

U.N. PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES, 18th Session, Item 5

International Year of Indigenous Languages. April 22, 2019

Statement from: Indigenous Languages Caucus, Halay Turning Heart

[*Indigenous language greeting* in Yuchi language by Halay Turning Heart, recognizing the traditional caretakers of this land and offering appreciation to our traditional Elders past and present who are providing so much support for our Indigenous languages.]

Honorable Chairperson:

I am Halay Turning Heart, greeting you in our Yuchi language, a rare language that is a language isolate, not part of a larger language family.

I have been spending time with Yuchi Elders since I was a child in order to reclaim our language.

Due to the billions of dollars spent on boarding schools and the colonial assault on our Indigenous communities we now have fewer than 10 Elders who grew up speaking Yuchi as their first language.

In fact, according to linguistic research, 90% of the world's languages (almost 6,800 languages) may fall silent during the lifetime of my children. But that is not the end of the story. We are now reclaiming our future as we take back our original languages, using face-to-face immersion methods between youth and Elders. In fulfilling the vision of our Elders, I am here at this U.N. meeting with four Yuchi youth from our community who have learned to speak the Yuchi language and we have now been able to grow 12 more young speakers of the Yuchi language who are fluent enough to teach younger generations.

We are at a most critical turning point in the life of our Indigenous languages. It is imperative that we stop listening to those colonial voices that tell us that it can't be done. And I myself have never spoken any English to my two children. Instead of using the colonial language we always talk together in Yuchi.

This means that Yuchi is their first language. And they are now the first children in 90 years raised hearing only Yuchi language from their mother. The best way to decolonize our thinking is through listening to our Elders and relearning our languages. The only way to re-Indigenize our minds in a full way is to learn to speak the language of our ancestors.

yUdjEhanAno^ so^ KAnAno^ (We Yuchi People are still here!)

We call on all young Indigenous mothers to speak only their original languages to their children and give them their birthright as speakers of their mother tongue. Doing so will revitalize our original languages and restore the cultural health of our Indigenous communities.

We can indeed breathe new life into our God-given languages all around the world.

I was here at the PFII in 2006 Calling for an International Year of Indigenous Languages. We are, indeed, very excited that the IYIL is finally here. abA w@nchE gOchathla gO'wAdAnAha k'@bE dalAga k'aOk'uhATÁ!

We offer the following RECOMMENDATIONS from the Global Indigenous Languages Caucus for the International Year of Indigenous Languages and beyond:

- + We must make sure the majority of the focus gets to the grass-roots level to ensure that the concentration, participation and outcomes of the International Year remain **focused on benefitting Indigenous Peoples themselves**. Because at the end of the Year, the only thing that will matter is **growing new young speakers** in our living Indigenous communities.
- + That the UN give an **Eminent Elder Award** in each region during each Regional Gathering to recognize their work in Indigenous language revitalization and these should be accompanied by an **Indigenous Youth Award** to recognize exemplary work by young language advocates. This will bring attention to excellent work that is being done and call attention to the great need of keeping alive our languages (and that these Awards be written in the language of the recipient).
- + We call for establishing a U.N. International **Decade** of Indigenous Languages. And we call for this Decade to be led by Indigenous leadership.
- + We appeal for new funding for our vital work in keeping alive our original languages. Monies should be directed toward **Indigenous-led funds such as the Global Indigenous Languages Fund** housed within

Seventh Generation Fund. The amount invested in restoring our Indigenous languages should be equivalent to the enormous amounts spent trying to destroy our languages.

+ That a **Special Rapporteur for Indigenous languages** be designated in consultation with Indigenous Peoples to prepare for and coordinate with UNESCO the International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

+ We call upon UN agencies and processes (including UNICEF and UNESCO) to **implement a strategy of triage** in order to give direct and immediate attention to the most critically endangered Indigenous languages

+ We need new laws to address the current crisis in the world's languages. Just like the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990 in the USA, we call for new legal support for the languages of our Indigenous Peoples with the passage of **NALPRA: Native American Languages Protection and Repatriation Act**. Such a law could be taken up by colonial governments all around the globe and would cut off federal funding for any institution or individual that failed to provide complete copies of all documentation of our Indigenous languages collected by researchers.

+ We support the establishment of a set of **UNESCO chairs dedicated to Indigenous languages** to be set up under the existing UNESCO chairs system. These chairs should be filled by scholars of Indigenous heritage.

As with all of our work on Indigenous Peoples' issues, the revitalization of Indigenous languages also needs to be decolonized. Even as we meet here, hundreds of millions of dollars are now being spent on Indigenous languages this year. Unfortunately, less than one percent of these enormous funds are actually going to Indigenous communities themselves. Instead of providing direct support to help grass-roots communities in their struggle to keep their languages and cultures alive, 99% of these millions of dollars are going to linguists, museums, archives, scientific institutes and entire language departments for the purpose of studying, warehousing, researching, dissecting, and publishing about our living languages.

But let's be clear, whereas, we welcome the help and interest from friends and supporters in the academic and business communities—that is what the International Year is all about—we must still address the heavy heritage from the old colonial equation of imbalances that still dominates the relations between Indigenous communities and the patterns of intellectual colonialism that have been in place for many centuries.

We have to make sure the International Year of INDIGENOUS Languages remains focused on the Indigenous side of the colonial in-equation.

Indigenous languages cannot be divorced from biological diversity and cultural diversity. Eighty percent of the world's biodiversity, and over 70% of the world's linguistic and cultural diversity is found in Indigenous Peoples' lands and territories. Research has revealed an extremely high correlation of direct overlap between lands with high ecological diversity and linguistic diversity. Therefore, the struggle to protect land, water and biological diversity is intrinsically linked to the survival of our Indigenous languages.

Assaults from extractive industries against Indigenous Peoples' territories are also devastating our languages. We cannot save our languages without resisting the plundering of our lands, territories and resources. These invasive actions are all expressions of the underlying Doctrine of Discovery. We speak for the earth. Indeed, our languages come from the earth—from the particular landscapes where our peoples originated. We are compelled to speak out on behalf of our languages due to the extreme urgency facing our Indigenous languages and the immeasurable **value of our original languages**. Our Indigenous languages are essential to Indigenous Knowledge, ceremonial life, medicinal practices, and our own identities as Indigenous peoples. Our languages are the basis for unwritten histories, specialized agronomies, and the understanding of local ecosystems and regional environments. In short, our languages carry our original instructions about our proper way of being in the world and keeping proper relations with other-than-human beings in the circle of life. **Ôk'ajU gOchathla gO'wAdAnAha hEIA TahAÔk'âfATA**

(Working together we can carry all our languages forward!)

s@nIAk'ayasOTa ("thank you")

-Halay Turning Heart, *Indigenous Languages Caucus*

1010 South Main, Sapulpa, Oklahoma, USA 74066 1-(918) 224-7017 info@yuchilanguage.org