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**INTERNATIONAL EXPERT GROUP MEETING
ON INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES**

8-10 January 2008, New York

Presentation to the International Expert Group Meeting
on Indigenous Languages

Presented by the Kanien'kehá:ka Onkwawén:na Raotitóhkwa
Language & Cultural Center

Mohawk Nation at Kahnawà:ke



KANIEN'KEHÁ:KA ONKWAWÉN:NA RAOTITÍÓHKWA LANGUAGE & CULTURAL CENTER

Ionkwaterièn:tare ne Kahnawa'kebró:non tsi Niionkwaweinnò:ten

**Presentation to the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues:
International Expert Group Meeting on Indigenous Languages
January 8, 2008**

**Presented by the Kanien'kehá:ka Onkwawén:na Raotitíóhkwa
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Tekwanonhwerá:tons sewakwé:kon tsi ionkwatia'taró:ron ne nón:wa wenhniserá:te tsi nikarí:wes ne Sha'tekohshérhon. Teiowí:sonte niwakshennó:ten, Kanien'kehá:ka nitiató:ten tánon wakenonhses-ró:non ne Kahnawà:ke.

Midwinter greetings to you Madame Chairperson and to each of you here today. My name is Teiowí: sonte Thomas Deer. I am here today representing the Kanien'kehá:ka Onkwawén:na Raotitíóhkwa Language & Cultural Center, which is situated in the Mohawk Nation at Kahnawà:ke. As a citizen of the Haudenosaunee, I'd like to first congratulate Tonya Frichner on her appointment to the Permanent Forum as it is certainly a victory for our people to have her in such a prestigious and invaluable post in the United Nations.

I'd like to begin by explaining our language and cultural situation in Kahnawà:ke and report upon the recent activities and achievements made within our community. As Kenneth mentioned earlier, our community had only regained control of education during a period of cultural reawakening and nationalism in the late 1970's/early 1980's. Before that, our community was at the discretion of faith-based and state-controlled education, which resulted in a severe language gap that my parent's generation fell victim to; ultimately trickling down into my generation.

In 1978, Kahnawake's Cultural Center had been established and was mandated by the community to serve as both hub and conduit for our people to relearn and re-experience that which distinguishes ourselves as Kanien'kehá:ka; *tsi niionkwarihó:ten* – our culture. As a demonstration of independence during a period where it was much needed, our community endeavored upon creating its own high school and elementary immersion program through our newly established education center. At the same time, the *People of the Longhouse*, our traditional government that exists beneath the Six Nation Iroquois Confederacy, also created two schools that were grounded within our language and cultural traditions.

These programs are considered victories for our people as they continue to exist and thrive today.

In the early 2000's however, during a series of community meetings it became evident that our language situation had somewhat worsened of late as we came to the sad realization that many of our teachers (mostly elderly) were passing away with no one to replace them. Moreover, in evaluating the effectiveness of our existing elementary immersion programs, it became more and more evident

that the children weren't using their language outside of the classroom; making it what we often call a *school language*.

We understood all too well that this was due to the intense language gap created before the initial immersion program in the early 1980's, which inhibited the children of the immersion program to converse at home since their parents did not speak their language. Another obstacle is the overpowering influence of non-indigenous popular media which is thoroughly accessible within our socio-geographic region outside of Montreal.

In evaluating the many causes that inhibited the effectiveness of our language programs, the community understood that something much more drastic and aggressive was needed if the language were to survive the next 50 years. In 2001, a merging between the Onkwawén:na Center and the Cultural Center resulted in a reinvigorated institution of learning called the Kanien'kehá:ka Onkwawén:na Raotitóhkwa Language & Cultural Center. Shortly after this change, KOR along with other community organizations initiated a pilot project called Kanien'kéha Ratiwennahní:rats, an adult immersion program with an emphasis on teacher training. Kanien'kéha Ratiwennahní:rats is now in its sixth year and while it no longer has an emphasis on creating teachers specifically, it gives adults the ability and opportunity to converse with their children, many of whom are currently enrolled in existing the immersion programs.

Kanien'kéha Ratiwennahní:rats had prepared many parents in establishing a communal language nest, based upon the extremely successful Maori model. Kahnawake's language nest, another initiative of our traditional government, immersed both pre-school children and their parents in an all-Kanien'kéha environment that mimics the common household within our community. The program, while certainly intensive, was immensely successful as it produced a new generation 1st language speakers of Kanien'kéha. Surely there is a distinction between one who has acquired that Kanien'kéha in later years as a second language, and one who's learnt Kanien'kéha as a first language. The distinction being; these children actually think in the language,

No doubt, one of the primary obstacles in creating any immersion program is curriculum. As there is no existing curriculum in our language, we must endeavor in creating our own. We achieved this by creating a curriculum department within KOR, which focuses on developing culturally relevant curriculum that harmonizes with the goals and objectives of both Kanien'kéha Ratiwennahní:rats and KOR.

In a symbiotic relationship between the teachers and students of Kanien'kéha Ratiwennahní:rats, they themselves determine what curriculum is needed to achieve their goals of language comprehension and cultural identity, which allows us to remove the yoke of colonial control and influence over our education. Basically we teach and learn about who we are.

Aside from the in-house immersion program, KOR has adopted modern technologies as a means to teach our people using attractive means as we must now compete with MTV and video games. We began our multimedia activities with radio, by creating a weekly open-line talk show, hosted by two local elders. We also provide both our radio station and local newspaper with weekly Kanien'kéha lessons.

We then progressed into television and currently produce two television shows on the KOR site, which in turn is broadcast within the community via closed circuit cable TV network. Our first show is called *Tóta tánon Ohkwá:-ri*, which features a variety of puppet characters and serves as our answer to Sesame Street. *Tóta* and *Ohkwá:ri*, now in its four season, is targeted towards children

and pre-school children in particular. Our other television series is a news magazine, which reports on all culturally relevant activities that take place within our community and the Iroquois Confederacy.

As another extension of multimedia endeavors, KOR created a partnership with Rosetta Stone, a software company that has developed a unique interactive language comprehension software based upon visual/cognitive association. In 2006, KOR released the first ever Kanien'kéha interactive language software via Rosetta Stone.

Currently, KOR is developing an ambitious semi-animated feature that should prove attractive to younger and adult viewers alike. The feature, being recorded entirely in Kanien'kéha, will focus appropriately on our original teachings articulated in our majestic Creation Story. Aside from the animated feature, which will be available on DVD once finished, the story will be available and relayed through a variety of mediums. We believe that by commandeering the aesthetic of popular media, we can certainly generate an invigorated interest in language and culture amongst who we call in our language *Tehotikonhsatáties* – the faces that are yet to come.

Ultimately, KOR has its sights on creating a post-secondary institution; a goal I am confident we will achieve in my lifetime.

Politically, we must further concern ourselves in the area of funding and program sustainability. Far be it for me to absolve the fiduciary responsibility of colonial states, but I would certainly advise caution when seeking *foreign aid* from the state. In many cases, the conformability of receiving constant and consistent funds from state may in fact breed an Indigenous dependence upon the state. This would allow the state to exert much more control and influence over Indigenous Peoples; thus inhibiting or preventing their ability to self-determine as per the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Furthermore, by having the state flip the bill for both language and cultural programs, the state may become empowered to commandeer a culture that is not theirs. Certainly we feel that our language and cultural rights would not hurt the national unity of the colonial state, however we must ensure that the cultural and language rights of Indigenous Peoples remains the intellectual property of the Indigenous Peoples themselves. By allowing a colonial state to amalgamate the cultures of Indigenous Peoples within their own national heritage, truly undermines the right of Indigenous Peoples to maintain their identity as distinct sovereign peoples as it is defined by their respective cultures and languages.

In conclusion, all of our successes and achievements could not have taken place if we had not worked so hard in asserting our jurisdiction and sovereignty over our education and culture; nor could it have happened if we had not removed Canadian control and influence upon our children's future. Through modern technology and ancient teachings, we will continue to do for ourselves. After all, who knows us better than ourselves?

Tho niió:re nentakaterihwatkwé:ni,
Ta ne tho