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# PAAYISH NEKEN, REALIZED

*The Dawn Is Coming*



By Jeanne Farris

UNDER THE OPEN skies of bright sunshine, black oak acorns are gathered in tightly woven baskets that hold water and even serve as a skillet over fire. International museums curate these baskets, which are still being used by the Cahuilla. Families have united specifically for a day's work to prepare *wiiwish*, an acorn mush. This is a prehistoric ritual and a labor-intensive recipe that has deep-seated familial and communal ties.

Here at the Paayish Neken (pie-yesh neck-in) community, also known as the Cahuilla Language Camp for Families, *Ivilyu'at* is spoken often and always. Children and adults alike wear T-shirts with the slogan *Nik Ivilyu!* (Speak Cahuilla to me!). These children and parents are students of the California Indian Language Foundation (CILF), a nonprofit language immersion camp taught by multigenerational elders and other well-respected members of the Cahuilla tribe.

"The family learning as a whole unit is crucial and critical to the success of Payish Nekken," William Madrigal (Cahuilla) said. "The emphasis is on leadership and 'decolonizing our minds.'

Parents are the real leaders in our tribe who can guide their children. In fact, I wish more tribe members would take an active role in participating. Our biggest challenge for revitalizing the Cahuilla language at Paayish Neken is complacency and stepping outside of our comfort zone."

William Madrigal is cofounder of and a teacher at CILF, contributing editor for *News from Native California*, and a Ph.D. student in California Indian Studies at UC Riverside. His young children are his own students at the camp as well. One could say Madrigal walks his talk. But when asked how many actual tribal members were left who spoke *Ivilyu'at*, his soft-spoken articulation turned swift and decisive.

"I feel that the dull rhetoric of linguistic statistics such as 'less than fifty speakers left today' is damaging," Madrigal said. "Think of how discouraging it is to a ten-year-old or a teenager to pursue their native tongue when they constantly hear the words 'dead language.' Why should they pursue it if they think it is dead? We have enough challenges navigating politics with the federal government and the lure of casinos."

Madrigal added, "Perpetual input of these kinds of statements and preoccupation with extinction diminishes tribal

pride and impacts their sense of identity. We need to encourage passive learners to actively seek the language."

CILF's most prominent benefactor is their partner, the Native American Land Conservancy ([www.nalc4all.com](http://www.nalc4all.com)) and its president, Michael Madrigal. They were instrumental in helping CILF obtain a grant that supported basic materials such as groceries for the family gatherings, portable toilets, and a venue for the center, which were essential for the pilot program in November 2015.

In short, Paayish Nekken, realized. Its translation is apropos: the dawn is coming.

This grassroots effort is modeled after the Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival (AICLS) program, which is based in the San Francisco Bay Area.

"CILF defies the pedagogy of Western curriculum," Michael Madrigal said. "It is family and gender inclusive, with games, songs, and tribal customs taught in oral traditions in the outdoors. Initially, we had about five families from the Cahuilla Tribe, which has ten bands in all."

Other CILF founders and teachers are Raymond Huate, who has an M.A. in linguistics; Ashley Tota (Kumeyaay /

Luisseño), Ph.D. in sociology; and Sean Milanovich (Agua Caliente Cahuilla), a Ph.D. candidate, historian, and former curator at Riverside Metropolitan Museum. The all-Indian board is dedicated to the preservation of Cahuilla tribal customs and language for future generations.

"We are still in crisis and still in danger of losing the vitality of the culture," Michael Madrigal said. "We need to rise to the challenge to reconnect and maintain the language. This keeps us in contact with our ancestors by honoring and teaching the language. It is this spiritual force and power we ultimately seek. This is what keeps us moving forward. We need to widen the circle."