

Essay Title : Tribal Language Preservation

The Muscogee Creek Nation is a thriving tribe that has grown extensively in recent years. Due to improved leadership and community involvement, the nation has grown strong. Job opportunities for tribal members are abundant, and many tribes are starting colleges for tribal members, capitalizing on tribal careers and programs. Tribal culture is strong and stays alive through tribal people. However, even amongst this progress in our Native American tribes, tribal language preservation is fading.

A tribe's language is essential to the endurance of a tribe. An integral part of Native culture and practices, a language is the foundation of a tribe. For the Muscogee people, the Creek language is the tie to past generations, the one tangible and sentimental thing that connects us to our forefathers. Native Americans have endured innumerable hardships throughout time. The fact that we as a people, much less our language, even survived the brutality thrown at us is unbelievable, even a miracle. Our language has survived for centuries, through thick and thin. But today, just as our tribes are getting on their feet and standing once again, our tribes are losing perhaps their greatest possession: their language.

Tribal languages are sacred. Our languages are the foundation of our tribes, and keep the spirit of the past alive today. By losing our languages, we are losing part of our identity as Native Americans. Many tribes have allowed their languages to slip away with the passage of time. While this is very unfortunate, other tribes have recognized the terrible phenomenon and are taking giant steps to prevent the same fate to their own people. The Muscogee Creek Nation is a tribe that recognizes the threat posed at their people and culture, and our people are fighting to

preserve our language. The ethnic population of the Muscogee tribe stands at about 52,000 people (“Ethnic Population of Muscogee”). The number of speakers in the Muscogee tribe is 6,000 worldwide (“Status of Indian Languages”).

An important part of language preservation is recording the language in writing and through audio and video techniques so that the language will be protected forever. The Creek Nation has worked very hard to preserve the tribe’s culture and language. Some techniques have been to record elders speaking in the traditional way to serve as an example for others learning to speak. An ambitious project, started by the Mvskoke Language Institute, is a film documentary project to conserve the practices of the traditional Creek church. In the film, elders were recorded talking about the practices of the church and their own elders, and they were encouraged to speak in the Creek language. I was fortunate enough to have a part in this project as director and editor of the film. The filmmaking process was enlightening and an once-in-a-lifetime experience; I was honored to speak to the elders and I learned more than I ever could from a history book. I feel like I helped play an important role in tribal culture preservation by taking a part in this project.

Many programs started by the Creek Nation are targeted at tribal youth. Teachers of the Creek language travel to schools with Creeks, and teach all students the basics of the Creek language. More recently, the Creek Nation has started Integration Camps for teenagers. At these camps, the Creek language is taught to campers, along with tradition and cultural information. These camps allow young Creeks to learn about their culture and language in a fun and encouraging setting. The Creek Nation has also started the Creek Nation Challenge Bowl, an academic bowl that uses material from Creek history, culture, current events, and language. I have been a participant in the Creek Nation Challenge Bowl for eight years, and I can honestly

say that it was a life changing experience. Without the Challenge Bowl, I would have very little knowledge of my tribe and culture and probably wouldn't know any of my language. The Challenge Bowl also encouraged my family to become involved in our tribe. Today, my dad is a Creek Nation National Council representative for our district. He works to represent the people in our tribe and actively fights for preservation of our culture. The Challenge Bowl also encouraged me to learn more than the study material provided to us, which leads to another step of language preservation in our tribe: tribal colleges.

The College of the Muscogee Nation is a college that builds its foundation on the values of Native Americans, regardless of tribe: "Native American values will be the basis for the campus as well as for academics, activities, and student organizations." The College of the Muscogee Nation offers many classes and programs for students; among these courses are classes that teach the Creek language. I was fortunate enough to be able to take Creek language courses at the College while still in high school. These classes have taught me so much more than my language; these classes have shown me the importance of preserving our culture and language, and that even I can make a difference in my tribe.

Finally, the Office of Cultural and Historical Preservation is hugely involved in the preservation and documentation of the Creek language. The Muscogee Nation Library/Archives, directed under the Office of Cultural and Historical preservation, "addresses the research and information needs of both citizens and non-citizens engaging in serious inquiry into Muscogee culture and history." This program, among with countless others, work hard to inform other citizens of the importance of preservation and are making a difference in our tribe every day.

The road to building up our language to its initial grandeur is a long and difficult one. It will not happen in one night, and it will not happen with one person. It will take time and the

cooperation of the entire tribe. However, I have hope that Native American tribes everywhere will fight for their language together, and become the strong and miraculous people that we are meant to be.

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