



Myaamiaki Neehi Myaamia Mihš̄i-neepwaantiikaani: Neepwaantiinki

The Miami People and Miami University: Learning From Each Other

The Myaamiaki [Miami people], were historically located throughout the southern Great Lakes region, on the northern shores of the Wabash River in central Indiana. After years of treaties, the Miami lost their rights to occupy these lands and in 1846 the Tribe was forcibly removed to an unwanted reservation in the Kansas Territory. Their time in Kansas was brief, as White settlement forced a second removal to Indian Territory by the late 1870s. The following years would bring further hardships to the Myaamiaki: the allotment of tribal lands, their children forced into boarding schools and pressures to suppress all aspects of being Miami.

By the 1960s, the Miami were a landless tribe and the last of the native speakers of the language had passed on. They were losing an entire generation of elders who grew up among those who spoke the language, harvested traditional plants, and still maintained a worldview that was uniquely Miami. If they were going to learn from these elders, they had to move quickly.

In the 1990s, the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma initiated to pursue language and culture reclamation, motivated by the desire among tribal members to learn something of their heritage language and culture, a recently-completed outline of the of the Miami language and the Native American Languages Act,

which provided startup funding for a Miami Language Teacher Training program.

The Myaamiaki didn't realize the tremendous amount of research, training, and material development that would be needed over time in order to realistically reverse language loss. But they did know that whatever shape the final result would take, the result would be community-driven and in direct support of community desires and needs.

The Miami Tribe of Oklahoma is a small tribe of only 4,000 citizens, with populations scattered across the country with concentrations living in Oklahoma, Kansas, and Indiana. Like many other tribes, they had very limited monetary resources. Community cultural leaders realized that the tribe did not have the money or educational infrastructure for conducting research and developing educational material.

After much discussion among community leaders, a decision was made to turn to our friends at Miami University for help. The Tribe and the University have

By Thomas Green with Daryl Baldwin, Miami University and Julie Olds, Miami Tribe of Oklahoma



Chief Thomas Gamble of the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma (L) and President David Hodge of Miami University



Daryl Baldwin, Director of the Myaamia Project, teaching language to tribal students at MU.





KEEPING TRADITION

“I am convinced this work is the single most important effort we have initiated to ensure the survival of our Tribal Nation.”

Chief Thomas Gamble, Miami Tribe of Oklahoma

a relationship dating back to the 1970s. Tribal officials regularly visit campus, and the University has been involved in a number of projects designed to benefit the Tribe in Oklahoma. Trust was essential in creating a climate that would allow tribal officials and cultural leaders to feel comfortable bringing something as important as their traditional language and culture into an academic setting far from the Tribe’s location.

During negotiations with the university, Tribal representatives had two requirements. First, all research projects must be initiated and directed through the Tribe’s cultural preservation office. This would prioritize tribal needs over academic interests, as has happened in other similar partnerships. The second requirement was that the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma would hold the copyright to all published materials produced through the project. The Myaamiaki felt that any publications documenting their ancestors’ intellectual knowledge should remain under the control of the Tribe. In exchange, the Miami Tribe agreed to share their research, knowledge, and experiences in community-based language and cultural education settings.

In the summer of 2001, the Myaamia Project for language and cultural revitalization became a reality at Miami University. It didn’t take long for a wide range of projects to be initiated, and it is typical for these projects to start out with a simple goal and then blossom into something much bigger and potentially more meaningful.

One example is the extensive ethnobotany research currently underway. A database was created to catalog and store all historical references to plants.

Through discussions, elders began to recount their memories of plants they had harvested in their youth. There was still a good deal of living botanical knowledge that had been considered lost. This led the research to, under the direction of community elders, traditional harvesting practices, the preparation and cooking of native plants. From this, information about seasonal diets naturally followed.

During a recent gathering, a variety of corn soups and hominy dishes were prepared among a group of tribal elders. Two of the elders could not agree on whether heat was used during the lye process in the preparation of hominy. Hominy processed with heated lye and without heated lye were tried, with no discernible difference in the effect on the hominy. Researchers then turned to the language record and found that there was specific language for preparing hominy.

Hominy with heated lye = peelakiinkweesaakani
Hominy with no heated = peelakiinkwaakani

Both elders were correct, they just had different recollections of the process. This is an example of how both living knowledge and the historical language record can be used together to help better understand traditional practices.

An in-depth geography project was launched that will result in a number of information layers created through Geographical Information System (GIS) technology. These layers will include a reconstruction of the historic vegetation of the Tribe’s historic homeland, a layer of traditional names for significant places and a layer showing permanent and temporary village locations over time. This will help the tribe to understand the past and respond to current needs.



Sharing plant knowledge



Traditional food research



Recording hand drum songs



Summer youth program



Projects include work in many diverse fields, but all projects must meet the same standard of service to the community.





KEEPING TRADITION

“It’s important for us that our young adults feel intellectually challenged and connected to their community.”

Julie Olds, Cultural Resources Officer, Miami Tribe of Oklahoma

The first major publication produced by the Project was a dictionary of the Miami language, compiling over 15 years of research. Most recent, is the first collection of texts from the Myaamia and Peoria ever published. Of the 45 texts it contains, 16 are in English only, and 29 are in the Myaamia, Peoria, or Wea dialects with English translations. These include origin and culture hero stories, Trickster stories (including stories of Fox and Wolf), animal stories, biographical, auto-biographical and historical narratives, how-to stories, and Christian prayers.

These examples represent only a sampling of a multitude of projects and research efforts that are currently underway, all of which were born from the needs identified by community leaders and through the Miami Tribe’s Office of Cultural Preservation.

One exciting and unanticipated outcome of our work involves the tribe’s own students on campus. Many of these students did not grow up near Miami lands in Oklahoma and have not been able to participate in tribal functions. The Miami Tribe felt it would be a shame if these young people came to MU, got their degrees, and moved on—without ever having the opportunity to learn from the work being done through the Myaamia Project.

A series of one-credit classes were created for tribal students. These classes include two semesters of history and ecological perspectives, two semesters of language and culture, two semesters of tribal economic development, government and sovereignty, and in their fourth year, a topic of their choice which should give back to the community. This series has been popular and successful and it has allowed tribal educators to work with tribal students

on a more personal level in the areas of language, culture and history.

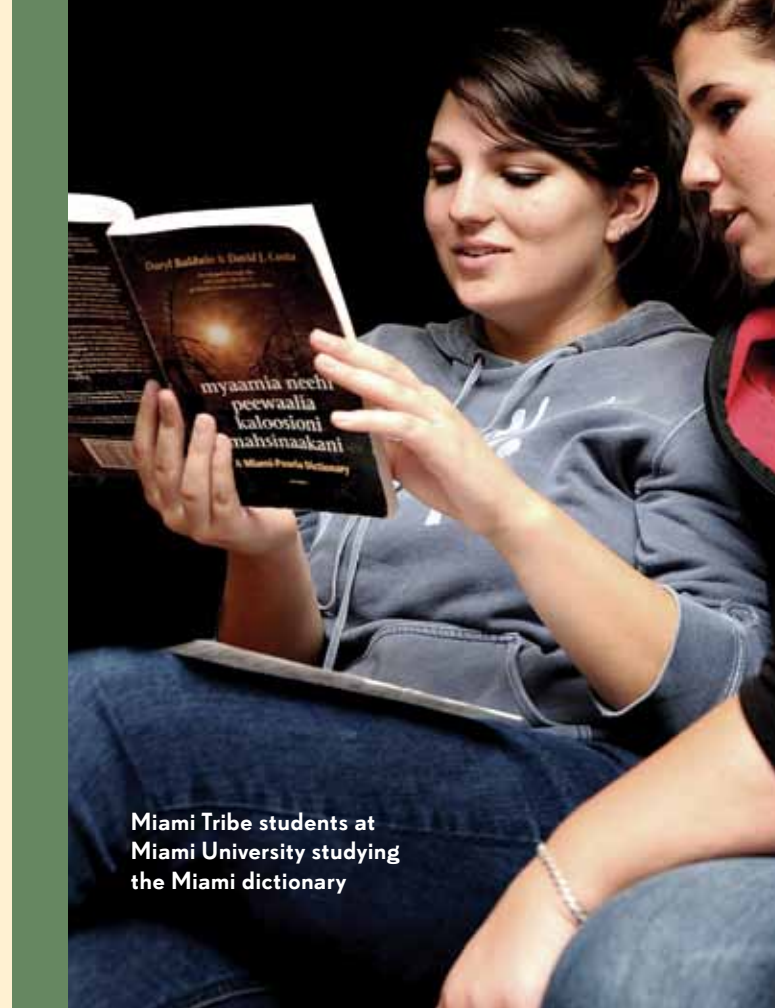
The Myaamia Project has created an atmosphere of learning and sharing among those who have devoted their lives to the continuation and survival of the community’s traditional language and culture. They feel that one does not have to be Miami to work within that circle of commitment.

When the Myaamia Project was created we didn’t know what it would look like, or the kind of impact it would have on both the tribal and academic community. The creation of the Myaamia Project has had a profound effect on our Tribal community at large. Prior to its conception there were few Tribal members specializing in fields related to language and culture. Now we have several tribal members specializing in a multitude of fields relating to our culture, language and history” says Daryl Baldwin.

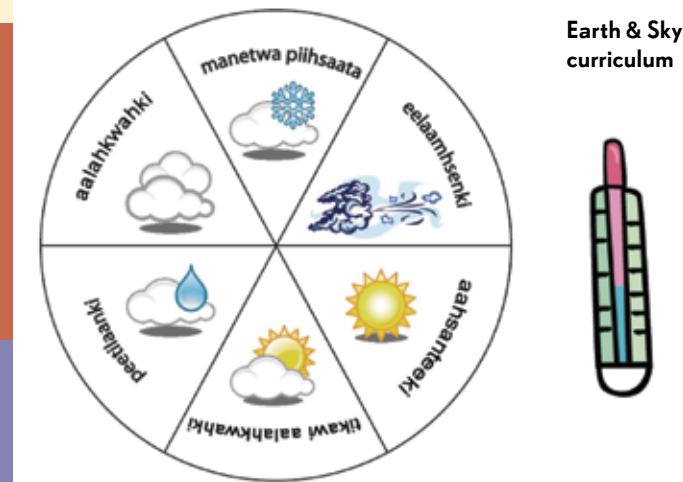
The Myaamia Project is a tool of immeasurable value to the Miami Nation. Born of a respectful relationship between a sovereign Nation and an educational institution located on the lands of our ancestors, the Myaamia Project is acknowledged by the Myaamiaki as the cornerstone to their ultimate success in reclaiming their language, restoring their traditional worldview and ensuring the survival of their Nation.

For More Information:
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Courtesy Myaamia Project Archives; Removal map based upon work assisted by a grant from the Department of Interior, National Park Service.



Miami Tribe students at Miami University studying the Miami dictionary



Earth & Sky curriculum



Livescribe smartpen picture book

Products include print and digital publications, educational software and promising research with smartpen technology.

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Language Software: Body Parts



Museum exhibit online tour



GIS maps with informational layers

