

Myaamiaki Eemamwiciki Program

Miami Tribe of Oklahoma

The United States has a shameful history of displacing its original inhabitants from their homelands and attempting to wipe out their cultures. Such actions had a devastating effect on the Miami people, who, by the 1990s, became scattered across the country, resulting in an ongoing struggle to maintain their cultural identity. In response, the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma created the Myaamiaki Eemamwiciki (the Miami Awakening) program. Rooted in strengthening their kinship ties to one another within a strategic educational framework, Myaamiaki Eemamwiciki helps citizens reconnect to their Indigenous knowledge and value system. And, as tribal citizens reconnect with the knowledge of their ancestors, they are creating a new understanding of what it means to be Myaamia.

A NATION UNDER THREAT

At the time of European contact, over 20,000 Myaamiaki lived in what are now the states of Indiana, Ohio, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin. In the mid-1800s, many Myaamia families living in the Great Lakes region were forcibly relocated to present day Kansas. Two decades later, tribal citizens were forced to move again, this time to Indian Territory in present day Oklahoma. These repeated removals decimated the Myaamia. By the late 1800s, the Tribe—now known as the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma—consisted of fewer than 100 adults. Allotment, a US government policy that isolated tribal citizens on small parcels of land, further undermined the Tribe's ability to thrive.

Severe population decline, loss of land, and aggressive attempts by the federal government to assimilate tribal citizens fractured the Miami Tribe. Citizens were living in small settlements in Oklahoma and elsewhere in the country. Many struggled in extreme poverty. Under these difficult circumstances, the Myaamia language and tribal cultural

practices slid into dormancy. By 1900, more than 60% of the Tribe's citizens already used English as their first language. By the mid-20th century, the Myaamia language was no longer spoken fluently, and only a few tribal elders remembered what it was like to grow up hearing the language and participating in the cultural traditions of their communities.

Compounding the problem, the Miami tribal government was unable to fund cultural programming. As one tribal citizen described the situation for the Miami Tribe in the early 1990s, "There was no sign of perpetuation of language and culture within the community, and the Tribe possessed no resources to affect change. The language was silent. There were no stories, no games, no dancing. The end to Myaamia cultural identity was looming." In recognition of and concern for the decline, tribal leaders applied for and received a grant from the Administration for Native Americans (part of the US Department of Health and Human Services) to examine what could be done to reverse centuries of damage.

HONORING NATIONS

REVIVING THE PAST

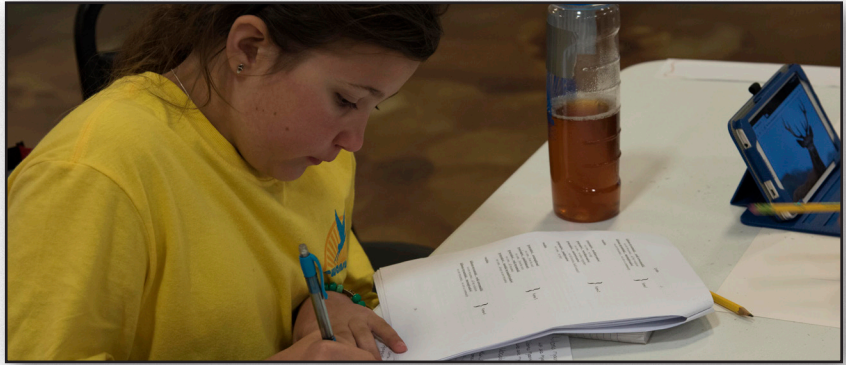
The Miami Tribe used the grant funds to bring together community members and academic experts to explore ways to reclaim the nation's heritage. Through these efforts, the Tribe learned of the vast historical resources held in archives throughout Canada and the United States that would become central to the revitalization effort. Two linguistics students, tribal citizen Daryl Baldwin at the University of Montana and PhD candidate David Costa at the University of California at Berkeley, were both researching the Myaamia language and eager to assist the Tribe. These connections provided the basis for the launch of an ambitious initiative to revitalize the Tribe's ancestral language and customs. The Myaamiaki Eemamwiciki aims to rebuild identity through the use of language and cultural practices at gatherings, summer camps, heritage courses, cultural workshops, and widely disseminated publications.

To develop educational content, the Myaamiaki Eemamwiciki program relies heavily on both oral interviews and archival resources

primarily derived from the research efforts of the Myaamia Center at Miami University of Ohio. Housed in a stand-alone building on campus, the Myaamia Center is jointly funded by the University and the Miami Tribe under a Memorandum of Understanding formalized in 2008. As an interdisciplinary research center, the Myaamia Center is directed by the Miami Tribe and tasked with assisting the nation with the revitalization of Myaamia language, culture, and historical knowledge. For the past 15 years, Myaamia students enrolled at the University have participated in the Myaamia Heritage Program, which integrates Myaamia language and traditional knowledge into their studies. The Center also serves as a gathering point for tribal students.

The Miami Tribe's Cultural Resources Office coordinates Myaamiaki Eemamwiciki with strong support from tribal leadership. Extensive educational content is distributed to every tribal household free of charge. Beginning with a Myaamia dictionary published in the late 1990s, program materials





have covered a wide range of topics including Myaamia history, ecology, traditional stories, ribbonwork, and activities for children. In 2005, the Tribe launched a week-long Myaamia summer education program for youth aged 10 to 16. In 2014, programming was expanded to include an introductory program for children aged 6 to 9. The Cultural Resources Office organizes numerous cultural events to bring citizens together throughout the year, such as an annual powwow, lacrosse games, Family Day, Language Day, and stomp dances. While attending these events, community members can also choose to participate in classes and workshops, such as language learning and skirt making. To further reach citizens living outside Oklahoma, the Tribe purchased property in Fort Wayne, Indiana, where it hosts events and offers classes through an on-site tribal Cultural Resources Extension Office. Like the program at Miami University in Ohio, the center in Fort Wayne promotes Myaamia culture and re-establishes the Tribe's presence in its traditional homeland.

By reviving language and cultural practices that were in danger of being lost forever, the Miami Tribe has redefined—in just two decades—what it means to be Myaamia. Tribal citizens are once again taking part in lacrosse games and traditional dances. The tribal government now takes all of its votes by responding *iihia* (yes) or *moohci* (no) in Myaamia. The language is visible in signs on tribal buildings and Myaamia vocabulary is used strategically in tribal offices including the courts, social service programs, and child care. The youth camps have grown significantly to more than 100 total participants across sessions held in both Miami, Oklahoma and Fort Wayne, Indiana. Over 30 tribal students at the undergraduate and graduate levels are currently enrolled in the Myaamia Heritage Program at Miami University of Ohio. Most importantly, Myaamiaki Eemamwiciki rebuilds community by creating a sense of belonging. In the words of one citizen, “When I greet another Miami in our language, I feel a connection between our hearts.”

HONORING NATIONS

RECONNECTING THE NATION

Myaamiaki Eemamwiciki aims to provide every tribal citizen with information about their Myaamia heritage, regardless of where they live and how much contact they have with the Tribe. Other tribes' language and culture programs have successfully strengthened existing Indigenous language and cultural practices within cohesive communities, but the Miami Tribe's circumstances required a different approach. As Cultural Resources Officer Julie Olds explains, "As forcefully as we were removed, we had to forcefully go back and reclaim our language and culture." In order to engage each of the Tribe's more than 5,000 citizens, Myaamiaki Eemamwiciki offers a wide range of activities and materials that appeal to various ages, levels of commitment, and interests. Some families take part in formal classroom learning while others watch performances, participate in sports, or simply follow community blog postings. Myaamiaki Eemamwiciki has helped rebuild a sense of identity within a dispersed population by encouraging all tribal citizens to learn about their ancestral language and lifeways. Participants note that before the program, they felt Myaamia based only on ancestry, but now they consciously understand the shared cultural bonds of the Myaamia community.

In the absence of fluent speaking community elders, the Tribe's partnership with Miami University of Ohio plays a crucial role in creating program content. The Tribe had long-standing links with the University, which is located on Myaamia ancestral lands. Tribal leaders were able to build upon these connections to launch the Myaamia Center research initiative. Although academic institutions have valuable resources that can help find and interpret materials relating to Indigenous peoples and their customs, outsider-led research on these materials rarely serves tribal interests. The innovative

Memorandum of Understanding between the Miami Tribe and Miami University for the Myaamia Center benefits both parties without jeopardizing the Miami Tribe's control over the use of its intellectual and cultural heritage. Notably, the agreement stipulates that the Tribe must initiate and approve all Myaamia Center research and educational activities in order to ensure that they meet tribal objectives. The Tribe also owns the copyright for all publications and materials produced by the Center, allowing it to supervise the distribution of its ancestral knowledge.



While Myaamiaki Eemamwiciki's overt objective is to revive Myaamia language and traditions, the program's most profound effect has been to reconstruct a sense of nationhood. As citizens have embraced language and cultural practices, Myaamiaki Eemamwiciki has sparked a political reawakening. The Tribe has experienced a dramatic upswing in the number of citizens who vote in tribal elections. There has been a fourfold increase in participation in the annual General Council meeting, the Tribe's ultimate governing body, which is open to all citizens above the age of 18. From the beginning of the initiative, tribal leaders

made personal commitments to take part in Myaamiaki Eemamwiciki programming, publicly reinforcing the importance of this initiative to the nation's future. The Tribe's Akima (Chief) Douglas Lankford has observed that language and cultural knowledge has "not only affected us and our personal identity as Myaamia citizens, but it has enhanced our capability to perform our duty and service to our community." Within a difficult context, Myaamiaki Eemamwiciki has greatly enhanced community engagement and tribal solidarity. Tribal citizens are now better equipped to contribute to the nation's future.



HONORING NATIONS



LESSONS

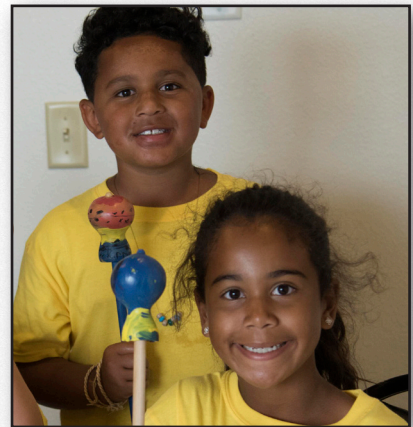
A loss of identity threatens the very survival of a tribal nation. For the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, the strategic use of historical research for language and cultural revival charted the path forward. At the launch of the Myaamiaki Eemamwiciki program, there were only small pockets of Myaamia cultural bearers and no fluent Myaamia language speakers. Today, through the Myaamiaki Eemamwiciki Program, the Tribe is successfully reviving a dormant language, restoring cultural traditions, overcoming centuries of displacement and assimilation, and demonstrating the resilience of the Myaamia people.



Native nations can achieve widespread cultural and community revival by engaging every citizen, no matter their age, location, or previous knowledge.



Partnerships between Native nations and institutions of higher education can result in innovative and integrated programming that builds human and cultural capital.



Programs that renew tribal culture can rebuild community and re-engage tribal citizens—and in so doing, strengthen tribal sovereignty through political renewal.