



## INTERNATIONAL & COMPARATIVE EDUCATION | REVIEW ARTICLE

# AA AH NAK

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**Abstract:** In this article, Aa Ah Nak, the authors' methodology presents not only various reflections but also diverse contradictions about the Aa Nii language as well as language revitalization. This article explores language foundation and how the Aa Nii language revitalization is inextricably linked to the genocide and resulting historic trauma pervasive in today's Aa Nii communities. This article provides salient examples of clashing worldviews around these revitalization efforts and offers solutions on how to walk through language genocide and to empower Aa Nii people.

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I have never known where or how to begin. M. L. Smoker (2005)

We are told that language is the foundation of who we are. Yet, the absolute genocide of what has happened to our people serves as a contradiction in terms of who we are today. The contradiction began with the colonized naming of the Aa Nii people as "Gros Ventre" by French explorers and its institutionalization through formal historical documents. Unfortunately, this has been a global phenomenon—pandering to colonial entitlement and comfort levels while further isolating Aa Nii and other First Peoples from their core identities. Today, there are rare remnants of what has historically changed. If one knocks at the door of a traditional Aa Nii home, the phrase "See Cats" which means "Come in" may be expressed. Historic trauma is inextricably linked to language loss and indicates, from a tribal perspective, the necessity for language revitalization. One cannot understand historic trauma without relating it to violent language loss.

Historic trauma is defined as the physical, spiritual, mental, emotional, and verbal violence experienced by Aa Nii tribal citizens. Ripped away from their Aa Nii families, they were moved to the

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Na Gya Tha & Thay Wus

Lenore A. Stiffarm, Na Gya Tha, is an enrolled Aa Nii (White Clay) from the Fort Belknap Reservation, Montana, with Nakoda and Kainai ancestry. She writes using her ancestral names of Na Gya Tha, A Hock Nack Itha and Bo Dock ee. She received three degrees from Harvard University and is the first tribal citizen from Fort Belknap to receive a doctoral degree. Lenore is the sole proprietor of Dry Lake Associates and serves as an independent consultant. Her passion is language revitalization and preservation. Her research interests include historical and intergenerational healing and wellness and spirit writing. John Mark Stiffarm, Thay Wus, is an enrolled Aa Nii (White Clay) from Fort Belknap with Nakoda, Kainai, and Northern Cheyenne ancestry. He writes using his ancestral name of Thay Wus. He has been teaching the Aa Nii language for the past 10 years and is a Class 7 certified language instructor.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This article highlights the strong connection between language and culture for the Aa Nii (colonized name Gros Ventre) tribal members of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in north central Montana. The historic trauma experienced by Aa Nii tribal citizens and the language loss that resulted indicates, from a tribal perspective, the necessity for language revitalization. Reflections from this paper derive from personal experiences and clashing worldviews which are embedded in how the Western worldview differs from the Aa Nii Indigenous worldview. For the Aa Nii, part of the Algonquian language family, language not only serves as the spiritual foundation for Indigenous ceremony, but also serves as the cornerstone for Aa Nii worldview.

foreign, sterile, cold Catholic schools to be educated by the Jesuits, who were harsh, insensitive, and uncaring. These Jesuits justified their actions as part of the process of civilization of the “savages.” This attitude became more toxic and pervasive following the directive of Captain Richard H. Pratt on the education of American Indians, whose mantra was to “kill the Indian and save the man.”

Ultimate authority over all aspects of tribal lives was relegated to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) including the choice of reservation land. BIA agents placed Aa Nii and other Indigenous peoples on designated federal lands at their discretion, sometimes mixing multiple tribes into a single reservation. It wasn't uncommon for these placements to pair historic enemies into the same and/or neighboring reservations.

Reflections from this paper derive from personal experiences on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, a small territorial land base designated within the 1855 Treaty with the Blackfeet Nation, of which the Gros Ventre (Aa Nii) were original signators. In the 1870s, Aa Nii tribal members were displaced from their traditional territory to the area known today as the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. A BIA agent decided to place the Nakoda (Assiniboine) People on this same land without consulting with the Aa Nii. On 01 June 1888, the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation was formally designated and recognized. The land base included approximately 1,014.064 square miles of property in north central Montana. According to Regina Flannery, “little was known of the Gros Ventre language except that it was an exceedingly difficult one ....”<sup>1</sup>

The Fort Belknap Reservation lies within traditional hunting grounds for the Aa Nii Nation (colonized name *Gros Ventre*). There is a deep yearning—the Aa Nii yearn—I yearn—to hear the stories, the journeys, that have brought our Aa Nii people to where we are today. Being in our traditional hunting grounds brings me close to the universe, *Bee Ta Woo* (“Mother Earth” in the Aa Nii language). This, in turn, brings me closer to **Ba Hat Tik**, our Creator. Before we were Gros Ventre, we were the Aa Nii. After we are the Gros Ventre, we are the Aa Nii.

For many winters, we were told that our language was gone. In the depth of genocide, the language was beat out of our parents and grandparents. I, Na Gya Tha, am a second-generation boarding school survivor. My late father, *Ah Hock Nak* (The Rock), told me that he did not want me to learn the language because as a child the language was beaten out of him. He said,

The white man<sup>2</sup> is *Hok Ats* (crazy). When I was taken to the St. Paul's Mission School in Hays, MT the language was beat out of me by the Catholic nuns—beating my fingers each time I spoke the language. I had no other way to talk with my younger brothers and sister who were crying. I tried to comfort them in the only language that I knew. The Catholic nuns beat my fingers with a ruler. My brothers and sister were still crying so I tried to speak with them through sign language. The Catholic nuns beat me again.

Then, my late father would hold his hands up where his fingers were deformed because the Catholic nuns beat the language out of him. He then stated,

Today, the crazy white man wants to pay me \$100.00 to go into the schools to teach my grandchildren how to speak our language. The tobacco is still here on the table. I am not sure whether I should teach our language. What if the white man gets crazy again and beats the language out of my grandchildren?

This is the fear and trauma dilemma that my late father pondered throughout his lifetime. Many Aa Nii tribal citizens feel that the language is gone. Part of this perception is a result of the tragic historic trauma that permeates the Aa Nii people. Today, there are two fluent speakers in the Aa Nii nation. The late Darrell Kipp stated, “Language should not be politicized.” He also said, “Never be ashamed to speak your language.” These words resonate through my spirit as I try to hold on to my language.

In Dr. David F. Peat's *Blackfoot Physics*, he eloquently states, "language is a sacred vibration (Peat, 2005, pp. 219–238)." Peat states that language is grounded in the worldview of Indigenous people. For the Aa Nii, language not only serves as the spiritual foundation for Indigenous ceremony, but also serves as the cornerstone for Aa Nii worldview. At Harvard University, there is a person named George Elliott. Harvard has named buildings after him. Apparently, he is an important person. Mr. Elliot made an important statement in which he said, "It depends on where you sit as to what you see."

The Aa Nii nation has similar analogies. I am reminded of a story shared by a brilliant Blackfeet elder, the late George Good Striker. He shared how two Blackfeet men were taken to jail because of drinking. They came before the judge who asked the first Blackfeet man, "Sir, could you tell me where you are from?" The Blackfeet man felt rather nervous, tense, and was afraid of the aura of authority that the Judge exuded. He shuffled his feet, rubbed his hands together and put his head down. He said, "Your Honor, I come from the trees; I come from the grass. I come from the water; I come from the mountains. I come from the berries." At this point, the judge slammed his gavel down and sternly said, "Next!" The second Blackfeet man stood up. The judge looked very authoritatively at the second Blackfeet man and said, "I want you to tell me in three words, where you are from!" The Blackfeet man felt extremely nervous about how to respond. He shuffled his feet from side to side; rubbed his hands together; put his head down; and looked at his colleague. Finally, he said, "I'm his neighbor." So, you see, it does depend on where you sit as to what you see (Stiffarm, 1995, pp. 117–121).

Clashing worldviews are embedded in how Western worldview differs from Indigenous worldview. In the Aa Nii worldview, how one articulates what we say may have very different meaning. For example, I asked my son how to say "mental illness" in our language. He said, "We don't have a word for mental illness in our language; but the closest description is *Tei Nee II IIn Kin*, which means to live strongly" (Personal conversation with J.M. Stiffarm on July 19, 2017). *Tei Nee II IIn Kin* can also be applied to families living strongly and communities living strongly. In this way, language revitalization is also a healing ceremony for our people.

This exploration of the Aa Nii language speaks to language revitalization. In other words, language was violently taken from the Aa Nii. We were raped of our language—the foundation of our ways of knowing and being. Today, Aa Nii tribal citizens are reconstructing their language. There is a pull to utilize the Western linguistic framework with which to re-build this language. There are Aa Nii tribal citizens who look to the older ones. The linguistic dichotomy urges language to be changed by adding verbs, adjectives, and voice to the language vis a vis various linguistic orthographical expressions and/or "squiggles." Years ago, the Aa Nii language was used to describe numerous scenarios. For example, *Nee Byaa* would describe "singers, sing, or one person who sang, or one who had a good voice." In today's invasion of linguistic colonization, *Nee Byaa* means singer. *Nee Byok* now means "he/she is singing." The Aa Nii language is being further colonized through the Western linguistic framework of language. There is a perception in the Aa Nii community to save the language using whatever means it takes. Up until our language was colonized and ripped from the Aa Nii, the way each person spoke was defined by their gender. Remnants of the gender voice are still evident in today's language. For example, the greeting for women is "*Na Ha*"; for men, the greeting is "*Wa Hay*." The inherent knowledge within the Aa Nii language has been lost through this genocide, including gender specificity and roles.

So, how does one revive a language? A language immersion movement is gaining momentum in Indian Country. There are numerous interpretations of what defines an immersion school. Some feel that if one opens the day with an Indigenous reflection and Indigenous classes are interspersed throughout the day, that this is immersion. Due to pervasive language extermination, Indigenous peoples have endured, immersion programming ranges along a broad spectrum from complete immersion to smatterings of integration depending upon local language resources. One challenge immersion schools face as students learn their Indigenous language is that there is no one who speaks

the language at home to reinforce what is being taught within these immersion programs. Then, there are some public schools that offer Indigenous language classes to all students kindergarten through grade 12. However, in these schools, the instructor goes to each classroom and offers the language class to students for a short period of time. The teacher then becomes a visitor to each classroom. These teachers are certified under “Class 7 Language Instruction Certification.” Under this certification, the Montana Office of Public Instruction utilizes the World Language Standards as the foundation for this certification; this same standard is also used for all world language standards. Various tribal nations within the state have taken different forms of endorsement for given tribal nations. As a result, there is an external requirement imposed on language instructors to provide instruction in public schools. This can stand as a barrier to many first, fluent and other speakers who suffered through the boarding school language extermination legacy. At the same time, each tribal nation is moving toward defining individual tribal nation’s language requirements. For example, the Northern Cheyenne Nation uses Chief Dull Knife College, their local tribal college, as the certification endorsement for the Northern Cheyenne Nation. At Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, the Fort Belknap Indian Community President signs off as the final endorsement for the Class 7 Language Instructor certification. In 2014, the Montana State Legislature awarded funding for language preservation programs for each reservation in Montana. Each tribal nation was asked by the Montana Legislature to finalize certification requirements for the Class 7 language instructor.

I envision Aa Nii language certification to be a ceremony where candidates utilize a spiritual foundation for such certification. For example, candidates would use appropriate cultural protocol such as sponsoring a sweat lodge ceremony. There is much preparation in terms of how this takes place. A Class 7 Language Instructor candidate would be fulfilling the holistic worldview of Aa Nii ways of knowing and being through knowing the spiritual, physical, emotional, mental elements of the Aa Nii worldview. These candidates would also demonstrate and empower themselves by successfully framing a way to move from effects of historic trauma to one of empowerment.

At the Fort Belknap Reservation, the Aa Nii Nation is fortunate to have an immersion School located on the Aa Nii Nakoda College Campus. This program has been in existence since 2003. The immersion School admits a cohort of students and begins with grade one and follows them through to grade six when they graduate and are prepared to enter junior high school. Funding for the immersion program comes from grants, foundation sources with which to operate and sustain the efforts of the immersion school.

So, again, the question, “How does one revive the Aa Nii language?” One avenue of reviving Aa Nii language is to try to find ways of speaking and utilizing the Aa Nii language from our schools to our homes, through social media to the heart of our ceremonies and beyond. The United States government beat our language out of our people and with it our ways of knowing and being. It is imperative that we all step up and nurture its resurrection. We have a story to tell. Our story is beautiful, but tragic. It is filled with richness. It is filled with pain. It is filled with humiliation. It is filled with vibrancy. It is filled with shame. It is filled with resiliency. It is filled with grief. It is filled with hope. There are many ways to heal. Language is the foundation of who we are. We are Aa Nii. We are resilient. Together, we will revive our language.

The following is what I, Na Gya Tha, call “spirit writing.” I have composed my spirit writing deliberately using the Aa Nii language first to pay my respects to my ancestors and to strengthen my spirit. There are some different ways of translating some of the words, but this is a beginning point for discussion. I provide an English translation immediately following the Aa Nii language.

GABITHA (WALKING)

By Na Gya Tha

2017

*Gabitha*

Walking ...

*Ga’Nah Athon Eesei Eena wooth Ak ee Siss*

Stepping slowly into the sunset ...

*Wow Sa Na’neetawon Ee Na keet*

Now understanding more about the life cycle ...

*Gabitha*

Walking ...

*Nee Naw Ahwoon its Be dat dow*

Watching the shadows as they grow longer

*Ut neetawon nee ta nat’sack be gabitha*

Figuring out, contemplating the next walk ...

*Gabitha*

Walking...

*Wa’Nah Ee To tah tha Nay ee Nakeet*

Wondering how life passed so fast,

*Ah sits on Nayt see tah nay ee na keet*

Never ever thinking that my health would fail me ...

*Gabitha*

Walking ...

*Ut neeta won nee hon ee nah kee nah*

Realizing that time is passing so fast “like the breath of a buffalo on a

*Etona’Kits ee nek Nah’Etanon ah what tow In Katsnah Stake Ee-na-*

*keet noo eeki naw ee naket ut nee ot*

cold winter’s morning.” Life is here; then it is gone.

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#### Notes

1. Flannery, Regina (1953/1975, p. 1x).
2. He used this term to refer to the Catholic priests, BIA

Agents, any authority that was in a position to suppress us Aa Nii people.

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