Voices of the Earth, Part 2
Langscape Magazine is an extension of the voice of Terralingua. It supports our mission by educating the minds and hearts about the importance and value of biocultural diversity. We aim to promote a paradigm shift by illustrating biocultural diversity through scientific and traditional knowledge, within an appealing sensory context of articles, stories, and art.

ABOUT THE COVER PHOTOS
Front: Dr. Rimberia Mwangi, Sacred Site Custodian, Meru, Kenya.
Photo: Jess Phillimore/The Gaia Foundation, 2012
Back: Two fishermen on Lake George, Western Uganda.
Photo: Hal Rhoades/The Gaia Foundation, 2016
Faith Baisden

Faith Baisden is from the Yugambeh community south of Brisbane, Australia. She is an artist, photographer, curator, and composer. Faith is Director of Binubal Projects, an Indigenous consultancy involved in business planning; Indigenous language, cultural, and artistic project management; and book production. Faith has been involved for over twenty years with Indigenous language projects both at the community level and in consultation for state and national policy in support of languages.

Carolyn Barker

Carolyn Barker is a producer, contemporary jeweller, and facilitator of community cultural development projects. When she isn’t head down at her bench or playing in the wild with family, Carolyn works with creative Indigenous language workers through First Languages Australia and the Queensland Indigenous Languages Advisory Committee on an array of national projects, including Yaman: Voices of an Ancient Land; Warra: Building Teams, Building Resources; and Gambay: Australian Languages Map.

Peter Bridgewater

Peter Bridgewater is a visiting fellow at the Australian National University’s Centre for Museums and Heritage, a visiting professor at Beijing Forestry University, and an adjunct professor at the Institute of Applied Ecology at the University of Canberra, where he pursues an interest in the links between biological and cultural diversities.

Kagole Margret Byarutfu

Kagole Margret Byarutfu, from the Hoima region of Uganda, is a custodian of seeds and of a sacred natural site. Under the shadow of oil mining and land-grabbing, she has gathered her clan and elder women from other communities to reaffirm their knowledge, revive indigenous seeds, and rehabilitate the land.

Clint Carroll

Clint Carroll is an enrolled citizen of the Cherokee Nation and an assistant professor in the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder. His work with Cherokee communities in Oklahoma focuses on tribal environmental management; and book production. Faith has been involved for over twenty years with Indigenous language projects both at the community level and in consultation for state and national policy in support of languages.

The Cherokee Nation Medicine Keepers

The Cherokee Nation Medicine Keepers are a group of Oklahoma Cherokee elders who have incorporated to perpetuate Cherokee ethnobiological knowledge for future generations. As fluent Cherokee speakers conversant with the ties between language, knowledge, and the environment, they seek to strengthen these connections by promoting tribally led land education and conservation.

Thomas Dick

Thomas Dick is an independent producer and researcher who is currently completing his PhD. He has produced two documentary films with communities in Vanuatu, and is an associate producer of the Australian film “Yaman”. He is an investigator on a project funded by the Australia Research Council, which explores music, mobile phones, and social justice in Melanesia.

Joanna Dobson

Joanna Dobson lives on the North Norfolk coast, England, where she is writing her book To Altai, which describes her experiences of living for a decade with the Indigenous People of the Altai Republic. During that time she worked as a translator in the field of biocultural conservation.

Javier Domingo

Javier Domingo hails from Bariloche, Argentina, and is working on a revitalization program for the Tehuelche language of Patagonia. He holds masters’ degrees in Comparative Languages and Literatures and in Italian Language and Culture for Foreigners from the University of Bologna, Italy; and a master’s degree in Cultural Anthropology and Ethnolinguistics from the University of Venice.

Amy Eisenberg

Amy Eisenberg is a botanist and associate scholar with the Center for World Indigenous Studies. She received her PhD in Arid Lands Resource Sciences (Etnoecology) and American Indian Studies from the University of Arizona. She conducted collaborative research with the Aymara people of Chile through USAID and the International Cooperative Biodiversity Group Project.

Marilee K. Gloe

Marilee K. Gloe has a Master of Arts in Cultural Sustainability. Working with Indigenous cultures, she focuses on cultural capital resources, natural resource preservation, and biodiversity. In the Caribbean she assists in the development of ecologically sustainable small-scale aquaculture to reduce coral reef degradation and ensure food security.

Patrick Howard

Patrick Howard is a assistant professor in the Education Department at Cape Breton University in Nova Scotia, Canada. A former public school teacher for over twenty years, his research explores the intersection between language, literacy, phenomenology, and ecology. His article “Inspiriting the Bioregional Imagination: Deepening the Connection to Place through Reading, Writing and Ecology” was published in Green Teacher.

Ajuawak Kapashesit

Ajuawak Kapashesit, of Cree and Ojibwe heritage, is a non-profit communications consultant, freelance writer, and researcher. He graduated from Macalister College in Saint Paul, Minnesota, USA, with a degree in Linguistics focusing primarily on endangered languages, and has been working in this field ever since.

Kristina Kelman

Kristina Kelman is a highly accomplished choral director, having directed some of Queensland’s best performing choral groups. Kristina’s choirs have won several local, state, national, and international competitions. She holds a PhD in Music Education and a Master of Music in Jazz Voice and Choral Studies.

Joseph Lambert

Joseph Lambert does research and communications work for the Gaia Foundation, where he has been particularly involved in facilitating the 2016 United Nations’ “Harmony with Nature” Dialogue. He lives in Brighton, England, and is also studying for a master’s degree in Environmental Law.

Katherine Dominique Lind

Katherine Dominique Lind hails from Colorado and is currently living in Bloomington, Indiana, where she is working on her dissertation at Indiana University. She teaches rhetoric courses focused on public advocacy, animal communication, public memory, and social movements.

Asha Paudel

Asha Paudel is an assistant lecturer at Amrit Campus, Tribhuvan University, Nepal, teaching about climate change and biocultural diversity in the high Himalayas. An accomplished field scientist, her interests also lie in pollination biology as well as plant systematics of the alpine regions of Nepal.

Andrea Lyall

Andrea Lyall is a registered professional forester working with Indigenous forestry initiatives in Canada and the USA. She teaches Aboriginal Forestry at the Faculty of Forestry at the University of British Columbia, Canada. She is working on her PhD dissertation, with a focus on Indigenous perspectives on forests and culturally relevant forest governance. She is a member of the Kwakwaka’wakw Nation.

Priscilla Wehi

Priscilla Wehi is a conservation biologist at New Zealand’s government terrestrial ecology institute, Landcare Research Manaaki Whenua, and also parents three children. She is a 2014-2020 Rutherford Discovery Fellow with interests in human-nature relationships and stable isoype ecology. She affiliates to Tainui, Tūhoe, and Ngāpuhi through marriage.

Hēmi Whanga

Hēmi is a research fellow in Te Pua Wānanga ki te Ao at the University of Waikato, Aotearoa/New Zealand. He has worked as a project leader and researcher on a range of projects centered on the revitalization and protection of Māori language and knowledge. He affiliates to Ngāti Kahungunu and Ngati Tabu.

Ken Wilson

Dr. Ken Wilson grew up absorbed by both the cultural diversity and biological diversity of Central Africa, and committed to integrate them despite an excess of English education. He enjoyed trying that at Oxford, the Ford Foundation, and The Christensen Fund. Retiring to Borneo in 2015, he remains involved with the African villages of his youth.
Taking the Dance

Luisa Maffi

Am I ever so lucky! As Landscape Editor, I sit in my Salt Spring Island office and, looking out of the window, I not only get to see the stunning beauty of the coastal rainforest all around me, I also get to see the entire world in its full biocultural glory. I see it vividly through the eyes of the revolving cast of diverse, thoughtful, and eloquent contributors whose poignant words and images grace the pages of our magazine. What a privilege it is to listen to this chorus of voices of the Earth, and what a joy to share those voices with you, our readers!

In the second of a two-part series devoted to the theme of “Voices of the Earth,” we again travel across continents to drop in on some of the myriad peoples and places that, like wet and warp, form biocultural diversity’s tightly woven fabric. And we again hear stories of connectedness and resilience, challenges and struggles, re-emergence and resurgence. But first we travel for a while through the more rarified world of ideas and reflections—through a tapestry of thoughts that help us delve deeper into a concept that, intuitively appealing as it may be, is often hard to define and comprehend: biocultural diversity.

To start off, in this year that marks Terralingua’s twentieth anniversary, we bring you a second article in our Special Feature “Biocultural Diversity at 20.” The guest writer for this issue’s feature is Ken Wilson, biocultural diversity champion extraordinaire and a close Terralingua friend of many years. A visionary in the world of philanthropy, Ken recognized early on the value and promise of the nascent idea of an “inextricable link” among cultural, linguistic, and biological diversity. In a fond retrospective look at the birth of biocultural diversity out of several decades of intellectual gestation, he skilfully traces the ideological and political changes that made it possible for the concept to emerge and take off when it did. As he puts it, he was fated to throw his life “into loving this golden child.” So, too, was he bound to throw his support (and that of the foundations he was involved in) behind that child. And the world, I might add, is a far better place for it.

In the “Ideas” section, Peter Bridgewater also pursues some historical musings about the rise of ideas that, like that of biocultural diversity, intensively link the cultural with the biological. He revisits the concept of “linguasphere”—a concept that he and his linguist daughter proposed nearly two decades ago, on the model of Teilhard de Chardin’s idea of the noosphere, or Earth’s “thinking envelope.” Similarly, the linguasphere can be seen as a planetary “envelope” of languages and cultures that overlays and interacts with the biosphere. In what is now coming to be known as the Anthropocene—the epoch of global human impact on Earth—Peter finds the linguasphere to be as relevant and even more essential than ever. Maintaining the diversity of languages within the linguasphere along with the worldviews they embody, he argues, is key for us to survive and thrive in the Anthropocene.

On a related note, Joseph Lambert points to language as “both a reflection and an agent—a mirror and a maker” of societal attitudes and perceptions toward Mother Earth. Reflecting on a series of “Harmony with Nature” dialogues that the United Nations has been conducting for a few years, Joseph finds that the dialogues—propelled by the UN’s “brute-force” ability to bring language, and the associated social change, into the global psyche—may have the potential to shift mainstream discourse about humans and nature away from prevailing anthropocentric views of humanity as fundamentally separate from and dominant over nature. That is especially the case, he argues, insofar as the dialogues bring to the fore a diversity of voices, including Indigenous voices, to share alternative ideas and radical language that can help steer global society onto a more sustainable Earth-centered, bioculturally focused path.

The links between language, landscape, and custom—and the way in which those links shape understanding, identity, and memory—are the object of both essays in the “Reflections” section. In a heartfelt and poetic recollection of his years as a teacher in Newfoundland on the east coast of Canada, Patrick Howard brings us the world and words of children from that rugged land sculpted by wind and waves, which was once home to a thriving cod fishery. That fishing way of life, gone now for over three decades after the fishery’s collapse, still formed an essential element of the children’s sense of belonging. As he puts it, “That fishing way of life, gone now for over three decades after the fishery’s collapse, still formed an essential element of the children’s sense of belonging.”

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with nature; and a throat-singing storyteller whose voice and music flowed and permeated the landscape as if ’ceremoniously blessing all that it encountered.” In that land’s permeable words, each of these remarkable figures brings us closer to an emotional understanding of the spiritual link between people and place and of the sense of reciprocity that resides at the root of that link.

Kagole Margret Byarufu, a member of the Bagungu tribe of western Uganda, is another sacred natural site custodian, who inherited that role through her family lineage. The inheritance comes with a strong responsibility to protect and care for such places of special cultural and spiritual significance, which often are of great importance for nature conservation. “These sites,” she explains, “are instrumental in promoting co-existence and living in harmony. They help in protecting the spiritual connections between us, the people, and Mother Earth.” And that is the task that she and other women have dedicated their lives to. In so doing, these intrepid women are also helping preserve traditional seeds, wild foods, and medicinal plants—often working against the tide of religious conversion and acculturation that leads local people to abandon ancestral beliefs as pagan and backward, and to then damage or destroy sacred sites for which they no longer have respect and care.

Sometimes, though, a sacred natural site can be as popular as ever and yet become degraded. The wisdom of their languages to address our real-life problems. “As we need to resort to all forms of knowledge in all directions from all that advocates of diversity in nature and culture stand for. But we need to take a longer view and heed what Ken Wilson in his opening essay urges us to do: “Take the dance”—the joyous and life-affirming dance of biocultural diversity. And so I hope you will. Step onto that ancient dance floor, tune in to the music, and enjoy. The more of us who sway to that rhythm, the greater our hope will be for a truly sustainable future.

Biculturally yours,
Lujo Matti
Lanscape Editor
Co-founder and Director, Terralingu

Whatever parts are left of the “story” of the Tehuexche language of Patagonia, Argentina, Javier Domingo is at work to help rescue and revitalize it. For what he knows and respect. The next three “Dispatches” stories chronicle efforts to reawaken and reinvigorate Indigenous languages and the place-based knowledge and wisdom that they embody. These efforts also aim to bring those rich stores of knowledge and wisdom to bear on recreating this sense of interdependence and interdependence between people and nature, reaffirming traditional ways of sustainably managing the environment, and rebuilding Indigenous identity.

Andrea Lyall, of the Kwakw̱aḵa’wakw First Nation of coastal British Columbia, Canada, recounts her personal journey to gain fluency in her ancestral language, Kwakw̱ala, and to compile a dictionary of plant names and related ecological knowledge. Kwakw̱a’wakw knowledge of forest trees and plants is of special relevance to her work as a forester. That knowledge reveals not only “how the forest works,” but also what the Kwakw̱a’wakw have considered sacred in their relationship with the land—a bond that has been traditionally upheld through the performance of stories, songs, and ceremonies. As Andrea and other researchers learn more about age-old Indigenous management practices that were successfully applied along the coast, the importance of learning from Indigenous knowledge for wise environmental decision making and stewardship becomes ever more apparent.

Similarly, Hémi Whanga and Priscilla Wehi delve into their Māori oral traditions in search of gems of ecological and cultural wisdom whose meaning had become lost to the younger generations of their tribe. In all the past to illuminate the future. Ancestral sayings in the Māori language offer clues to ecological knowledge while metaphorically conveying observations and precepts about human behavior. The wisdom of their ōpuna—their ancestors—emerges vividly from Hémi’s and Priscilla’s examples. That wisdom suggests, as they put it, that at a time in which “humankind is at a cultural, linguistic, biological, and spiritual crossroad,” we need to reassert stewardship of all languages to address our real-life problems. “As Indigenous Peoples have realized,” they add, “all parts of the story matter.”

The topics of language and knowledge revitalization continue with the “Action” article and the remaining two “Louder Than Words” photo essays. Ajuawak Kapashesit goes straight to the nuts and bolts of documenting and “saving” the country’s “vanishing voices.” What does it mean for a language to be “endangered”? How many levels of endangerment are there, and what kind of situation does each level correspond to? And what can be done to reverse endangerment and re-establish the intergenerational transmission of language fluency? Ajuawak gives useful answers to such practical questions, while warning that the work is indeed difficult and slow. But the reward, he likens it to that of growing a flower: with the right care, you see it bloom.

Clint Carroll and the Cherokee Nation Language Keepers in Oklahoma, USA, understand the challenge of restoring intergenerational transmission—especially at a time when youth’s attention is captivated (and distracted) by the instant availability of technology, games, and social media. Mindful of that, the Cherokee elders chose to harness video technology to create a documentary in which they convey their views and values about language, land, and health. Their photo essay presents a series of stills from the documentary, along with excerpts from the elders’ commentary. The final photo essay, which is brought to us by Faith Baisden, Thomas Dick, Carolyn Barker, and Kristina Kelman. Those six forces of nature (and culture) cases together around the idea of using contemporary song to re-instill pride in Indigenous languages and cultures and rebuild the strength of identity. The outcomes are 143 songs in five different languages, a companion video, and rousing live performances. The photo essay gives us an intimate glimpse of the process—and the video and other audiovisual resources are not to be missed. View additional online content at http://www.terralinguabuntu.org/Landscape/Volume_5/yanami/

This issue of Lanscape continues online with some “Web Extra” content. The essay by Katherine Dominique Lind (available at http://www.terralinguabuntu.org/Landscape/Volume_5/ lind.pdf) tackles a different approach to “listening to the voice of the Earth”: the approach taken by Conservation International with its “Nature Is Speaking” video campaign. A critical look at this campaign leads Katherine to conclude that it misses its target and may actually end up being counterproductive, obfuscating “the stark truth about ecological collapse.”

We do live in times of ecological collapse—and of rising social unease and uncertainty. The tide appears to be pushing us in the opposite direction from all that advocates of diversity in nature and culture stand for. But we need to take a longer view and heed what Ken Wilson in his opening essay urges us to do: “Take the dance”—the joyous and life-affirming dance of biocultural diversity. And so I hope you will. Step onto that ancient dance floor, tune in to the music, and enjoy. The more of us who sway to that rhythm, the greater our hope will be for a truly sustainable future.

Biculturally yours,
Lujo Matti
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If there are challenges in language revitalization, none of them seems to have been daunting enough to the six Australian Aboriginal women who launched the “Voices of an Ancient Land” project celebrated in the final photo essay, which is brought to us by Faith Baisden, Thomas Dick, Carolyn Barker, and Kristina Kelman. Those six forces of nature (and culture) cases together around the idea of using contemporary song to re-instill pride in Indigenous languages and cultures and rebuild the strength of identity. The outcomes are 143 songs in five different languages, a companion video, and rousing live performances. The photo essay gives us an intimate glimpse of the process—and the video and other audiovisual resources are not to be missed. View additional online content at http://www.terralinguabuntu.org/Landscape/Volume_5/yanami/
Flourishing at Twenty

On Context and Foundations in the Rise of the Concept of Biocultural Diversity

In the last issue of Landscape, Dave Harmon traced the emergence of the field of biocultural diversity as a call for engagement with the beautifully rich complexity of life. In this second take on “biocultural diversity at twenty,” I ponder the emergence of the concept (and field) from the perspective of the history of ideas and idea making. The concept took off when it did, quickly flowering and bridging to the mainstream after centuries of marginalization, because deep global intellectual and political changes that embraced diversity and complexity created conditions for the term to take root.

Let’s start in the 1960s. Western thought had been captivated for centuries by the Cartesian separation of “nature” and “culture” and Newtonian physics of linear causation. Although Indigenous and other more holistic ways of knowing were still entirely marginalized, it was in the 1960s that we began to awaken to the concept of biocultural diversity was in their languages, cultural values, and institutions and was expressed in ways that were crafted to be beautiful. Photo: Ken Wilson, 2013

Above: Sungai community fish trap on the Kinabatangan River in Sabah (Borneo). One of the main ways that activist scholars were awakened to the concept of biocultural diversity was in their encounter with Indigenous ecological knowledge. Not only did such communities have extraordinary knowledge of fish diversity and ecology, but also their knowledge was grounded in their own languages, cultural values, and institutions and was expressed in ways that were crafted to be beautiful. Photo: Ken Wilson, 2013

European colonies, civil rights in the US, feminism, and global student movements that rejected a top-down hierarchical and mechanistic world. It was a time when discussions of cultural difference began to elicit more listening by the mainstream. When intercontinental connections emerged among Indigenous movements. When a generation arose globally that embraced freedom and pluralism. We still live in the wake of the 1960s. The 1970s were mostly spent arguing about what all this meant politically and culturally. Meanwhile, and on an infinitely finer scale, some wayward intellectuals wandered into human ecology and ethnobotany and pointed out that Indigenous knowledge was very significant.

Then came the 1980s and the explosion of new thinking that had been seeded in the 1960s. Lovelock had proclaimed the contemporary concept of Gaia in 1979, and the term “biodiversity” was coined in 1980. The early 1980s saw an astonishing flowering of attention to such areas as environmental history, Indigenous knowledge, landscape ecology, holism, community-based resource management and community forestry, common property theory, conservation biology, ecosystem health, agroecology, eco-agriculture, organic food, and so forth. In fact, apart from “biocultural diversity” itself, the 1980s seem to have generated all the themes in contemporary struggles around diversity and most of the terminology.

“The concept of biocultural diversity took off when it did… because deep global intellectual and political changes that embraced diversity and complexity created conditions for the term to take root.”

I was part of that movement, and we certainly intended to be deeply subversive of the Western academic canon and neo-colonial global development practice. People like me caught up in the academy fought for these ideas because of human connections we had with grassroots struggles and Indigenous Peoples. Indeed, it was at this time that “participatory” and community-based approaches emerged as the “alternative” approach to development and resource management. At the end of the decade, two themes then suddenly overwhelmed the public mind: globalization with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and climate change propelled to attention by the summer of 1988. For many that year it was Chico Mendes who represented the connection between the bottom-up struggles that motivated us and the increasingly visible planetary environmental crisis. It was only later that more of us heard about the founding of the International Society for Ethnobiology and the “inextricable link” between cultural and biological diversity framed by the Declaration of Belém.

From 40,000 feet, the decade of the 1990s appears as one of “win-win” and “stakeholders” rather than radical intellectual movements, dominated by the birthing of the Internet, biotechnology, and a time of massive global economic expansion and integration under neo-liberalism. But while all that was happening, the new thinking of the 1980s flowed unstoppably towards describing a different world.

Above: Sacred site in a forest in Bhutan. Sacred sites in culturally managed landscapes proved to be a particularly powerful way to convey the biocultural diversity concept to new audiences, in particular because numerous field studies showed how they contained higher biodiversity. Photo: Ken Wilson, 2014
unstoppable exponential growth after 1990.

result: namely, that they all show a very similar and terms (see graph), we find a further astonishing we plot the rates of expansion in the use of these associated with biocultural diversity. Yet, when in these journal articles than any of the terms (and its cognate biological diversity) is present of "biodiversity" and thirty years after "cultural diversity"—a whole decade after the coining of "diversity"—a whole decade after the coining of "biodiversity" and thirty years after "cultural diversity" entered the official discourse. Some terms are far more prominent than others: biodiversity (and its cognate biological diversity) is present one to three orders of magnitude more frequently (and its cognate biological diversity) is present one to three orders of magnitude more frequently in these journal articles than any of the terms associated with biocultural diversity. Yet, when we plot the rates of expansion in the use of these terms (see graph), we find a further astonishing result: namely, that they all show a very similar and unstoppable exponential growth after 1990.

Furthermore, when looking from underneath, it turns out that it was in the 1990s that most of the institutional structure that now underlies our field emerged, symbolized perhaps by the 1992 Rio Conference on Environment and Development and the achievement of Article 8(j) of the Convention on Biological Diversity, with its reference to the importance of traditional knowledge. The work done in the 1990s becomes especially clear when we look at the emergence of institutions working at the interface of Indigenous, environmental, and human rights. Examining a sample of such institutions worldwide from the Wiser Earth database, I found that a full quarter in the years 1990–94, and nearly as many forming in the next five years, although this obviously varies by region of the world. The decade of the 1990s was when “fortress conservation” took a wobble; when the Indigenous movement went global; and when sacred places were first discussed in official venues as places of significant biodiversity and cultural importance. All this went global; and when sacred places were first discussed in official venues as places of significant biodiversity and cultural importance. All this varied by region of the world. The decade of the 1990s was when “fortress conservation” took a wobble; when the Indigenous movement went global; and when sacred places were first discussed in official venues as places of significant biodiversity and cultural importance. All this went global; and when sacred places were first discussed in official venues as places of significant biodiversity and cultural importance.

From my perch at the Ford Foundation, I witnessed closely how it was in the 1990s that all of these struggles and the potential to succeed began to find traction with foundation, private, and even bilateral government funding. Most important of all, individuals, mostly North Americans of wealth (for better or worse), increasingly chose to back these communities and their advocates. Most of these radical donors had come of age in the 1960s and embraced the new and different. They were not afraid of complexity and were ready to back the feminine. Josh Mailman—one of them—once referred to this as the "the rise of the female donor": the era when women (typically widows and daughters) got their hands on significant philanthropic moneys for the first time. Alongside these donors, I also saw in the 1990s the impact made by the intellectuals who had come of age in the 1980s, and who by the 1990s had begun to have the capacity to influence how things worked.

It is hardly surprising, then, that the different threads we needed to name “biocultural diversity” came together in the 1990s (and not earlier or later), albeit with the alignment of the right mavericks and with the dogged creative energy of Luisa Maffi. I see these threads as being the maturing of multiple parallel academic fields that valued diversity; the recognition of trans-disciplinary connections and holism; an ever-stronger voice for Indigenous ways of knowing; and a constituency ready and able to ground a multiple-syllable concept in the deliciously complex daily reality of peoples and their struggles. I believe counter-cyclical thinking is often most potent when the mainstream is most confident. But was there really the possibility that the deliciousness of biocultural diversity and related thinking could take on the global cultural and financial juggernaut?

Along came the 2000s. These biocultural ideas from the margins, now with some institutional grounding, pressed forward surprisingly relentlessly. 

Above Left: Ma’s Juju, leading member of the Muonde Trust, at a community workshop under a mukonde (b) tree atop a granite outcrop at the home of Trust Chairman Takura Moyo in south-central Zimbabwe. Across the planet, community institutions like Muonde have found much benefit in deploying the concept of the biocultural. Photo: Ken Wilson, 2016

Above Right: Director of the Muonde Trust, Abraham Ndhlovu (right) provides the son of Chief Mapanzure (left) a digital copy of a video of the installation ceremony of his ancestor taken by colonial administrator J.D. White. As part of his nearly forty-year association with the communities of south-central Zimbabwe, Ken Wilson continues to bring social and ecological history back into the hands of the community. Photo: Ken Wilson, 2016
In my experience, the pioneers and advocates for the biocultural paradigm, and the leaders of the struggles with which it is associated, overwhelmingly elected to fight for their causes irrespective of whether they were likely to succeed and independent of whether they had funding or other support. Coming from the margins and often suspicious and contemptuous of the mainstream in equal measure, they were an unlikely group to make the strategic shift from protest, creative disruption, and quiet labors of love toward strategies that could also facilitate “storming of the citadel” as opportunities for recognition and mainstreaming arose. Part of the way that evolution of strategy happened was the engagement of social justice funders who knew something about building institutions and movements and who could resource strategic change. Again this is a story I know because I lived it. Indeed, it was while I was still at the Ford Foundation in 2001 that I learned about Terralingua from linguist Michael Krauss, for I was planning a program around Indigenous language revitalization. That was actually the first time I heard the term “biocultural diversity,” despite it having stalked me all my life, and a rather surprised Luisa Maffi received a fateful phone call. Then in 2002, as I was now involved with The Christensen Fund, the foundation’s Board agreed to make the concept fundamental to its mission and so unleash new levels of support to the nascent field.

In the 2000s, a growing number of funders allied with the passionate struggles of place-based peoples taking on the Homogenocene and Anthropocene. The rise in funding for biocultural work is thus connected to the increasing recognition of Indigenous Peoples and the need to support them on their terms and through their own institutions and partnerships. It was in 1999 that International Funders for Indigenous Peoples (IFIP) was founded in a gathering of just a dozen people; by 2009, IFIP had 51 members, and hundreds would attend its conferences. Although reliable statistics are hard to calculate, it is clear that foundation giving to Indigenous causes domestically and internationally probably increased 10-fold over that decade, especially around the intersection of environmental and Indigenous work. As funders, we did not cause this global shift, rooted as it was in the unfolding of the 1960s, but it would be hard to argue that we did not accelerate and deepen change. It is also clear that we helped close gaps and build relationships between the intellectuals and policy makers and the grassroots activists and community stewards. Bioculturalism was a powerful connecting concept.

Biocultural Diversity is, of course, not “at twenty” it is as old as biological and cultural diversity, and is a concept fundamental to most if not all pre- (or non-) Cartesian cultures. But, at the same time, viewed as a formal idea, a mantra, or a rallying cry, it is clear that it is now very much “at twenty.” It is this age because, in order to launch, biocultural diversity needed the three decades from the explosive freedom of the 1960s to build the foundations that could carry it—intellectual, cultural, political, and institutional. It is also clearly “at twenty” because of how it flourishes so beautiful, lithe, and invincible. Too insignificant as yet to have been fully tested by the powers that be, but old enough to be the determined and beguiling idea for the future. And the only optimistic way to prepare for the reorganization, restoration, and revitalization that will follow the collapse and crises that are bound to dominate the twenty-first century. As one of the many individuals apparently fated to throw my life into loving this golden child, and in the spirit of my retirement, I commend him and her to you with all my love. Take the dance.
Maintaining the Linguasphere in the Anthropocene

One of the books that most influenced me as a young student was The Phenomenon of Man by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit priest who trained as a paleontologist and geologist. His work on evolution, though not uncontested, remains some the most important in the world of paleontology. In The Phenomenon of Man, he writes: “The present zoological era... is positively renewing the face of the earth. ... We must go further and declare that ‘within this human era we are actually passing through a singular critical epoch.’ It is our wish to seek in that supreme manifestation of biological forces surrounding us, a final and direct reason for admitting the distinct existence and believing in the certain future of a noosphere.”

Without a doubt, Teilhard de Chardin’s singular contribution was this concept of a noosphere—the “thinking envelope” that overlays the biosphere, which in turn overlays the geosphere and hydrosphere, all interacting to sustain life. In developing this idea (probably alongside the Russian Vladimir Vernadsky), he was also identifying the special place of people in nature. Despite the impact his writings had on me, I learned that not only did the noosphere exist, but also there was an allied concept, the linguasphere. In a 1999 article, building on the concept of the noosphere, my linguist daughter and I developed the idea of the linguasphere, which combined language and culture as an important means for people to interact with the environment, as well as with one another. At the same time, the concept of biocultural diversity was developing, likewise stimulated by language studies. As with the linguasphere, biocultural diversity has not only a scientific base, but also a spiritual base.

“The idea of the linguasphere... combines language and culture as an important means for people to interact with the environment, as well as with one another.”

But the phrase in single quotes in the Teilhard de Chardin passage above shows that there was another idea forming in the great scholar’s mind. We now recognize that we are indeed passing through a “singular epoch,” the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is about to be accepted as the newest geological epoch—although not without argumentation. As the word suggests, the Anthropocene has been proposed as the geological epoch distinguished by the global influences of humankind. At its heart, the Anthropocene embodies a concept that appears radical to many: that people and nature can no longer be seen as separate. There is no more nature that stands apart from nature; that stands apart from people. There is no landscape or species that people haven’t affected or changed. As people, we are now affecting the cycle of weather and seasons, changing the boundaries of species, ecosystems, and bioregions, and daily manipulating the genomes that shape the rest of biodiversity. The question is no longer “can we preserve the wild from people’s actions?” It is “can we sustainably shape a world we seem unable to stop changing?” The Anthropocene suggests a worldview in which humans are not just relevant but entirely responsible for the fate of the planet. There’s a sense of epic impatience about viewing ourselves in the midst of the Anthropocene: we want the potential disasters or glories of the future to be visible now.

In the epoch of the Anthropocene, it is especially important to recognize the linguasphere as a key component of human activity and potential indicator of landscape health. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) already uses the “Index of Linguistic Diversity” (developed by Terralingua, http://terralingua.org/our-work/linguistic-diversity/) as an indicator of success in reaching its Target 18 by 2020. CBD Target 18 mandates that “By 2020, the traditional knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, and their customary use of biological resources, are respected, subject to national legislation and relevant international obligations, and fully integrated and reflected in the implementation of the Convention with the full and effective participation of indigenous and local communities, at all relevant levels.”

The concept of linguasphere resonates importantly with the environment—and with human management of that environment. People have helped shape existing biodiversity, and through positive feedback biodiversity plays a major role in shaping cultural memory—especially through the medium of the linguasphere. Twenty years on since the concept was proposed, and reinforced by the twentieth anniversary of Terralingua, it is time to revisit the linguasphere and see if we can make good use of the concept in our navigation of the Anthropocene.

The linguasphere can define both the envelope of human communications and the envelope of human cultural exchanges. Many authors have described how languages decline due to destruction or change of the habitats and ecological bases of the speakers—creating endangered languages in parallel with the more familiar case of endangered species (and, less often identified but equally critical, endangered spaces or ecosystems).
Indeed, postulated extinction rates for languages parallel those for species over the next century—and the forces for extinction are essentially the same, biotic and cultural homogenization of people and landscapes.

Endangered ecosystems are often said to be in need of preservation, yet that is the wrong word. They should be conserved, that is, used and managed in a responsible way, not kept in metaphorical glass cases. The inherent dynamics of ecosystems, coupled with the increasing unpredictability of living in the Anthropocene, reinforce this view. Similarly, maintaining an ecosystem should not imply it cannot be changed, used, or developed by people, just as maintaining a language should not imply the language cannot change or develop. A language, like an ecosystem, is dynamic in nature and will change and adapt to new situations as they arise—as Indigenous languages have done for millennia, and as today’s dominant languages such as Spanish, Arabic, and English are also doing, ever more rapidly.

How, then, does this noosphere/linguasphere manifest itself? Language and culture act in synergy to form unique worldviews containing a wealth of knowledge. These worldviews and knowledge systems are best accessed through the languages that are associated with a particular culture. This realization is beginning to dawn in many places around the world. In Australia, as the wider community truly embraces the realities of multiculturalism, there is growing awareness that traditional Aboriginal languages can enrich everyone with a bounty of linguistic and cultural diversity. On Norfolk Island in the South Pacific, the islanders (descended from the Mutineers of the Bounty) have maintained their own traditional language, a unique mixture of eighteenth century Platt Deutsch, Tahitian, and West Country English. Norf’k, as the language is called, has its own words for plants and animals of the island, the bounty of the sea, and the ways in which people intersect with these aspects of the environment for food and shelter. Again this emphasizes the role of language in linking even modern living to the environment people find themselves in.

To maintain a diversity of worldviews and knowledge systems we must maintain cultural diversity, and to access these worldviews and knowledge systems we must maintain linguistic diversity. “In recognizing our roots and recovering the language, we reclaim part of our identity, too,” wrote Cristina Zárraga in the last issue of Langscape. “We won’t be the same as in the old days, but with the new energy of hybridity, we will be able to recreate our history in the present and into the future.” Her article doesn’t explicitly mention the linguasphere or the Anthropocene, but her powerful writing takes us there all the same, and serves to underline my message.

The linkage between languages, cultures, and the landscapes/seascapes in which they developed poses the question: “Is the maintenance of cultural and linguistic diversity really comparable to the maintenance of biodiversity?” The answer is clearly yes. While knowledge about the natural world may be encoded in an Indigenous language, that same knowledge is not retrieved easily through other languages that lack specific vocabulary to describe local biodiversity and resource management practices. Using this idea, Australia’s Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) has published a range of ecological calendars, essentially based on aspects of the linguasphere.

As the first European explorer to travel through far Northern Australia in the mid-nineteenth century, Ludwig Leichhardt recorded in some detail the extent of burning he saw being undertaken by Aboriginal people on the floodplains of the South Alligator River. Such burning was (and still is) carried out for a variety of utilitarian purposes, particularly in relation to hunting activities and the gathering of vegetable foods. But there is also a cultural dimension, indeed imperative, expressed in the activity of arri warlhe, a term describing the burning/cleaning of country from the early-mid dry season. This dimension relates to the timing of burns in connection to likely rainfall and the consequent growth of particular species, which in turn promote population increase in a range of animals used for food. It also allows the landscape to become very heterogeneous in texture, lessening the potential for extensive wildfires to develop from lightning strikes, thus making for safer and more resilient living. While living in a very different ecosystem 2,000 km away, the traditional owners of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park in central Australia also practice burning as a landscape management tool, mediated through language, art, dance, and tradition—all elements of the linguasphere. And so the linguasphere includes not only language but also law/lore.

“We won’t be the same as in the old days, but with the new energy of hybridity, we will be able to recreate our history in the present and into the future.”

To sum up, a final comment from Nipper Kapirigu, Traditional Elder in Kakadu National Park, Australia, from a conversation recorded in 1984 about when, why, and where to burn country:
more radical—Earth-centered and holistic—it can be redolent with platitudes and token compromises (so “sustainable development” can mean “sustaining our current consumption”). But this does not have to be the way. We can co-opt establishment discourse, make it listen to Mother Earth, and magnify the voices of those most in harmony with nature. In doing so, we can affect how society actually and meaningfully acts in relation to the rest of nature.

The United Nations (UN) has been hosting dialogues on “Harmony with Nature” since 2012, but this year was the first time the event was opened up significantly, through a two-month online dialogue that brought together 127 experts.

So by maintaining and using all the languages in the linguasphere and their stores of traditional knowledge, law, and lore, human societies can continue with ecological management at many different scales, from local to global, helping us survive, if not prosper, in the Anthropocene.

Acknowledgments. Celia Vuckovic has been a great stimulus for these ideas as they developed since 1996. I am grateful to many folk in Parks Australia, both staff and National Park Board members, for help in sourcing and gaining permission for the illustrations—and in the 1990s for providing the environment that stimulated the linguasphere idea.

Further Reading


from 33 countries. Sorted loosely by discipline, the participants all piled in with their thoughts and recommendations on transforming our society from being destructive and anthropocentric to being holistic and Earth-centered. As one of the discipline facilitators (for the humanities), I attempted to draw together the dialogue into discipline summaries and an overall dialogue summary, the latter of which was presented at the 71st Session of the UN General Assembly in September 2016. The dialogue was limited in language; awkward in dubbing the mix of academics, Indigenous Peoples, and activists as “experts” (technocracy and “expertise” were issues frequently brought up during the dialogue); and quite possibly over-ambitious or, rather, underfunded. That being said, it was an impressive gathering of voices of those at the forefront of trying to change humanity’s relationship to Mother Earth—a sharing of language and ideas and a forging of alliances across continents and disciplines. What did we do and what can we do? How can our ideas and language take root in the UN, and why should we want them to?

The first thing to bring up is that the UN, like international establishment bodies more generally, does have a certain “brute-force” ability to bring language, and the associated social change, into the global psyche. A prime example of this is the word genocide (the height of neologisms: using both Greek and Latin roots), which was first coined in 1944 by Raphael Lemkin and then gained full force in the UN’s 1948 Genocide Convention, the Nuremberg Trials, and other regional and international fora. Originally it was “a crime without a name,” as Churchill described the mass slaughter enacted during the German occupation of Russia. When the word arose and then permeated the global human consciousness, it fundamentally altered humanity. This power to thrust new language and its accompanying set of ideas onto the world stage, or to support their rise, applies just as much for language around nature, Mother Earth, and biocultural diversity.

We have already seen the UN Harmony with Nature dialogues achieve this to some extent. In the 2015 dialogue, the term “Earth Jurisprudence” was brought up, which refers to a practical philosophy describing how humanity is a subject in communion with the rest of nature and how we must derive our laws and governance systems from Mother Earth. “Earth Jurisprudence” was then picked up by the General Assembly, and a resolution was passed to make it the centerpiece of this year’s dialogue. As an Earth-centered re-appropriation of the traditionally anthropocentric term “jurisprudence,” having such a term and its surrounding language and worldview get a spotlight at the UN is, while not a revolution, certainly the sowing of some quite powerful language.

What has come and taken root already is all well and good, but during the course of this dialogue I watched Earth-centered language collide and swirl together. Participants and groups brought with them all the neologisms, sayings, Indigenous thought, and wisdom of their lives, study, and work. All this spectacular language is what helped make the dialogue so powerful, and it is certainly worth drawing some of it out.

Much as with Lemkin and genocide, many of us take delight in the self-aware creation of new language or in finding new meaning in old language. Neologisms abounded in the dialogue—such as Glenn Albrecht’s use of the term “sumbios” from the Greek sumbios (living together) to indicate the study of humans living together with the totality of life. Another term that found its way into the final summary was “Symbiocene”—looking beyond the Anthropocene (the epoch of humanity’s impact upon the Earth’s geology) to envisage an epoch of humanity symbiotically living among the rest of nature. Other participants re-read old words, with theologian Konrad Raiser drawing on the word “Earthling” and how it emphasizes that we are “inseparably related to, and dependent on, the community of all created life.”

Even with the language limitations, the dialogue brought in several Indigenous persons, as well as academics who work with Indigenous language and worldviews. Those of us who work to preserve biocultural diversity are always keenly aware of the centrality of Indigenous communities, and Indigenous language often paints our task in clear strokes. Drawing on the Andean heritage of the Harmony with Nature programme (initiated by the Plurinational State of Bolivia), Natalia Greene spoke of the power of the Kichwa notion of Sumak Kawsay—a “full life,” which she explained as “a model of development based on cooperation and reciprocity” and one that held no place for endless consumption. The Afro-Brazilian sociologist Bas’ilele Malomalo spoke of Ubuntu, the word and philosophy common to many Bantu peoples that indicates a strong variety of communalism.

As well as Indigenous language and neologisms, there was much re-appropriation of what one might consider to be “establishment” terms. Obviously this is most dearly seen in “Earth Jurisprudence” itself—making law something that emerges from nature rather than being directed toward it. Other re-appropriations of language that emerged in the dialogue were highly...
to hear dozens of voices, coming from vastly different places in all meanings of the word, sharing the ways we can transform from an anthropocentric society to an Earth-centered one. We all had a spectacular opportunity to bolster each other’s language; to critique and challenge each other; to develop lasting and profound relationships in our collective and connected journeys. It was as though a hundred rivers converged in one place, and you couldn’t help but be swept into new ways of thinking and seeing—and new ways of listening to the Earth.

Further Reading

I feel comfortable on that rocky peninsula jutting into the North Atlantic swept by the Labrador Current. It is a place of rugged cobble beaches with black tumbles of seaweed knotted with fragments of lobster traps, abandoned nets, rope and buoys, red plastic shotgun shells, and pieces of old wharves. Driftwood lays bleached and bony white, heaved above the wrack line by great storms and tides. Onshore gusts and salt spray prunethes forests; the

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Children Give Voice to the Fullness of Language, Landscape, and Life

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We don’t like to think of our lives as predictable, as being mapped out, but our connections to people and place and how they shape who we become are most often undeniable. Much to the surprise of friends and family, on graduating from teacher’s college, I chose to take a position in a small coastal community in Newfoundland, on the east coast of Canada. I remember justifying that decision to raised eyebrows and incredulous stares. And yet the choice did not seem conscious, planned, or deliberate. On reflection many years later, it was the type of choice to which writer Annie Dillard refers in her observation, “We choose where we live.” Our lives bring us to many places; some we can call home, others we simply cannot. Most often, the choosing feels as if it is has been done for us. But, ultimately, on some level, we choose to stay, to live in a place. The reasons are as varied as our lives.

I felt comfortable on that rocky peninsula jutting into the North Atlantic swept by the Labrador Current. It is a place of rugged cobble beaches with black tumbles of seaweed knotted with fragments of lobster traps, abandoned nets, rope and buoys, red plastic shotgun shells, and pieces of old wharves. Driftwood lays bleached and bony white, heaved above the wrack line by great storms and tides. Onshore gusts and salt spray prunethes forests; the
wind sculpts coastal trees, nipping exposed needles and buds. This place where my wife and I were going to raise a family was a good fit.

We bought a home overlooking the ocean. The backyard led into endless stands of spruce and fir forest. The teaching staff was close-knit; the children warm and friendly. The years spent there were not without challenge. Coming from homes without a tradition of the literacy and the skills valued by the mainstream economy and culture, many children found the classroom difficult and required consistent, thoughtful care and attention.

As the ocean was plundered and communities decimated, the school children dutifully categorized the natural resources and diagrammed the food cycle. A way of life that had sustained communities for almost two centuries was no longer available to the young. Hope and promise were on the wane. Many children grappled with the prospect of leaving the place that was their home.

And yet, it was in this place and through language, specifically my students’ personal, expressive writing, that the children’s stories and poems spoke to me of struggles in a rapidly changing reality. “Storytelling,” writes the novelist Barbara Kingsolver, “is as old as our need to remember where the water is. It’s as persistent as our desire to teach our children how to live in this place that we have known longer than they have.” In these words, Kingsolver touches on something at the core of what it means to be human and to live fully in this world. Language—words spoken, written in story, prose, or poetry—points to experience, allowing us “to remember where the water is.” Children’s writing, their stories and insights, are often dismissed as too naïve to be taken seriously. Yet, when children connect experience and place through narrative and poetry, it offers a way of thinking about language and experiencing language that situates it, as ecopsychologist Andy Fisher says, “Within this world, as an expression of it.” It is to language that we can turn to better comprehend the relationship between our defining human capacity—language—and the living Earth. Neuroscientist Humberto Maturana emphasizes that the phenomenon of language does not occur in the brain; it occurs “in the flow of interactions and relations of living together.”

I was struck by the numerous references in my students’ writing to “the water,” the term used by so many of them instead of “ocean” or “sea.” The word “water” seemed to elicit a proximity, a primordial, elemental character. These were children whose surnames place them, who “belong” to a particular community. People along that coast ask, “Where do you belong?” not “Where are you from?” My classroom allowed for a safe space to explore this belonging, discovered through story and poetry.

The children provided intimate details of their own and their families’ involvement with the land and the sea. They wrote of berry-picking and wood-gathering, of garden plots and cabins, of favorite beaches and punts, and of “cooks” in sheltered coves. I looked for ways to take up the written word, to do as eco-philosopher David Abram counsels, to nurture children in the craft of freeing their words to respond to the language of the Earth itself. In his book The Spell of the Sensuous, Abram reminds us that words, stories, and poems can slip off the printed page to inhabit the tide pools, the beaches, the meadows, and whispering bushes of our lives. In letting language take root, in planting words like seeds, we take up the rhythm and cadence of our place.

Pointing to our inherency in language as our defining human ability and a fully embodied experience, the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty believed that languages are different “ways for the human body to sing the world’s praises.” Speech and thought are, according to Merleau-Ponty, “the perceptible world’s explosion within us.” Understanding language this way called me to identify writers who reflect our place back to us, who draw a particular power from an inherently organic, sensorial matrix—an interconnected reality.

In his poem “On the Full Tide,” Newfoundland poet Tom Davie reflects on his childhood and offers a deep sense of the participatory, reciprocal interaction with his place. In the poems, the speaker desperately seeks the recognition and approval of an old fisherman; yet...
smoking ritual the participants murmur, “We are all related.” In First Nations’ traditions, according to Highwater, tolerance, ethics, duties, and rights become unnecessary, for our relationship with all others is predicated on “the experience of the self as part of others. We are all related.”

This sense of relationality, of coming to fully and honestly know our place, requires openness, attunement, and engagement with the others, both

“Language has the capacity to inspire a deeper sense of connectedness to the world, and to that which may appear as wonder-full.”

the human and the more-than-human, who share our place. Language and story which lead out into the world in an imaginative, experiential engagement can allow children to turn to the articulated-ness of things, to their groundedness. Perhaps it is possible to return to the conditions of human fulfillment and embeddedness in the life-world of their place. Just maybe we can confront our place with awe and admiration, respect, and wonderment.

After reading Enos Watts’s poem “Longliner at Sunset,” fifteen-year-old Jamie recorded this brief response in his writer’s notebook:

The poem “Longliner at Sunset” is a poem that I can relate to. I know what it is to watch a longliner inch above the horizon heading towards the wharf, to see “a halo of saddlebacks riding the sun.” I’ve seen all of this and it fills me with feelings for my home... Everyone couldn’t help but just stare at it. No one said a word. “Fishing boats, a setting sun, a harbor in a small coastal community occur as commonplace. But even the commonplace can shift so I recognize that possibly never again will the world give me this in the same way. In Jamie’s situation, it is a moment shared by others who do not speak, who couldn’t help but just stare at it!” Language has the capacity to inspire a deeper sense of connectedness to the world, and to that which may appear as wonder-full.

Language can nurture and cultivate an attunement for the awesome, the numinous, and wondrous in our lives. The experience of engaging with the poems and stories of writers who are able to give voice to the essential fullness of life and landscape may allow children, wherever they live, to be sensible to the essential truth of our earth-centeredness, to be present to the great mystery of our being, and to be oriented to a mindful attitude of questioning their place in a cosmological whole.

Further Reading


One February day I made my way through Jordan’s al-Siq at Petra. Jutting skyward, the granite walls were shades of orange, peach, brown, and beige, whipped into curvatures and sharp edges by the passage of wind and water over time. The magnitude of the walls dwarfed all human presence. The winter air was cool, the sun visible only if you looked all the way up. As the passage ended, the area opened to reveal the place where the ancient Nabatean peoples lived, secreted away, having left their mark where the landscape opened wide: a spectacular carved rock façade now dazzling in the sun.

Curious to climb a long rocky path to the top of the granite mountain, my feet stepped one after the other, scaling a hundred steps upon flattened orange rock. Gradually, the heat of the sun reflecting off the rocks had me shed my cloak and then my sweater. Leaning against the rock, aware that I had made only half the journey, I greedily consumed what remained of my bottled water. No one else was around; not a sound was heard other than an occasional drift of wind. I leaned my head back and considered my options to either continue or descend. It was then that the sound of a young human voice floated mysteriously upon the air, snapping my mind into seeking its source.

The voice sung out. Not a melody, and yet melodic, the voice carried on in a language of antiquity. It floated; it ricocheted, hiding its origin. I climbed the rock now, searching for it. Around a bend, up some more, and then, there she was. A little girl, perhaps six years old, stood alone on a stone bluff; hands clutching a baby doll, she was still as stone. All that moved was her mouth, calling out what I thought was a song but realized might be a prayer.

It was mesmerizing.

Conveyed against the backdrop of the landscape, in the sun and wavy heat, the little voice emptied its purpose out across the rock. It was unrushed, in the way of children who live in the moment.

Without a doubt, for the little girl, mountains were a normal part of her ecology. But whether she might have a cultural association between mountains and prayer, I do not know. Nor do I know whether the place she chose had any special significance for her—or it was just by happenstance that she had stopped to sing there? All I do know is that particular spot afforded her the freedom to sing.

Just as environment shapes our human biology, making allowances for difficult conditions, so can a listener grasp the interpretation of an unknown language by absorbing its pace, its degree of force, or its softened notes. Here, the human words of a little girl spoken toward rocks eons old seemed to float over edges cut by wind and sand. My ear heard beauty, as if beckoned by a gentle soul. Yet, the same language, if spoken with force or anger, might ricochet over the same rock with jarring sharpness. Here, all the linguistic rules of understanding evaporated. What remained was what I could absorb by sight and sound, and it was the landscape that accentuated my interpretation of intent. Without purposeful thinking, evaluation, or prolonged concentration, the landscape led the recesses of my mind to associate the girl’s sounds to prayer, linking her softened voice with aural images of monks intoning notes of invocation near rocky promontories. It recalled a feeling of peace, akin to the way a child feels when seduced by the cadence of a lullaby, whether sung in the mother’s tongue or a foreign one.

Once she finished, she scampered away, surefooted and swift. I stood a moment, fixated to my spot. I became very warm, then very hot. I took off my cape, tied it around my waist. I had been careful enough to bring a hat and was grateful I had not left it behind. But oh, was I thirsty. Images of people crossing deserts, lips parched, seeing mirages… these floated across my mind as I realized how ill prepared I had been, feeling like a foolish tourist. There was no one around. I decided to keep going up.

When I finally planted my feet at the mountain’s peak, I presumed someone would be selling something to drink. Surely, the need for water would be anticipated? But alas, the realization set in that there would be no such convenience. I leaned against a stone, dizzy. After nearly
Wearily, I looked up, and there across the way, a wall crevice revealed the narrow opening of a cave. A man stood at the misshapen entry. His patterned tunic and trousers cut a crisp silhouette against the darkness; his white misshapen entry. His patterned tunic and trousers cut a crisp white and red scarf, his white headgear at the entrance revealed the narrow opening and I could think about was water.

Over a lump of charred wood inside a dilapidated metal frame, the man who welcomed me worked to heat a dented pot. In a few moments, he brought me a small cup, the size for espresso. His dry fingers lifted it near my mouth; then he nodded, as though to say, “Here, drink this.” And I did. And it was a sweet, hot something like tea. It slipped down my throat, reviving me. My eyebrows involuntarily crinkled into an expression of gratitude. No one spoke to me, and I knew to remain quiet. Unsure where to look, I gazed upon a faded poster of the current Jordanian King that was tacked at an angle on the wall. I felt better. A lot better. And then he brought me a refill.

For the entire journey down the mountain, I reflected upon this happenstance where I understood tradition without comprehending the vocabulary. In this place, a country covered in jutting, unforgiving rock and shifting sand, undulating between extremes of heat and cold, I experienced voices that, like the landscape, ranged from gentle and forgiving, to jarring and brisk. Each granted an opening toward intuitive understanding. Inside the cave, despite the initial harsh-sounding exchange of words, I felt the warm gesture of cultural kindness that sought no compensation as it met a universal human need. Odd as the landscape itself, surpassing histories of conflict, riveted into their being was the unaltered custom to honor others with hospitality.

Language is our human call system, the primary way for us to communicate, whether spoken, sung, or written. Linguists and travel writers have talked at length about the disorientation and stress visited upon people when they encounter barriers with others; language alone offers resistance. For the entire journey down the mountain, I reflected upon this happenstance where I understood tradition without comprehending the vocabulary. In this place, a country covered in jutting, unforgiving rock and shifting sand, undulating between extremes of heat and cold, I experienced voices that, like the landscape, ranged from gentle and forgiving, to jarring and brisk. Each granted an opening toward intuitive understanding. Inside the cave, despite the initial harsh-sounding exchange of words, I felt the warm gesture of cultural kindness that sought no compensation as it met a universal human need. Odd as the landscape itself, surpassing histories of conflict, riveted into their being was the unaltered custom to honor others with hospitality.

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The Aymara Cosmological Vision

“K’itarapxiw quanakaxxa, ataxta phichantaqasarakixi, qwa tuma lawanaka jik’iwraxi, ukatiti janipu-niw jik’ supkit quyua tuma saphanakaxxa.”

“One should take pride in one’s land and culture. There is a popular saying in Aymara: They cut our branches, they burn our leaves, they pull out our trunks... but never could they overtake our roots. ‘This was addressed to the Spaniards.’”

— Aymara yapuchiri (farmer) of Chile

Jaqin Urapachat Amuyupa is the Aymara cultural landscape—Aymara people’s thinking about the world. The Indigenous Aymara of the northern Chilean region of Arica y Parinacota, who for centuries have lived in one of the most extraordinary landscapes on Earth, amid glaciated peaks and active volcanos, have developed and continue to sustain a relationship of mutual respect and exchange with the earth and one another. The Aymara cultural landscape is alive with vitalizing energy and infused with powerful spiritual beings whose presence the people must acknowledge in all their activities. The Aymara are socially enmeshed in their environment and share a perpetual dialogue with the supernatural beings that govern the forces of nature. The Aymara cosmovision is one in which humans, environment, and the entire cosmos work together simultaneously and cooperatively within a network of reciprocal relations. The spiritual dimension in Aymara culture penetrates every sphere of life.

Aymara people respect and maintain the knowledge and way of life of their ancestors, which is a continuum of their social responsibility, solidarity, and reciprocity. Aymara scholar Vicenta Mamani stated, “The sacred permeates Aymara culture. We manifest our religiosity through ceremonies.” In the Andes, Aymara rituals are grounded in the daily and seasonal activities and realities of life—living on the land, planting, irrigating, weeding, and harvesting—hence the people’s very existence involves ritual. Aymara ceremonial activities are strongly associated with social and economic phenomena. The Aymara give wax lu (offerings), wilancha (llama sacrifices), and chullu (libations of alcohol) to the pitu—pudiri—the mountains, akhunaka—the achachila (protective spirits of the family and community) and to Pachamama (Mother Earth, Mother Cosmos, or Mother Universe).

“The Aymara cultural landscape is alive with vitalizing energy and infused with powerful spiritual beings whose presence the people must acknowledge in all their activities.”

Pachamama is the spirit of the unencultivated earth, who occupies a very privileged place in Aymara culture because she is the intermediary for production and the generative source of life. The achachilanaka are the grandfather: ancestor spirits that reside in preeminence places and outstanding objects and exercise a constant influence over people. The mountain peaks are akhunaka—places of spiritual power, shrines to the personified forces of nature that influence human destiny. The ancestors help the Aymara orient themselves within their holy land. They are masters of the clouds, water, snow, and hail. If they are not fed and feasted, there will be brine disaster to fields, canals, pastures, and animals. The achachilanaka control meteorological phenomena by sending rain, hail, or frost, but winds are sent by spirits that inhabit volcanos. Every extraordinary element in nature contains a spiritual essence that plays an active role in the existence of all that surrounds it, including people.

Aymara yatirinaka are wise ones, leaders in ritual and wisdom. They know intimately each of nature’s features within their sacred landscape and recount the unique history that is inscribed there in great depth. The yatirinaka feel the life forces that pervade the physical world, and they are the cultural guards of the people. They determine what belongs to Aymara culture and what is intrusive. Yatirinaka make offerings to the achachila, asking for their blessing and protection in times of struggle. Recognized as mediators between the supernatural and human beings, they intercede with the invisible forces of nature. In trance, they look into the numinous world of spirits.

Yatirinaka use kuka (coca) leaves (Erythroxylum coca Lam.), an oracle of the earth, in divination. This sacred leaf is a cornerstone of Andean culture and serves as medicine and as a way of communicating with the supernatural. Coca is used at all fiestas and ritual occasions to promote goodwill. At these ceremonial events, people beg one another’s pardon, as ill feelings are believed to destroy the efficacy of the rite. Kuka is invariably part of every ceremonial offering, and akhullu is the ceremonial sharing of coca leaf. By chewing coca collectively, one calls for unity and communication within the community, and one’s body is united spiritually with the earth. Currently, the coca leaf is being condemned, threatened, eradicated, and persecuted because of drug trafficking. Yet, for the Aymara kuka is the symbol of life and hope.

For Andean people, economic, spiritual, and social life is inextricably tied to land and water. The Aymara of Chile are struggling to maintain their sustainable and traditional systems of irrigation water distribution, agriculture, and pastoralism in one of the most arid regions of the world, the Atacama Desert. Interviews with Aymara people reveal the social and environmental dimensions of the larger conflict between rapid economic growth and a sensitive cultural and natural resource base. The Aymara help us grasp their cosmological vision and understand Indigenous issues.

We are human beings; hence we must communicate. We are obliged to dialogue, and through communication, we also face and resolve all the conflicts in which humans take part. The Aymara believe in the unity of humankind and that only as one we can make this earth a good place for us all.
Development in the Andes must respect the individual and collective needs of the Aymara people, in their own terms. Environmental transformation must be grounded in a careful understanding of the Aymara and their way of life. Our partnership with the Aymara Marka (Aymara Nation) attempts to contribute to that understanding.

Aymara people of each Andean community study the climate, soil, and plants of their respective altitudinal zones. Elders read signs in nature to determine when to plant and harvest in areas where it freezes two hundred days of the year. The Aymara have garnered a holistic understanding of their cultural landscape through many generations of living in this area, since pre-Columbian times. Aymara farmers continue to be active agents in conserving the material base of their Andean agricultural legacy and have been successful in the cultivation, selection, and adaptation of many plant species, while possessing an acute awareness of specific ecological constraints within the vast mosaic of their environment.

Minimal transformation of the Andean environment is necessary for the subsistence of the Aymara communities of northern Chile. Agricultural fields are located on terraces that cover steep valley walls like great staircases and have been carefully filled with earth to prevent erosion. Open areas are left undisturbed to ensure the survival of the native flora and fauna and the continued maintenance of domesticated animals. Thus Aymara people must be regarded as an integral part of their environment. There is no such thing as natural, untouched landscape in the Andes. Indigenous presence during the millennia has intimately shaped and molded the environment and its biotic resources; hence biodiversity in the Andes is as much cultural as it is natural.

It is in the awesome, frigid, windswept expanse of the high plateau that traditional Aymara ways of life remain superior; the Aymara are the experts in this formidable environment. Aymara culture endures admirably in one of the most challenging environments on Earth.

Aymara medicine of each Andean community reflects an expansive knowledge and understanding of nature, whose classification was developed according to their cosmological vision. Today, the Aymara of Arica y Parinacota recognize that by working together with organization and unity to revalue and revitalize their medical system, they can benefit the whole community. Their work is advancing through the Taller de Salud (Health Workshop) in Arica.

At the Taller, Aymara elders discussed their traditional medicine: “We all participate in gathering our medicinal plants. We are all interested in having good health and recovering when we are sick. Together, we can exchange medicines with others for healing. We understand illness. There are some Aymara who know a great deal about medicine. They learned this from their parents and grandparents. We respect our yatirinaka, wise ones and leaders in wisdom and ritual. They know nature very well. The medicine of the city has caused us to forget our own. It is very good to learn new things but without forgetting what is ours.”

Aymara perceptions of a person’s health embrace self and body and include the community. Aymara medical practices are grounded in their cognitive, cultural, ecological, economic, geographic, physiological, ritual, and social systems. There is an analogous association between their bodies, land, water, and social organization. Aymara healers employ medical techniques that have been tried and tested through time for promoting the spiritual and psychological wellbeing of the patient. An understanding of Aymara healing is a prerequisite for people who wish to improve health conditions in the Andes.

“The Aymara always ask permission of Pachamama before working the soil or planting a seed. As the principal Aymara deity, with the achachilamaca, Pachamama is the guardian and caretaker of the Andean people. She is an elderly mother who protects the Aymara and provides them with all that is necessary for life. Pachamama is the mother of Aymara culture because existence itself is made possible through this inexhaustible source of life. With Pachamama are all the generative spirits connected with the animals and crops. Vincenta Mamani elaborated: “We believe the land is for all people—that it is meant to be shared and not used only for the benefit of a few. Land is life, because it produces all that we need to live. Water emanates from the land as if from the veins of the human body. There is also the natural wealth of minerals, and pastures grow from it to feed the animals. Pachamama is sacred... she is like a mother who nourishes us with the milk we need. She is not meant to be exploited, or to be converted into merchandise. She is there to be cared for... Respect for Pachamama is respect for ourselves, after all she is life.”

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Andes. From reflecting on nature within their lands, the Aymara understand their bodies and are aware that the laws governing nature apply to all life systems. Reciprocity is the guiding principle of Aymara society to the extent that it has become institutionalized. Aymara people depend on one another to a large degree and create and maintain lasting social relationships in various ways; hence reciprocity is one of their core cultural values. In the Aymara cosmovision, the social order of humans is linked with the natural order of the universe. A disturbance in the equilibrium calls for all means to restore the broken balance. Family and community are sacred; thus one’s commitments concerning them must be honored. The performance of each member of the community affects the wellbeing of the whole. Health, productivity, and survival depend on an enduring vision of reciprocal relations among humans, nature, and the supernatural, whose roots reach deeply into the past. The *Jaqin uraqpachat amuyupa* serves to keep our world in balance.

**Further Reading**


Joanna Dobson

**A Journey of Language and Soul**

Golden Mountains of Altai, Southern Siberia

I traveled to Altai for the second time in 2002. On my first visit there two years back, the landscapes of this small republic in southern Siberia made such a profound impression on me that I felt I had to return. When I recall this second journey, I find that I am left with photographic clarity of a few defining moments, and absolutely no memory of anything in between. Three images stay with me to the exclusion of all others. They are the faces of a knowledge keeper, a poetess, and a throat-singing storyteller whose voices spoke to me, calling me to the land that would subsequently become my home.

**The Knowledge Keeper**

We stopped at the entrance to the sacred valley as one would naturally do before knocking on the door of any great residence. The indigenous nature park was relatively young and had been created only with much anxiety and discord among local inhabitants. Many people did not wish tourists to enter the valley at all. Our guide, Danil Mamye, called us to be mindful of our behavior and asked us not to take offense if some of the local people were to give us strange looks or ignore our greetings. When queried as to why he had chosen to share his knowledge of the sacred valley with outsiders, he said, “I made the decision prepared to take responsibility for the consequences.”

Left: Knowledge Keeper Daniil Ivanovich Mamyev, Director of Uch Enmek EthnoCultural Nature Park, on pilgrimage in the Karakol Valley. Photo: Irina Jhernosenko, 2014

Above: Amy with an Aymara awatiri (pastoralist) and her beloved qarwa (llama) on the Chilean Altiplano. Photo: John Amato, 1999

To the Golden Mountains of Altai, Southern Siberia

A Journey of Language and Soul
Noah Dobson

a little abashed, he added more quietly, “My cup is full. If I don’t share from it, there will be no room for anything new.”

We drove slowly along a winding track that ran parallel to the river, passing villages of wooden houses and haystacks. Small herds of wild horses were grazing and playing between the villages and the forest edge. A huge black kite circled low, accompanying us as we moved further through the valley towards the mountain. We stopped at points along the way to admire rock art, kurgan sites (prehistoric burial mounds), and Bronze Age standing stones. Each place inspired our guide to share some aspect of the Altai worldview or other profound thought.

Turning a corner, we emerged onto a high plateau that widened out to reveal a magnificent view of the snowcapped peaks of Mount Uch Enmek, shining brilliantly against the blue summer sky. In the Altai language, uch means ‘three’ and enmek the ‘soft spot’ or ‘fontanelle’ on the top of a baby’s head. Uch Enmek was a replacement name. It was taboo to speak the mountain’s true name aloud, except in special circumstances of prayer and ritual. Here, Danil spoke more openly, feeling perhaps stronger now that he stood at the foot of Uch Enmek. I studied our guide with a knowledge keeper at the front. He had a wide forehead, large round cheekbones, and heavy Asian eyelids. He was totally still and unhurried, his face remaining expressionless while he spoke. I could imagine and heavy Asian eyelids. He was totally still and unhurried, his face remaining expressionless while he spoke. I could imagine

At the front. He had a wide forehead, large round cheekbones, and heavy Asian eyelids. He was totally still and unhurried, his face remaining expressionless while he spoke. I could imagine


many separate parts. In life we must be like pilgrims searching the lands for these scattered pearls of knowledge to piece them together again in our own lives.”

There was a profundity to our guide’s words that gained power because they were inspired by this specific spot, on this particular day, perhaps because the wind had blown in such a way on his face, or the grazing herd had wandered in our direction giving their approval. Perhaps there was something he had chosen not to share because Mount Uch Enmek had veiled his highest peak with clouds saying “Not yet.” This was the voice of the Earth, the ultimate conductor of our conversation with a knowledge keeper at the foot of a mountain peak—majestic and eternal.

The Poetess

The table in the cozy ail (traditional Altai six-sided wooden yurt) where we had stopped for a meal was laden with ceramic bowls filled with chunks of homemade soft white cheese and small balls of fried dough, the names of which sounded as scrumptious as the buckwheat honey in which they were dipped: byshkot, horkoš. Two Altai women were standing over a gas stove that took up one side of the wall. Marina was gazing intently at the ritual soup kocho, which she had made from barley grains, lamb, and garlic. Her fingers were covered with a white paste, her hair and a round face, open and pale like the moon. She sat quietly on the single bed that stood to the left of the stove, waiting to be entrusted with holding plates and bowls as food was ladled into them.

If at that time I had spoken the Altai language, I would have understood that while I was eating my soup the girl had whispered to her mother, “Eje (mother), look at that English girl. Look at her eyes. They are so bright and alive! Look at her necklace. Do you think those are real diamonds? Eje, can I speak to her?” “Balam (my child),” came the answer, “wait until she has finished eating and we serve the tea.” And so it was that, as I took my last spoonful of rice, the girl strode toward me in a manner of correctness that transcends shyness and, without a moment’s hesitation, introduced herself to me in perfect English: “Hello, my name is Aiaru. Would you like to see our domestic animals?”

We wandered up the path past the potato plants to the farm sheds, where we sat down and leaned up against a haystack.

The conversation quickly turned to language. Aiaru jotted down the Altai words for ‘yurt’ and ‘cow’ in my Moleskine notepad, demonstrating the correct pronunciation of the letter ‘j’ in the Turkic alphabet and explaining that in the Altai language stress always falls on the last syllable.

Then she said that she would like to read me her poem, “Flower People.” This is the essence of that poem as I remember it: A small community of wildflowers grows peacefully in an alpine meadow. Every flower on the mountainside has its own unique personality, just like people do. In the morning, as they set about the day, the flowers call out to their neighbors with a cheery “hello”. May we all learn to live together with the same mutual respect and friendship of the meadow flowers.

Perhaps something is lost in my account of Aiaru’s poem, but I remember that her poem breathed and opened a window onto a world I did not know existed. There was no doubt that the flowers truly greeted one another as the day began, just never when I had been looking.

Aiaru’s poem reminded me of a few lines by the Christian mystic, Jakob Boehme: “The flowers of the earth do not grudge at one another… but stand kindly by one another, and enjoy one another’s virtue.” I looked at the girl beside me and noticed that in an act of teenager expression she had drawn stick-like rock art figures in white paint all over the legs of her dungarees. Aged just sixteen, the young poetess had captured the natural metaphors worthy of a seventeenth century theologian in a language that was simple and happy. Aiaru belonged to the Maiman clan, the last Turkic clan to fall to Genghis Khan’s army. Here was a beauty characteristic of her clan: rare, formidable, hidden on a scroll deep inside, which her pen would unravel with time. How I wished that I too had the perceptivity and courage to see a brother in a rock, a sister in a meadow flower.

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The Throat Singer

As we entered the mouth of the cave, a throat-singing storyteller, a kaichy, moved slowly toward the fire that burned at the center. He had the awkward gait of an old man and leaned slightly forwards over a topshur, a wooden string instrument he kept closed close to his body. He wore a fur hat and a thick, tawny-grey suede coat crossed over at the breast. The edges of the front and wrists were decorated with white hare fur, a run of gray patterned silk, and wide gold and silver trimmings. The coat was tied at the waist with a thick band of bright, yellow fabric. From a fine leather strap slung over the shoulder hung a plump, black horsehair whip. The flames of the fire ran to caress his cheek and speaking a blessing meant only for the ear in the coals.

He crouched down on one knee before the fire, now holding his instrument out towards the flames and speaking a blessing meant only for the ear in the coals.

Arphan, the young kaichy, turned to us, now sitting on a low stool. Holding his topshur in his hands, he began to sing. A huge guttural sound emerged from within his chest. O-oh-o! Then he began strumming the topshur, interweaving the drone sounds of the strings with the growing strength of his vibrating voice. Then as he broke into lines of poetic and speaking a blessing meant only for the ear in the coals.

And so it continued, the performer and the listeners, the cave and the valley’s space resonating with his voice. The music gripped us as it flowed in waves through the valley. We turned to us, now sitting on a kaichy.

Further Reading


Voices from the Field

African Rural Women, Custodians of Seed and Traditional Knowledge

My name, Kagole, was given to me upon my birth. It initially belonged to my father’s aunt who had died a few months before I was born. She was herself a custodian of the sacred natural site cared for by my family, so the other members of my clan in the Bagungu tribe of Uganda were so excited when I was born. They named me after her and initiated me to become her successor in regard to this traditional responsibility.

Receiving the name of your forefathers or lineage ancestor is a great investment in protecting the Earth’s nature and its rules: it means the ancestors are still living in you through their names. Having such a name means you must do what your ancestor did and protect nature in order to not disturb their peace.

Today I am the custodian of the Wandyeka sacred natural site in Kisyansya, Bulisa District. My role is to lead the worship of our lineage of ancestors who reign in here and guard our sacred site. Sacred sites are areas with special spiritual significance to us, the custodians, and also our communities. Here many sacred natural sites are areas of great importance for the conservation of biodiversity.

These sites are instrumental in promoting co-existence and living in harmony because they help in protecting the spiritual connections between us, the people, and Mother Earth. When people visit these sites and humbly worship, they get cleansed of their misfortunes, and then peace is restored in their families or communities. This gives us responsibility and courage as custodians to keep caring for and protecting the sites.

The names you use for the sites and in rituals depend on what Giver you want to worship and what you want the gods to give you when you visit the sacred site. Different sacred sites have different roles. Some are for the main community rituals for seeds, harvests, and rain. Others we go to for healing people or the land.

Our ancestors and forefathers are many, and they have interconnected power, but their names are unique. For instance mine is called Wandyeya, meaning the giver of peace, food, and wealth. Others take care of different parts of nature. For example, there is a site called Tikimu-titytyalo, who is one of the biggest spirits and is responsible for solving all the problems moving in the air.


Kagole Margret Byarufu

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Our ancestors and forefathers are many, and they have interconnected power, but their names are unique. For instance mine is called Wandyeya, meaning the giver of peace, food, and wealth. Others take care of different parts of nature. For example, there is a site called Tikimu-titytyalo, who is one of the biggest spirits and is responsible for solving all the problems moving in the air.
When I go to the sacred site, I kneel and call all the names of gods I know, depending on what I want them to do. Because there is a rain-giver, a wealth- and life-giver, and the god of food. Then I meditate with the Earth because, unlike other religions, our tradition tells us the spirits live with us on Earth, but easily connect with us through custodians and only when they appear in sacred sites. So that way, gods of this sacred site will restore health. The weather will change back to normal, epidemics will go; but, most importantly, such changes show the community that protecting these sacred sites of Mother Earth is the best hope for their lives and that destroying them will bring severe punishments from the ancestors.

**Further Reading**


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**Above:** Dr. Rimberia Mwangi, Sacred Site Custodian, Meru, Kenya. Photo: Jess Phillimore/The Gaia Foundation, 2012

**Above:** Two fishermen on Lake George, Western Uganda. Photo: Hal Rhoades/The Gaia Foundation, 2016
Dakshinkali is a sacred grove located at 1550 m of altitude about 22 km south of Nepal’s capital, Kathmandu. It is a local symbol of divinity, devoted to the Goddess Kali. Hindus consider Kali to be the supreme, dark female power whose role is to destroy evil. Therefore, people worship her as a mother figure of this sacred grove. We highly value and appreciate the time they gave us to explain their values and beliefs.

Everywhere around the world, traditional ecological knowledge and spiritual beliefs teach people to treat plants as manifestations of the gods; restricts their exploitation, and traditional taboos protect rare and endangered species as well their importance for the very existence of many plant species found there to be holy. The belief that the protection of the Goddess Kali. Hence, they deem the grove’s vegetation is under her care has played a huge role in their conservation.

The forest patches of Dakshinkali, however, are no longer free from anthropogenic pressures. Several political, economic, and social issues often challenge management through the traditional system. The abandonment of sustainable practices in favor of the conveniences brought about by development—such as road construction, non-biodegradable waste pollution, and illegal harvesting of rare and endangered species—is among the causes of loss of the sacred grove’s pristine features. Biodiversity loss is an ongoing problem, resulting in a serious need for long-term revitalization and sustainable management efforts. Awareness programs for local people about the value of rare and endangered species as well their importance for the very existence of the Dakshinkali deity are essential steps to be undertaken urgently to ward off the ongoing devastation of the area.

Acknowledgements. We are thankful to the high-spirited people in Dakshinkali who shared with us information, anecdotes, cultural references, and traditional knowledge of this sacred grove. We highly value and appreciate the time they gave us to explain their values and beliefs.

The main temple of the Goddess Dakshinkali is surrounded by a lush sacred grove encompassing an area of 56 hectares. Upholding traditions and beliefs helps protect and conserve the uniqueness of the forest. Plants found here that are protected because they are considered holy (and several of which are endemic and have no English names) include: Aegle marmelos (Asian mugwort), Aristolochia indica (Indian mugwort), Buddleja asiatica (bhimsen pati), Carpinus betulus (Himalayan birch), Castanopsis indica (chestnut), C. tiliaefolia (linden), Cynodon dactylon (Bermuda grass), Datura stramonium (thorn apple), Emblica officinalis (Indian gooseberry), Engelhardia spicata (mawa), Ficus religiosa (sacred fig tree), F. benjamina (weeping fig), F. microcarpa (Bengal fig), F. carica (common fig), F. carica (Indian fig), F. carica (European fig), F. carica (American fig), F. carica (Asian fig), F. carica (Persian fig), and many more. This place is perhaps the last refuge for many such plant species. Photo: Sheetal Vaidya, 2015

Top Right: The Seshnarayan pond within Dakshinkali is imbued with deep cultural and historical significance. The holy complex was built by one of the Lichhavi kings of Nepal (400 to 750 CE) to guard the Kathmandu Valley below. The sacred water of the pool is believed to be the milk that flowed down from the udder of the holy cow Kamdhenu. This udder is now represented by a cluster of stalactites hanging from a cliff just above the main temple of Seshnarayan. Photo: Asha Paudel, 2016

Bottom: Water from the pond is piped down or carried in water tankers to provide drinking water to the households of Lalitpur District. People can be seen coming to the pond carrying their grayscale to fetch drinking water from the water source. Water is also carried in buckets that are then emptied into the tankers for commercial water supply. Students from nearby hostels and monks from the gompa (Buddhist monastery) do their laundry here as well. Water was tapped from here to construct Nepal’s first hydropower project in 1911, only 29 years after the world’s first hydropower project was realized in Wisconsin, USA. Photo: Asha Paudel, 2016

Left: The main temple of the Goddess Dakshinkali is surrounded by a lush sacred grove encompassing an area of 56 hectares. Upholding traditions and beliefs helps protect and conserve the uniqueness of the forest. Plants found here that are protected because they are considered holy (and several of which are endemic and have no English names) include: Aegle marmelos (wood apple), Artemisia indica (Indian mugwort), Buddleja asiatica (bhimsen pati), Carpinus betulus (Himalayan birch), Castanopsis indica (chestnut), C. tiliaefolia (linden), Cynodon dactylon (Bermuda grass), Datura stramonium (thorn apple), Emblica officinalis (Indian gooseberry), Engelhardia spicata (mawa), Ficus religiosa (sacred fig tree), F. benjamina (weeping fig), F. microcarpa (Bengal fig), F. carica (common fig), F. carica (Indian fig), F. carica (European fig), F. carica (American fig), F. carica (Asian fig), F. carica (Persian fig), and many more. This place is perhaps the last refuge for many such plant species. Photo: Sheetal Vaidya, 2015
Top: An Indigenous Newar of Dakshinkali, Radhe Shyam Kapali, 58, makes a living in a small corner of the Seshnarayan pond by selling ritual butter lamps that his wife prepares. Photo: Asha Paudel, 2016

Bottom Left: Locally famous as Jaributi Baje (“Herbal Grandpa”), Sanu Manandhar, 75, prepares various Ayurvedic medicines from indigenous plants, which he sells in bottles labeled with local names. He holds the knowledge of numerous plant species used in special rituals of the Newars and Tamangs, the two Indigenous communities of the surrounding area. “I have been doing this for 40 years,” he says, adding that he has the power of curing disease by chanting holy mantras. He believes that the Goddess Kali has bestowed him with this healing power. Photo: Sheetal Vaidya, 2016

Bottom Center: Prem Maya Balami, 64, sustains her livelihood by selling medicinal forest products, such as dried flowers of Bombax ceiba (cotton tree) and Rhododendron arboreum (tree rhododendron) and dried leaves of Cinnamomum tamala (Indian bay leaf). Here she is seen removing the skin from rhizomes of Bergenia ciliata (hairy bergenia) to prepare a tonic to be given to her daughters-in-law who are in their post-partum period. “I lost my home during the recent earthquake,” she says. “I now live in a small that in the field while my sons with their families have rented separate houses. But that does not ... their wives, at least when they are at this stage. The women have to take care of their health properly at such a time.” Photo: Sheetal Vaidya, 2016

Bottom Right: Offering the indigenous biodiversity at the Dakshinkali market not only brings smiles to local women but also contributes to wild germplasm preservation. Pear (Pyrus communis) and Nepali hog plum (Choerospondias axillaris) are the main fruits of commercial value cultivated in local farms and sold in Dakshinkali. The women prepare juice, jam, and dried pickles to sell locally as well as to export. They do, however, face challenges in continuing to secure the economic benefits from these fruits, due to the lack of a reliable storage system. Photo: Sheetal Vaidya, 2015

Previously they had to walk hours to transport beans, pears, and hog plums to the nearest center of commercial activities. Yet, road building is being done without previously conducting an Environmental Impact Assessment, which is a legal requirement in Nepal, and is not being done in an appropriate manner. Photo: Sheetal Vaidya, 2016

Top Right: People from all over the country come to worship Dakshinkali. Here, large crowds of people carrying offerings stand in line outside the main temple. Photo: Sheetal Vaidya, 2015

Bottom: The line-ups go on for hours, with people waiting patiently to enter the main temple and seek Goddess Dakshinkali’s blessings by touching her Photo: Asha Paudel, 2016
Further Reading


Kwakwala is the Indigenous language of the Kwakwaka’wakw on the mid-coast of present-day British Columbia. It expresses a connection to the land through words, stories, and ceremonies, which describe the patterns of the seasons, traditional use, important places, and cultural and spiritual values.

When I was young, I remember walking in the woods with my mum and her teaching me which berries to pick and which ones not to pick—and she remembered the Kwakwala names! This was unique because she forgot, or decided to forget, her first language at residential school, St. Michael’s in Alert Bay. Yet, while berry picking, she would exclaim, “Teggul!” (thimbleberry, Rubus parviflorus) and other plants names, too. These were happy times walking in the woods because I shared my mum’s excitement of her remembered Kwakwaka’wakw ecological knowledge and Kwakwala. My interest in linking language and the land was rekindled when reading The Living World: Plants and Animals of the Kwakwaka’wakw, published in the late 1990s by the U’mista Cultural Society, a Kwakwaka’wakw-led organization in Alert Bay. I was an undergraduate student at the University of British Columbia’s Faculty of Forestry, learning the plants and trees in English and Latin. Reading The Living World, I saw trees, plants, seaweeds, and animals of importance to the Kwakwaka’wakw, but could not read the Kwakwala orthography.

A way to decolonize my own knowledge about the forests was to begin to learn Kwakwala. Two years ago, as a part of my graduate studies, I completed a plant dictionary in Kwakwala to build upon the work completed by U’mista and The Living World book and to add to the First Voices online archive of First Nations languages. In collaboration with Kwakwaka’wakw fluent speakers and U’mista Cultural Society, 300 additional words and phrases for plants in Kwakwala can now be found in the First Voices Kwakwala section.

In addition to audio and U’mista orthography, the plant words are complemented with a picture of the plant for identification purposes. The dictionary has audio files of over 5000 words and 1000 phrases so that people who cannot read the orthography can hear fluent speakers say the Kwakwa’wala words. Now, almost 20 years after reading The Living World, I am taking a class with linguist Patricia Shaw and a fluent Kwakwa’wala speaker from the First Nations and Endangered Languages Program at the University of British Columbia.

“Potlatch: a strict law bids us to dance. We dance to celebrate life, to show we are grateful for all our treasures. We must dance to show our history, since our history is always passed on in songs and dances. It is very important to tell the stories in exactly the same way. We put our stories into songs and into dances so they will not change. They will be told the same way every time. We use theatre and impressive masks to tell our ancestors’ adventures so the people witnessing the dance will remember it.”

This quote from the U’mista webpage signifies the importance of songs, stories, and ceremonies to the Kwakwa’wala culture and governance system. The language in our stories and ceremonies contains teachings and protocols—and if you listen and watch carefully, through the stories and ceremonies of the Kwakwa’wala, you will understand our connection to nature.

A small example of the wisdom that the Kwakwa’wala hold in the Kwakwa’wala language can be demonstrated by the word a’agala, a small, rare wintergreen plant. The English translation of a’agala is “it grows in the shade.”

This and other literal translations of words taught me that the Kwakwa’wala have an in-depth knowledge of the ecology and ecosystems around them.

What is most important to the Kwakwa’wala is demonstrated by what has been given the most extensive vocabulary. In Kwakwa’wala, not all plants have names, if they were not of use for food, medicine, ceremonies, or structures. The plant for which Kwakwa’wala has the largest number of words is Western red cedar: at least forty-one words. The words describe every part of the tree and its multiple uses.

As a graduate student, my research interest is in understanding an Indigenous Peoples’ perspective on forests. This interest stems from my career as a forester, during which I have lived in Indigenous communities and heard their concerns for the lands and resources—concerns that stem from the impacts of industrial resource extraction on traditional ways of life, as well as from access issues, unsustainable harvest rates, and lack of local benefits. What often seems to be lacking is a cultural fit, as well as equity in decision making.

Realizing the interconnectedness between Kwakwa’wala, Kwakwa’wala, and nature, the next step in my research is to understand how words, stories, ceremonies, and cultural and spiritual values could inform discussions around local decision making.

Words’ Connection to the Environment

Literal translations from Kwakwa’wala clearly demonstrate that the Kwakwa’wala have a complex and intimate knowledge of land, ecology, and forests and of the interconnectedness between plants, animals, environment, people, and spirituality. Kwakwa’wala describes “how the forest works” by explaining what a place or plant looks like and what places or plants can be used for. Looking deep into a word can also reveal something about the history of interaction and trading with neighboring Indigenous Peoples. To Kwakwa’wala, plants and animals are more than things: they hold spirits, and some plants and places are considered supernatural and important spiritually for our ceremonies.

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the land. Our creation stories link us to specific places. The ‘numima’ (clan) is regarded as the fundamental social structure of the Kwakw̱ak̓a’wakw. Each clan has descended from animals or supernatural beings represented by family crests. Our family crests, now expressed in regalia and button blankets, link us to our ancestors, who are worthy of respect and care. Clans feast together and have titleholders, who hold names, songs, and crests. Traditionally, clans had access to resource sites in clam beaches, herring spawning grounds, berry patches, halibut banks, cedar-root fields, and rivers. During winter potlatches, dancers channel supernatural spirits and animals when they put on their masks and costumes. To prepare for ceremony, they will have a much wider applicability once again.

Indigenous Knowledge & Decision Making

In the last couple of decades, many biologists and conservationists have recognized that we can learn from Indigenous knowledge and practices. For instance, researchers at the Hakai Institute are celebrating that for millennia the Indigenous Peoples of present-day British Columbia lived in the forests without degrading them, but actually made them more productive by the way they used them. Indigenous management practices included developing clam gardens, creating perennial root gardens in estuaries, and using fire to enhance berry patches. The forests grew taller and faster from the nutrients in clam shells and fire. This is a positive trend suggesting that Indigenous knowledge and practices are being valued as something that can contribute to land and resource management.

As well, in present-day Canada, in particular British Columbia, Indigenous rights are becoming recognized. Indigenous Peoples are in the process of rebuilding their governance institutions. While the approach, challenges, and goals vary depending on the unique characteristics of each community, there are common themes that emerge in these conversations, including ensuring cultural continuity, assertion of greater decision-making authority over lands and resources, and increased social and economic autonomy.

A resurgence of traditional decision making is important because the Kwakw̱ak̓a’wakw are surrounded by forests and waters. Our language, stories, ceremonies, and practices are interwoven and dependent on one another. Each is important and speaks to what the land needs to be protected. Looking at words, stories, and ceremonies is a way to find a cultural fit that is missing in state-led “solutions” that are failing to provide permanent social and economic benefits to Indigenous Peoples.

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Acknowledgements: Gílak̓as’la (thank you) to the Kwakw̱ak̓a’wakw elders and fluent speakers Audrey Wilson, Douglas Sclv, Hazel Dawson, and Annie Joseph for your invaluable work with the audio files for the plant dictionary; Drs. Pat Shaw and Mark Turin from the First Nations and Endangered Languages Program for your advice and assistance with the Kwakwa’ala orthographies; Sarah Holland, U’mista Cultural Centre; and to Alex Wadsworth and Barb Malitipi, First Peoples’ Cultural Council for all of your work on the First Voices project.

Further Reading


Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future

E koe koe te tūi, e kete kete te kākā, e kākā te kererū
“The tūi chatters, the parrot gabbles, the wood pigeon coos.”
(A saying for “It takes all kinds...”)

Hēmi:
As a young child, I often sat at the window of my house peering out at the roses, manicured lawns, and hedges, listening to introduced birds like the sparrows and house wrens peering out at the roses, manicured lawns, and hedges. I rarely heard the chatters of the blackbirds as they fluttered through their days. These first hedges, listening to introduced birds like the sparrows and house wrens peering out at the roses, manicured lawns, and hedges. I rarely heard the chatters of the blackbirds as they fluttered through their days. These first hedges, listening to introduced birds like the sparrows and house wrens peering out at the roses, manicured lawns, and hedges.

Our kin, the birds, now fly with a new plumage, a new form of the colonizers’ banknotes with which I would go buy bread and milk at the local shop.

My father would share the blueprints of his memories and those passed to him by his parents and their parents—by my ancestors, my tīpuna. Our physical and cultural landscape had dramatically changed since the time of my tīpuna. Our trees now lined the walls and halls of our colonial houses. I would watch and listen, yearning to see through his mind’s eye and that of my tīpuna, to feel and hear their stories, the songs, the poems, our history, our ancestral sayings, my Indigenous language.

He kōtuku rerenga tahi i te tau
“The white heron of a single flight in the season”
(A familiar saying used for a rare visitor, often one of importance)

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Koia tīnei: ko te toroa noho au, e tangi ana ki tōna kāinga; e mihi ana “This is a fact: I live like an albatross, crying out to its nestling place and greeting (you in sorrow).”
(A saying used to refer to the confiscation of lands and the displacement of Māori from their homes)

Cilla:
The tūi was my friend growing up. I was lucky enough to spend a lot of time in our forests when I was a child, particularly in the summers, and that was where my love for the world around me grew. We would walk past the flax ferns, glittering with water after rain, and feed the parrots or kākā outside our house on sugar water, similar to the honeydew that they love to lick in the forest. My godfather could mimic the calls of many of the birds, like the chattering of the parakeets or kākāpō overhead. But even living in a small city during the rest of the year, there was opportunity to observe and interact with some of our native birds.

Once, a baby tūi fell from its nest in our garden, and we couldn’t put it back. The nest, and its tree, was too high. So, we fledged the baby tūi; it lived in our house, and we spent the early summer hunting for grubs to feed it. I tried to teach it to talk, but lacked the skills of previous generations of Māori who taught these birds to speak, with their magnificent powers of mimicry. Finally, we took our pet to a wildlife sanctuary to be a wild bird once again; it was illegal for us to keep our tūi, as with all other native birds. I never saw it again. Yet, every summer when I see the male tūi puffing its chest, and chasing the other males away from its territory of flax nectar, I am reminded of “our” tūi.

The details of tūi’s life are recorded in whakataukī, ancestral sayings that act as a repository of ecological knowledge, and in the many names that describe the changes in their body shape, form, and behavior.

He wa kōwhai “A kōwhai shower”
(A saying that describes a spring shower, at the time of the kōwhai blooms, and signals the appearance of the tūi as well as the availability of some food sources)

****

Fast forward 40 or so years to the present, and our journeys and blueprints have changed drastically, as have the blueprints of the communities we grew up in and the cultural blueprints of this land. The history, language, songs, and wisdom of our tīpuna are no longer lost to us. We appreciate and value our place between Ranginui (Sky father) and Papatūānuku (Earth mother). Working closely with like-minded scientists, friends, colleagues, respected leaders, elders, experts, and practitioners has allowed privileged access to the knowledge and science, to the many stories, songs, poems, history, and ancestral sayings of our tīpuna, and has brought a deeper respect for collaborations and collaborators.

Whāia te mātuaranga hei oranga mō koutou. “Seek after learning for the sake of your well-being.”
When we now hear the chattering of tūī, we recall its role in whakataukī (genealogy) and mythology, the many names it carries: its male form kōkōtea, kōkōtea, kōkōteau, and tūī are highly prized birds in Māori society. Along with the kererū and the kākā, they were harvested in great numbers, sometimes tamed and taught to speak, to recite mihi (formal speeches), karakia (incantations), and whakataukī (ancestral sayings), hence the whakataukī:

*Me he korokoro tūī
“Like the throat of a tūī” (Said of a gifted orator or singer)*

Words like ecosystem, biodiversity, global warming, climate change, and extinction are now part of our vernacular, our everyday language. They now form layers in our blueprint of understanding—our mind’s eye. Thus, many human questions are now no longer framed inwardly, focused on individualism, on small things. We have a deeper appreciation of our impact on ecosystems, and now we collaborate to seek solutions to these global issues. Where can we seek answers to these global issues to guide future directions, future generations, future blueprints? Can the teachings of the past provide guidance in our quest for solutions to local and global problems? Are there clues in Indigenous knowledge, in our oral traditions, in our ancestral sayings?

For the past 10 years, we have sought to unpack some of the critical messages in oral tradition, in whakataukī. These sayings contain a wealth of material about Indigenous science, ecological knowledge, and the ways in which our tūtūnā formulated, tested, and modified their knowledge according to ecological, environmental, and societal changes over the past 600 years. These sayings remain an important method for transmitting critical intergenerational information about all aspects of life, including traditional knowledge, tribal memory, historic events, behavior, and personal achievement.

*Ehara i te mea poka hou mai, nō Hawaiiki mai anō
“It is not something of recent origin but a tradition from Hawaiiki.”

(This saying refers to the source and destination of life. In some traditions, Hawaiiki is perceived to be a physical place from which the Māori people first emerged before arriving in Aotearoa/New Zealand).

Much of the elders’ wisdom about the ethics, philosophy, and straightforward tactics for how best to live in a dynamic balance with the environment, plants, and animals is rapidly being lost through the combined impacts of urbanization, abandonment and/or prohibition of customary uses of plants and animals, and the depletion of ecosystems. Humankind is at a cultural, linguistic, biological, and spiritual crossroad. The many paths to our future are riddled with choices.

*Ahakoa whai te manga, e takoto ana te kōkōteau
“Although the branch is broken off, the trunk remains.”

(The loss of a branch does not destroy a tree whose trunk consists of solid heartwood. Misfortunes will not ruin an individual or group if the foundations are strong.)

In order to solve real-world problems, we have to engage with all forms of knowledge, language, and science to control deforestation, reduce carbon dioxide emissions, adapt to climate change, and halt ecosystem degradation. We need to work closely with the local communities that are most affected to devise new observations and new *whakataukī* that embrace these local and global concerns. We also need to foster the *kaitiaki* (environmental guardians) of the future, our *kaitiaki* wherever they may live, with the principles of sustainability in mind. In our changing world, we need kaitiaki in urban areas and on farms, in global fora and in our homes.

*“Humankind is at a cultural, linguistic, biological, and spiritual crossroad. The many paths to our future are riddled with choices.”*

Stories are like ecosystems, with a community of meanings, interpretations, and systems interacting with their physical, cultural, and spiritual environments. As Indigenous Peoples have realized, all parts of the story matter. The observations in *whakataukī* may change, but the principles beneath endure.

*Whatangarongaro te tangata, toitū te whema.
“People pass on, but land remains.”

Further Reading


Above: A kauri tree. Photo: Simon Steinberger, 2005 (Pixabay)
I make an effort to use the few Tehuelche words I know, but she almost always answers in Spanish. Sometimes it’s hard for her to remember her language: with whom? Today I need to put together a list of animals, and it pains me to ask her to repeat. How many times must she have done it? “Doña Dora, how did one say ‘cougar’?”

Easier to start with dogs: there’s more than enough narchen in this house. The one called Peque barks, wanting attention. “Kkom (enough), Peque. I’m not giving you anything!”—but then she slips him some ham under the table. There’s a surplus of cats, too, but for ‘cat’ “there’s no pronunciation.” Yet, the dictionary I carry with me lists the word pel—but Dora says: “That’s another cat, a bigger one, so big that it once ate a cat I had, which liked to go wandering. I went out to look for it and only found its hind parts, that was it. I told my husband: My cat! I don’t know what ate it! And he told me that it was one of those cats that go around at night. A pel had caught it.”

Clear enough to me now that the pel’s tail in his hand.” Dora teaches me that an kkanter would fall asleep with the heat of his body, its hind parts, that was it. “Yuck, that’s disgusting, the lizard,” but Dora recoils: “That’s another cat, a different kind of pel.”

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Clear enough to me now that the pel’s a different kind of cat (a wild cat, perhaps the pamphas cat or Geoffroy’s cat?)

There are no more animals in the house at this point to add to my list. My workspace is Dora’s kitchen, with a window that opens onto the patio. I don’t have many more options than to show her some drawings, such as that of the cougar, and Dora tells me: “This is the goolen, I think it is. There used to be goolen up there in the Cañadón (gully), now I don’t know. They say there are some on the other side of the river. They go around hunting guanacos and sheep, but they hide, you can’t see them.”

I run out of drawings, so now we’re left with going over the Tehuelche dictionary. I try to pronounce klanter (lizard), but Dora recollects: “That’s disgusting, the kkanter! It reminds me of a neighbor who always went around with a kkanter in his pocket to frighten me. ‘Would you like a candy?’ he would ask, picking out the kkanter. The kkanter would fall asleep with the heat of his body, becoming torpid. That’s how one day he was left with the kkanter’s tail in his hand.” Dora teaches me that an effective remedy for the (admittedly rare) Patagonian heat is rubbing a klanter on one’s forehead. Will have to try.
The tcehpeer (butterfly), too, is lucky for Dora. And it makes her angry, because it was the tcehpeer that asked Elal, the one who created the world, for there to be death.

“Therre’s going to be a lot of people, and they’re going to step on me,” said the tcehpeer. “In revenge, Dora always squashes the tcehpeer whenever she sees one.

I read out ‘qam,’ but Dora asks: “And what’s that?” I read the translation to her: “Cuis (southern mountain cavy),” and then Dora remembers: “A cuis! It’s that one forgets, you know, here alone. But of course! That’s why I call ‘qam’ that little dog that Diana has, which is small like a qam. And I no longer knew why I called the dog that way…”

The pajer (Patagonian mara, or Patagonian hare) is easier for her to remember. “Earlier on, Peque would run after the pajer, when he would still go run outside, but he would never catch them, because he has short legs. Karen says that they come by at night, but I don’t see them, as I don’t have a window to that side.”

It’s true: the window of Dora’s kitchen, the room where she spends most of her time, opens to the other side. Looking that way, she tells me: “The qalderoo (swallows). They fly around here in the sky they sing: keshekesheh! They sing: they call out their own name: keshekeh! In spring I listen to them, but they’re unfriendly; those ones; they always stay far away. They’re unfriendly like the chamberrot (a kind of plover?), the one that has long skinny legs, which is why I call Viviana that way.”

“And at night, Doña Dora?” I ask. “There’s the amen (eagle owl). Sometimes I see it fly by. And then there’s the kokoo (barn owl), which is smaller than the amen, but it’s a bad amen. When they sing in front of a house, you can be sure a neighbor is going to die.”

I search my mind for more birds, but I don’t know that many. Lucky me, she volunteers: “Those of which there are many are the cha’ (sparrows), those brownish ones that are so abundant.” I tell her that my grandmother ate them with polenta,* and she laughs at the implausible idea that one can eat a cha’. “The teoporpat (falcon?) are the ones who eat the cha’, but they aren’t coming yet either. It’s a skinny little one that always goes after other birds. Once I chased after one to grab the bird away from it, but it flew high and took the bird with it. Those that are nice are the scekal (swallows). They come here and leave right away, though, like soldiers… Seekal… they’re black, shiny they are, how lovely they are! But what a pity that they leave so soon. Luckily it won’t be long before they arrive. As soon as the cold is gone they will come. From here I can see them that way, where pools of water form sometimes, but now they’re building a house there, so maybe this time they won’t come.”

“I go back to the dictionary: ‘Qaldak (ibis), Doña Dora?’ “There aren’t any of those here, either. In Laguna Azul there are many.” She promises that if I take her there she’ll show them to me. It’s hard for her to walk, but she loves to go on car rides. In winter, though, Patagonian roads are difficult—and there are no birds.

We go on: does she know the bolan (Patagonian negrito)? “Bolan! I had forgotten about the bolan! It’s a black bird. Those arrive for the New Year. They fly around there all the time, the little birds… Bolan… it has a red tail… Bolan… First comes the guy, ‘causes it to be a rascal. It comes to see what the weather is like here, and then comes the wife.’ She keeps smiling and repeating the name again and again: bolan… bolan… Their delight melts away the embarrassment I came in with, and I can almost hear Doña Dora’s kitchen fill up with trills. I’d like to keep asking, but she can remember no more. “I used to know more, but have forgotten. All the creatures around here had names in Tehuelche, and now they don’t anymore, they’re ancient words.”

Dora knows I visit her because of the language; that’s why she had a CD on the table. She wants to listen to it to see whether she can remember more animals. We hear the voice of an old woman, and Doña Dora translates a few sentences for me, interrupted by Peque who wants more harm: “The fox farted… the ostrich stepped on the mara’s tail… someone grabbed the cougar’s balls.”

The naughtiness brings out laughter: “Sometimes when I’m alone I listen to those stories to get a laugh.” The recording ends, and she wants to listen again—and again: “The fox farted… the ostrich stepped on the mara’s tail… someone grabbed the cougar’s balls.” And so again until the sun goes down, the mud hardens with frost, and I return home, kicking garbage and worried that someone might mug me and steal the recorder with Doña Dora’s voice saying that the fox farted…”

Several days later, I go along with Dora and her granddaughter to a kindergarten where a group of children chose the name chelechon (butterfly) and another patten (fox). The kids are sitting around on the floor, and a community member is giving them a chat about their people. When the “surprise” arrives, they receive her with a loud “Uáingeuch, Dora!” Hearing that brings tears to my eyes—and it’s enough to look at Dora’s eyes for me to realize that yes, all this work really is worth it.

Translated from Spanish by Luisa Maffi

Further Reading


Above: Kindergarten #15, Río Gallegos: the patten and the chelechon surprise the “surprise.” Photo: Paulo Hidalgo, 2016

* [Ed.’s note: Originating from the northern Italian region of Veneto, Janio’s grandmother would have eaten polenta con pezzi (polenta and garlic), a traditional cornmeal dish served with a variety of small wild birds including sparrows, which would have been roasted on skewers or pan-fried.]
Language endangerment is a growing issue around the globe. Of the less than 7,000 languages spoken today, many are not expected to survive into the next century. Because of this growing threat to our planet’s linguistic diversity—something that should be cherished as much as our biological diversity—many language activists and linguists have taken on the important task of documenting and reinvigorating these vanishing voices. What steps can be taken to save languages around the world? Through case studies and by reviewing the literature from experts in the field, we can better understand how to combat language endangerment in every community facing it.

The first question is: What is an endangered language? According to UNESCO, “A language is endangered when its speakers cease to use it, use it in fewer and fewer domains, use fewer of its registers and speaking styles, and/or stop passing it on to the next generation.” Let’s dissect this definition. “When its speakers cease to use it” is a direct reference to two potential scenarios: a) all of the speakers of a given language pass away; or b) speakers of a language decide to stop using that language and shift to using another language. The next part of the definition references “domains.” Domains are areas of use for the language such as the household, the office, schools, and spiritual gatherings. The expression “registers and speaking styles” describes the use of different vocabulary for different social groups or settings. For example, the way you speak to your family may be different from the way you speak to your friends and is quite likely to be different from how you speak to your boss. Finally, “stop passing it on to the next generation” references the natural transmission of languages from one generation to the next.

UNESCO’s definition can help determine whether a language is endangered or not. But how do we define exactly how endangered a particular language is? For example, a language that is no longer being used in government though is still strong in the community is in a different position from a language with only a few elderly speakers remaining, even though both fit our definition of an endangered language.

Much as in the plant and animal kingdoms, there is a spectrum of endangerment for languages.

Organizations like UNESCO and the Summer Institute of Linguistics have created guidelines to guide a classification of endangered languages. In a nutshell, the guidelines break endangered languages down into five categories, based on the work of renowned linguist Joshua Fishman, as summarized in the following table.

We can see in this table that there are a lot of different stages of language endangerment. Because of this variation, different languages will need different kinds of support to be revitalized. That is why it is crucial to assess each language’s status as accurately as possible to create the most effective plan to revitalize it. In defining the state of a language, it is important to consider other variables, such as speaker population and the language’s status in society. Based on the state of the language, the appropriate revitalization methods must be identified. Different revitalization methods can be implemented for languages at different levels of endangerment, working backwards from the most extreme to the least extreme level.

The process of reviving an extinct, or dormant, language is trickier than others. The most important step is to locate any and all information on the language. Things like grammar texts, letters, recordings, interviews, linguistic notes, and archives often make up the backbone of the resources for understanding these languages. Some languages are highly documented whereas others are less so; the more documentation you can find, the better.

It is also highly important to learn about related languages, or sister languages, that stem from the same original language (e.g., Italian and Spanish are sister languages coming from Latin). Through sister languages, one can learn about how the languages have changed over time to find patterns of change that can be replicated across the language. It is also possible to find words missing from your language by comparing the related languages’ words for objects and concepts.

It was through this method that the Wampanoag people in Massachusetts, USA, have been able to revitalize their language, not spoken in over a hundred years, based on the tireless efforts of the staff of the Wampanoag Language Reclamation Project. Through their work, which included collecting old letters and books in the Wampanoag language and comparing them to sister Algonquian languages, there are now many learners of the language, including the first native speaker in over a century.

Criticaly endangered languages, as you may recall, are the languages with very few speakers who are of the great-grandparent generation. These languages are in a dire position, and the
work of documenting and revitalizing them can be the most pressing of all to prevent more cases of language extinction. A method for helping to revitalize these languages that has grown in popularity around the world is the Master–Apprentice training method. This method takes an elderly speaker of the language and partners them one on one with a younger learner of the language for extended periods of time. During this time, the elder speaker (Master) will use only the target language to communicate with the student (Apprentice) as they learn to navigate everyday situations. It’s like how Yoda trains Luke in the Star Wars original trilogy. This process, first launched in California, has proven to have some success in language revitalization if both Master and Apprentice are faithful to the system.

A shared aspect between definitively and severely endangered languages is the idea of a language being moribund. Moribund means that the speakers of the language are adults; children do not use the language. This was the situation of Māori in New Zealand. In the 1970s, most of the fluent Māori speakers were forty or older, which worried many about the language’s future. Because of this, there was a movement in the Māori community to reinforce Māori language and culture. One of the things that came out of this movement was the creation of Te Kohanga Reo, which translates as “the Language Nest.” The nests are designed for children ranging in ages from one to six. These children are put in a daycare-like setting with speakers who are not tasked with “teaching” the language, only with using it as one normally would. After all, your parents never gave you formal lessons in your first language, you just picked it up. The goal of these language nests has been to recreate this natural learning situation with the target language of Māori. These nests have been shown to be quite successful in the work of getting youth to use the language.

“Much as in the plant and animal kingdoms, there is a spectrum of endangerment for languages.” An important aspect of this system is the cultural reinforcement that occurs concurrently with language learning. Māori culture includes an aspect of a kinship community, known as whanau, which is important both for cultural practices and language nests. The speakers and staff who work in the nest are the whanau of the children involved. It is because of these ties that the language nest model works to become self-sufficient as speakers and staff work together to ensure the success of the nests. The program became wildly successful in the country, leading to further education through the medium of Māori that has created many more young speakers of the language.

Unsafe languages are used by children and adults alike, but are not used in every language domain; thus, there is a level of erosion of the language. One language facing this level of endangerment is the Irish language. The Irish people have had great success in recent decades with revitalizing their language through making it an official language of Ireland as well as making it mandatory in school. Though not all Irish people consider themselves fluent speakers of the language, most are familiar with it. The work of several Irish radio stations has been dedicated to creating a space for a language community outside of established speaking communities.

One of the main tasks that come with this tremendous work has been the creation of new vocabulary for the Irish language. As a news-distributing structure, Irish radio needs to be able to discuss many of today’s most pressing issues. Economic development, political campaigns, and military actions are just some of the concepts often discussed today; few endangered languages have terms to discuss these—let alone for more common words such as computer, cell phone, or Facebook! Creating words for these is an important aspect of any revitalization plan, in order to expand domains and make it easier and easier for speakers to continue using the language to reference aspects of their everyday lives. Further, it is important for both Māori and Irish to work to ensure that the revitalized language is not just the language of the school. To guarantee its survival, children need to use it on the playground as well as in the classroom. It is up to adults to show youth that the target language is appropriate in all domains, not just the required ones.

So now that we’ve defined endangered languages and learned about how some communities have revitalized them, what are some of the most important things to save alanguage in your community? First, learn and collect everything you can about it: dictionaries, grammars, recordings, and any information on current speakers of the language. These are the resources you will need to learn how to best understand the language. Second, understand and define as thoroughly as possible what is lacking for the level of language vitality you want to help attain, and define some reasonable goals you can work towards. Examples of this can be getting kids to learn some of the language or growing the domains that it is used in. Each language will be different. Then, create a plan to reach those goals. Read examples of language communities that faced similar issues and how they overcame them. There are plenty of useful resources that can help you on this journey (see some examples in Further Reading).

Remember that this work is slow. Nobody learns a language overnight, and no community will either. Like flowers, only with constant care and the right environment will these languages grow. Much as it is the case with our plant and animal relatives, it is up to all of us to save our world’s linguistic diversity.

Further Reading


Above: Arikara elder Melda Lambert records narratives about her life and experiences for her family to have. Photo: Ajawak Kapasheitis, 2016. Reproduced with permission.

Two generations of Hidatsa and Arikara speakers remember their childhoods and their languages. From left: Victoria Elk, Melda Lambert, Shirley Grady, Eleanor Hale Sorensen, Martha Birdbear, Mary Elk, Mary Gachupus. Photo: Ajawak Kapasheitis, 2016. Reproduced with permission.
Cherokee Voices for the Land

Photovoice film by the Cherokee Nation Medicine Keepers

Amid the ever-present concerns throughout Indigenous communities over the health and vitality of our people, lands, and ways of life, our elders represent sources of knowledge and wisdom that we rely on for guidance and direction. Yet, increasingly, traditional ways of passing down knowledge through person-to-person relationships and kinship bonds have to compete with dispersed tribal populations and the dazzling array of technology preferred by today’s youth. In this context, how can our elders effectively communicate their knowledge and perspectives on pressing issues to tribal officials, youth, and the general tribal population? How can media technology be harnessed in the service of this goal? What contemporary means of communicating information can tribal communities adopt today? How can technology support the service of these rich storytelling traditions? A Photovoice project distributes cameras to individuals, asking them to photographically document places in their community related to a defined topic or question. With participants’ guidance, a researcher compiles the photographs into a presentable format that conveys the community’s voice in a visual form—a slideshow, collage, or still-image documentary. Through the power of imagery and through the eyes of community members themselves, Photovoice promotes critical dialogue and new knowledge about community-defined issues.

The establishment of the Cherokee Nation Medicine Keepers marks a critically important time in Cherokee history and affords a unique opportunity to confront pressing questions about land conservation and its relevance to human health. The group formed in tandem with Carroll’s previous work on a tribally-led ethnobotany project through the Cherokee Nation Office of Environmental Protection from 2004 to 2007. A number of cultural roadblocks inhibited the ethnobotany project—from taboos surrounding discussions of plant medicine to skepticism about placing such knowledge in a tribal database. In response, Carroll and Cherokee Nation Natural Resources Supervisor Pat Gwin called together numerous elders who had expressed interest in the project, and whom Carroll had previously interviewed individually. At this first meeting in October 2008, the group agreed that they represented perhaps the last generation to have been reared with a significant amount of plant knowledge, and that now was the time to reverse its decline. They discussed how plants and Cherokee ancestral knowledge were mutually dependent: if plants are threatened by development or other activities, so is the knowledge of those plants; conversely, when Cherokee knowledge fades through lack of transmission, so does the significance of wild plants in Cherokee culture—and therefore their continued protection.

“Plants and Cherokee ancestral knowledge are mutually dependent: when plants are threatened by development or other activities, so is the knowledge of those plants; conversely, when Cherokee knowledge fades through lack of transmission, so does the significance of wild plants in Cherokee culture—and therefore their continued protection.”

Cherokee Voices for the Land gives voice to the elders’ perspectives on land and plant conservation, while also guiding tribal policy toward this urgent end. The film integrates the individual photos and voiceovers of the Medicine Keepers and serves as a platform for their collective voice on land and health issues in the Cherokee Nation. It also emphasizes how the Cherokee language intersects these issues as a key component of cultural vitality and place-based knowledge. Ranging from childhood stories about growing up on the land to commentary on contemporary land use and the effects of industrial pollution, the video presents critical Cherokee perspectives on the connections between language, knowledge, and the environment. It is a call for Cherokee—and all people—to “honor the earth” by recognizing the spirit that resides in all life and that connects us all.

Further Reading


Native peoples have long transmitted knowledge through stories, and storytelling continues to be a powerful means of communicating information in tribal communities today. Photovoice is one way of employing recent technology in the service of these rich storytelling traditions.

Film Details
Title: Cherokee Voices for the Land
Medium: Digital still image video with voiceover (in Cherokee and English), music, and nature sounds
Running time: Approximately 30 minutes
URL: http://www.terralinguabuntu.org/Landscape/Volume_5/cherokee_voices_for_the_land

For more information about the Medicine Keepers and “Cherokee Voices for the Land,” you can contact Prof. Clint Carroll at the University of Colorado, Boulder: clint.carroll@colorado.edu.
The Photovoice video presents critical Cherokee perspectives on the connections between language, knowledge, and the environment.

Top - Phyllis Edwards: “When we were growing up there used to be a lot of cane, but now there’s not that much.” Photo: Phyllis Edwards, 2015

Inset Top - David Scott: “This is what Cherokees like to see—undeveloped land. There’s medicine out there.” Photo: David Scott, 2015

Inset Bottom - David Scott: “If we could all learn to see what’s out there, we would be a lot healthier than what we are today.” Photo: David Scott, 2015

Below - Nancy Scott: “I think if we take better care of the land, it will take better care of us.” Photo: David Scott, 2015

Top Left - Roger Vann: “To everyone else, that ain’t nothing but a thorn, but man it’s useful to the Cherokee people.” Photo: Roger Vann, 2015

Top Right - Roger Vann: “See, this stuff needs loving—just as much as me and you need loving.” Photo: Ed Fields, 2015

Above - Crosslin Smith: “Everything that they had at that time, and that we have at this time, comes from the soil—comes from the earth.” Photo: Crosslin Smith, 2015
For tens of thousands of years, the rich and beautiful sounds of hundreds of different languages washed across Australia. Over all of the continent it is believed there were more than five hundred languages at one time. Around two hundred years ago, a new language began to replace them, sweeping across the land with such force that some parts of it could no longer hear the voices that told its stories and held its secrets. A deep silence seemed to be looming.

Then, finally, a change began. As the volume of the old words faded to a whisper in some places, the people who are their custodians began to take action, calling for respect, for the rights to speak and be heard in their traditional tongues, while stirring everyone to appreciate the treasury of knowledge held in the first languages of Australia. “Yamani: Voices of an Ancient Land” is part of that call.

“Language is cultural identity encapsulated by song.”

“Yamani: Voices of an Ancient Land” is an innovative collaboration between the Queensland Indigenous Languages Advisory Committee (QILAC)—an Indigenous language advocacy organization—and the Wantok Musik Foundation record label. More than just a recording, the results of this project include a fully-mastered CD with ten songs in five different languages, a short film highlighting the impact that this project has had on the participants, and a range of performances.

The film, also titled “Yamani: Voices of an Ancient Land,” can be viewed at the link provided below. It illustrates the power of language, the strength of identity, and the way in which pride in Indigenous cultures can be shared through contemporary song. The Further Reading / Viewing / Listening list below includes links to two other films, one that shares Ethel Munn’s story and another from Joyce Bonner. These two films help to provide some background to the Yamani project.

Warrgamay elder, Bridget Priman, explains: “Yamani means ‘rainbow’ in the Warrgamay language, and as the name for this group it reflects the coming together of different people and languages in a rainbow of song.”

Knowledge holders from other communities joined with Bridget to create this musical rainbow. They are Ethel Munn (Gunggari), Leonora Adidi (Kalaw Kawaw Ya), Joyce Bonner (Butchulla), Faith Baisden (Yugambeh), and Melinda Holden (Warrgamay). They have come together to produce eleven songs in five different languages to share the many voices of Australian country. As this process empowers each language community through the opportunity to share Australia’s ancient knowledge, so too does it empower these “Voices of the Earth”: the people who continue to speak and share Australia’s first languages. Forming QILAC a decade ago,
the six women have been collaborating with the vision of making Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages stronger for many years to come.

While some of the women were nervous at the start of the project, believing that they couldn’t sing or read music—let alone write music—that didn’t stop them. Committed to strengthening the many Indigenous languages of Queensland, they found that music was an excellent tool for learning one another’s languages.

The film portrays the women’s journey and shows how the different stages of the language-learning, storytelling, and music-making process were significant to the women in different ways. Joyce found that just writing down a song on paper was special, whereas Ethel was finally able to witness an old and sentimental songbook come to life at 84 years of age. The power of collaboration is portrayed especially through Leonora’s workshop with the other women, in which she turns a poem about her grandmother into a song. Bridget wrote a song about the Warrgamay creator and shared her cultural knowledge of her region.

“We each shared songs in our languages with the others. We sing together in five languages, so we had to teach our language and learn the other four language,” explained QILAC Chairperson Joyce Bonner. “It has been a wonderful, challenging, and joyful experience which truly shows the power of music for sharing language.”

All of the women participated in music and technology training for twelve months, proving that it is never too late to learn new skills. With the assistance of a singing coach, Kristina Kelman, the women learned how to use muscles and deep breathing to develop harmonies and
find notes that they never knew they could reach. They then learned how to use new technology throughout the recording process, working with award-winning composer David Bridie and Wantok Musik Foundation to produce a CD. In David’s words, “Language is cultural identity encapsulated by song,” and Yamani illustrates that it is never too late to share this cultural identity by learning new languages and new songs.

To view the Yamani: Voices of an Ancient Land video, go to: https://vimeo.com/140554259

Further Reading / Viewing / Listening


To view more images of the Yamani project artists and read their testimonials about their ancestral languages, go to http://www.terralinguubuntu.org/Langscape/Volume_5/yamani.
"Stories are like ecosystems, with a community of meanings, interpretations, and systems interacting with their physical, cultural, and spiritual environments. As Indigenous Peoples have realized, all parts of the story matter."

— Hēmi Whaanga and Priscilla Wehi