

A Struggle for Survival:

The Algonquin Language Immersion Program of Kitigàn Zibi School, Maniwaki, Canada

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I. Introduction

The Algonquin First Nation took part in one of the oldest civilizations in Canada - the Algonquian civilization, which existed a thousand years before the founding of Canada. The Algonquin gave also the name of the large Algonquian linguistic and cultural family of First Nations, which stretches from the Atlantic coast to the Prairies and the North. The Algonquin language was admirably described by the first French explorers of Canada as one of the most beautiful and poetic languages. And yet, at the beginning of the 21st century, this ancient and rich language is almost extinct. Some Algonquin bands and particularly Kitigàn Zibi Anishinàbeg, however, continue to do literally the impossible and to look for paths of survival with their limited resources and very strong will. Few determined members of Kitigàn Zibi community in Maniwaki, Quebec organized various initiatives, such as an Algonquin partial immersion program, a language committee, and mentorship programs in order to preserve their language and to pass it on to the next generation.

Hence, this article will focus on the development and struggle for survival of the Algonquin language in the First Nation community of Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg, near Maniwaki, Canada, which will be used as a case study. Taped interviews and personal observation of Algonquin language classes are used to reveal the tremendous efforts of Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg Band to preserve their language and pass it on to the next generation through various programs and initiatives, such as an Algonquin partial immersion program, a language committee, and mentorship programs. This paper will also analyze the efficiency of these initiatives, the minimal involvement of the Canadian federal government in this process at present and its restrictive policies in the past, as well as possible paths for success in the future.

II. Who Are the Algonquins?

The Algonkin First Nation is a Canadian Aboriginal group that traditionally occupied the Ottawa River tributaries and adjacent territories in Southwestern Quebec and Eastern Ontario. Their territory stretched as east as the surroundings of Montreal and as west as Lake Nipissing in Northeastern Ontario as it can be seen from the map below.¹

¹ [<http://www.algonquinnation.ca/home.html>]



The Algonquin First Nation and culture, however, must not be confused with the larger Algonquian or Algonkian civilization. In fact, the Algonquins gave the name of the Algonquian civilization and in the past most historians and anthropologists used both terms ‘Algonquin’ and ‘Algonquian’ but now the term ‘Algonquin’ is referred only to the Algonquin First Nation in Ontario and Quebec, whereas ‘Algonquian’ is a much more generic term that is applied to all First Nations inhabiting large parts of the USA and most of Canada from the Atlantic coast to the Prairies and the North. All these Aboriginal groups have similar languages and cultures to the Algonquins and form the Algonquian linguistic family.² Hence, the relationship between

² Peter D.K. Hessel. *The Algonkin Nation: The Algonkians of the Ottawa Valley: An Historical Outline* (Arnprior, Ont.: Kichesippi Books, 1993), 2.

‘Algonquin’ and ‘Algonquian’ is similar to the relationship between ‘German’ and ‘Germanic’ or ‘Turkish’ and ‘Turkic’ languages and cultures.

It is still a mystery when the Algonquins decided to move to the Ottawa River area, but according to Peter Hessel, who quoted the archeologists Wright and Kennedy, the ancestors of the Algonquins inhabited their traditional territory as far back as 1000 A.D.³ Further archeological research is necessary, because it might occur that the Algonquins inhabited these lands even prior to 1000 A.D.

The first European explorer to meet and name the Algonquin tribe was Samuel de Champlain, the Father of New France, who described in the account of his 1603 voyage his impressions with the ‘Algoomequins’ at the feast in Tadoussac, presently in Quebec, where the Algonquins and their Montagnais and Maliseet allies celebrated a grand victory over the Iroquois.⁴ The naming of the Algonquins happened due to a misunderstanding. Hessel refutes the idea of the Nadowek expert J.N.B. Hewitt, who claimed that the name ‘Algonquin’ derived from the Micmac term *alkoome*, referring to spearing fish. Hessel maintains that there is no evidence for the participation of Micmacs at the feast in Tadoussac and secondly, spearing fish was not a distinct way of hunting that could characterize only one Aboriginal group. Rather, Hessel suggests that the Maliseets (Etchemins) used the word ‘a’llegon kin’ for the Algonquin dancers and it meant simply ‘dancers.’⁵ Indeed, Hessel’s argument is very compelling and the Maliseet member Peter Paul from New Brunswick confirms that in his native language *a’llegon* is the word for dance, whereas *a’llegon kin* is dance and *a’llegon ka* refers to dancers.⁶ The term Algonquin, however, was imposed by all euro-centrist explorers and scholars to First Nation

³ Hessel, *The Algonkin Nation*, 5-9.

⁴ H.P. Biggar, ed. *The Works of Samuel de Champlain*. Volume I (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1922-36; Toronto: University of Toronto, 1971), 105-107.

⁵ Hessel, *The Algonkin Nation*, 12-13.

⁶ *Ibid*, 13.

members, who never referred to themselves with this term. The Algonquins prefer to call their nation with their own word- *Anishinàbeg*. The Algonquin author Stephen McGregor translates the term *Anishinàbeg* as “the real people.”⁷ Pauline Decontie, who is the teacher in Algonquin at the Kitigan Zibi Algonquin immersion program, gave me another version of the term *Anishinàbeg* referring to it as “one who was sent from above.”⁸ Regardless of the original meaning of the word, however, *Anishinàbeg* is a more appropriate term than Algonquin or Algonkin, because it is an Aboriginal name, chosen by the Algonquins themselves.

Algonquin bands were traditionally nomadic groups that counted on hunting, gathering and fishing. Occasionally they tried to grow corn during the summer but Bruce Trigger concluded that such attempts failed “because of poor soil and an uncertain growing season.”⁹

The traditional social organization of the *Anishinàbeg* was predominantly male-centered and patrilineal but democratic with respect towards the women. The principle of respect is detrimental in the Algonquin spiritual system. Every creature has to be respected as it is part of the circle of life and everything revolves around this circle.¹⁰ Thus, the *Anishinàbeg* beliefs promoted environmentally-sensitive lifestyle.

III. Algonquin Language prior to First Contact

The economy, social organization and spirituality of the Algonquins, are not unique but rather shared with many other First Nations across Canada and the USA. The Algonquin language and

⁷ Stephen McGregor. *Since Time Immemorial: "Our Story": The Story of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinàbeg* (Maniwaki, Quebec: Kitigan Zibi Education Council : Printing: Anishinabe Printing, 2004), 3.

⁸ Author Interview with Pauline Decontie, Head of the Algonquin Language Program at Kitigan Zibi School, January 19, 2007

⁹ Bruce Trigger. *The Indians and the Heroic Age of New France* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1977), 6.

¹⁰ *History- Algonquin Nation* [http://www.anishinabenation.ca/eng/alg_history_en.htm], accessed: January 30, 2007

its development, however, set apart the Anishinàbeg First Nation from the other Aboriginal groups in Canada.

Prior to First Contact, the Algonquin language was transmitted primarily by oral tradition, even though as Pauline Decontie noted hieroglyphs and other symbols were used and discovered by archeologists,¹¹ we could conclude that the oral tradition was dominant. In the traditional Algonquin education, not only the parents but the whole community took care of all children and made sure that they mastered the Algonquin language. The elders also played a vital part in this process. The elders were the keepers of all the wisdom and knowledge of the Native community and they had the task to transmit this knowledge to the next generation. There were no books and libraries and hence, all the values and knowledge were transmitted with narratives. As Freida Hjartarson observed: “narratives entertained, educated and chronicled the life of the people.”¹² The language quite naturally reflected the traditional lifestyle of the Algonquin hunters and it instilled complete respect to the nature. There were no words for abstract terms and phenomena that were irrelevant to the Anishinàbeg lifestyle. During my interview with Mrs. Decontie, she shared with me that prior to the arrival of the first Europeans there were no words for the days of the week in Algonquin, because traditionally seasons were much more important for the Algonquins.¹³

¹¹ Author Interview with Pauline Decontie

¹² Hjartarson, Freida, “Learning and Algonquian Children,” In William Cowan, ed. *Actes du vingt-cinquième congrès des algonquistes* (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1994), 229.

¹³ Author Interview with Pauline Decontie

IV. Algonquin Language after First Contact

The arrival of the first European settlers, however, radically influenced the development of the Algonquin language. The *Jesuit Relations* described in much detail the first encounters of the French missionaries with the Algonquins and their language. As early as 1641, there were Jesuit monks, who were sent to the Anishinàbeg to learn their language so that they could preach. Initially, the Jesuits were fascinated with this Native language. It sounded as music and poetry to their ears. They compared it to Greek in its brilliancy and elegance. The Jesuits were even more astonished when they realized that Algonquin had no terms for cursing and swearing. A Jesuit monk expressed his joy and astonishment, writing: “The Algonquin language has no words for the expression of oaths. An Algonquin can neither swear, nor blaspheme.”¹⁴ They believed that this was an indication for the purity of the Amerindians and that they were *tabula rasa*, ready to be converted to Christianity. It is very revealing to be mentioned here that regardless of the devastating effect of the European influence over the Algonquin language and culture, the Anishinàbeg still do not have words to swear. The famous Algonquin elder and chief from Maniwaki William Commanda mentioned in an interview in 1993 that: “to curse and criticize the Creator, you have to borrow from the two official languages of Canada.”¹⁵

Charlevoix also reflected the fascination of the French with the Algonquin language comparing it to the Huron language: “[it] has not the same force with the Huron, but much more

¹⁴ Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed. *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791: The Original French, Latin, and Italian Texts, with English Translations and Notes*. Vol. XXI Chapter XII: Quebec and Hurons: 1641-1642 (Cleveland: Burrows, 1898), 283.

¹⁵ Freida Hjartarson, “Traditional Algonquin Education,” In David H. Pentland, ed. *Papers of the Twenty-Sixth Algonquian Conference* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, 1995), 153.

sweetness and elegance. Both have a richness of expression, a variety of turns and phrases, a propriety of diction, and regularity, which are perfectly astonishing.”¹⁶

The primary goal of the Jesuits, however, was not to be anthropologists and ethnic historians who merely admire and record the Native languages, but to preach the Catholic faith. Facing the immense difficulties of learning the new language, the French and later the English started to criticize the unfamiliar speech. They complained that Algonquin lacks a number of consonants, such as *f*, *l*, *v*, *x*, and *z*, which is also mentioned by the Ursulines.¹⁷ The bigger obstacle was the deficiency of abstract terms in Algonquin. Thus, the missionaries started to develop new terms. Their purpose was to invent words, which would be related to Christianity with the hope that the Christianizing of the everyday language would lead to the complete adoption of Christianity by the Algonquins themselves. Hence, the missionaries carefully learned Algonquin and attempted to use local words instead for new terms instead of borrowing from French or Latin in order to make the new words easier for comprehension by the Native community. Mrs. Pauline Decontie gave me a wonderful account of the days of the week, which were invented after the arrival of the Christian missionaries. Sunday (*Manàdjitàganiwan*) refers to a ‘holy day.’ Monday (*Metizowini-gijigad*) is the day of the purgatory. Tuesday (*Anjeni-gijigad*) is the day of Angels. Wednesday (*Sozep-gijigad*) is St. Joseph’s Day. Thursday (*Ishpiniganiwan*) reminds the Algonquins about the blessing of the Eucharist. Friday (*Chibayàtigo-gijigad*) is Good Friday and Saturday (*Màni-gijigad*) is literally Mary’s Day.¹⁸ Thus, we can see that all days of the week are strongly related to Christianity and nothing reminds of the Algonquin culture, traditions and spirituality. This was

¹⁶ Pierre-François-Xavier de Charlevoix. *Journal of a Voyage to North-America: Undertaken by Order of the French King: Containing the Geographical Description and Natural History of That Country, Particularly Canada, Together with an Account of the Customs, Characters, Religion, Manners and Traditions of the Original Inhabitants, in a Series of Letters to the Duchess of Lesdiguières.* [Microform] (London: Printed for R. and J. Dodsley ... , 1761), 300.

¹⁷ Religious of the Ursuline Community. *The Life of the Venerable Mother Mary of the Incarnation: Joint Foundress and first Superior of the Ursulines of Quebec* (Dublin: J. Duffey, 1880), 32.

¹⁸ Author Interview with Pauline Decontie

a strong indication for the primary goal of the European missionaries. Their efforts of introducing Christian terms to alter and even destroy the old traditions of the Anishinàbeg, however, were not always successful. The French and later the English were concerned that many of the Biblical terms sounded as very distant, vague and incomprehensible notions to the Aboriginal population. The translation of terms such as *heaven*, *trespasses*, *temptation*, *hallowing* was still a concern even in the 1870s.¹⁹

The Algonquin language managed to survive during the 18 and the 19 centuries, regardless of its shift towards accommodating Christianity. During the 19th century to the end of the Second World War, many traditional ceremonies and songs were banned by the Canadian government through the *Indian Act*. The efforts of the French missionaries in the 17th and 18th centuries were to make the Algonquins sedentary so that they could influence them better and make them listen more often to their sermons. The Canadian government in the 19th and 20th centuries also disapproved the nomadic way of life, because they wanted to persuade the Algonquins to become sedentary agricultural workers. Regardless of this oppressive policies and the system of Indian Residential Schools across Canada, to some of which were sent Algonquin children, particularly to Amos, Pointe Bleue in Quebec and even as far as Spanish Indian Residential School in Kenora Ontario, the language was kept alive according to Pauline Decontie thanks to traditionalists. Such as her grandparents, who lived in the bush at least part of the year and while away from the reserve they spoke only Algonquin.²⁰

The period after the Second World War occurred to be the grimmest in the history of the Algonquin language. In the 1970s, the Algonquins suddenly realized that most members of the community did not speak their own language and this old and beautiful language was slowly

¹⁹ Hammond J. Trumbull. *Notes on Forty Algonkin Versions of the Lord's Prayer* [microform] (Hartford [Conn.] : [s.n.], 1873), 1

²⁰ Author Interview with Pauline Decontie

dying. Particularly in Maniwaki, the band of Kitigan Zibi Anishinàbeg started to look for the reasons of this decline and a way to reverse it and revive their linguistic heritage.

V. The Broken Circle and the Sparks of Hope

In the decades after the Second World War and particularly in the 1960s and the 1970s, the Algonquins of Kitigan Zibi Anishinàbeg started to realize that they were losing their Native language, because the circle of life as they had known it for hundreds and even thousands of years was broken by the intrusion of the Europeans in their lifestyle. The French missionaries discouraged the nomadic lifestyle and the traditional extended family in which anyone could take care of the children in the community and teach them in favour of the closed nuclear family. They disapproved the traditional songs and dances of the Algonquins as non-Christian and this policy was continued by the British and Canadian governments. All these oppressive policies led to the vanishing of many traditional stories and songs and to the eroding of the power of the elders. The elders became less and less respected by the new generations and thus, they could not fulfill their inherent role of teaching the language and transmitting their knowledge. Pauline Decontie sadly shared during our interview that nowadays, the children do not want to listen to the advice of elders or merely older people than them. They ignore them with: “you are not my father or grandmother to tell me what to do.”²¹ Hence, if the parents do not speak Algonquin, the children cannot learn it from the elders, because they do not communicate enough with them and do not respect them. The Canadian federal government also played a very negative part in this process of linguistic decline with the application of the old Roman principle *Divide et Impera* [Divide and Rule]. The Algonquin First Nation was divided similarly to all other First Nations

²¹ Author Interview with Pauline Decontie

into ten bands, who live in ten different reserves. Nine of these bands are in Quebec and they include: Pikogan, Lac Simon, Timiskaming, Winneway, Barriere Lake, Grand Lac Victoria, Wolf Lake, Kipawa, and Kitigan Zibi and only one, is located in Ontario- Golden Lake Reserve.²² The total population is less than 10,000 and some communities, such as Wolf Lake have a population of just over 200 inhabitants. The bigger concern for the Anishinàbeg, however, is that the primary language in all their bands is English and French and not Anishinàbe. Even in Kitigan Zibi, which has about 1800 inhabitants, the fluent speakers of Algonquin are no more than 80 in January 2007, according to Pauline Decontie.²³ As early as the 1960s, Pauline herself started to be concerned that her own children did not speak Algonquin, even though it was her native language. And she added that there were many others in her situation. Her husband and other Algonquin men were in the USA for work, where they used English. The women who wanted to find jobs as baby-sitters in Maniwaki or any other city had to speak English or French and the children were educated in English only. The only people who kept the language alive and used it were the older Algonquins.²⁴

In the 1970s, the Algonquins of Kitigan Zibi decided to reverse this process of cultural and linguistic decline and to revive their own circle of life. By then, the Algonquin children of Kitigan Zibi already had English as their primary language as we noted above and therefore, the band decided that in order to teach the language they should invent an easy writing system that will be quickly picked up by the students. In fact, the French missionaries had comprised a few dictionaries and even grammars of the Algonquin language, such as *Principes de la langue*

²² Hessel, *The Algonkin Nation*, 91-106.

²³ Author Interview with Pauline Decontie

²⁴ *Ibid.*

algonquine [Principles of the Algonquin Language] as early as the 1660s.²⁵ Pauline Decontie noted, however, that these dictionaries were based on French spelling rules and were considered unsuitable for the English-speaking children of Kitigan Zibi. In order to create a new Algonquin alphabet, the Anishinàbeg hired a non-aboriginal linguist David Jones who worked closely with some members of the Native community to create the modern Algonquin writing system, based on the English alphabet with a phonetic spelling of the words.

The other big obstacle that had to be overcome was the invention of new words that would reflect better the modern lifestyle. Pauline explained that: “We have that bush language that we used in the past but we had to develop new terms, using basically the same techniques, [vocabulary] and basis. We believe that if Algonquin is going to be a living language it has to speak in terms of today.”²⁶ In fact, this is a quite natural challenge for every language. Even today, during the era of booming technological development, we have to think of new words to describe each new invention and computer program that appear. This strong determination of Mrs. Decontie provoked the author of this essay to test how far the Algonquins went with the introduction of new terms. In fact, the Algonquins appeared to have a wonderful linguistic approach that employs the local vocabulary to describe modern inventions and this way they managed to preserve the natural melody and poetry of the language. *Odàbàn* designated a sledge, something that is moved by force but in modern Algonquin it is used for a ‘car.’ A sledge in modern usage is *kon-odàbàn*, literally a ‘snow-sledge.’ Furthermore, *odàbàn* became the root

²⁵ Victor Egon Hanzeli. *Missionary Linguistics in New France: A Study of Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Descriptions of American Indian Languages. Appendix A: “Principes de la langue algonquine” From Manuscript No.12 (c1662)* (The Hague-Paris : Mouton, 1969), 103-116

²⁶ Author Interview with Pauline Decontie

word for other vehicles. *Ishkude- odàbàn* is ‘train’, a compound word in which *ishkude* is ‘fire’, whereas *kijigu- odàbàn* poetically describes the ‘airplane’ as a ‘sky-sledge.’²⁷

In 1972, the Kitigan Zibi High School included in its curriculum Algonquin. These classes were not sufficient, however, because the language was taught as a second language for a few hours weekly and the students did not have the opportunity to practice it. Pauline Decontie was a principal at the school in the period 1980-1988 and she discussed the idea of establishing an immersion program with other members of the school board and the larger community. Fortunately, the provincial government of Quebec did not attempt to intrude into the school affairs of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinàbeg. Bill 101 was irrelevant and the Algonquins were exempted from its provisions, so that they could operate their own schools in English and Algonquin and were not obliged to teach in French. In fact, Pauline Decontie proudly shared with me that the Algonquins have never been too much concerned about the provincial government, because since the 1763 Royal Proclamation, they have dealt primarily with the British and then federal government.²⁸ The federal government was not supportive either. There has never been federal funding for teaching Algonquin. The Department of Indian Affairs provides 5 million dollars that are distributed evenly among all bands and this money goes only to the cultural centres. There were many sweet promises for more funding, commented sadly Pauline, but they were never fulfilled.

Despite the enormous challenges that they faced, the Kitigan Zibi Anishinàbeg mobilized all their efforts and thanks to their enthusiasm and some funding by their school board they managed to open in the fall of 1988, the Algonquin partial immersion program. It was situated in a trailer, near the reserve high school and later in 1993, the students moved to newly-built nice building.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Pauline Decontie became the first teacher and still continues her teaching duties in the immersion program. Unfortunately, out of 250 students in the school, only 13 children visit the Algonquin immersion program but it is a good beginning and Pauline hopes that the program will be kept alive in the future by more enthusiastic young people, passionate about learning their language and heritage.²⁹ She reminded me, however that this was not an immersion program based on the English/French immersion schools in many Canadian schools. The Algonquin immersion program of Kitigan Zibi is dubbed ‘partial’, because children of various age groups visit it after school every day between 12:30 and 3:00 p.m. The students do not study any subjects or grammar during these classes. Instead, the emphasis is on building a good vocabulary and practicing Algonquin in order to improve their comprehension and speaking.³⁰ In order to achieve better results, Pauline constantly speaks only in Algonquin to her students. She follows strictly the guidelines offered by manuals as *Teaching Algonkian Language as a Second Language*, which recommend only the use of the native language in the classroom, talking naturally as if the children understand everything but by many gestures, ignoring students’ questions asked in English and encouraging the students to speak.³¹

During my invited visit to a lesson on January 19, 2007, I could observe Pauline using all these methods aspiring to pass her linguistic knowledge. The first task of the students in this class and in fact every day, was to write a short story in Algonquin about anything they wanted, their daily routine or any event. During their assigned time for the writing, which was about 20 minutes, the students asked Pauline about words that they did not know and she gave them the Algonquin equivalents. Then the class officially started with a prayer in Algonquin and each kid

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ -----, *Teaching an Algonkian Language as a Second Language. A Core Program for Grade One* (Ottawa: Indian and Inuit Affairs Program, Education and Cultural Support Branch, 1978), 5.

read aloud their short story. The core of the time consisted of different vocabulary games that helped them to learn and practice certain vocabulary, such as human tic-tac-toe, bingo, reproducing the words that they saw on colourful cards with pictures depicting various activities, actions, trades, or objects. Pauline explained that on Mondays they did the ‘talking circle.’ She joked that this was their equivalent of the psychiatrist coaching.³² All students were sitting in a circle and shared with one another their problems and good moments. “Usually at the end,” commented Pauline, “everybody comes up relieved from the circle, because they shared their problems.”³³ Pauline is also sending every year a binder with vocabulary and lessons in Algonquin to each student’s address and she gives them some homework every day. She was not sure, however, how often the children practice Algonquin at home. Sadly, the first language of the children is English and the moment they heard the school bell, they started to talk among themselves in English. Pauline noted that at their homes, they also use English, so at least for now Algonquin is their second language.³⁴ The Algonquin curriculum writer, whose maiden name is Annette Odjik also complained that the language is dying, because most people prefer English. She asserted that her first language was Algonquin and she talked at home Algonquin with her family but then she admitted that few people were active speakers of Anishinàbe in the community.³⁵ Annette demonstrated how tight the budget of the immersion program was. She used a tape recorder to prepare audio learning materials and there was no library with books in Algonquin, only some dictionaries. Pauline also mentioned this deficiency in learning resources. She explained that many songs were lost, because no one was recording them and now they were trying to recover them using the resources of the Smithsonian Institution and the voluntary

³² Author Interview with Pauline Decontie

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Author Interview with Annette Odjik, January 19, 2007

cooperation of researchers and anthropologists.³⁶ The local newspaper *Zibi News* is published in English and the local radio station is occasionally broadcasting in Algonquin. According to Pauline the dominant language is English because most people in Kitigan Zibi do not understand Anishinàbe. APTN also has some programs in Algonquin but they are not sufficient, argues Pauline.³⁷ The availability of electronic media in Algonquin is vital particularly for the teenagers as they spend a great number of hours watching TV. William Commanda also realized the power of the electronic media and suggested that videos should be made in First Nations languages, so that they could be watched by the kids at home.³⁸ Indeed, such videos showing the ancient Anishinàbeg traditions and telling old stories and legends would be an invaluable resource for education and preservation of the Algonquin language and culture but without funding this plan cannot be realized.

The other big issue for the Algonquin immersion program is the lack of teachers. Pauline is retired and she comes to teach Algonquin merely because of her love to the language and her concern that the language might die. She was not sure, however, who would replace her. McGill University offers an option for Amerindian teachers to be certified as teachers in Algonquin, but unfortunately most Algonquin university students prefer to get teaching certificates in other subjects that offer better employment opportunities.

The other Algonquin bands have to face similar challenges with their language revival. Six of the Algonquin bands have partial Algonquin immersion programs. The Ontario band of Golden Lake had to cancel their program, because they lost their teacher. Pauline told us that the Golden Lake Algonquins desperately asked for a teacher to be sent from Kitigan Zibi, but unfortunately

³⁶ Author Interview with Pauline Decontie

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Hjartarson, "Traditional Algonquin Education," 152.

Pauline had to reply that they had no teacher to spare.³⁹ Kitcisakik or Grand Lac Victoria band also does not have an Algonquin immersion program, so they send their children to the school of Kipawa Algonquin band, near Val d'Or, Quebec. Barriere Lake (also known as Rapid Lake Band) has 500 members but no Algonquin teaching is provided in their school, either.⁴⁰

There are certain variations of the language spoken in the ten bands. In Maniwaki, the Algonquins use 'g' for plural and nasalize very often, whereas in the other bands the pronunciation is different and they use 'k' for plural but the language is the same- Anishinàbe.⁴¹ Thus, Pauline and Annette felt that there should be coordination between the bands to teach the same curriculum and to cooperate in teaching and reviving the language. This idea was approved by all Algonquin band chiefs and in 2000, all Algonquin bands set up an Algonquin language council that is funded by all bands. Pauline noted that the language council has four meetings a year to coordinate the curriculum and other language issues.⁴²

Beside the Algonquin immersion program which is designed only for schoolchildren, Pauline discovered to us that in Kitigan Zibi they attempted to organize two other pilot programs: adult learning program and a mentorship program. The adult Algonquin learning program was aimed at working members of the community who could come to the school in the evening. The main problem was, however that most people who attended the program were people who were laid off and the moment they found new work they stopped attending.⁴³

The mentorship program was more successful, Pauline admitted. It involved an elder, who was an active speaker of the language and another adult who at least understood Anishinàbe. The goal of the elder was to expand the vocabulary of the student and to improve their speaking

³⁹ Author Interview with Pauline Decontie

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Roger Gilstrap. *Algonquin Dialect Relationships in Northwestern Quebec* (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1978), 34-35.

⁴² Author Interview with Pauline Decontie

⁴³ *Ibid.*

ability. “Unfortunately, we lose many elders, who are active speakers of the language, because they just pass away,” concluded Pauline.⁴⁴

VI. The Future of the Algonquin Language

Considering the limited resources that they have, it is indeed admiring to see what the Algonquins from Kitigan Zibi and the other Anishinàbeg bands could achieve. And yet, the important question that we wished to ask was how they imagine the future of the Algonquin language. Annette Odjik seemed to be in the pessimistic camp. She concluded that once the last old active speakers pass away, the Algonquin language will probably be extinct.⁴⁵ Pauline was more optimistic and she expressed her belief that if the people have the will, they could preserve their linguistic heritage and pass it on. She also agreed, however, that: “if the kids don’t start speaking it, it will take just a generation to lose the language.”⁴⁶ Pauline supported her argument with a very revealing story:

I remember when I was a principal of the school, we used to have students from Rapid Lake, and there was this smart little girl. When she first arrived, she came to my office, she was angry about someone teasing her and she complained to me in Algonquin. That back and forth happened maybe for a year. She would come and speak to me in Algonquin, because she knew I understood. A year after she started to use English only. I think by the third year, she wasn’t speaking Algonquin at all. Comprehension of a language is easier, but speaking needs practice.⁴⁷

Pauline believes that the saving solution for the Algonquin and all other First Nations languages would be lobbying in parliament for federal funding on national level and legislation

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Author Interview with Annette Odjik

⁴⁶ Author Interview with Pauline Decontie

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

that guarantees official language status of the First Nations languages, equal to English and French.⁴⁸

The Assembly of First Nations also suggested similar ideas for the preservation of the Amerindian languages as well as “raising community awareness of the importance of First Nation languages at the community level.”⁴⁹ The Assembly of First Nations also realized the importance of the language preservation for the First Nations cultures stating that: “Language is our unique relationship to the Creator, our attitudes, beliefs, values and fundamental notions of what is truth. Our Languages are the cornerstone of who we are as a People. Without our Languages our cultures cannot survive.”⁵⁰

Indeed funding is a major issue that could not be overcome without the support of the federal or the provincial governments, which are even less likely to support any Amerindian initiatives, because the provincial administrations have always considered the First Nations only as a federal responsibility. The federal government could prevent the extinction of Algonquin and most other Canadian First Nations languages. It is very difficult to predict if any federal government would have the will to commit efforts in this direction because the Algonquins and all other Amerindian communities are insignificant in numbers and therefore they cannot decide the elections, which is a disadvantage for separate First Nations lobbying. The federal government might consider a radical change in its policy towards the aboriginal languages and heritage only if the Assembly of First Nations manages to unite all Indian bands for this goal and simultaneously proceed with educating campaigns to the wider Canadian public about the value of all Aboriginal cultures and languages and their importance for Canada. Such strategy would

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Assembly of First Nations [<http://www.afn.ca/article.asp?id=122>]

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

raise awareness and support for the First Nations cause on national level that could also influence election results.

VII. Conclusion

The Algonquin language is an ancient language that survived for hundreds of years. It also managed to successfully adapt to modernity and yet, within the period of less than one hundred years it is on the brink of extinction due to the prejudices and fanaticism of the European Christian missionaries against Native cultures and the oppressive and assimilating policies of the Canadian government. The Algonquin First Nations and particularly Kitigan Zibi Anishinàbeg are aware of this unfortunate development and they did literally the impossible in the last thirty-five years to preserve and revive their language with their partial Algonquin immersion program and other initiatives. They would not be able, however, to secure the successful development and preservation of their linguistic heritage without the financial and moral support of the Canadian government. The general Canadian public should also be aware that the First Nations languages and cultures are extraordinary treasures that are part of the Canadian heritage and culture. We must not forget that even the words that signify our country, provinces and biggest cities, such as Canada, Ontario, Quebec, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Ottawa, and Toronto are in fact First Nations words. The federal government has the moral obligation to support the preservation of all aboriginal languages of Canada, not only because of its unjust policies in the past but also because the Canadian history did not start with the Vikings, the French, or the British but with the First Nations, who are indeed the first and real masters of Canada. On the other hand, if the

Algonquins themselves do not mobilize their whole community to commit to the preservation of their ancestral language, the cause will be lost even if the Canadian government supports with more funds the Native languages preservation.

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