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Haidawood: A Social Media Approach to Indigenous Language Revitalization

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Abstract

British Columbia is home to 34 different Indigenous languages, most of which are in danger of losing fluency due to the combined effects of introduced diseases and assimilationist Indian Residential Schools. The Haida language, or Xaad Kil (pronounced “haad kill”), is considered critically endangered with only 9 elderly fluent speakers left. Many Haida believe that revitalizing Xaad Kil is important for keeping their culture alive: they see Xaad Kil as a cultural keystone that keeps worldview, artistic expression, food gathering, dances, stories, and songs integrated together as a unified whole. Xaad Kil also helps assert Aboriginal land rights: identification of traditional place names demonstrates use and occupation of lands since time immemorial. Xaad Kil names of medicinal plants and foods also contain important environmental information. Indigenous communities are adopting a range of strategies to revitalize their languages, including: master-apprentice programs, early childhood immersion programs, and technological approaches such as audio databases, language apps, and social media projects like Haidawood. Learning Xaad Kil can be a challenge: there are limited resources and often language learners are overwhelmed with obstacles. Haidawood helps make Haida language learning fun by bringing Haida stories to life using the power of stop motion animation and embracing an “aesthetic of accessibility” that creates beautiful art out of readily available materials, including carved puppet faces and sets made from cardboard. Haidawood seeks to help revitalize the Haida language, facilitate inter-cultural understanding, and inspire other communities to preserve and share their own stories.

Introduction

Indigenous languages around the world are under threat as Indigenous communities continue to grapple with government assimilationist policies aimed at undermining Aboriginal Title to the land and forcing Indigenous people into capitalist and colonial structures. Against this backdrop, Indigenous communities are working to revitalize their endangered languages and assert Aboriginal Title. Haidawood is one example of a project that uses modern technology and social media to support the revitalization of the endangered Haida language (Leslie & Bedard-Edenshaw, 2013).

Haidawood was started in 2007 as a collaboration between Dr. Ken Raj Leslie and K’alts’idaa K’ah Productions (pronounced “gul-ji-da kaa” meaning “Laughing Crow”). K’alts’idaa K’ah is directed by the Haida carvers Jaalen and Gwaii Edenshaw. Haidawood supports the revitalization of the endangered Haida language (Xaad Kil) by making stop motion animations featuring Xaad Kil words, phrases, and stories. Haidawood animations are meant to be appealing to children and adults alike, and are designed to be viewed multiple times. Haidawood animations stimulate an interest in the Haida language and culture and can help language learners develop an ear for Xaad Kil.

Haidawood is guided by the Haida principle of yahgudang (pronounced “yah-gu-

dang” meaning “respect”), as well as a sense of fun: Haidawood animations are fun to make and fun to watch. Haidawood has made 8 animations to date that reflect the culture and people of Haida Gwaii (see videography below).

Indian Residential Schools and Language Revitalization

British Columbia is home to 60% of the Indigenous languages in Canada, including 34 different languages. Many of these languages are losing fluency due to the devastating effects of small pox, which decimated the local indigenous population, and assimilationist Indian Residential Schools, which punished children for speaking their Indigenous language and forced them to speak colonial languages, namely English in the West and French in Quebec.

Indian Residential Schools were part of a Canadian government policy of forced assimilation of First Nation peoples, which began soon after the implementation of the Indian Act in 1876 and reached its peak around 1930 with over 80 different schools operating across the country. During this time, children were taken from their parents and forced to attend these church-run schools. In addition to punishing students for speaking their indigenous language, students were also subjected to a range of deprivations and abuse, including physical and sexual abuse, malnutrition, and medical experimentation (Miller, 2014). According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, at least 4,000 children died in these Indian Residential Schools. The Canadian government began closing Indian Residential Schools in the 1960s, and the last Indian Residential School closed its doors in 1996. In 2008 Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued an official apology, and the Canadian government has paid over \$1.6 billion in compensation to Indian Residential School survivors across the country. The average amount for a Common Experience Payment is \$20,452 CND (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2014).

Today, Indigenous language speakers make up a shrinking minority of the BC Indigenous population and most are over 65. The Haida language is considered “critically endangered” with less than 9 fluent speakers left (First Peoples Cultural Council [FPCC], 2014).

The Haida language (Xaad Kil) is a keystone to Haida culture, and helps keep worldview, artistic expression, food gathering, dances, stories, and songs integrated together as a unified whole. Traditional Xaad Kil place names assert Aboriginal Title and demonstrate use and occupation of the land since time immemorial. Xaad Kil names for traditional medicine plants and foods also convey important environmental knowledge.

Indigenous communities are adopting a range of strategies to revitalize their languages, including master-apprentice programs, early childhood immersion programs, and digital technology. Learning Xaad Kil can be a challenge: there are limited resources, and often language learners are

The Haidawood YouTube Channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/haidawood>

overwhelmed with obstacles. The greatest barrier is the limited number of fluent speakers. Technological tools may be able to help bridge the gap, and communities are developing a variety of different technological tools, including audio language databases, language apps, computer games, and social media projects like Haidawood.

Carved Puppets

The Haida have maintained a strong carving culture, and are famous for carving monumental cedar poles (totem poles) depicting stories and clan crests. Both Jaalen and Gwaii Edenshaw are accomplished carvers: Jaalen recently completed the Gwaii Haanas Legacy Pole that was raised to mark the 20th anniversary of the Gwaii Haanas Agreement. And the original inspiration for Haidawood came from the carved avocado seed faces that Gwaii has been making since he was a youth (see Figure 1).



Figure 1
Avocado seed face carved by Gwaii Edenshaw

Community Animation Process

Stop motion animation dates back to the beginning of film. Puppets are photographed and moved and then photographed again. This is done repeatedly, and the photographs are then played one after another to create an animated sequence. Stop motion has the ability to create visually stunning cinema with simple tools: a digital camera, computer, software, puppets and constructed sets. The work of animating can be shared with community volunteers and sets can be made out of readily available materials. This resilient technique has the power to bring Indigenous art to life. In an era dominated by computer graphics, stop motion animation remains visually appealing, and big budget stop motion animations continue to be made, e.g., Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993), *Coraline* (2009), and *Boxtrolls* (2014).

Haidawood embraces an “aesthetic of accessibility” that creates beautiful art out of simple and readily available materials, including carved puppet faces, and sets made from cardboard and natural materials. This look is inspired by Do-It-Yourself (DIY) maker culture, and is aimed at putting the power of creation back in the hands of the community. Haidawood uses a 5-step community animation process:

1) Script: Identify a story that the community is willing to share. Record the story told from a knowledgeable Elder. Translate and transcribe the story into a storyboard that is approved by the community.

2) Pre-production: Work with community members to make puppets and sets.

3) Production: Animate the storyboard scene by scene at 12-15 frames per second.

4) Post-production: Edit sequences together and record soundtrack with traditional musicians.

5) Distribution: Host community screenings, submit to film festivals, and share on-line.

Tsinni Stephen Brown’s Nuū Story

Nuū (pronounced “new” and meaning “octopus”) is a 9 minute animation told by the late Tsinii (pronounced “chin-ee,” this is an honorific meaning “grandfather”) Stephen Brown, a Haida language advocate who was awarded the Language Champion Award by the First Peoples Cultural Council in 2011 (see Figure 2). His narrative acts as the soundtrack for Nuū and provides an uninterrupted whole language narrative told in Xaad Kil. This whole language narrative preserves the prosody, or “music,” of the language. Nuū contains all the linguistic elements of a complete traditional narrative, while also being understandable to non-speakers and people with limited fluency through the power of animation. Nuū was one of the last projects Tsinii Stephen Brown worked on before he passed away in December 2012. Nuū was awarded an Honourable Mention at the 2013 ImagiNATIVE Film Festival in Toronto and was featured on Air Canada flights in the Fall of 2014.

Nuū video clip:





Figure 2

The likeness of Tsinii Stephen Brown telling the Nuu story, carved by Leo Gangnon out of the medicine plant Devil's Club

Haida Raid 2, Haida Raid 3 and the Politics of Oil

The development of an Indigenous cinema on Haida Gwaii also creates opportunities for expressing a Haida worldview, including political animations aimed at protecting the land and oceans of Haida Gwaii. Haida Raid 2 and 3 are “puppet activism” animations that feature the likeness of Canada’s pro-tar sands Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, and contain explicit anti-pipeline and anti-tanker messages (see Figures 3 and 4). The Haida are opposed to the introduction of oil tankers to British Columbia’s pristine northwest coast. The waters of the Hecate Strait are notorious for being unpredictable and dangerous, and as the Exxon Valdez disaster in 1989 off the coast of Alaska has demonstrated, an oil spill can be devastating to local sea life and to the people who depend on the sea for their food.

Haida video:



Figure 3

Haida Raid 2: A Message to Stephen Harper takes aim at the proposed Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipeline. This viral video features the rap protest song "Pipe Dreams" by Haida rapper JA\$E El-Nino. Papier mâché mask made by Dr. Ken Raj Leslie.



Figure 4

Haida Raid 3: Save Our Waters opposes the introduction of oil tanker traffic to the northwest coast. This new animation features the song “Save Our Waters ” by Juno award winning producer and Indigenous activist Kinnie Starr. Puppet made by Amanda Strong.

Technology, Media and Language

Technology can create new opportunities for community empowerment. Haidawood is meant to be an antidote to a media landscape dominated by images of colonial society. The animations are easily shared on social networks, and the presence of Xaad Kil in this domain is an expression of power (Popp, 2006). Language learners get to hear Xaad Kil spoken in context and this stimulates interest in local Xaad Kil learning programs.

K'aalts'daa K'ah has also turned the Haidawood animations into Haida language comics (see Figure 5). These help introduce people to Haida words and phrases, while stimulating interest in Haida language, culture, and art.



Figure 5

An example of a Xaad Kil comic book made with images taken from the Nuu story

Conclusion

Haidawood empowers the Haida community to create media that reflects a Haida perspective. There is a need for mainstream society to understand Indigenous concepts of stewardship and our inter-connectedness with Nature. Issues like global warming and increasing income inequality are leading many mainstream Canadians to question the values and beliefs upon which the colonial system is based. And Indigenous movements like Idle No More are asserting political power and creating new opportunities for reconciliation between Indigenous and mainstream peoples.

Indigenous language revitalization is hampered by the low number of fluent speakers still alive. Language is a highly emotive issue within Indigenous communities, and for many, language fluency is synonymous with their identity as Indigenous people.

Xaad Kil is undergoing incredible pressure with the passing of the last fluent speakers. There is an urgent need for inter-generational language transmission. Haidawood fits in with other efforts to bring Xaad Kil to a digital platform, including the release of a Haida language app by the Skidegate Haida immersion Program (SHIP) and a similar app now in development by Xaad Kihlga Hl Suu.u (Speak Haida Society) in Masset.

Haidawood brings Haida stories to life using a Community Animation approach, and shares Haida culture and values with community members and people around the world. The Haidawood model can be adapted by other Indigenous communities to create their own Indigenous language animations.

Haidawood Videography

Haidawood animations have been screened at film and cultural festivals in Canada and around the world. In 2013 Haidawood released a DVD entitled Haidawood: Our Stories Animated. You can find all the animations on the Haidawood YouTube Channel, (see: <https://www.youtube.com/user/haidawood/videos>) and learn more about the project on the Haidawood blog (see: <http://haidawood.ca>).

Haida Raid (0:30, 2007): This 30-second proof-of-concept animation has one word of dialogue, “Haw’aa” (pronounced “how-ah” which means “thank you”). Puppets were made from Bionicles (a LEGOTM toy) and feature heads carved from avocado seeds by Gwaai Edenshaw. <http://youtu.be/4XzZRyHV5J8>

Hoopla (4:38, 2007): An original story about a basketball game between Massett and Skidegate. The animation uses English and Haida phrases and references hip-hop and basketball culture.

<http://youtu.be/He5hdLaOOFY>

Golden Spruce (6:43, 2008): The legend of how the Golden Spruce came to be. A boy and his grandfather leave their dying village and a fateful encounter with a salmon leads to a magical transformation. http://youtu.be/T6_4FCA43vQ

Yaanii K’uuka (5:18, 2008): A naughty little girl won’t eat her food. Her mother warns her to be nice or Yaanii K’uuka will get her. Sure enough, she is kidnapped by Yaanii K’uuka and must find her own way to escape. <http://youtu.be/cSGzkAJ5GUA>

Haida Raid 2: A Message to Stephen Harper (4:33, 2012): What happens if Prime Minister Stephen Harper decides to go ahead with building the Northern Gateway pipeline? This viral video has had over 24,000 views and is the perfect storm of edgy art, political protest, and internet satire. http://youtu.be/-KYiGc_Hmnl

Taaw story (6:56, 2013): The traditional story of how Tow Hill moved from the interior of Haida Gwaii to his current location on North Beach. http://youtu.be/_IkEqA-6FBg0

Nuu story (9:17, 2013): Told by the late Tsinii Stephen Brown before he passed away. Fishermen are mysteriously disappearing off the West Coast of Haida Gwaii and two heroes decide to find out why. Nuw won an Honourable Mention at the 2013 ImagiNATIVE Film Festival in Toronto. <http://youtu.be/IjdInHl8Vqk>

Haida Raid 3: Save Our Waters (5:41, 2014): A contemporary tale of resistance against the introduction of oil tanker traffic on the northwest coast, featuring the song “Save Our Waters” by Juno award winning music producer and indigenous activist Kinnie Starr and directed by Metis animator Amanda Strong. Haida Raid 3 won Best Music Video at the 2014 ImagiNATIVE Film Festival in Toronto. <http://youtu.be/UsDC5cN->

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Haw'aa

Haw'aa to the Haida Elders who continue to keep Xaad Kil alive through their hard work and dedication, and to all the Haida language learners everywhere. Haw'aa also to K'alts'idaa K'ah Productions for their continued partnership, and to Xaad Kihlgaa Hl Suu.u for their early support of Haidawood. Haw'aa to the Old Massett Family Centre and the Old Massett Village Council Education Department for their support. Haidawood animations have been funded by the Canada Council for the Arts, the First Peoples Cultural Council, and an Indiegogo Crowdfunding campaign.

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Taaw video clip:

