The Washington Post

Entertainment

Young members of Louisiana's Houma Nation try to reclaim tribe's lost language

By Mark Guarino January 3, 2015

NEW ORLEANS — Even though Janie Luster has lived in Bayou Dularge all her life, in some ways she is still a stranger to the land.

The tiny water-bound fishing community in southwestern Louisiana is rich with the culture of the Cajuns that are familiar to so many, but Luster, 62, is 100 percent Houma, an indigenous Indian tribe of which little is known.

The tribe's language consists of so few words that she has named her two dogs the Houma words for raccoon (chaoui) and perch (naní) just to keep them in circulation.

"We only have a handful of words left," she says. "The more time goes by, the more time we lose. Our elders are passing on."

Two millennial-aged women of Houma ancestry have committed to the race to save that history. Hali Dardar and Colleen Billiot, both 25, have embarked on a project to reconstruct the language of their ancestors through linguistic sleuthing. It is a language that wasn't spoken for almost a century.

The challenges are steep: There are few available recordings and texts of the language and only a few dozen words are known, largely because of a Smithsonian anthropologist who interviewed native speakers in 1907.

The fate of the Houma language is not unique. Linguists say that the rate of language extinction is accelerating and that by the next century, nearly half of the 7,000 languages spoken around the world today — like the Houma, mainly spoken by small tribes in remote places — will probably disappear because of cultural assimilation and globalization. The loss will be profound, says Irina Shport, an assistant professor of language acquisition at Louisiana State University in Lafayette.

"Every language is the world view of the speakers and world in which they live; it's not just about culture. Language is really the window into how the human mind works," she says.

Shport says the race to save the Houma language "is a difficult task, but not impossible. It just depends on how much we

have to work with."

The starting point was a single recording made in the early 1970s by Elvira Molinere Billiot, the great-grandmother of Billiot, a Georgetown University graduate who grew up in St. Bernard Parish outside New Orleans. Her father's distant cousin found the cassette recording and gave it to Billiot, who upon moving back home had already expressed a strong interest in learning more about her Houma ancestry. The recording was made by Mennonite missionary Greg Bowman, who was conducting research about the Houmas to help them achieve federal recognition. It features the elder Billiot singing "Chan-Chuba," a simple children's song that some believe is about chasing an alligator out of the house.

Earlier, at a Houma tribal council meeting outside Lafayette, Billiot met Dardar. The two women realized they shared an interest in researching their tribal roots but didn't know where to start. When they listened to the elderly woman sing the strange melody, in a language they did not understand, they knew it presented an opening to their project.

"I was getting teary-eyed listening to a voice I was related to, but who died before I was born. It was surreal," says Billiot, who now lives in Northern Virginia and works in government. "We knew there was something to be preserved, something we should care about, that we should at least try to find more about as Houma. We finally had something to go off of and we got exited."

They digitized the song, drew up a mission statement and started interviewing elders such as Luster, who sits on the tribal council. Within months they were able to construct a pocket dictionary of all the known Houma words, which they printed and distributed at local powwows, Indian festivals and summer camps for Houma children. They also created phonetic lyric sheets of "Chan-Chuba" to teach the song to a new generation of children.

"We don't know what the words mean, but they are still able to sing the song," says Dardar, who lives in New Orleans and works in information technology. "It allows them to begin questioning what are those words were. That's the important thing to stimulate even though we don't have all the answers for it yet."

The Houmas settled central Louisiana and are closely related to other tribes in the region, particularly the Choctaw. They were discovered by French missionaries in the late 1600s and by the 1700s became their military allies, bringing them into conflict with other tribes and the British military. By the late 1700s, encroachment by Acadian settlers intensified hostilities, which reduced their numbers even more, pushing them further south into the coastal bayous. Living in relative isolation, the Houma were largely left alone until the oil and gas boom early in the last century dispersed them further to more remote parishes.

Racial segregation prevented Houma children from enrolling in public schools, forcing them to attend mainly missionary schools where English was spoken, which further eroded the use of their native tongue.

Today, the United Houma Nation says that 17,000 people of Houma descent live in a six-parish region in southwestern Louisiana. Many of these people, like Luster, grew up speaking a variety of French that reflects the assimilation of both cultures. Why some words survived and why others have not is a mystery, Luster says.

"Sometimes I hear elders older than me using a word that we hadn't heard in a long time and it's like, 'that has to be a Houma word,' " she says. "It's pretty interesting to see what survived and you wonder why and how."

The words that are known reflect, unsurprisingly, the landscape of coastal Louisiana: šankoló (cyrpress), níta (bear), santé (snake), sakčé (crawfish) and okélawaféna (water).

LSU's Shport conducted research with students who worked with Billiot and Dardar to first transcribe "Chan-Chuba" phonetically and then analyze the findings to determine whether there were parallels to other native languages from the area, such as Choctaw. The group also met with elders, scoured archival materials, and searched dictionaries of Houma French and a universal trade language called Mobilian, which all Gulf Coast tribes used, in an effort to trace overlapping words or grammar.

While both women say the project is a lifelong commitment, they outlined milestones they want to hit: grow their finely sourced database of vocabulary words, grammar and syntax, and create a curriculum that will allow it to operate within a contemporary context. And then get people using it.

"The biggest role Hali and I play are being mediators between the tribal community and the academics," says Billiot. "It takes a lot of people to keep it going. Our being there when the linguists are there validates this project. It's a matter of trust."

Luster hopes that resurrecting the language will give the Houma Nation something it has been trying to secure for several decades: federal recognition.

Entertainment Alerts

Big stories in the entertainment world as they break.

Sign up

After rejection by the Bureau of Indian Affairs' Office of Federal Acknowledgement in 1994, the tribe once again intends to go through the recognition process.

Luster says that the Houma people are slowly restoring their culture. In 1993, Richard Conn, an expert on Native American art at the Denver Art Museum, reintroduced to the Houma a form of basket-weaving that he discovered was indigenous to the tribe.

Luster and other Houma women now demonstrate the craft at festivals around Louisiana, including each spring at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival.

"We know as a tribe what it is to lose something and then have the opportunity to gain it again," she says. "What we are now lacking is the language. It would be the full circle."

Guarino is a freelance writer.

The Post Recommends

Actor Michael Caine says he changed his name

because of ISIS

He's Michael Caine.

Donald Trump still hasn’t figured out the ground game

A look at the campaign's mixed messages on the subject.

Google’s Vanessa Marcotte, visiting family in Mass., went for a jog — and never came back

Vanessa Marcotte was found dead late Sunday night about half a mile from her mother’s house in Princeton, Mass.