RECOVERING VOICES: DOCUMENTING AND SUSTAINING ENDANGERED LANGUAGES AND KNOWLEDGE

by Joshua Bell

What happens when people stop speaking their local language and carrying out their traditions? What knowledge of the world is lost when these practices cease? How can cultural anthropologists, linguists, and community scholars work to address this global problem? What ways can museums in general, and the Smithsonian in particular, serve as active resources helping communities engaged in cultural and language revitalization projects? How can such collaborations transform museum practice, data management, and public understanding of language and knowledge loss?

The search for answers to these and other such questions has given rise to the Smithsonian’s new Recovering Voices Project (http://anthropology.si.edu/recovering_voices/), an interdisciplinary research and public initiative created through a collaboration of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History (NMNH), National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), and Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. Working with communities eager to sustain and revitalize their cultural traditions, Recovering Voices (RV) is working to marshal the collective strengths of these three institutions to address the issues surrounding language and knowledge loss.

The Recovering Voices Project is interested not only in the academic understanding of these phenomena, but also in the ways in which the Smithsonian’s diverse collections of audio recordings, ethnographic artifacts, natural history specimens, film, photographs, and texts can be used to help communities around the world continue and foster language and culture programs. With current estimates predicting that by 2100, 90% of the world’s 6,000+ known languages will disappear or be on the brink of extinction, it is urgent that we address the loss of languages and associated cultural knowledge in communities.

Languages hold thousands of years of history and are vital resources for documenting and understanding the Earth’s biological and cultural diversity. When languages disappear, society loses unique environmental and cultural information as well as specific insights into many fields of knowledge and thought including mathematics, biology, geography, agriculture, history, and religion. Language is a critical window into the creativity and the capacity of the human mind. Perhaps most importantly, language and cultural knowledge help guide and ground communities in the face of political, economic, and social disempowerment. As this process progresses, communities are deeply affected, and the diversity of human creativity and our ways of understanding and engaging the world are irrevocably diminished. This is both a local and a global problem that results in an irreversible loss in our shared cultural patrimony, our ability to comprehend the universe, and to pass that multifaceted vision to future generations.

Drawing upon the Smithsonian’s scholarly expertise, comprehensive collections, public outreach capacity, and convening power, Recovering Voices has been working over the past two years to develop innovative strategies to conduct interdisciplinary and cross-cultural research in order to effectively collaborate with communities that are working to abate language and knowledge loss. Three key principles direct this work:

1. Developing new collections-based methodologies for advancing research in language/knowledge studies and documentation;
2. Strengthening partnerships and building new lines of collaboration; and

3. Engaging the public through providing access to speakers of endangered languages, cultural experts, researchers, and collections.

This synergistic work is being accomplished through collaborations among anthropologists, biologists, folklorists, geographers, linguists, mineral scientists, and museum professionals. Counteracting language and knowledge loss through this intentionally diverse mixture of scholars, and with the focus on knowledge, Recovering Voices marks a critical and holistic approach resulting in productive collaborations with communities and broad-reaching public programs. Sensitive to the politics and histories between museums and communities, Recovering Voices is being carried out with interested communities but after negotiations as to the nature of the collaboration. Collectively we are sensitive to the different needs and concerns of communities regarding collaboration and issues surrounding heritage documentation and revitalization. Through a range of public programs, scholarly and artist fellowships, consultation with indigenous experts, museum and online exhibits, and symposia, Recovering Voices helps communities and scientists address time-critical aspects of the loss of endangered languages and knowledge, and promotes public awareness and support.

Through such integrated efforts we will continue to explore how to better make the museum’s materials an active resource for communities engaged in cultural and language revitalization projects. We also will continue to explore how the knowledge materialized in our collections can be integrated into our databases and thoughtfully conveyed to the public. Doing so makes room for other ways of knowing, which helps make the Smithsonian better stewards for this cultural patrimony. Museum objects in all their diversity are much more than their material form: they embody particular sets of skilled action, are manifestations of ways of engaging and knowing the world, and are concretizations of knowledge about the environment.

Take for example a red, yellow, and black feathered Hawaiian cloak known as 'ahu 'ula, traditionally worn by the Hawaiian nobles. These important items of chiefly adornment materialized the mana or power of the chief, female and male labor, the sky, forest, and the divinities associated with the birds used to make these items. The cloak’s braided ohia fibers (Touchardia latifolia) that form the cloak’s infrastructure ensnared prayers and genealogies chanted by the kahuna (priests) during the cloaks’ making, which when combined with the sacred feathers woven into particular crescent patterns, made the cloaks into powerful condensers of divine forces.

Similarly, linguistic documents written for the Bureau of American Ethnology’s Truman Michelson by Meskwaki speakers in Tama, Iowa, in the early 1900s, using the Great Lakes syllabry, contain seldom-used vocabulary. Such manuscripts offer insight into the language’s grammar and relate knowledge about traditional practices car-
ried out during the winter. Today, just as the cloaks preserved at the Smithsonian offer present-day Hawaiians insight into their technical and artistic heritage, so too do the documents and sound recordings offer community members the means by which to read and hear the words of their great-grandparents and also offer them more sources by which to sustain their revitalization efforts. All objects possess these types of relationships. Recognizing this and finding ways of activating the Smithsonian's collections' potentials in this regard is critical to Recovering Voices.

As this initiative unfolds, those involved in Recovering Voices look forward to challenging our preconceptions about our collections and re-imagining our relationships with communities around the world. Our long-term collaboration with Alaskan communities for the recently opened Smithsonian exhibit in Anchorage (Living Our Cultures, Sharing Our Heritage) is an important model that we look forward to replicating in our project areas in North America (Anchorage, Southwest and Midwest), Mexico (Oaxaca), and the Pacific (Papua New Guinea). The Recovering Voices initiative will engage and inspire audiences through a variety of media. We are developing a web portal highlighting our research and that of our partners. We will also create focused radio, film programs, and festivals, and are working towards a Folklife Festival in 2013 and an exhibit at the National Museum of Natural History for 2014. Our hope is that these efforts will help spark public interest in the issues surrounding linguistic and cultural diversity, and, in turn, prompt that public to value different perspectives and aspects of our global heritages.

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