



NEWS

Can movies help save the world's dying languages? New wave of Indigenous films share untold stories

**Marc Ramirez**

USA TODAY

Published 5:39 a.m. ET Feb. 20, 2022

When Benjamin Young was asked to consult on a film to be made entirely in his ancestral Haida tongue, he thought the project sounded almost impossibly ambitious. As head teacher and director of Haida Immersion Preschool in Hydaburg, Alaska, he knew the number of fluent Haida speakers could be counted on just two sets of hands.

“It was too crazy to be true,” said Young, whose Indigenous people live mostly in Haida Gwaii, the tree-laden archipelago off Canada’s British Columbia that they have occupied for millennia. “Make a full, feature-length film only in our language? I knew the complexity of the work it would take to pull something like this off.”

“*S̱Gaawaay Ḵuuna*,” a largely Indigenous effort inspired by the classic Haida tale of the wild man Gaagiixid, would ultimately be honored by the Vancouver International Film Festival and Vancouver Film Critics Circle as the best Canadian film of 2018. The movie, whose title means “Edge of the Knife,” also earned the critics’ nods for best director, best actor and best supporting actor in a Canadian film.

Filmmakers are increasingly centering Indigenous languages in their work, with efforts such as last year’s “Soojii” (“Creatures”), made entirely in the Blackfoot language of northern Montana, and Guatemala’s “Ixcanul” (“Volcano,” 2015), whose dialogue is conducted in Kaqchikel, one of the country’s 22 existing Mayan languages.

The growing success of such efforts, some say, not only presents opportunities to tell untold stories more authentically but is fueling additional Indigenous-led projects by filmmakers and communities with hopes of inspiring younger generations to hold on to dwindling ancestral tongues.

“There’s been just a phenomenal resurgence of Indigenous pride in the last 20 years,” said Leonie Sandercock, a professor at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver who co-wrote the script for “SGaawaay K’uuna.” “With that comes a real desire to not just reclaim language, but to bring it back before it’s gone.”

Indigenous people make up less than 6% of the global population, according to a United Nations report, but speak more than 4,000 of the world’s approximately 6,700 languages. Many languages, however, are imperiled: UNESCO, the UN’s world peace and security agency, predicts 3,000 of them, mostly Indigenous, could vanish by the century’s end.

In response, the UN in January 2020 declared the years 2022 to 2032 as the International Decade of Indigenous Languages to draw attention to the crisis and galvanize efforts to prevent extinction.

Feb. 21 is also International Mother Language Day, as proclaimed by UNESCO in 1999.

For the past seven years, Washington, D.C.’s Mother Tongue Film Festival has scheduled an annual event showcasing the world’s linguistic diversity to celebrate the day. The festival is a project of the Smithsonian’s Recovering Voices initiative promoting documentation and revitalization of endangered languages. It went virtual with the COVID-19 pandemic and this year features a free two-week program with three dozen films and five roundtable discussions.

“The aim is to amplify the work of diverse practitioners who explore themes in their mother tongues,” said festival founder Joshua Bell, curator of globalization at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History.

The current entries include “Chuj Boys of Summer,” a 17-minute dramatic short about an Indigenous Guatemalan migrant making a life in Telluride, Colorado, and “First Time Home,” a 29-minute feature directed and shot by a group of second-generation cousins living in Washington state and California who travel to Oaxaca, Mexico, to visit their ailing grandfather and in the process learn about their Indigenous Triqui background.

Both films dispel notions that Latin American people all speak Spanish, said Amalia Cordova, who co-directs the festival with Bell and serves as Latinx digital curator at the Smithsonian’s Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.

“Our point is to say, there are all these diverse languages, and they’re vibrant and alive,” she said.

Some festival films confront issues such as substance abuse, the legacy of boarding schools and missing and murdered Indigenous women, “stories it would not behoove an outsider to tell,” Cordova said.

Many of the directors are Indigenous themselves, she added, driven by a desire to counter misleading or narrow depictions previously set by outsiders.

“But it’s not all doom and gloom,” Cordova said. “Film production can show that there’s a life force in these communities – the idea that, ‘We have survived and made it this far.’”

The joys of reclaiming a mother tongue

The seeds of “SGaawaay K’uuna” were planted after Sandercock, the U-BC professor, learned through her Indigenous community planning work on Canada’s Haida Gwaii that language preservation was among the community’s priorities. Nearly all abled Haida speakers were older than 70.

“There was a real concern that, when those folks died, then the language would die,” she said.

When the Haida chief floated the idea of making a Haida-language feature film, Sandercock, who had a screenwriting degree, embraced the possibility. Tribal elders mulled it over, having often fretted that younger members were not drawn to traditional classroom language instruction.

“We argued that a film in the Haida language could be a really cool way for youth to get into language, and that the goal would be to employ as many local people as we could,” Sandercock said.

Fewer than 20 of approximately 5,000 Haida people are fluent in their mother tongue – a legacy of Indigenous boarding-school punishments designed to replace the language with English and parents urged by school officials to do the same so their children could become prosperous members of society.

“It wasn’t something where the elders said, ‘This language is obsolete,’” said Young, the preschool director. “It was taken from them – from my parents’ generation. I have to recognize that (my parents) only wanted the best for us.”

As a linguistics student at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, Young noted his desire to learn his ancestral language to his instructor, who urged him to go where the language was – back

to his native Hydaburg, a tiny Southeast Alaskan city on Prince of Wales Island, just north of Haida Gwaii.

What started as a plan to spend a semester being mentored by his 95-year-old grandfather turned into five years spent learning conversational Haida, until his grandfather died at age 100. At 35, Young is now widely considered the youngest proficient speaker of Haida.

Despite his doubts, he was thrilled to work on the Haida movie project, for which Sandercock had gotten the green light.

Guided by a friend who worked with the company that had produced “Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner,” Canada’s pioneering 2001 Inuit-language film, Sandercock organized screenwriting workshops and a competition soliciting three-page story ideas for a film targeting a Haida audience.

Three writers emerged from the pack, including artist brothers Gwaii and Jaalen Edenshaw, language preservation enthusiasts whose father had been a longtime Haida tribal leader. Their script, written with Sandercock and Graham Richard, is a mystery/thriller set in the mid-1800s about a man who accidentally causes the death of his best friend’s son at an annual summer fishing retreat and bolts into the wilds, traumatized by what he has done.

Gwaii Edenshaw would also co-direct the film along with Helen Haig-Brown, whose roots were in British Columbia’s Tsilhqot’in First Nation.

Actors were chosen from the community and fluent Haida elders were paid to translate the script; some led an intensive language boot camp at a group of remote log cabins on the island since the vast majority of actors were unfamiliar with Haida beyond a few words. Sandercock recalled listening to the actors practice guttural tones common to the language at one session.

“The actors really struggled with getting those sounds down that come from deep in the back of the throat,” she said. “But it was a pretty transformative experience. They felt like they were connecting with their ancestors, taking an important step into their culture.”

One woman, Sandercock remembered, had lost her ability to speak Haida after her boarding school experience. Now, in her 70s, she was being given the chance to reclaim it.

“She was so elated,” Sandercock said. “It was like unlocking stuff that was still there.”

At the film’s initial community screenings, she said, people shed tears of joy.

In addition to consulting on the film, Young appears as an extra throughout and has one line that made the cut. He was thrilled that the film was packed with so much Haida culture and inside humor.

The excitement generated for language by the film has carried on, he said, inspiring some who had dabbled with Haida to further hone their skills.

“It kickstarted a lot of people on their learning journeys,” he said. “There are a lot more teachers now. Before, it was just a few of us doing all the heavy lifting, but many have now improved their proficiency enough to teach a class. Folks are climbing.”

Reflecting realities of Indigenous life

Another director spotlighting Indigenous tongues is Guatemala’s Jayro Bustamante, whose 2015 drama “Ixcanul” and 2019 horror/mystery “La Llorona” both feature Kaqchikel, one of the country’s 22 existing Mayan languages.

“Ixcanul,” made entirely in Kaqchikel, depicts life that usually goes unseen – the harsh existence of coffee workers laboring in snake-infested lands near a Guatemalan volcano. It tells the story of Maria, a Mayan girl whose plantation worker parents have pledged her to the foreman’s son in an arranged marriage while she dreams of escaping for riches in the United States with a local boy who plans to make the journey.

For Bustamante, centering the Indigenous language was paramount as an homage to his late Kaqchikel grandmother. When he was young, she taught him bits of her mother tongue and at one point told him that “she didn’t use that language in public,” he said. “At that moment, I understood that being associated with Indigenous people was seen as a shame.”

Bustamante credits the exchange with awakening his social consciousness, which prompted a desire to accurately reflect the realities of Indigenous life in Guatemala – the discrimination and language barriers that limit access to proper medical care or legal rights, circumstances both reflected in “Ixcanul.”

“If you can’t understand the laws and rights that you have, you are lost,” he said.

While some scoffed at the idea of producing a movie entirely in Kaqchikel, that changed when the film garnered prizes and fame for his two lead actors.

“People started paying to take a picture with them,” Bustamante said, and Maria Mercedes Coroy, the young star of “Ixcanul,” became the first Indigenous woman to grace the cover of a

local fashion magazine.

“Movies can open up a lot of doors,” he said.

They can be impactful in other ways, too: Through the foundation Bustamante created, also called Ixcanul, he brings film to Indigenous communities, showing his works as well as those of other directors that tap into local social issues or problems as a means of unleashing pent-up frustrations in the discussions that follow.

“Sometimes being discriminated is so difficult because there is that shame behind it,” he said. “You won’t admit you’re discriminated even if you are. It’s easier to use the movie and say, ‘Maria is being discriminated.’ That’s one of my preferred programs in the foundation because you can really feel how proud people are to be represented.”

'Your language is a way of looking at the world'

In the 2021 film *Sooyii*, a young Blackfoot warrior wrestles with the destruction of his community as smallpox, introduced to the area by Europeans, spreads through his native villages in the late 1700s. “Father,” he asks in his mother tongue, “why am I not cursed? Why am I still alive?”

The movie, with an entirely Blackfoot cast and script, was shot on tribal land in Montana and directed by Hungarian-born Krisztian Kery. The language, spoken by fewer than 5,000 of about 50,000 Blackfoot people, is considered endangered by UNESCO.

While film itself can’t revive a language, said festival founder Bell, it can become a tool for teaching beyond the classroom.

“It creates another conduit for people to hear the power of voices,” he said. “And hopefully it inspires them to pursue it.”

In addition to films made in mother tongues, major English-language films have also seen first-time translations into Indigenous languages of late, such as Disney’s 2016 hit “*Moana*,” which was translated into Maori, Tahitian and Hawaiian. Previously, “*Star Wars: A New Hope*” was translated into Dine’ Bazaad, a 2013 effort that proved so successful among the Navajo community that it was repeated with Disney’s “*Finding Nemo*” and the classic spaghetti western “*A Fistful of Dollars*.”

“Every language has its own richness and lens,” said festival co-director Cordova, “and there are concepts that can only be expressed in your language.”

She and Bell credit the rise of online streaming, as well as a desire to engage younger generations where they are, with helping to fuel the boom of Indigenous language films.

“As filmmaking equipment and editing software are becoming more ubiquitous, people are stepping up,” Bell said. “There’s growing recognition that there are so many stories we haven’t heard yet, and people are pushing through and creating these fantastic pieces of work.”

Additionally, a climate of rising social awareness and cultural empowerment has liberated people to express themselves more freely, they say.

By empowering people to produce cinema for themselves in their own languages, “you’re flipping this idea of audience, tapping the fountains of a community’s knowledge,” Cordova said. “The films being submitted to us are being made with the blessing of these communities, where the history has not been one of consent. They’re projecting their stories to the world in a way they are comfortable with.”

For Indigenous people whose exposure has been limited, inaccurate or narrowly presented by non-natives, she said, “it’s claiming the right to be alive. Language is the ultimate proof of your presence.”