A Precious Spring:
Land Reclamation, Culture, and Language Revitalization in Mountain Maidu Country

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Out of respect for the departed,
uttering his name is to be refrained from for the period of one year.

* * * * *

I speak my favourite language
because
that’s who I am.

We teach our children our favourite language
because
we want them to know who they are.

~Christine Johnson, Tohono O’odham elder,
American Indian Language Development Institute, June 2002

Heh-heh! Niki yan kakan Maya. Hesaska? Yaman manto kodok’ woweh minsuh
hukiti-dum kuhkahsi-beh. Tuh-si mak’-weh-eh. Tuhk’kan Maidu weh-eh-beh. In the Mountain
Maidu language of Northern California, these words mean “Hello! My name is Maya. How
are you? I’m going to (cause in your brain to intellectually stimulate) speech from the
country of lots of mountains. This is the people’s language from the north. The people call
themselves Maidu.” Ah, the vagaries of translation! A rhythmic poetry in the Maidu words
just doesn’t quite “translate” when phrased in English (thus, the parenthetical phrasing
mid-sentence). Additionally, this is a “pidgin” orthography, composed of the author’s
limited knowledge of the standard Maidu orthography (Shipley, 1964), and her own
phonetic approximations of sounds. Is it a further threat to this “critically endangered”
(UNESCO, 2003, p. 8) language when I change its orthography? Or is it better that I make
any attempt to learn to speak the language? These seed questions, among many others concerning language loss, preservation, and revitalization have sprouted in my consciousness, seeking fertile ground in which to root and grow.

Initially, my interest in studying Maidu came from my own geographic and cultural connections to home on the Western slopes of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in Northern California. I knew a few Maidu words, learned from local road names (wepa – coyote; sumi – deer), and I had felt time disappear as my fingers traced the smooth, circular inside of the grinding hole worn into bedrock hundreds of years before. I had harvested willow to weave a basket, elderberries for medicine, and manzanita berries (eh-puhm hini) for a nourishing snack. However, I knew next to nothing of the fraught and tenuous passage the Maidu people, their language and their culture have undergone in the last 160 years of California’s dominant history narrative, including the complex story of genocide, land loss, and cultural annihilation and assimilation. I did not know that only a handful of first-language speakers is still living, nor of one young man who had listened and learned at his grandparents’ and elders’ knees to come forward in our time with the knowledge of his people’s language intact, a gift from the ancestors to bring back to the people. “Language, more than any other single human creation, is the living artifact of a culture” (Slater, 2004).

The traditional homeland of Northeastern or Mountain Maidu “extends roughly from Mount Lassen in the northwest, to the Elysian Valley in the northeast, and from the middle area of the North Fork Feather River canyon vicinity in the southwest, to the Sierra Valley in the southeast” (Cunningham, 2007, p. 7). This land of lush mountain valleys, crisscrossed by numerous rivers, streams and lakes, is located an average of 4000 feet above sea-level, characterized by pine, cedar, fir, and oak, as well as alder, willow, manzanita, ceanothus,
and numerous grasses and bulbous roots that make up the forests and meadows of this remote region. Animal inhabitants include hawks, squirrels, Stellar jays, mountain lions, red fox, mule-tail deer, and black bear, to name but a few - Mountain Maidu country.

In addition to Mountain (or Northeastern) Maidu, there are two other distinct Maidu linguistic groups: Konkow, the Northwestern or Valley Maidu, and Nisenan, also known as Foothill or Southern Maidu (Mithun, 1999, p. 455). The Konkow traditional territory lies west of the Sierra Nevada mountains, between Chico, Oroville, and surrounding areas, while Nisenan lands extend south to the Sacramento Valley and east into the Sierra Nevada foothills around Auburn, Colfax, Grass Valley and Nevada City, California. These languages are all in the Maiduan language family, of Penutian stock (Mithun, 1999, p. 455), as illustrated in the map below (California Department of Parks and Recreation, 2011). As Leanne Hinton notes, "(b)efore white contact, California had more linguistic variety than all of Europe. Today California Indian languages are indeed in the ultimate crisis in a life-and-death struggle...We may see ninety percent of these languages, or perhaps all of them, disappear in our lifetimes" (Hinton, 1994).

Earthmaker said:
“If I could but see a little bit of land
I might do something very good with it.”

Floating along then,
they saw something like a bird’s nest.
Earthmaker said:
“It really is small.
It would be good if it were a little bigger,
but it is really small.
I wonder how I might stretch it apart a little.
What would be good to do?”
In what way can I make it a little bigger?"
As he talked, he transformed it.


It is difficult to approximate an accurate sense of Maidu population figures, due to factors related to years of displacement from traditional ancestral lands, the effects of colonialism and genocide, and the convoluted results of treaties that were never ratified by the U.S. government (L. Gorbet, personal communication, November 22, 2011). For
example, Ethnologue (2009) reports an “ethnic population” of only 110 Mountain Maidu in the 2000 U.S. Census, but more illuminating, perhaps, is this assessment:

According to the 2000 Census, the surrounding area includes at least 530 people reporting Native American as their sole ethnicity. However, the Census is a problematic source of information on the Maidu population because there may be Maidu who count themselves as mixed race or who do not report their ethnicity, and there are other Native American people included in the category of "Native American," which is not broken down by tribal affiliation. At the November 2008 Maidu Summit meeting, one participant reported that there were as many as 1,500 Maidu heads of household in Plumas County. Of the Maidu population, some are members of other Rancherias, but many are federally unrecognized and have no tribal membership, despite their relatedness to members of the recognized tribes. Because of this lack of collective recognition, Maidu struggle to continue their land-based culture on the political, economic, and ecological margins of their own homeland. (Middleton, 2010 p. 5)

These estimates reflect a population recovering from a 1904 low of 286, after pre-contact estimates of 20,000 Maidu people living in the area in 1800 (L. Gorbet, personal communication, November 22, 2011). Lorena Gorbet, Maidu community member and untiring activist with the nine-member consortium Maidu Summit, estimates the current Mountain Maidu population at around 2000 (personal communication, November 9, 2011).

Demographically, of California’s 58 counties, Nevada, Lassen and Plumas counties are, respectively, 36th (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), 47th, and 51st (Middleton, 2008, p. xv-xvi) in
population. In Plumas and Lassen counties, Native Americans constitute the 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} largest minorities (Middleton, 2008, p. xvi); Natives Americans are also the 3\textsuperscript{rd} largest minority in Nevada County, while the 2\textsuperscript{nd} largest minority group was people reporting two or more races (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In Plumas and Lassen counties, incomes are less than both State and National averages; in Lassen County in particular, a wide disparity exists between locals at or below poverty level (or of a moderate middle class), and 2\textsuperscript{nd} & 3\textsuperscript{rd} home-owning retirees (Middleton, 2008, p. xvi). Finally, families living below the poverty line in each of these three counties represent 9\% of the population in Plumas County and 11\% in Lassen County (Middleton, 2008, p. xv-xvi), and 10\% in Nevada County (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

Similarly, accurate assessments of the vitality of a language may vary greatly between statistical sources and what is actually the case on the ground. In addition, community members may feel distinctly different about the strength of their language than what the statistics present. According to Ethnologue (2009), Mountain Maidu only has 2 living first language speakers, and as such is classified as “nearly extinct.” In actuality, it appears the number of remaining first language speakers is closer to seven, all of whom are estimated to be (well) over the age of 80 (F. Cunningham, personal communication, October 14, 2011). These elders all live rurally and are not, it is believed, actively engaged in passing on the language at this time (C. Stewart, personal communication, November 9, 2011). The only other fluent speaker of Mountain Maidu is Farrell Cunningham (the young man referred to earlier), who has been teaching Maidu language classes for more than thirteen years, in several locations throughout traditional Maidu homelands. Nonetheless, in terms of the nine factors that comprise UNESCO’s Language Vitality Index (2003), with its handful
of speakers and limited usage in multiple domains, Maidu still exhibits criteria of a 
“critically endangered” (p. 17) language.
PHONOLOGY and ORTHOGRAPHY of the MAIDU LANGUAGE

The primary reference on Maidu phonology comes from William Shipley’s (1964) *Maidu Grammar*. “Maidu has 18 consonants, six vowels, 3 degrees of stress, and 4 junctures, or a total of 31 phonemes” (Shipley, 1964, p. 6), as illustrated in the following chart:

### CONSONANTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Restricted:</th>
<th>Labial</th>
<th>Alveolar</th>
<th>Palatal</th>
<th>Velar</th>
<th>Glottal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voiced Imploded Stops</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>d</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voiceless Glottalized StOPS</td>
<td>p’</td>
<td>t’</td>
<td>c’</td>
<td>k’</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(as in “ch”)</td>
<td>(“cq” as in Jacques)</td>
<td>(glottal stop)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unrestricted:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voiceless Plain Stops</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>c</td>
<td>k</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirants</td>
<td></td>
<td>s</td>
<td></td>
<td>h</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasals</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>n</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semivowels</td>
<td>w</td>
<td>j</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(as in “ya”)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lateral</td>
<td></td>
<td>l</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### VOWELS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High</th>
<th>i (as in “seen”)</th>
<th>y (”uh” as in “could”)</th>
<th>u (as in “you”)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>e (as in “eh”)</td>
<td>ai ¹ (as in “I”)</td>
<td>o (as in “oh”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>a (as in “ah”)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ Shipley spelled the phonetic “I” as /aj/; to distinguish this from the sound of “hay”, F. Cunningham has adopted a spelling of /ai/ (personal communication, November 27, 2011).
According to Shipley (1964), imploded stops and glottalized stops only occur in syllable-initial positions (p. 6). He notes that even in word-initial placement, glottalized stops are “normally lax...Although some slight glottal coarticulation is never absent, the acoustic quality of these stops is often similar to that of voiceless unaspirated stops” (Shipley, 1964, p. 7) in English. Thus, the glottalized /p'/ in Maidu sounds like /p/ in “spool,” while the glottalized /t'/ sounds like /t/ in “stop.” The voiced imploded stops, the letters /b/ and /d/, are sounds that are not heard in English, created when “a partial vacuum is formed in the area between the glottis and the point of articulation. The release is effected by breaking this vacuum, with a resulting slight rush of air into the mouth” (Shipley, 1964, p. 7). Degree of emphasis on the imploded sounds and glottal stops seems to be lessening with subsequent generations (F. Cunningham, personal communication, November 14, 2011) as influences from English and other languages seep into usage. Shipley’s /j/ is pronounced like an Eastern European “y”, as in “ya” (F. Cunningham, personal communication, November 14, 2011). In regards to the glottalized /c'/, Cunningham has adopted the spelling “ch” in order to better explain an English sound equivalent to his students (personal communication, November 19, 2011). Roland Dixon (1912), who recorded the first Maidu orthographies, designated this sound /ts/ (p.3); Shipley also notes the glottalized /c'/ “is a palatal, similar to {ts}” (1964, p. 7). Maidu is “laxly articulated and is normally pronounced slowly and deliberately,” states Shipley (1964, p. 7); in contrast, intense or rapidly delivered speech suggests strong emotion on the part of the speaker, “especially impatience or irritation” (Shipley, 1964, p. 7). Cunningham (2011) concurs, characterizing Maidu speech as “polite” (personal communication, November 19, 2011). Also, like many Indigenous languages, Maidu “is
polysynthetic, meaning that what we would express in a sentence the Maidu express in a single word containing a long string of suffixes” (Slater, 2004).

Although Roland Dixon created the first orthography of the Maidu language, it was based on non-standardized writing systems that showed up in personal collections and obscure or non-archival sources (F. Cunningham, November 14, 2011), and as such was somewhat inconsistent. Shipley, a linguist, was the first to formalize the process, aiming for uniformity and a style that would fit with what were then current typographical standards (of the manual typewriter). Shipley’s (1964) grammar is that of Mountain Maidu speech patterns and vocabulary (not Konkow or Nisenan), though there is some overlap and intermingling of terms and usage. Currently, Farrell Cunningham is working on a completely different orthography, in conjunction with the Maidu Language Council, which he refers to as “idiographic,” somewhat like pictographs, but where sounds are represented by particular script patterns that “look like Arabic” (personal communication, November 14, 2011). Cunningham feels that Dixon’s (1912) Maidu Texts, formatted with Maidu text on one page and an English translation facing on the opposite page, is the “most comprehensive Maidu language resource” (personal communication, November 19, 2011), perhaps as much for the wealth of cultural information embedded in the fabulous stories as for Dixon’s comprehensive orthographic rendition of those tales. Citing Shipley’s 1963 Maidu dictionary, Mithun (1999) points out that, morphologically, Maiduan “languages are noteworthy for the lack of a formal distinction between noun, verb, adjective, and adverb roots; a root may appear with any semantically compatible suffixes: Maidu soli ‘song’, solkan ‘he’s singing’, solpe ‘singing’ (attributive), solnini ‘singly’ (p. 456). Interestingly, F. Cunningham (2011) points out that some people didn’t like the way Shipley took verbs
down to their “root,” as that isn’t typically done in Maidu; at the same time, he expresses
great respect and appreciation for Shipley’s work, and for the fact that he would “always
come when (the community) asked for help” (personal communication, November 14,
2011).

**We Are the Land**

“The language is who you are. Also, it’s part of the land. And we are the land.”

- Chairman Don Ryberg, Tsi-Akim Maidu Tribe (NCTV.org, 2007)

Any discussion of Maidu language revitalization cannot, intrinsically, be separate
from an understanding of their land-based culture, and the deep interconnectedness
between the beings on the land (plant, animal, etheric, ancestral) and a current dweller’s
relationship therein. “Prior to colonization the Maidu enjoyed the benefits of one of the
most refined subsistence patterns ever to have existed on this planet. Commonly termed
‘hunters and gatherers’ the Maidu subsistence pattern was one of intimate knowledge and
understanding of the ecosystem of which they were a part” (Tsi-Akim Maidu, 2011). The
Maidu are known, particularly, for their understanding of forest management practices
(sustainable forestry, before it was called that), including the use of prescribed burns to
manage acorn-producing oak groves and healthy meadowlands.

The people relied, almost entirely, upon their landscape to provide them with
the resources they needed. Acorns were a major crop along with various
grass seeds, bulbs, and numerous greens. The landscape was carefully tended
through multiple generations to ensure sustainable harvests and somewhat
predictable crop locations. (Cunningham, 2007, p. 8)
Whereas the Maidu had remained fairly isolated during the first wave of Spanish colonization of California, they were not immune to the ravages of California’s gold rush, as settlers (and towns and cities) moved in to the once pristine valleys, and changed a way of life forever. “Oak groves tended for centuries were wiped out. Multi-generational relationships between people and the land were severed” (Cunningham, 2007, p. 10), as subsistence foodstuffs and foraging areas were decimated.

What happened to further exacerbate the situation for the Maidu people is the convoluted and complex history related to what is known as the California Homeless Indian Act (Heizer and Sturtevant, 1978, p. 118), and myriad circumstances surrounding subsequent Termination Era policies, Tillie-Hardwick, and the reinstatement of some (but not all) California Rancherias (F. Cunningham, personal communication, October 14, 2011). Lorena Gorbet is quick to clarify that the Rancherias created for ‘homeless California Indians’ were not for individual tribes, and were not necessarily made up of the Indigenous tribe of the area (personal communication, November 9, 2011). In the ensuing process, some Indigenous groups – like the Maidu – did not end up with land or federally recognized tribal status (nor access to any of the avenues of state and federal funding and support that come with that status). Thus it is that:

“The great Maidu ‘nation’ is one of the largest Native Indian tribes in California, whether we organize people based on Kroeber’s linguistic boundaries (which would include the Nisenan and Concow Maidu), or around the nationalistic views of some Maidu. Yet, the Maidu Nation is difficult to find—on a map, in the list of recognized California tribes, or in the Census” (Middleton, 2010, p. 2).
Lorena Gorbet reveals an oft-overlooked lens on this issue: 20% of Native Americans in the U.S. live in California; 80% of those Native Californians descend from federally unrecognized tribes. Thus, California only receives 2% of federal funding for Native Americans, despite the 80% who remain unrecognized (personal communication, November 18, 2011). Only those 2% operate casinos, i.e. manage such revenue sources for their tribes; the rest are still landless, and unable to access a government-to-government sovereign relationships with the United States. It is possible the unrecognized figure is actually as high as 90% (F. Cunningham, personal communication, November 18, 2011).

Tsi Akim Maidu of the Taylorsville Rancheria, with an office in Grass Valley, California, is a 501(c)3 non-profit with a mission “(t)o acquire a secured land base, (t)o better educate tribal members and non-Indian community (and to) (s)tudy the history of our tribe and all Indian peoples (Tsi-Akim.org, 2011). Accordingly, Tsi Akim is in the process of seeking federal tribal recognition, and the return of formerly held lands on the Taylorsville Rancheria in Indian Valley. Tsi Akim sponsors seasonal gatherings for its membership (and all that entails for sharing, stories, and new connections forged), an extended celebration of Indigenous People’s Day in October, and a vital, traditional ceremony for Calling Back the Salmon. (This past October, Nevada City, California officially declared Columbus Day renamed as Indigenous People’s Day.)

2 The complex story of the Taylorsville Rancheria, which was “overlooked” (F. Cunningham, personal communication, October 16, 2011) during Termination era and subsequently sold, is addressed already in several excellent papers (see Cunningham, 2007, and Middleton, 2008 and 2010).
elaborate celebration spanning several days that included speakers, musician–poet-activist John Trudell, a round dance, cultural activities at an ancient Maidu village site along the Yuba River, community feasts and more.

Tsi Akim Maidu is one of many links in a widespread network of grassroots efforts to return once-traditional land holdings to their original inhabitants, and to restore Native culture, including lost or endangered languages, to their people. Like a pungent earthbound acorn determined to sprout a tree, processes of language, cultural, and land-based revitalization have already been rooting in Mt. Maidu country. Tufts University scholar, in an interview with Salma Monani (2009), describes the value of “joined-up thinking,” or thinking across policy boundaries. For example, it says housing policy is intimately related to energy policy.... Just sustainability advocates for the overlap. It asks us to look across the social, cultural, economic and environmental realms and realize that there is really no separate or isolated cultural, environmental, or economic realm. These are all part of the human experience and relate to each other intrinsically. (Monani, 2009, p. 54)

For precisely these reasons, “movement fusion” has become a successful strategy through which some Maidu people have begun to (re)organize on their own terms, and in the case of several tribal groups (including Tsi Akim), to petition for federal recognition status and for the return or acquisition of previously stewarded Maidu lands.

Encompassing concerns that span cultural preservation, education, language revitalization, and tribal status, the nine-member Maidu Summit Consortium “is made up of various area Maidu tribes, non-profit organizations, and other groups” (Cunningham, 2007
p.4), which currently include Greenville Rancheria, Roundhouse Council Indian Education Center, Mountain Maidu Preservation Association, Susanville Indian Rancheria, Maiduk We’ye, Tasmam Koyom Cultural Foundation, Tsi-Akim Maidu, United Maidu Nation, and Maidu Cultural and Development Group among its membership. The power in coalition lends more minds (and backs and hands) to the multiple projects that each group spearheads, from the State-mandated cultural, social, and educational work of the Roundhouse Council, to the grassroots language revitalization commitment among members of Maiduk We’ye (an immersion-style Maidu speaking-practice group), the Federal Rancherias and their represented memberships, Tasmam Koyom’s land stewardship and traditional forestry initiatives in the Humbug Valley region of Mountain Maidu territory, the language and cultural programs of the Tsi-Akim Maidu, and combined efforts of associated United Maidu Nation tribal members.

By securing once traditional sacred sites, the Maidu Summit Consortium is reinvigorating traditional knowledge and practices related to harvesting native plant materials for medicine, food, and basketry (Maidusummit.org, 2011). Cunningham (2007) emphasizes the long-awaited opportunity residing in these land claims:

Some of these lands include areas where resources such as medicinal plants and basketry materials are gathered. Others include ceremonial and religious sites such as geographic formations and cemeteries. Maidu uses of these areas have gone largely uncommented upon because the Maidu have enacted use within a pattern of necessary obscurity. Maidu ownership of these lands represents an opportunity for the Maidu to interact with their landscape in openness and without fear of reprisal. Within modern times this opportunity
This pattern of obscurity Cunningham describes above helps reveal the multifaceted legacy of cultural and linguistic recovery from forces of colonized existence. Thus, as Cunningham elaborates, the socio-political-economic conundrum of not owning once-traditional lands, and having no “legal” rights to activities once enacted on those lands, becomes clearer:

Community groups seeking to learn about resources are challenged by their ability to find those resources on accessible lands and in a healthy condition. The continuation of dances is threatened because the people do not own the land upon which these dances have been performed for generations, and land use changes. Basketry, one of the central arts of the Maidu, is threatened because the people do not have access to the quantity and quality of materials that they need. Maidu people have managed willow areas for generations only to find that an indifferent land owner has decided to eliminate willow stands in order to create more habitat for domestic grazing animals. (2007, p.11)

If the meaning of a people’s existence is intimately embedded with the land, with these terrains and practices, then the language must exist, as well, within the borders, tributaries, and forested depths of that land. For example, to harvest basket materials means to remember (and use) the words related to the plants, the weaving itself, the basket created, and a bevy of traditional stories (cultural history) passed on during all the steps in the process: layers of meaning emerge around the plants, the ancestors, full circle to the place itself, and its other inhabitants.
A primary project of the Maidu Summit is a quest to have traditional Maidu territories returned via a series of Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E, California’s public utility conglomerate) divestitures (Cunningham, 2007, p. 4), a generative community project ultimately aimed at continued cultural preservation, as well. As described in the goals of the Maidu Summit’s Land Management Plan (2007) for the divested PG&E lands, core tenets of “movement fusion” are inherent to this process:

Environmental education, ecosystem sustainability, social wellness, and justice built around: The celebration of the most ancient cultural heritage of the region as evidenced by: Being the first example of the return of lands to collective Maidu ownership and management since conquest; Being the only large scale area of land upon which Maidu traditional ecology can genuinely, be implemented; Being the only lands wherein all people can learn about the Maidu way of life as expressed by the Maidu; Being the only lands wherein all people can learn about the unique benefits of Maidu traditional ecology as a land management tool; Being the only lands in the region that can be truly restored to a pre-conquest condition by embracing the human role in shaping that condition. (Cunningham, p. 4-5)

It is crucial to understand “embracing the human role in shaping that condition.” This elegant remark captures how Maidu culture and language cannot be separated from what happens on the land, where the voices of plants, animals, and ancestors all interact to inform the revitalization of the whole. Language cannot be extracted from its “nest” of speakers, dreamers, remembers, and other living creatures (animate and inanimate) who inhabit its terrain. As Tsi Akim’s Cultural Director Grayson Coney explains, acknowledging
and participating from “an inherent human element, our position on the land there” begins
to place the people back in the landscape as well. Where the people dwell, language follows.

While the Maidu Summit works is a regional network, another excellent local
collaboration exemplifying movement fusion sees Tsi Akim Maidu partnering with the
South Yuba River Citizens League (SYRCL) for the annual Calling Back the Salmon
ceremony (and festivities) that focus on salmon returning to their spawning grounds above
the Englebright Dam on the South fork of the Yuba River. After spearing a salmon in waters
below the dam, and ceremonially wrapping it in blankets for its journey upstream, a team
of runners who have been specially trained and prepared for the spiritual and physical
rigor of the event then run the salmon upstream until they reach the dam. Once there, they
have to travel by boat to finish the course the salmon would traditionally travel via the
river’s (undammed) course in reaching its home waters. This ceremony was not performed
between 1856 and 2004 (D. Uran, personal communication, November 10, 2011). Tsi Akim
Maidu Chairperson Don Ryberg researched the ceremony with his tribal elders, initiating
its return into the people’s cultural experience. SYRCL director Jason Rainey describes how:

(W)e joined with the Tsi-Akim Maidu to support the revival of this ceremony
as an action for both cultural and salmon restoration. Now we’re five years
in to this work, we have involved dozens of other environmental and
indigenous rights groups, and I’ve come to see the primary purpose of the
ceremony as one of acknowledgement, healing, and reciprocity. Healing
among people, land and water are preconditions for returning salmon to the
upper Yuba Rivers, and coming together in the Calling Back the Salmon
ceremony is the healing action for restoring our home watershed.
Therefore, restoring the home watershed is central to revitalizing the Maidu language as well. “Maidu culture epitomizes a place-based culture whereby language, song, dance, material production, and thought patterns are all based in the ecosystem of the homeland” (Tsi-Akim.org, 2011).

Another exemplary collaboration in Maidu country is that between the Bear Yuba Land Trust and Tsi Akim Maidu, where site maintenance, stewardship education, and cultural programming at the Burton Homestead site outside rural Nevada City intertwine. Tsi Akim Cultural Director Grayson Coney stresses that this is an active cultural site (not merely passive and interpretive): their programs range from teaching children tracking skills (“Fox Walkers”) and Maidu plant names, to how to attend to what the land is saying “with a diffuse consciousness,” or “ambient thinking,” as well as family gatherings, hand game competitions, and regular tribal gatherings (G. Coney, personal communication, December 2, 2011). A regional hand game tournament was held at Bear Yuba Land Trust this past summer, drawing about a thousand people from across the Western United States. Language revitalization occurs as participants learn the traditional songs that accompany the games (F. Cunningham, personal communication, November 27, 2011), and Coney elaborates that there are “all kinds of gatherings...(held) almost every week. It is our destination for immersion in culture...(W)here we belong on the land” (personal communication, December 2, 2011).

While inquiring into Maidu language revitalization, a persistently nagging question keeps arising: what about the remaining elder speakers? Ethnologue and other statistical sources don’t seem to account for their numbers. Donna Clark, Language
Program Coordinator at Susanville Indian Rancheria, states that there are “a few elders who know bits and pieces... it’s the traditional territory” (personal communication, October 14, 2011); according to Farrell Cunningham, there are at least 7 elder speakers between the ages of 80 and 96+ living in the Greenville, Taylorsville, and Quincy areas. He remembers a lot more speakers from when he was a kid, probably numbering around 35 as recently as 1980 (F. Cunningham, personal communication, October 9, 2011). Kenny Holbrook, the grandson of Maym Gallagher (the primary interviewee for William Shipley’s work on the Maidu language), did not grow up speaking Maidu, but in an interesting twist on the story of language documentation and preservation, studied with Shipley as an adult. Since he has been living in Grass Valley, Cunningham has, unexpectedly, met several people who also speak Maidu, which he remarks has been a “very interesting process for me, learning more about the different Maidu dialects” (personal communication, December 4, 2011). In the big picture of Maidu language revitalization, the existence of surviving speakers in any of the three dialects is a great boon (F. Cunningham, personal communication, December 5, 2011). Cunningham believes there are at least 3 elderly speakers of Konkow, and possibly 2-3 speakers of Nisenan. In addition, a young man named Joel Miller, who studied Maidu at Brown University, currently teaches Konkow dialect on the Mooretown Rancheria near Oroville, California (C. Stewart, personal communication, November 14, 2011). Allan Wallace, a speaker of Hill-Nisenan dialect, has remarked that Mountain Maidu and Hill-Nisenan are not that dissimilar (Cunningham, personal communication, December 5, 2011), a possibility that clearly intrigues Cunningham and warrants further investigation.

At the invitation of Tsi Akim Maidu, Farrell Cunningham relocated to Grass
Valley, CA. three years ago to teach Maidu language classes. Since then, he has been leading classes 3-4 times a week, to both Maidu and non-Maidu students. From beginning to “advanced-advanced” levels of proficiency, approximately 23 students (ranging in ages from 3 to 70+ years old) are currently studying Maidu. Cunningham teaches with a combination of techniques, including immersion, and the use of skits and songs to help contextualize the students’ language acquisition. Domains are being bridged as well, as one of the students in his “advanced-advanced” group has created a Maidu board game, complete with “Chance” cards written in the Maidu orthography, as well as illustrations and decorations on the game board itself; all the players don animal personas (coyote, fox, bear), and play centers around collecting acorns and other aspects of local skill and livelihood (F. Cunningham, personal communication, December 5, 2011).

Cunningham, who had broad exposure to linguistics training in college, has spoken Maidu fluently since he was a child. These combined experiences leave him particularly suited for his role as language instructor (and for his foray into creating a new Maidu orthography). Linguist Ken Hale notes that “(l)anguages belong to those who speak them, not to those who study them as outsiders” (Speas, 2009, p. 24). Yet Cunningham sits in the unique position of the language belonging to him, and knowing it from the “outside,” as a linguistics scholar. He expresses great fondness for Shipley’s (1964) Maidu Grammar and for Roland Dixon’s Maidu Texts, as one can imagine they have been old friends for him in an increasingly quieted language scape. Similarly, Cunningham is a crucial link between remaining elder speakers, and the hopes of many who would wish to document their voices, stories, and memories, initially as a conservation measure, but with the hope and potential for creating language learning materials from such recordings in the future.
Grayson Coney tells a story, of Farrell Cunningham predicting that in two years time, people would be able to meet over the produce section at the Briar Patch Co-op and speak to one another in Maidu (G. Coney, personal communication, December 2, 2011). In the predicted time, according to Coney, this has come to pass, as former and current students from Cunningham’s classes run into each other, exchange “hello” and “how are you,” and share “a common language” (F. Cunningham, personal communication, October 9, 2011). Not only has a seemingly unrealistic prediction come true, but an additional domain of usage is also engaged in the process, as language moves out of the classroom and into the social sphere. This small but vital step reflects the sometimes slow but insistent process of revitalization. Coney refers to this as the beginning of a “snowball effect,” quietly insisting that if Cunningham’s seemingly optimistic prediction has already come true, what else might be possible? Cunningham acknowledges that “this is what I’m hoping for...a preponderance of people who have some knowledge of the language, so it’s not quite as obscure” (personal communication, October 14, 2011) as it had formerly become.

Other ongoing efforts at Maidu language revitalization include several projects at the Susanville Indian Rancheria (SIR), the Greenville Rancheria, and Roundhouse Council Indian Education Center (located in Greenville, California). On Susanville Indian Rancheria, street signs are posted in all 4 languages of that Rancheria’s tribal membership (Maidu, Washoe, Pit River, and Paiute), as are greeting signs at their health center. Donna Clark, herself of Maidu descent, visits local schools and plays a “word search” game with students (in all four of SIR’s tribal languages). Although she has a number of “highly interested” community members who have expressed interest in language lessons, there are currently no classes held on the Rancheria (personal communication, October 14, 2011). Among the
resources on site at SIR is a copy of Shipley’s *Maidu Grammar* (1964) and his dictionary (1963), as well as 1 ½ hour CD recording of one of Cunningham’s language lessons, including greetings and other common words and statements. In a particularly hopeful indication of language presence in the home, Cunningham's niece and nephew reportedly listen to his language CD at night (personal communication, October 10, 2011), although Donna Clark’s sense was that Maidu language use in the homes was not really occurring (personal communication, October 14, 2011). Clark has been offered the pro bono services of two retired linguists who studied the Pit River language in the 1970s and who now “want to give back” to the tribes. No specific application of their offer has been applied to Maidu language questions within the community, but the potential for collaboration is encouraging, especially considering that Clark is also applying for an Administration for Native Americans (ANA) grant that, if funded, will run for 3 years, record the elder speakers in the outlying communities, involve tribal youth in the recording process, and make the recordings accessible online as learning tools. SIR already has recording equipment, acquired through a grant from The Seventh Generation Fund for Indian Development. The urgency of such plans for documentation cannot be overemphasized:

> For an endangered language especially, documentation is of key importance. At the present time, documentation may be done through audio and visual recording, and these means should definitely be used...but written documentation remains critically important and serves some functions better than audiovisual means (in fact, the most valuable documentation of all is audiovisual documentation with a written transcript). Endangered languages, as they lose speakers, also lose much of the knowledge that the
traditional culture has accumulated. Stories, songs, histories, prayers, ceremonies and traditional crafts and practices are all in danger of dying with the languages. And the unique and wonderful words, sound semantics....All of these can be at least partially preserved through writing.

...For language revitalization, written documentation may be the primary surviving resource from which teachers and language learners may draw. Thus any and all possible recording of the last speakers through writing or other means is essential. Language pedagogy depends in part on the written word: even if oral approaches are stressed and native literacy is not being taught, teachers might depend on a writing system in their language to be able to create lesson plans and curriculum. (Hinton & Hale, 2001, p. 240)

With the additional language documentation, SIR also has plans “to develop curriculum that...local schools will test, to determine how well (it) works” (D. Clark, personal communication, October 14, 2011). Two schools are currently slated to participate: a Native run school just outside of Oroville, CA, and a charter school (Four Winds Indian Education Center) in Chico, California. Clark is also seeking a National Endowment for the Humanities grant on behalf of SIR to create an online program where local Maidu can contribute words and phrases they know (a sort of language clearing house), which everyone can then access to learn from: a digital library of memories and speech rhythms and usage patterns. Clark also intends to contact companies like Internetpolyglot.com and Rosetta Stone, in hopes that they can produce a language instruction course in Maidu.
The Greenville Rancheria, when it was formed, included descendants from Maidu and Wintun ancestry (F. Cunningham, personal communication, October 14, 2011). The Rancheria itself is quite small, and those tribal members living off the Rancheria proper encompass an area with a 150-mile radius. The Rancheria publishes a newsletter for their members, which regularly lists Maidu words and definitions, and they house a few (vital) resources in their collections, including some tapes of Shipley’s Maidu interviews, and 10 of his lessons in Maidu (C. Stewart, personal communication, November 3, 2011). For a time there was a much more active language revitalization presence in the region, when Cunningham still lived and taught there. He led classes in Susanville at the Rancheria, in Quincy, through Roundhouse Council, and out of his home in Greenville, where he co-taught with his elder relation, Wilhelmina Ives. Students report that it was wonderful to hear he and Wilhelmina dialoguing in Maidu (E. Middleton, personal communication, November 18, 2011). Classes have not continued in Cunningham’s absence (at least not formally), yet Cunningham believes “people are speaking” over in Greenville (personal communication, October 14, 2011).

What are the next steps for students and proponents of the Maidu language? A note at the bottom of one of the many drafts for this paper says simply, “Hope.” The most significant shift that this writer has experienced, in investigating Maidu language revitalization practices, is that there is reasonable cause for hope in the number of opportunities currently available, combined with the determination and desire of community members to reclaim their language.

For example, Cunningham has initiated conversations to obtain a Maidu keyboard from LanguageGeek.com. Once he works with their staff to create the best design
model for Maidu, other Maidu speakers and learners can acquire these keyboards as well. This will literally help to “spread the word” within those domains relying on the written word. A number of excellent programs through Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival (AICLS), Indigenous Language Institute (ILI - in New Mexico), the American Indigenous Language and Development Institute at the University of Arizona (AILDI), and the Consortium of Indigenous Languages Organizations (CILO), all have teacher training programs and resource development trainings for creating language materials in print, audio-visual, and digital formats. There is desire in the community to create Maidu-appropriate language materials, including storybooks for younger (and older!) language learners, online stories with orthographic transcription and English translation provided next to the storyboard (see Our-First-Voices), or audio lesson recordings.

Ideally, speakers like Mr. Cunningham will begin working with a serious apprentice in a Master-Apprentice relationship. AICLS has a training program for Master-Apprentice “teams,” including stipends so they can afford to focus on the language immersion lifestyle and commitment to the work together. Cunningham has expressed that, ideally, he would love to work in the Master-Apprentice model (personal communication, October 14, 2011).

Since Bear Yuba Land Trust is already engaged with youth groups, the idea of mini-immersion programs – day or week long – has been proposed. Similarly, if such programs are integrated into community pre-schools and elementary schools in the tribal communities near Susanville and Indian Valley, the ideal learning environment for passing on the language – through the children – will be naturally engaged. As community members
in Hawaii and this Blackfoot community found, one doesn’t have to wait for the teacher to arrive to begin the process of creating an immersion school:

(W)hen we chose to follow the path of the Hawaiians with a full day immersion school, we possessed no funds, no teachers and no classrooms...

We went ahead anyway trusting we would find a teacher once it was completed. In 1995, a master teacher of the Blackfoot language, Shirlee Crow Shoe, from our relative tribe in Canada, arrived in the nick of time to teach in the newly built school. Apun’ake, a young woman in our tribe, so much wanting to learn to speak our language joined as a volunteer, then as an understudy in the classroom. Today, she is a Blackfoot language teacher in our school. (Kipp, 2009, p. 3)

There are ways to start speaking immersed, even while teachers are also still learning their language, as in the case of the Blackfoot example. Sometimes, this is simply where one has to begin. With the support of programs like LINC and CILO, teacher trainers come to the home community:

CILO will provide the workshops to train teachers, parents and community language advocates how to plan and implement language immersion practices to transmit their endangered languages to their children (especially age 0-8), the most effective way of cross-generational language transmission. The workshops will cover various pertinent topics in immersion practices. All workshops are open to anyone interested in language revitalization and bringing their Native languages back into their lives. (www.illinative.org/cilo, n.d.)
As CILO emphasizes, to begin to find ways to reintroduce Maidu into the home domains of students and tribal members is crucial to the eventual strengthening and full return of the language in place: "(R)eal language maintenance can only come when members of the community bring up their children speaking the language" (Speas, 2009, p. 26). Therein lies the community’s strongest hope for the recovery of their language: that people start speaking at home, at whatever level they are able, whether through songs, learning one or two words, or listening to a bedtime story on CD from Uncle Farrell.

_I surprised myself, the words came out like a string of beads._

- Gertrude Leivas, Chemehuevi elder

Finally, in an effort to return currently existing language materials to their home communities, it is hoped that in the near future copies of existing texts (Shipley and Dixon) can be housed in Nevada, Lassen, and Plumas County libraries, as well as on the Rancherias and at the Roundhouse Council. (Currently, these materials are only available through a few university libraries, including Simon Fraser University here in Vancouver.) Similarly, numerous audio recordings of Shipley interviewing Maidu consultants is currently only available online through U.C. Berkeley, while it is hoped that these files can be directly linked to SIR and Greenville Rancherias’ websites, as well as Tsi Akim Maidu and that of Maidu Summit. As community members and friends of the language have an accessible opportunity to actually hear the language spoken, it will indeed grow less and less obscure.

Tsi Akim Maidu Chairperson Don Ryberg notes that “it would take a lifetime to learn about the issues” affecting the Maidu people (personal communication, November 29, 2011). Yet without lifetimes to spare, the time is now and the task at hand. Grayson Coney speaks of “place immersion: if the land is happy, you feel that...that’s where language
happens,” describing the constant array of Maidu cultural activities happening at Bear Yuba Land Trust. “It’s about a quality of relationship to place and the land...There is no segregation between tribes anymore. We all need to learn to steward this land. Then we can all learn the language once spoken here, as part of stewarding. We’re all here re-learning this together - Maidu, Miwok, French, German, English” (personal communication, December 2, 2011).

Grayson’s remark brings this writer full circle to where this inquiry into Maidu language began, connected by place to immersion and ambient thinking on the land, and the voice of the ancestors breathing life back into a poetical language. “The promise tribal language revitalization offers is reconciliation; a renegotiation of reality and a restoration of an intellectual beauty possible in the ocean of tomorrows” (Kipp, 2009, p. 6).
Resources for Language Revitalization

1. Pronunciation Chart (see below)

2. Dr. Jon A. Reyhner (Northern Arizona University) - http://www2.nau.edu/~jar/


4. American Indian Language and Development Institute (AILDI) - 
   http://aildi.arizona.edu/


7. Language Immersion for Native Children (LINC) - flagship project of ILI


9. Language Geek – Custom keyboards in Indigenous Languages 
   http://www.languagegeek.com/

    Voices (film shorts about Indigenous language revitalization in British Columbia) - 
    http://knowledge.ca/program/our-first-voices-shorts

11. Aha Punana Leo - www.ahapunanaleo.org
Maidu Pronunciation Chart

VOWELS

a = ah

e = eh

ei = ey

i = ee

o = oh

u = u as in “you”

ʊ = u as in “put”

ai = aye

CONSONANTS

b = (sound doesn’t occur in English – imploded “b”)

d = (sound doesn’t occur in English – imploded “d”)

y = y, as in “yes”

GLOTTALIZED CONSONANTS

c’ (ts) = ch

p’ = p (similar to voiceless unaspirated stop in English, as in “spool”)

t’ = t (similar to voiceless unaspirated stop in English, as in “stop”)

k’ = emphatic, as in “Jacques”

ʔ = glottal stop in middle of “uh-oh”

All other consonants used in Maidu sound the same as in English (c, h, k, l, m, n, p, s, t, w).
References


Middleton, E. (2008). “We were here, we are here, we will always be here”: A political ecology of healing in Mountain Maidu country (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database (PQDT 304697158)


