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April 2022 UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues: Comments

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April 2022 UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues: Comments

Ofelia Zepeda*

Cewagĩ

Pi ʃa:muñ 'ab dahă.

'ab dahă kc 'ab beihim g gewkdag

'ab beihim 'amjed g s-ke:g hewel.

'I:da gewkdag mo na:nko ma:s.

'I:da gewkdag mo d 'ep ge'e tatañ.

'I:da tatañ mat 'ab amjed o si i-hoi g jewed.

I:da tatañ mo we:s 'an 'i-t-bijimidahim.

Summer clouds sit silently.

They sit, quietly gathering strength.

Gathering strength from the good winds.

This strength that becomes the thunder.

The thunder so loud it vibrates the earth.

The thunder that surrounds us.¹

This is language. It is our strength, our way of life, t-ni'okĩ 'o ɖ t-himdag, as we say in O'odham. The language is always there when we need it. For many Indigenous communities the languages are quiet, resting, sleeping like the clouds that sit gathering strength for when they will be awakened by the people.

When a language finally moves, it might be like the desert clouds that slowly build in the distance. It may take a generation, or two before new

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¹ OFELIA ZEPEDA, *Cewagĩ*, in OCEAN POWER: POEMS FROM THE DESERT 26,26 (1995).

speakers stand and pull on the energy that has always been there in their language. When they speak the words, they will know the powerful potential of a language. They will be like the thunderstorms we hear in the distance, and we'll feel them when they vibrate the earth beneath us. This is one way of looking at the efforts of language recovery occurring among communities and language workers of Indigenous languages in the U.S. and internationally.

I am fortunate to have grown up speaking my language and knowing the knowledge of the O'odham. I am a generation who learned to speak English in school. This generation holds in common the experience of using English at school and then morphing into a world known to them and their parents and extend family, shifting into a special world held together by the language. Currently, I am in a field where I can use my language as part of a science and simultaneously as work in aesthetics. As a speaker of O'odham knowing how to use the language as a spoken form and how to perform in the language is something valued by the people. O'odham like many other people have always held in high regard storytellers, orators, singers. I am proud to be among them even though my language use in poetry and is more contemporary. It is valued.

Throughout the years of my academic work as linguist and language teacher this field has allowed me the position to address policy needs for Indigenous language education and revitalization.

As a language teacher and researcher, I was part of a true grassroots effort. In the 1980's that open the eyes of so many to the condition of Indigenous languages in the United States with passage of U.S. Public Law 101-477, The Native American Languages Act, NALA.² This policy directed Congress to acknowledge the state of U.S. languages, that they were all at different levels of endangerment, meaning many were losing speakers at alarming rates some to the point of have only a handful of speakers who were the most elderly and vulnerable. Something had to be done. The drafters of the policy pointed to U.S. history at fault for this status the history of American education including the boarding schools and institutionalized religions among others. The policy acknowledged the failure again of U.S. treaty rights to meet the educational needs of Native American children. This policy declared that the United States—"(1) preserve, protect, and promote the rights and freedom of Native Americans to use, practice, and develop Native American languages;(2) allow exceptions to teacher certification requirements for Federal or federally funded programs; (3) encourage and support the use of such languages as a medium of educational instruction"³ are only a sample of

² Native American Languages Act, 25 U.S.C. §§ 2901–2906 (2018).

³ 25 U.S.C. § 2903.

the list of recommendations. Some of the recommendations proposed in this policy have been addressed many of them still wait on the horizon. A primary concern has been funding and in the reauthorization of NALA 1990 funds were made available to support language revitalization, and teaching through the Administration for Native Americans, also known as ANA revitalization grants. Many tribes and Nations have benefited from this support. In 2006 with the reauthorization of the NALA it was renamed the Esther Martinez language act, honoring the late Mrs. Martinez. This reauthorization specifically directed funds at language nests, survival schools, and restoration programs, promoting language immersion for children with the goal of creating new speakers.⁴

With the success of these grants other federal programs and private foundations were approached to consider endangered language as areas for funding. Funding was now put in places where it had not been before. The Endangered Language fund (ELF) was formed, a non-profit organization, the National Science Foundation created the Documenting Endangered languages grants (DEL) directed at researchers to assist with Indigenous language documentation, research in efforts to support communities with their recovery efforts. Some of these funds are still in place today supporting language recovery, education and documentation. However, we know it is not enough. Language loss continues. Much more work needs to be done. It is often observed that Indigenous communities continue to compete with one another for limited funds to support their language revitalization efforts; and the fact that language recovery efforts takes time much more than the duration of most grants. A significant revamp is required for this approach.

UNESCO's declaration for the International Decade of Indigenous languages, 2022-2032 will work to continue to bring attention to the endangered status of Indigenous languages around the world and assist tribal nations to build on their work. The decade will be impetus to bring language communities together to address common challenges and needs at the local, and national level. It will encourage communities to draft policies to address their specific concerns or those held in common by many. Children, access to technology and information, basic language and linguistic rights are a few of the areas of concern for the decade.

As a member of the UNESCO IDIL international taskforce, I have started to share information locally and nationally about the decade. In March 2022, AIHEC, the American Indian Higher Education Consortium hosted their first language summit where I presented briefly on the Decade. This month some of us will gather to work with foundations and

⁴ Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act of 2006, 42 U.S.C. § 2991.

federal funding agencies on options for supporting efforts for the decade, this year and next the University of Arizona will host multi-day workshops for tribal communities from across the U.S. to draft projects, policies, and other-directed goals for their communities for the decade. It will take some information sharing and support for communities to consider what the realities might be during this decade for them. There is currently a U.S. National Organizing Committee for IDIL where language workers, advocates and supporters come together to address goals for the U.S. for the decade. The work is in its initial stages. I am hopeful that much will evolve throughout the decade. We continue to gather our power.