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Family at the Heart of Chickasaw Language Reclamation

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## Abstract

The Chickasaw Nation faces rapid and unprecedented decline of its language, *Chikashshanompa'*. As a result, community members are growing increasingly aware of the importance of the language to identity and culture, and language reclamation has emerged as a dynamic project requiring commitment from all generations. This article argues that despite the traumas of physical, cultural, and linguistic genocide, contemporary Chickasaw citizens are moving forward and re-envisioning the role of language in the community. In doing so, family has emerged to be at the heart of their efforts. In-depth interviews with community members representing multiple generations illuminated unique perspectives on the importance of *Chikashshanompa'* to the strengthening of Chickasaw families. The article begins with a personal account of my own experiences as a *Chikashshanompa'* language learner, followed by a historical overview of *Chikashshanompa'* decline. I then present a discussion of contemporary Chickasaw language revitalization efforts situated within the theoretical concepts of language reclamation, survivance, and linguistic responsibility. Culturally-grounded research methods frame my analysis of emerging themes, including: (1) elders' desire to ensure Chickasaw survivance through the language, (2) parents' responsibility to pass the language to their children, and (3) young peoples' yearning to speak *Chikashshanompa'* and developing consciousness of Chickasaw identity.

*Keywords:* Chickasaw language, Chickasaw families, language reclamation, American Indian language ideologies, American Indian language and cultural maintenance

## Family at the Heart of Chickasaw Language Reclamation

Located in south-central Oklahoma, the Chickasaw Nation faces unprecedented language loss. Largely a result of colonization and forced assimilation, the intergenerational transmission of the Chickasaw language—*Chikashshanompa'*—has been interrupted in families, leading to devastating and rapid language decline. In 1994, there were an estimated one thousand *Chikashshanompa'* speakers.<sup>1</sup> Currently, there are about seventy remaining speakers, all of whom are elders.<sup>2</sup> While a small but increasing number of second-language learners speak the language at a level of conversational fluency, new generations do not speak *Chikashshanompa'* as a first language.<sup>3</sup> As a result, community members are growing increasingly aware of the urgency surrounding language loss and the necessity for language reclamation. Currently, a small group of dedicated Chickasaw citizens and allies work to restore *Chikashshanompa'* as a healthy and vibrant language of the community. Significantly, family has emerged to be at the heart of their efforts.

This article examines intergenerational perspectives on the importance of *Chikashshanompa'* to Chickasaw families. I begin with an autoethnographic account of my own efforts to learn *Chikashshanompa'* and the responsibility I have in ensuring its continuance. Next, a brief historical account of language loss in the community demonstrates the impact of this historical trauma on Chickasaw families. A discussion of contemporary Chickasaw language work situated within the theoretical concepts of language reclamation, survivance, and linguistic responsibility follows. Culturally-grounded research methods frame my analysis of emerging themes, including: (1) elders' desire to ensure Chickasaw survivance through the language, (2) parents' responsibility to pass the language to their children, and (3) young peoples' yearning to speak *Chikashshanompa'* and developing consciousness of Chickasaw identity.

### *Chikashsha Saya*

My Chickasaw ancestors spoke *Chikashshanompa'* in southeastern homelands given to them by *Aba'binni'li'*, the One Who Sits Above. While first European contact imposed unprecedented change to Chickasaw society, my ancestors continued to speak *Chikashshanompa'*. By the turn of the nineteenth century, however, the federal government had grown increasingly hostile toward American Indian peoples, as the United States pursued its vision of Manifest Destiny and the taking of Indigenous lands. In the late 1830s, my great-great-great-grandparents were forcibly removed from their homelands to Indian Territory (now Oklahoma). Their children, who attended boarding schools in Indian Territory, were among the last generation in my family to speak *Chikashshanompa'*. Raised outside of the Chickasaw Nation, I did not hear my heritage language spoken as a child.

My interest in learning *Chikashshanompa'* developed as I entered young adulthood. As an undergraduate, I gravitated toward American Indian Studies because it was a space on campus that affirmed and allowed me to develop my identity as a Chickasaw person. Reading Keith Basso's *Wisdom Sits in Places*,<sup>4</sup> about Western Apache language and place-making, kindled my interest in Indigenous languages and inspired me to seek my own language. To this end, I participated in a summer internship through the Chickasaw Nation. My position with the Division of History and Culture afforded me opportunities to research *Chikashshanompa'* and, importantly, take language classes.

Sitting in a small room with a group of elder fluent speakers and other language learners, I heard my heritage language spoken for the first time. As we practiced saying words and phrases, I became increasingly conscious of the vital role of language in the continuance of Chickasaw culture and identity. Early in my *Chikashshanompa'* class, I learned to say the phrase,

“*Chikashsha saya* [I am Chickasaw].” While I had spoken these words many times in English, my life was forever changed when I said them in the language of my ancestors. I realized that my identity as a Chickasaw person was not adequately expressed through English. The far reaching impact of colonization and the enduring pressures of assimilation had prevented me from knowing my language, and, thus, fully knowing myself. Reclaiming this ability became a driving force behind my desire to learn my heritage language and pursue language reclamation as both a field of academic study and a potential career.

As a Chickasaw person and language learner, my experiences are inseparable from my research about *Chikashshanompa'* reclamation. In order to embrace and make visible my subjectivities, I utilize autoethnographic methods as employed by other Indigenous researchers. Gungarri Aboriginal scholar Roxanne Bainbridge advocates that autoethnography is an especially valid means for Indigenous researchers to construct knowledge from an “epistemology of insiderness” that values, validates, and prioritizes Indigenous ways of knowing.<sup>5</sup> In order to compose a personal account of my reasons for pursuing language, I self-administered a survey based on questions I asked other participants who were learning *Chikashshanompa'*, including: (1) When did you start learning *Chikashshanompa'*? (2) Why did you start learning? and (3) What motivates you to continue learning? The process of self-reflection in relationship to the research questions allowed me to have what Bainbridge describes as a “clearer and intuitive understanding” of the research phenomenon.<sup>6</sup> It is through this lens that I explore language reclamation and the importance of *Chikashshanompa'* to Chickasaw families.

### **Historical Trauma and the Effects of Language Loss on Chickasaw Families**

Research about American Indian families is often inseparable from discussions of what Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart (Oglala Lakota) calls historical trauma, or “the cumulative

emotional and psychological wounding, over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences.”<sup>7</sup> For this reason, the detrimental effects of language loss on Chickasaw families must be understood within the context of the colonization and oppression of Chickasaw people. While affronts on Chickasaw language and identity can be traced to as early as first European contact in the 1540s, this article’s historical analysis begins with the federal Indian policies of the nineteenth century which imposed rapid, severe, and unprecedented change to multiple aspects of Chickasaw society, including language.

In 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act and effectively thrust upon Chickasaw leaders an ultimatum. Chickasaws could either relocate to Indian Territory or surrender political autonomy as a nation. Concerned with their survival as a people, Chickasaws entered into nearly a decade of futile negotiations. Between 1837 and 1839, the United States military forcibly expelled thousands of Chickasaws from their southeastern homelands, which spanned present-day Arkansas, Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee. Because no suitable land-base was secured, Chickasaws were forced into a fourth district of the Choctaw Nation and effectively became Choctaw citizens until a new constitution was ratified in 1856.<sup>8</sup> Deprived of their resources, territory, and sovereign identity, Chickasaws struggled to rebuild a nation in Indian Territory.<sup>9</sup> The unprecedented political, economic, and cultural changes imposed by removal were further exacerbated by the dearth of Western-educated Chickasaw citizens. With few options, Chickasaws turned to English literacy as a means to secure stability in uncertain times.<sup>10</sup>

Amanda Cobb-Greetham (Chickasaw) writes that “[f]or the Chickasaw Nation, providing [English] literacy instruction for their children was a matter of survival.”<sup>11</sup> Beginning as early as 1844, Chickasaws established English-language boarding schools aimed at increasing literacy

among Chickasaw youth.<sup>12</sup> While Chickasaws preferred to retain autonomy over their institutions, they lacked the financial resources to maintain the newly opened schools. The struggling nation entered into a partnership with Protestant missionaries who sought not only to educate Chickasaw students, but to “civilize” and “Christianize” them.<sup>13</sup> The partnership was relatively short-lived, as the onset of the Civil War forced the schools to shut down. They reopened in 1876 under Chickasaw control and remained open until Oklahoma statehood in 1907.<sup>14</sup>

While the boarding school era launched the Chickasaw Nation on a trajectory toward political, economic, and social stability, it was largely at the expense of language and culture. Speaking *Chikashshanompa'* was discouraged in schools even under Chickasaw control because English was believed to be a more effective means of securing political, economic, and social success. Many graduates internalized the notion that English was a language of greater worth than *Chikashshanompa'*, which resulted in decreased use of the language in Chickasaw homes. Not only was *Chikashshanompa'* actively suppressed by the boarding schools, these institutions propagated the notion that English was superior to Indigenous languages. These beliefs and attitudes toward the language, or language ideologies, have persisted and continue to work as a damaging force against *Chikashshanompa'*. More recently, however, increasing numbers of community members have begun to confront and replace these damaging language ideologies by emphasizing the importance of language to culture, identity, and well-being.

Building on Brave Heart's analysis of historical trauma and the enduring effects of forced assimilation on American Indian communities, Deacon et al. assert that boarding schools disrupted the intergenerational transmission of language and culture which in turn has contributed to identity crises among Chickasaw people.<sup>15</sup> In order to promote well-being for



Chickasaw families, Deacon et al. sought Chickasaw perspectives on what makes a strong and healthy family. The study affirmed that Chickasaw families draw strength from their culture. Participants in the study felt that, along with tradition and ceremony, language should be prevalent in the realms of Chickasaw families.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Christopher John Aducci's research about historical trauma and resilience among Chickasaw families, found that Chickasaw citizens greatly valued their language and grieved over its decline.<sup>17</sup> They viewed *Chikashshanompa'* as a means to access cultural knowledge which had become inaccessible as a result of language loss.<sup>18</sup>

### **Chickasaw Language Reclamation as Survivance and Linguistic Responsibility**

The continuance of *Chikashshanompa'* has long been a concern of Chickasaw community members. Born in 1925, Chickasaw governor Overton James—who served from 1963 to 1987—witnessed great, rapid and unabated change as the values and language of the dominant society were imposed on and even embraced by Chickasaws. As federal Indian policy shifted from termination to self-determination, and pan-Indian activists mobilized around an agenda of tribal sovereignty, the Chickasaw Nation, too, embarked on a period of political and cultural revival. Importantly, this revitalization movement both encompassed and directed attention to the language. In 1967, James recognized that if nothing was done to impede language loss, the language would cease to be spoken altogether. With funding from the tribal trust fund, he commissioned a *Chikashshanompa'* dictionary.<sup>19</sup>

The dictionary became a family affair, as James recruited his mother, Vinnie May Seely James Humes, and her husband, Reverend Jesse Humes, to bring the project to fruition. Having no prior experience with language documentation, the Humes family worked diligently within their means. Vinnie Humes recalled:

We sat at that kitchen table, working. We had this little old Webster's Dictionary, and I would call out the English word and Jess would hand it back in Chickasaw, pronouncing it in syllables and spelling it phonetically. Our aim wasn't to get the meaning of the words so much as it was to help people who wanted to learn how to speak the language.<sup>20</sup>

Importantly, the intent of the Humes dictionary—published in 1973<sup>21</sup>—was not to document linguistic phenomena in the language, but rather to give *Chikashshanompa'* back to the Chickasaw people by providing a resource for language study.

Following the publication of the dictionary, efforts to preserve the language continued and slowly accelerated. *Chikashshanompa'* speakers began to develop language materials and teach introductory classes both for schools and the community.<sup>22</sup> Based in Los Angeles, linguist Pamela Munro and fluent speaker Catherine Willmond also made significant strides toward *Chikashshanompa'* preservation. In 1994, they published an extensive analytical dictionary, which built on the work begun by the Humes family.<sup>23</sup> Collectively, these efforts laid the foundation for current language reclamation efforts.

In response to an ever-increasing desire among Chickasaw citizens to know their heritage language, the Chickasaw Nation established the Chickasaw Language Revitalization Program (CLRP) in Ada, Oklahoma. Founded in 2007, the CLRP describes its mission:

We believe that our language was given to us by *Chihoowa* (God), and it is our obligation to care for it: to learn it, speak it and teach it to our children. The Chickasaw language is a gift from the ancestors for all Chickasaw people. The job of the Chickasaw Language Revitalization Program, simply put, is to help people access that gift.<sup>24</sup>

At the time of the study, the CLRP's primary focus was its Master-Apprentice Program, which pairs adult language learners with fluent elder speakers.<sup>25</sup> Striving for full language immersion, pairs work together approximately ten hours per week over the course of a year. Since the program's inception, its capacity has been about twelve to fifteen pairs per year. Children interested in the language had opportunities to participate in clubs and camps, while older youth

had the option of taking a *Chikashshanompa'* class at a local high school.<sup>26</sup> During the summer, older youth could also apply to work temporarily at the CLRP through the Chickasaw Nation Summer Youth Program.

Like the participants in both Deacon et al. and Aducci's research, individuals involved with the CLRP affirmed the idea that *Chikashshanompa'* is intrinsically connected to Chickasaw culture and a distinct Chickasaw identity. As one elder fluent speaker stated:

[The language] is something we need to hang on to because we were given our language by the Creator. If we don't keep speaking our language, it will be gone. Other tribes have lost their languages. [Our language] is part of our culture [and] our heritage. [It] is what separates us from everyone else.<sup>27</sup>

These words imply that language is a precious gift, and, as recipients, Chickasaws are responsible to attend to language by continuing to speak it. Notably, Leanne Hinton identifies themes which typically motivate the language revitalization efforts of Indigenous communities, including language as: healing, key to identity, spirituality, and a carrier of culture and worldview.<sup>28</sup> These themes are prevalent in Chickasaw language work. As the elder's words suggest, *Chikashshanompa'* is inseparable from culture and heritage, and it informs a way of being distinctly Chickasaw. For this reason, learning, teaching, and speaking *Chikashshanompa'* further functions as a means to counter historical trauma and pain for individuals, families, and the community; it is a healing process. Given these underlying motivations, current Chickasaw language revitalization efforts should be considered within broader frameworks of language reclamation, survivance, and linguistic responsibility.

Western approaches to language documentation and revitalization have traditionally emphasized the enumeration of *fluent* speakers as a primary measure of language health,<sup>29</sup> which diminishes the contributions and successes of younger generations of language learners.<sup>30</sup>

Alternatively, Wesley Leonard (Miami), whose research focuses on awakening *myaamia* as a

vibrant language of his community, proposes that community-driven efforts should be positioned within a framework of *language reclamation*. In his view, language reclamation is not just an effort to increase speakers and domains of language use; rather, it occurs “within a much larger social process of claiming—or reclaiming—the appropriate cultural context and sense of value that the language would likely have always had if not for colonization.”<sup>31</sup> Whereas the term *language revitalization* emphasizes the restoration of the language, *language reclamation* is concerned with people who are reclaiming their languages and, through that process, beginning to heal themselves, their families, and their communities.

Importantly, language reclamation exemplifies what Gerald Vizenor terms *survivance*. Vizenor writes survivance is “moving beyond our basic survival in the face of overwhelming cultural genocide to create spaces of synthesis and renewal.”<sup>32</sup> Survivance has important relevance to Indigenous language reclamation. In the face of physical, cultural, and linguistic genocide, the acts of speaking, teaching, and learning an Indigenous language are demonstrations of both presence and resistance. By continuing to use *Chikashshanompa'*, Chickasaw people reaffirm its presence and actively resist hegemonic power which is at the root of language loss. Survivance further creates space for new language practices and ideologies. Leisy Wyman, who explores the unique challenges Yup'ik youth have faced in negotiating rapid language shift in their communities, employs the term *linguistic survivance* to consider the ways individuals and communities use language(s) to “shape collective identities, practices and knowledge systems in challenging or hostile circumstances.”<sup>33</sup> It is through linguistic survivance that younger generations shape new language practices and redefine and reclaim the role of *Chikashshanompa'* in contemporary Chickasaw lives.

At its core, language reclamation is driven by a deeply personal sense of responsibility, especially for those generations characterized as language learners. Though my spouse—who is Cayuga with strong family ties to the Tuscarora Nation—and I do not yet have children, we often consider the role our heritage languages should and will play in our family. Before starting a family we agree that, as individuals, we must further develop proficiency in our own languages, and we must have knowledge of each other’s language. My husband calls this the *linguistic responsibility* of parents. By studying our own languages, we become responsible for the transmission of our Indigenous languages to a new generation, a process that has been interrupted in both of our communities. By ensuring new generations’ access to the language, we enable deeper cultural knowledge and sense of identity. In turn, cycles of trauma can be broken and pathways to personal and community wellbeing reopened.

While this notion of linguistic responsibility is not thoroughly analyzed across scholarly literature, it is a common theme in accounts of individuals and families working to prioritize endangered heritage languages in their daily lives. Leanne Hinton’s recent volume, *Bringing Our Languages Home*, comprises thirteen autobiographical contributions united by a sense of responsibility to reclaim and use heritage languages in the home.<sup>34</sup> Daryl Baldwin, a *myaamia* language learner, describes the emotion of realizing that the last fluent speakers of his heritage language had passed away in the early 1960s. He writes, “I remember feeling a sense of loss but also a sense of responsibility when I learned of the status of our language.”<sup>35</sup>

Notably, Tiffany S. Lee (Diné/Lakota) describes this developing consciousness of language loss as an *awakening*. Her research revealed that as Indigenous college students became increasingly aware of language shift and intersections with identity, they demonstrated a sense of agency in asserting an Indigenous identity and encouraging language reclamation.<sup>36</sup> Baldwin’s

increased consciousness of language shift and newfound sense of responsibility also prompted increased agency in pursuing his language. He went on to pursue a graduate degree in linguistics and, over several decades, to restructure his home and family life around speaking a once sleeping language.

jessie little doe baird further unpacks a sense of responsibility in her account of awakening *Wôpanâôt8âôk* (Wampanoag) through academic study and community-based language programming. She writes:

By the time my youngest was born, my husband, Jason, and i were both good speakers... i think that we agreed that we would use our language at home as soon as we decided to have a baby... We discussed the fact that our daughter would not be exposed to the language on a daily basis anywhere else and we acknowledged and accepted our responsibility to the language.<sup>37</sup>

baird reflects that while many Indigenous parents feel responsibility to share cultural knowledge with their children, language is seldom considered a part of that responsibility. The case may be that language learners do not feel confident in upholding this profound responsibility, however, baird reassures, “if I put out the language i do have, then i have given my child everything i have.”<sup>38</sup> In doing so, baird provides her child the means to access Wampanoag identity and culture, and assures the survivance of Wampanoag people.

### ***Chikashsha Asilhlha'*: A Culturally-Informed Research Methodology**

Indigenous peoples have a long and complex relationship with the academy and its research. Recognizing that the methodologies of dominant powers often perpetuate colonial agendas, Linda Tuhiwai Smith calls for ethical, respectful, and transformative research in Indigenous communities.<sup>39</sup> Answering Smith’s call for decolonized Indigenous research methodologies, CLRP director Joshua D. Hinson outlines a community-based and culturally-relevant protocol which he calls *Chikashsha asilhlha'*.<sup>40</sup> Importantly, *Chikashsha asilhlha'*

informed my own role as a Chickasaw researcher seeking to conduct meaningful and ethical research in my own community.

Based on a *Chikashshanompa'* verb meaning “to ask,” *Chikashsha asilhlha'* is driven by six ethical guidelines for conducting research about, with, and for the Chickasaw community:

1. Respect the house (*chokka'*), clan (*iksa'*), and tribe (*okloshi'*)
2. Be visible to the community
3. Listen and observe before questioning
4. Reciprocate gifts
5. Be careful with knowledge that is given
6. Be humble

The larger study on which this article is based examined motivations of those Chickasaw citizens who were especially committed to learning, teaching, and speaking *Chikashshanompa'*.<sup>41</sup> It involved inquiry into language reclamation as a community endeavor, as well as a personal one. As such, Hinson’s six guidelines were at the core of my research model.

In early stages of the research, the CLRP assisted me in recruiting participants across three generations who demonstrated commitment to learning, teaching, and/or speaking *Chikashshanompa'*. Commitment to the language was evaluated on the basis of engagement with existing language programs. Those selected were current or former Master-Apprentice participants, employees of the CLRP, employees of the Chickasaw Nation who worked with the language in their positions, and/or temporary youth workers at the CLRP. All identified as language learners and/or teachers.

While age was one criterion to approximate generational categories, I also considered familial and community roles, as well as patterns in language usage. The emerging generational categories included:

- Generation *Sipokni'*: Elders who were over fifty-four years of age, grandparents or great-grandparents, and respected fluent speakers.
- Generation *Iklanna'*: The middle generation who were parents between 26 and 54 years of age and did not speak *Chikashshanompa'* fluently as a first language.
- Generation *Himitta'*: Youth and young adults who were under twenty-six years of age, the youngest generation within their families, and learning *Chikashshanompa'*.

The study included five representatives from both Generations *Sipokni'* and *Iklanna'*, and four from Generation *Himitta'*.

Data was collected primarily through face-to-face in-depth interviews held at the CLRP office. When the CLRP was not a convenient meeting location, I also traveled to nearby towns or to participants' homes. I used a single interview sequence—modified from Irving Seidman's structure<sup>42</sup>—containing four distinct sections: (1) a focused life history; (2) experiences learning, teaching, and/or speaking *Chikashshanompa'*; (3) motivations to learn, teach, and/or speak *Chikashshanompa'*; and (4) reflections on the role of *Chikashshanompa'* for individuals, families, and the Chickasaw community. In order to accommodate a diversity of experiences with the language, I designed varying sets of interview questions for those who (a) were learning *Chikashshanompa'* as a second language; (b) spoke *Chikashshanompa'* as a first language, but stopped as a result of negative experiences; and (c) spoke *Chikashshanompa'* as a first language and continued to speak throughout their lifetime. Before each interview, I asked participants to self-identify with one of these categories. Given that participants were active in language



reclamation efforts, it is not surprising that no participants identified with category (b) spoke *Chikashshanompa'* as a first language, but stopped as a result of negative experiences.

Generation *Sipokni'* participants identified as fluent speakers who used the language regularly, while Generation *Iklanna'* and *Himitta'* participants were second-language learners with varying levels of proficiency in and usage of the language.

The larger study revealed that, across generations, family was a primary source of motivation for participants' involvement in language reclamation efforts. This article focuses specifically on the data which revealed intergenerational perspectives on the importance of *Chikashshanompa'* to Chickasaw families. Emerging themes across each generation included: the desire of Generation *Sipokni'* to ensure Chickasaw survivance through the language, Generation *Iklanna'* parents' responsibility to pass the language to their children, and Generation *Himitta'* youth's yearning to speak *Chikashshanompa'* and developing consciousness of Chickasaw identity.

### **Generation *Sipokni'*: Ensuring Chickasaw Survivance**

Your language is something you learn when you're small child... You don't forget it, or you forget because you want to forget it. (Dana)

Raised in a *Chikashshanompa'*-speaking home, Dana, a sixty-seven-year-old elder, recalled, "Our language started when we were all small and everyone in my family knew the language. We all knew who we were, what we were." For Dana's family, it was the norm that Chickasaw people speak *Chikashshanompa'*. As Dana and other Generation *Sipokni'* participants reflected on the changes to Chickasaw life over the years, they expressed a sense of responsibility to continuing to speak *Chikashshanompa'* and to ensure Chickasaw survivance by sharing it with younger generations.

After high school, Dana she moved out of state for several decades and used *Chikashshanompa'* only sporadically. When she finally returned to Oklahoma, Dana was eager to speak *Chikashshanompa'* regularly again. In reality, however, there were fewer remaining speakers than when she left. Reflecting on this situation, Dana stated:

I talked to so many people and they say, “I used to speak it when my grandmother was still alive, but after she passed away, I forgot and I can’t speak it anymore.” I always think, “No, that’s an excuse.” Your language is something you learn when you’re small child... You don’t forget it, or you forget because you want to forget it.

While Dana witnessed peers suppress their knowledge of *Chikashshanompa'*, she remained ever proud of her heritage and language.

For Dana, to continue to speak the language is an aspect of her identity and means to honor her mother. She reflected: “My mother was 80-something years old when she passed away. She’s passed on for over 30 years now. Therefore, I feel that I learned from that. That makes me proud of the fact that I learned how to speak the language in the way that they did years ago.” Speaking *Chikashshanompa'* is a source of pride because the language allows Dana to uphold an intimate connection to her mother who passed the language to her. In this way, *Chikashshanompa'* is source of both individual and familial identity that Dana desires to maintain and project.

Dana asserted a responsibility to speak *Chikashshanompa'* and ensure its continuance for future generations. When she moved back to Oklahoma, she began sharing the language with others by teaching community classes, translating materials for the Chickasaw Nation, and participating in the Master-Apprentice program. During the interview, Dana explained that a young person interested in the language had recognized the value of the cultural and linguistic knowledge she possessed, and helped her to get a paid position as a language consultant for the Nation. Importantly, the job affirmed her identity as a *Chikashshanompa'* speaker and allowed

her to fulfill her responsibility to the language. By teaching and sharing the language with others, Dana actively worked toward ensuring the language's continuance. She reflected: "This is where I'm supposed to be. This is where I was meant to be. This is the job that was waiting for me... There was a reason why I still remembered my language." For Dana, fulfilling responsibility to the language is a life calling.

Dana's desire to continue speaking the language and to pass it on to future generations was common among the elders in the study. Judy, age sixty, continues to speak *Chikashshanompa'* because her mother and grandmother instilled in her that Chickasaw people should speak their language: "My grandmother and mom used to say, 'Always speak your language.'" Whereas speaking *Chikashshanompa'* was the norm for generations past, Generation *Sipokni'* participants struggled to navigate the tension between their heritage language and the dominant language throughout their lives. This tension manifested itself in complex ways. For example, they did not raise their children to be *Chikashshanompa'* speakers. Sarah, age sixty-four, described this phenomenon:

From the way back, all they [Chickasaw ancestors] spoke was Chickasaw. Generation from generation, it was all in Chickasaw. Up until us kids started to go to white school. We started speaking English. That's how our language got away from us. I didn't even teach my kids how to speak Chickasaw. I wish I did now.

When asked why she did not teach her children the language, Sarah reflected honestly: "It never dawned on me."

While not passing the language to their children seems to conflict with Dana and Judy's portrayal of *Chikashshanompa'* as a language of the family, it is important to recognize the context in which these decisions were made. As pressure to assimilate increased, Charlie, age sixty-four, explained that many Chickasaws wondered, "Why speak [the language] if we're in a different atmosphere, a different world, a white world?" According to Charlie,

*Chikashshanompa'* speakers intentionally encouraged English language use as parents because they believed it would enable their children's success in a changing world and shield them from abuse associated with speaking an Indigenous language. Sarah's statement that the language "got away" is significant because it reveals that Generation *Sipokni'* participants did not foresee the current state of rapid and severe language loss as they were raising their children. While many recognized that *Chikashshanompa'* speakers were declining, they did not anticipate that the language could cease to be spoken within their lifetime or that they were unknowingly complicit in the process.

As the urgency of language decline has increased, Generation *Sipokni'* has had to reconsider their role in language reclamation. Participants have come to recognize a linguistic responsibility in ensuring Chickasaw survivance. Charlie explained that while he questioned the value of speaking *Chikashshanompa'* for many years, this changed as he got older and began to recognize the consequences of language shift for Chickasaw people. He remembered his grandparents encouraging him to attend school, but also telling him: "Don't ever be ashamed of your language. Don't ever lose it." Reflecting on his life, Charlie was now able to recognize the profound wisdom his grandparents shared. In pushing him toward education and reminding him of the value of his language, they were equipping him to stay rooted in his cultural identity so as to confront inevitable changes to Chickasaw life. Like Dana, all Generation *Sipokni'* participants expressed a sense of linguistic responsibility to continue speaking the language and to teach others. Importantly, the ability of these elders to uphold this role depends on the commitment of Generations *Iklanna'* and *Himitta'* to learn *Chikashshanompa'*.

### **Generation *Iklanna'*: A Responsibility to their Children**

[The language is] going to be lost if new people don't start learning it. That's kind of scary. I thought, well, I can start and then have a little one speaking it. That would be good, too. So, we'll keep it going. (Claire)

When he [my son] came along, I just wanted to give him something more substantial than just his [tribal] citizenship... I just had this instinct or feeling about the language, that that was the way to do it. (David)

Claire, age thirty-four, tended to her infant daughter as she shared her desire to carry forward the language by studying it and teaching it to her daughter. While Claire had just begun learning *Chikashshanompa'*, David, age thirty-one, had been studying for nearly a decade following the birth of his son in 2000. Overwhelmingly, these and other Generations *Iklanna'* parents desired to instill in their children a strong sense of identity and meaningful knowledge of their culture. Coming from homes in which *Chikashshanompa'* was either forgotten or actively suppressed, they knew personally what had been lost and wanted to give their children more than what they had. By enabling their children to connect to their heritage, these parents sought to disrupt the historical trauma of language loss.

Born in Texas, Claire was not exposed to the language as a child. Because her father served in the military, the family moved frequently and was often not around other Chickasaws. After completing her graduate degree, Claire began working for the Chickasaw Nation. Through her job, she met Dana and became inspired by language reclamation efforts. While Claire eventually transitioned to a new position and started a family, her desire to learn *Chikashshanompa'* remained. She began formally working with Dana through the Master-Apprentice program. Whenever possible, Claire brought her infant to Master-Apprentice meetings, giving her daughter the opportunity to hear and become accustomed to her heritage language.

Claire's participation in Master-Apprentice was motivated by Dana's reflections on the severity of *Chikashshanompa'* decline and a desire for her daughter to know her language:

[The language is] going to be lost if new people don't start learning it. That's kind of scary. I thought, well, I can start and then have a little one speaking it. That would be good, too. So, we'll keep it going.

Importantly, Claire recognized that, in order for the language to continue, Generation *Iklanna'* parents who did not learn the language as children must join new generations in the endeavor to begin to speak it. She explained:

It's important with the baby. I want her to pick it up, so that's why I bring her when we have our classes. You know, she's learning English and I think she'll get the Chickasaw, too. Hopefully she'll grow up knowing it.

Just as Dana feels a responsibility as a *Chikashshanompa'* speaker to ensure the language's continuance, Claire upholds a similar responsibility as a capable and committed language learner and parent. Given that the natural transmission of the language from generation to generation has been interrupted, this portrait of multi-generational language learning potential is powerful, as well as hopeful. Dana, Claire, and Claire's infant share a special relationship based on the goal of restoring a *Chikashshanompa'*-speaking family.

Claire's motivations to participate in language reclamation efforts were echoed by David. Raised in Texas, David did not participate in cultural activities as a child. Nonetheless, he had a fascination with the language and recalled receiving the Humes dictionary as a gift from his grandmother at the age of ten. It was not until the birth of his first child, however, that David began studying the language seriously:

When he [my son] came along, I just wanted to give him something more substantial than just his citizenship, his buffalo card<sup>43</sup> that says whatever Chickasaw he is... I just had this instinct or feeling about the language, that that was the way to do it.

David followed this instinct whole-heartedly and, over time, brought the language from the periphery to the center of his family.

For seven years, David poured through language materials trying to learn on his own. In 2007, he participated in the first Master-Apprentice cohort and, because of his prior study, was able to make progress quickly with the support of a fluent *Chikashshanompa'* speaker. Now an accomplished second-language learner, David turned his passion for *Chikashshanompa'* into a career, which in turn has transformed his family's perceptions of the language:

In my immediate family, I think that's how my children see me. Dad does language, that's what he does. For them, it depends on the day. Sometimes they'll take it, sometimes they'll leave it. They're little kids. It's a force. It's always there. I talk to my kids in Chickasaw every day. That's what puts food on the table. My wife doesn't really speak it, but she knows some stuff. It's not an organizing force per se because we have a mixed household. It's definitely sort of right there in the center of what we do.

At the forefront of Chickasaw language reclamation efforts, David actively supports others as they also seek to bring the language to the center of their family units.

Michelle, a mother of two, explains that she began learning the language and volunteering with a children's language club because she "wanted [her] children to be more involved from what [she] was." Whereas Claire and David grew up outside of the Chickasaw Nation, Michelle was raised locally and had many *Chikashshanompa'*-speaking relatives. Because of her father's negative schooling experiences however, the language was suppressed in Michelle's home. Despite participating in other aspects of Chickasaw culture, Michelle recognized that without the language, something was missing.

In 2011, Michelle had the opportunity to turn her volunteer position into a career and has enjoyed seeing the direct impact her work has had on her family. Not only are her children active in language programming, her extended family is becoming increasingly involved. What is more, her father, after two years of convincing, agreed to work with her through the Master-Apprentice

program. Bringing the language back into the home has had a remarkable impact on Michelle's family. She reflects: "The ability to see my kids and watch my nephew, who is two, will be three at the end of the month, sing in Chickasaw—it does my heart really good."

As these Chickasaw parents balance family, work, and other commitments, language remains a priority. Many feel a responsibility to ensure the continuance of the language and to instill in future generations a strong sense of Chickasaw identity that includes *Chikashshanompa'*. Anna, a Master-Apprentice participant with a four-year-old son, captures the desire of many Generation *Iklanna'* parents:

When I think about the things I have to do in life, I think about my son, my work, and how I'm going to get my time in with [my language teacher]. [The language] is always in the forefront of my mind. I envision a day when everything I do, I'll think about it in English and Chickasaw and when [my son] is older, we'll have a conversation just as smoothly in Chickasaw as we would in English. It would just be part of our day. [I want] him to grow up not knowing any different.

With the support of Generation *Sipokni'*, Generation *Iklanna'* fulfills their linguistic responsibility by learning and teaching the language. Because of their efforts, it is hopeful that that future generations will once again speak *Chikashshanompa'* as a first language.

### **Generation *Himitta'*: A Yearning to Speak *Chikashshanompa'***

"I've got that Chickasaw pride... I'm Chickasaw. I'm supposed to know [the language]." (Amber)

I grew up around [the language]. My papa used to speak it to me, but I never really understood what he was saying. [He] would teach me little words like mouse and stuff like that. Last year was the first year I really got into it. (Erin)

Amber and Erin, who were both working at the CLRP during the summer, grew up in the Chickasaw Nation and had *Chikashshanompa'* speaking grandparents. Still, neither of the teens had learned to speak the language as children. Through their interviews, Amber, Erin, and other Generation *Himitta'* participants expressed a yearning to speak their language, especially as a



means to connect with elder generations. Similar to the young adults in Lee's study, Generation *Himitta'* also demonstrated a developing consciousness of Chickasaw identity in relation to the language.

Amber, age sixteen, was frequently exposed to *Chikashshanompa'*, but was not a speaker herself. Her grandparents were *Chikashshanompa'* speakers, and her mother and step-father used *Chikashshanompa'* words and phrases in the home. Though her family valued the language, Amber's father wanted her to learn English as her first language: "[My dad] thinks we learn [English] first before we can learn Chickasaw because that makes more sense." Notably, these words are reflective of great tension between generations with conflicting language ideologies. While Generation *Iklanna'* and *Himitta'* participants seem to embrace the possibility of bilingualism, many families continue to struggle with a perceived either-or choice between English as a means to success in the mainstream and *Chikashshanompa'* as a marker of Chickasaw identity. Importantly, younger generations play a critical role in challenging those language ideologies which inhibit the intergeneration transmission of *Chikashshanompa'*. At the age of ten, Amber initiated her own language-learning process and has been learning the language from her grandmother by listening to and repeating *Chikashshanompa'* speech.

For Amber, speaking the language was not only a way to express what she calls "Chickasaw pride," it was a way to connect on a deeper level to her own family. When asked why she decided to begin learning the language, she explained:

Listening to my grandma speak Chickasaw sparked my interest, so I started asking her all this stuff. She started teaching me after a while. Then I started picking out some of the words in a conversation she was saying to my grandpa when she was speaking in Chickasaw.

As Amber began to shift from a passive listener to an active learner, her efforts were embraced by her grandmother, who, in Amber's words, was "trying to get [her] to be a fluent speaker."

Like Amber, Erin, age fifteen, saw the language as critical to strengthening intergenerational relationships in her family. Erin explained that she had limited exposure to the language as a child. Growing up, her grandfather taught her *Chikashshanompa'* words and phrases, but it was not until high school that she became motivated to learn the language:

I grew up around [the language]. My papa used to speak it to me, but I never really understood what he was saying. [He] would teach me little words like mouse and stuff like that. Last year was the first year I really got into it.

Erin's new interest in *Chikashshanompa'* developed in part because her grandfather began speaking the language to her with increased frequency. At the same time, Erin's high school offered her the opportunity to enroll in a *Chikashshanompa'* language class. Erin and Amber's family members spoke English fluently. Still both youths maintained that it was important to communicate with elder relatives through *Chikashshanompa'* as a means to strengthen intergenerational relationships within their families.

The yearning to speak *Chikashshanompa'* within the family was situated within a larger desire to affirm their Chickasaw identity. Erin explained that learning *Chikashshanompa'* was also important to her because of the language's capacity to mark Chickasaw people as distinct from other peoples: "[Knowing our language] is good because it's something other than English. It makes us different and we should keep it going." Mary, age 15, was raised outside of the Chickasaw Nation, but later returned with her family. She was enrolled in the high school language class with Erin. When asked why she was studying the language, she stated: "I'm Chickasaw...I want to learn because it's part of my life... People need to learn [the language] because it's part of Chickasaw culture. I think it's a really major part." For Amber, speaking the language reflected pride in her identity and heritage: "I've got that Chickasaw pride... I'm

Chickasaw. I'm supposed to know [the language]." Significantly, Amber's pride in her heritage reflected a sense of self-respect and dignity in being Chickasaw and learning the language.

Generation *Himitta'* participants expressed a responsibility to know *Chikashshanompa'*. Through family conversations, language courses, and working at the CLRP, the youth were becoming increasingly aware of language loss and the importance of *Chikashshanompa'* to their identities. Sheilah Nicholas (Hopi) writes, "Young adulthood brings with it a new perception of youth."<sup>44</sup> As youth come of age, their sense of responsibility develops and shifts. Similar to Lee's study, Nicholas's research with Hopi nineteen-year-olds demonstrated that as the youth developed awareness of the necessity of language to full participation in Hopi culture, they experienced new motivation and urgency to learn the Hopi language.<sup>45</sup> While the language learning process requires great commitment, Nicholas is optimistic that the youth will fulfill their responsibility and hold tightly to the language and Hopi way of life. Significantly, one participant stated, "Since you're Hopi, you're brought up that way; you can't let it go."<sup>46</sup>

Generation *Himitta'* youth echoed this sentiment, stating: "I want to learn [the language] because it's part of my life," and "I'm Chickasaw. I'm supposed to know [the language]." Notably, Generation *Himitta'* seemed to sense a community expectation that they, as young community members, would support the language's continuity and survivance. They yearned to know *Chikashshanompa'* and uphold this responsibility, but were also still reconciling the role the language would play in their lives. Mary's statement that the language was already part of her life is hopeful because it implies that learning *Chikashshanompa'* will be a lifelong commitment.

## Discussion

Language reclamation is about more than learning and teaching language; as Daryl Baldwin asserts, it “is about community building and healing from the past.”<sup>47</sup> Colonization and enduring pressures of assimilation have disrupted the intergenerational transmission of language and culture for Chickasaw families, contributing to historical trauma.<sup>48</sup> Seeking to restore a sense of well-being, Chickasaw community members have begun to collectively re-envision the importance of *Chikashshanompa'* to strengthening Chickasaw families. Interviews with passionate and committed fluent speakers and language learners across generations revealed a profound sense of linguistic responsibility to family and desire to ensure Chickasaw survivance through *Chikashshanompa'*.

Generation *Sipokni'* elders enabled the continuance of *Chikashshanompa'* by speaking the language despite persistent pressure by the dominant society against doing so. While Generation *Sipokni'* participants did not raise their children as *Chikashshanompa'* speakers, the increasing urgency of language decline has pushed them to reevaluate their role in supporting language reclamation and reinvigorating cycles of intergenerational language transmission. Generation *Sipokni'* elders' contributions to language reclamation are a prime example of survivance. Vizenor writes that survivance is a “sense of presence, the motion of sovereignty and the will to resist dominance.”<sup>49</sup> Generation *Sipokni'* expressed a sense of linguistic responsibility to share *Chikashshanompa'* with others. By speaking and teaching the language, elders resist hegemonic forces which fuel language decline. Importantly, the ability of Generation *Sipokni'* to fulfill this responsibility to Chickasaw survivance depends on younger generations' willingness and commitment to learn *Chikashshanompa'*.

Generations *Iklanna'* and *Himitta'* were committed to language reclamation and felt unique responsibilities as language learners. Raised in homes where *Chikashshanompa'* was either absent or suppressed, Generation *Iklanna'* was personally aware of the consequences of language loss. As such, participants expressed a profound sense of responsibility to learn the language and teach it to their children. They hoped that knowledge of the language would enable their children would be conscious of and grounded in their cultural identities as Chickasaws. By upholding responsibility as language learners and teachers, Generations *Iklanna'* parents furthered momentum toward Chickasaw survivance.

As Generation *Himitta'* youth and young adults developed increased consciousness of language loss and their identity as Chickasaws, they experienced a yearning to speak *Chikashshanompa'*. Amber and Erin were especially motivated to learn the language in order to communicate with their grandparents in *Chikashshanompa'* rather than English. This motivation seemed to be situated within Generation *Himitta'* participants' larger desire to affirm Chickasaw identity through language and strengthen intergenerational relationships. While Generation *Himitta'* participants felt the expectation that they should know the language, they were just beginning to consider how they could uphold this profound sense of linguistic responsibility.

Whereas speaking *Chikashshanompa'* was the once the norm for Chickasaw families, today it is a *choice* that requires the commitment of time and effort. The multigenerational portrait of *Chikashshanompa'* reclamation presented in this article suggests the need to support Chickasaw citizens of all ages who uphold a responsibility for ensuring continuance of the language. This is especially important for youth who are coming into consciousness of their identities and the potential role of language in their lives. Given that the CLRP has programming

for youth of all ages, further research with a wider range of participants representing Generation *Himitta'* might reveal how these programs support language learning and identity formation.

My first *Chikashshanompa'* language class was a pivotal experience that prompted a life-long journey toward reclaiming my heritage language for myself and my family. As a language learner, I am continually inspired by Chickasaws and other Indigenous peoples who make their language a priority. I have been especially impacted by the example of William H. Wilson and Kauano'e Kamanā who have organized their family, career, and daily lives around the Hawaiian language. Drawing on words of Hawaiian language advocate Larry Kimura, the couple shares their calling: *E paepae hou 'ia ka pōhaku i pa 'a maila ka hale e ho 'olulu ai* [Reset the stones of the platform and build upon it a house, a haven for our language and culture].<sup>50</sup> These words resonate powerfully across peoples. Younger generations of language learners must look to elders and ancestors in order to construct a firm foundation on which to build our homes. In doing so, we create space to celebrate and protect our languages and cultures. Importantly and in turn, we must nurture the family at the heart of the language reclamation.

## Notes

*Chikashsha alhiha' chokma anhili.* I offer my gratitude to the many Chickasaw people who shared their stories with me, as well as to those who work tirelessly to ensure the survivance of our language for generations to come.

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