous media without discrimination.

2. States shall take effective measures to ensure that State-owned media duly reflect indigenous cultural diversity. States, without prejudice to ensuring full freedom of expression, should encourage privately owned media to adequately reflect indigenous cultural diversity.<sup>21</sup>

Although the declaration within itself is not international law, the mechanism can be utilized to ensure that it is being followed in order to fulfill human rights issues concerning Indigenous peoples nationally, and internationally. This process of accountability in accordance to Indigenous languages has surpassed basic discussion processes through this declaration. The articles specific to language revitalization effectively provide justification to the importance of Indigenous linguistic sovereignty and its relation to identity to not only Indigenous peoples specifically, but non-Indigenous counterparts as well. Through the utilization of this mechanism and international tool, the change of previous constitutional and legal frameworks in North America pertaining to Indigenous peoples can begin to happen. This then can partner with the developmental relationship occurring between Indigenous languages and identity, formulating a sense of nationhood. The parallels between language and identity are integral to the nationhood, livelihood, sovereignty, and culture of Indigenous peoples in North America. The partnering component is attempting to gain linguistic proficiency in Indigenous youth by reversing the assimilative historical legislation and the impact on languages. The younger generations are attempting to gain cultural connections through a variety of ways, yet without language, the identity becomes somewhat convoluted with the western perception of social development. In all of these revitalization efforts, youth are arguably the most critical stakeholders, after all, their language opportunities and choices will determine the future of their heritage languages as well as their own experiences of cultural continuance.<sup>22</sup> The heavy weight of younger generations utilizing underdeveloped tools and mechanism to carry on traditional, and linguistic proficiency, is difficult in an era of economic crisis and lack of basic needs being met in many North American Indigenous communities. The need to survive surpasses the need to learn a mother tongue. Yet, once youth learn the traditional languages, identity can become much easier to formulate. With identity comes the components of self-determination and the capacity to engage in future goal development. The former assimilation and slow extinction processes which caused detrimental threat to Indigenous peoples in North America, and any threat to the persistence of

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<sup>21</sup> United Nations. (2008). *United Nations declaration on the rights of Indigenous peoples*.

<sup>22</sup> Tollefson, J. (2002). *Language policies in education: Critical issues*. New York: Laurence Erlbaum Associates Inc.

personal or cultural identity, posed a counterpart threat to individual or community wellbeing. This process was highly linked to language, and language is widely regarded as one of the most tangible symbols of culture and group identity—a link which connects people with their past, and grounds their social, emotional and spiritual vitality. The process of language revitalization can be a difficult one, yet the more that the younger generations embrace their cultural sovereignty, the faster the incline will become in regards to indigenous language education in North America.

### **Conclusion**

Indigenous languages in North America and their distinct connection to Indigenous youth identity is a difficult topic to address. Yet, through the tools of learning the historical assimilative agenda eradicated against Indigenous languages, understanding why Indigenous language extinction is occurring at the rapid rate it is, and the importance of language revitalization pertaining to Indigenous youth, one can construct an idea on the strong parallels between identity and language. Through legislation, political constructs, and endorsed declarations, the process of change can begin, providing space and time for Indigenous youth in North America to learn and understand their languages. Yet, it is truly up to the youth themselves to mobilize and interact with their elders to gain their cultural, and oral histories. The resurgence is happening, the 7<sup>th</sup> fire prophecy is occurring, and young Indigenous generations are now speaking up.

### **Recommendations:**

- 1.) The UN to encourage and support all States to formulate Indigenous language preservation commissions with particular focus on the links between language and identity. Youth perspectives and participation must play an integral role and the core of all language preservation commissions.
- 2.) The UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) provide a follow-up report on the recommendations from the International Expert Group Meeting on Indigenous Languages in 2008 to ensure that discussion continues on the importance of language to identity and workable solutions are discussed with an aim to implement in a reasonable timeframe.
- 3.) Ensure that Indigenous youth are involved in all Expert Group Meetings and the UNPFII in areas concerning languages and identity.
- 4.) UN encourages all states to surpass endorsing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples with particular focus on articles pertaining to Indigenous languages, and holds states accountable for implementation processes of all articles.
- 5.) The UNPFII provides financial support for the Global Indigenous Youth Caucus to meet regularly to further address the issue of identity within Indigenous youth, globally.

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