Tokunoshima Islanders' Treasures Rewilding from Garbage: Indigenous Language Emancipation

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Abstract

We begin with a collective story about shaming Tokunoshima Indigenous language use at school. As an adult, Nakagawa now recognizes such childhood stories as supporting the colonial education system imposed on Shimanchu, identifying Indigenous languages, cultural practices, worldviews, and identities as unworthy, if not actually garbage. Shimanchu were taught that shifting to the Japanese language and learning the colonizer's ways was essential to their living a modern, clean, and garbage-free life. We reflect on notions of garbage, examining such ideas as recycling as it applies to Indigenous language revitalization. For example, recycling, an idea that is emphasized in sustainability discourses, is potentially harmful to Indigenous peoples. Recycling is based on a capitalist ideology of cost/benefit, but even more importantly, emphasizing recycling allows us to overlook the initial extractive processes. Recycling does not reset the past and in fact uses additional extractive processes to meet its aims. We suggest that dominated by capitalist discourses and forms (e.g., education), the focus of most Indigenous language revitalization programs is recycling, discarding the foundations of Indigenous language, culture and identity, which is living in harmony with other human and non-human life forms. We propose instead focusing on Indigenous language emancipation, a form of rewilding.

Key words: Amami, Indigenous language, language revitalization, rewilding, Shimaguchi, Tokunoshima

Received: 29 September 2025
Accepted: 16 January 2026

Introduction and Context

I (Nakagawa) was a backward boy, one of those now recognized by all my Elders as having been lucky enough to have grown to near-adulthood (age 18) on the Indigenous Amami Island of Tokunoshima. Born on Tokunoshima in 1968, I grew up, like all my peers, known to everyone, always safe, never without view of the sea, never hungry, and surrounded by K-12 classmates with whom I continue to have annual reunions even now that we are all nearly 60. Most of us moved away from the island when we went to University, and have not returned. I have been privileged to spend lengthy periods on Tokunoshima throughout my life, to have my two children identify as islanders, growing to adulthood, each with one foot on the island, and to plan retirement there with my wife (Kouritzin) who is not from there but who loves Amami life. Having grown up *Shimanchu,* I can understand most of the conversations and express what I want to say in *Shimaguchi*. In community, I find it more fun to listen and have communication in *Shimaguchi*, sprinkled with dialectical forms of Japanese used by my age group, and referencing the worldview of Tokunoshima island and the Amami region.

I (Kouritzin) have complex relationships with my Siberian Yenisei, Scots Highlander, and seemingly unknown heritage. My ancestry has always seemed irretrievable and remote, desired and admired, pieced together from small heirlooms, oral histories, gravestones, and obituaries. Lacking intimate connection to my own roots, I have always embraced Nakagawa's, loving not only him, but also the security of knowing all the ancestors. Accepted without question by his immediate family, I have been honoured to bear Nakagawa children, care for my father-in-law as he transitioned to the next life, learn from all my relations, and embrace island life.

Historically, the Amami people were an independent people before being annexed by the Ryukyu Kingdom in a slow process that took place in the 15th century. The Amami peoples then became part of the Ryukyu Kingdom which stretched from Amami Ōshima and Kikai-jima to islands far south, including Ishigaki Island only 300 km from Taiwan. In 1609, the Amami people were colonized and enslaved for sugar production by Satsuma, also known as pre-modern Japan (Nelson 2006). They were dispossessed of their lands and subjected to colonial physical violence as well as ongoing epistemic (Fricker 2007), structural, and slow violence (Nixon 2011, Nakagawa 2023, Nakagawa, this volume). In July 2021, a number of the Amami Islands were declared a UNESCO World Heritage site, restricting Amami access to much of their ancestral land. This very brief history is important in understanding language shift in the Amami Islands.

Tokunoshima, Amami, Japan is known to be home to some of the lowest average incomes in Japan with wages often being less than half those in urban Japan (e.g., Hida 2024). Yet, as Elders including Nakagawa's mother say, "if we do not ask for too much, the Island (シマ) will provide everything needed to live happily." People who have community-based connections are not having a difficult time feeding themselves since almost all *Shimanchu* have their own gardens or agricultural fields, and they produce food on their own. On Tokunoshima, there is no gap between growing seasons because the island is located in the sub-tropical

region and has a fertile terrain (Arakawa *et al.* 2021). Tokunoshima is surrounded by oceans and has mountains to provide enough rain and rivers.

When Nakagawa graduated from high school in Tokunoshima in 1986, together with all of the other graduates destined for university, he left the island. Even those who were not planning to attend tertiary education left, most bound for cities like Osaka where there is a large diaspora of Tokunoshima Islanders and where they could find work, apprenticeships, and established networks.[1] There is no university in the entire Amami region, nor are there any workplaces for graduates except in farming, sugar cane factories, fishing, or forms of public or private service. Even now, in order to participate in capitalism and be viewed as successful, young adults must leave the island for the large cities. Returning, once almost unheard of, is becoming more common, but it still does not outpace the overall population loss, even despite the birth rates being nearly double those in mainland Japan (Hida 2024). The population of Tokunoshima has been declining for over 80 years, since the time of WWII (e.g., Bardot and Moriki 2024). There was a time when the island of Tokunoshima supported approximately 50,000 people, but currently number has been reduced to 21,000 people.

Once people leave the island of Tokunoshima, they do not always find it easy to return to the island lifestyle. They lose touch with their land, slowly drift from their ancestors, and learn to blend in with the mainland Yamanchu. In short, Tokunoshima islanders at the present time are doing their best to become modern, good capitalist participants who compete, produce, and pay taxes, but are still regarded as developmentally "backward," or as coming from a "hinterland" from the perspective of mainland Japan (Richards 2019).

The Language Offender

According to Tokunoshima islander Elder and linguist Okamura (2007), Tokunoshima islanders call Tokunoshima language Shimaguchi, and most islanders continue to distinguish Shimaguchi from the more condescending word "hougen" (dialect), a word viewing our language derivatively and derisively from the point of view of standard mainland Japanese. Shimaguchi belongs to the northern Ryukyu language group (Heinrich *et al*. 2015), and there are various dialects of Shimaguchi found throughout the Amami Islands (Heinrich *et al.* 2015). ShimaguchiShimaguchi is considered foreign.

A direct translation for *Shimaguchi* is either "island mouth" or "my territory's/ community's mouth". We have written elsewhere about the struggles we have encountered trying to assert our right to translate *Shimaguchi* into English as "island mouth" instead of the way outsider linguists have decided it should be translated which is "island language" (see Nakagawa and Kouritzin 2024). Because few Tokunoshima islanders speak English (and fewer still are academics), this is a little-known struggle taking place in scholarly spaces, spaces where certain Japanese, European and American linguists are given more legitimacy

1 This diaspora remains connected to Tokunoshima and even celebrates specific events together, meeting in a public venue. While living in Osaka, Nakagawa was invited and attended. Community members living in the Osaka diaspora broker deals and negotiate for islanders, and look out for one another.

to speak for Tokunoshima islanders than islanders—even highly educated islanders—are to speak for themselves.

Over the many years, even decades, that we have been researching Indigenous language theft through survey, interview (Nakagawa, 2013), analyses of ethics (Nakagawa and Kouritzin 2024) or language policies (Nakagawa and Kouritzin 2011) and in conceptual pieces such as this (Nakagawa and Kouritzin 2026, Nakagawa 2021, 2007, 2008), we have engaged in many conversations with family, friends, Elders, and other *Shimanchu* " シマンチュウ・島人 ", the islanders who have lived on the island through generations, about *Shimaguchi*. They have all told (and continue to tell) stories about a similar phenomenon. In this collective story, classroom teachers, who are themselves *Shiman-chu*, brought a lanyard to each classroom, from which hung a sign saying, "I spoke *Shimaguchi*" written in red ink, an important heuristic because writing someone's name in red ink signals that person is a criminal or has received a death sentence in Japan. Whoever spoke Shimaguchi first at school was forced to wear that sign around their neck, and the only way to get rid of the shameful sign, was to find someone else who spoke Shimaguchi, tattle tale on them, and then have the sign transferred to the new victim. Once the new Shimaguchi speaking victim was found, the shame for the first Shimaguchi speaker was over. This practice continued until the end of the school day. No one wanted to be the last victim to wear the sign around their necks. However, once school was over and as soon as the students step out of the school gate, they were not under the control of school policies. All the students who pointed fingers at each other to get rid of the lanyard began speaking Shimaguchi on their way home, including the schoolteachers who introduced the victimizing lanyard in the first place.

I (Nakagawa) remember participating in this practice, telling tales about my classmates at school in order not to be stigmatized by the lanyard of shame. I internalized the sense of degradation that accompanied speaking *Shimaguchi,* refusing to speak it at home, and carrying the sense that speaking my own language was a waste of time, that my language was worthless, that our ancestral words expressing our lifeways and worldviews were garbage, into my adult life. I gained pride and self-respect by policing my classmates' *Shimaguchi* language use, only coming to realize over time that I was a language offender. Too young to know what I was doing, I chose to respect Japanese over my own language, and to aspire to a modern capitalist life that seemed within my grasp only through the language of my colonizer.

Language Shift

Shimaguchi use was vibrant and not unusual until the 1960s. *Shimaguchi* was one of the social and cultural structures that formed part of the foundation of Tokunoshima lifeways (Nakagawa 2013). There were people who relied and depended on *Shimaguchi* to live their lives, to produce food, and to ensure they were sheltered. All ancestral knowledge of Shiman-chu was based on the landscape and the weather, and transmitted through *Shimaguchi:* The sun showed up at the same time at the same place during a specific season; the *habu* (poisonous vipers) were more active at night and hibernated in the winter once it

the temperature dropped consistently below what we now call 15 degrees Celcius; specific patterns in the waves and wind foretold when a typhoon would make a direct hit on the island and when it would not; birds warned other species of approaching dangers. All of this knowledge comprised Shiman-chu worldview, ideology, truth, justice, or philosophy (these are all the same to us). Together these constitute "*Shima no Kokoro* (heart of the island)." It is expressed and transmitted between and within generations through *Shimaguchi*, enabling *Shimanchu* to survive and be protected by Nature and her ecosystems, by the Land, the Air, and the Sea.

In 2008, the Japanese government officially acknowledged Hokkaido's Ainu as an Indigenous people, with protections for Ainu culture and language enshrined in 2019. At the time of recognition, there were fewer than 100 speakers of Ainu (Hohmann 2008), though this low figure is contested by more recent research (Teeter and Okazaki 2011). Despite having similar historical experiences with Imperial Japan in terms of annexation, colonization, and subjugation, neither the Amami people nor Okinawans or Yaeyamans are recognized as Indigenous peoples by the Japanese government to this date. They are, however, recognized as Indigenous by the United Nations as part of the former Ryukyu Kingdom. In recent years, UNESCO (in their Atlas of World Languages in Danger) and the National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics (nd) have designated *Shimaguchi* and all of the other Ryukyuan and Amami languages as critically endangered languages.[2] There are still many among the Amami population who speak the language, but each successive generation of Islanders who follow in the footsteps of fluent native-tongue *Shimaguchi* speakers do not speak *Shimaguchi*, or they do not speak it as well (Nakagawa 2013). Some may understand. Some retain only the cultural forms contained in *ShimaUta* (as discussed by Johnson, this volume) or in the names of plants or foods or festivals (e.g., Nakagawa 2024), or through influence from some of the art forms (e.g., Loh-Kazuhara 2026), especially when living in diaspora.

This slow drift of language shift, change, decay, or death found on Tokunoshima has been evidenced in Indigenous communities around the world, each context exhibiting different forms and speeds. Indigenous language shift and death are well-documented consequences of colonization, globalization, and formal education; when an Indigenous language is no longer used by a given people, the dominant narrative suggests, Indigenous knowledges are also lost, as is Indigenous identity. Some communities have lost language though many cultural activities remain. Others have kept language but do not practice daily traditional beliefs. Some still remote groups remain intact in terms of both language and culture. Some societies no longer practice language or cultural activities but maintain ancestral knowledges, beliefs and worldviews in their hearts and their blood even while

2 There is significant resistance to the Japanese words referencing Indigeneity among the Amami people, including Tokunoshima islanders. In Japanese and Japan, there is no honour or respect attached to the words, as there is in English, for Indigenous peoples. It is important to note that The United Nations Human Right Committee recommended in 2008 that Japan "should expressly recognize the Ainu and Ryukyu/Okinawa as indigenous [sic] peoples in domestic legislation, adopt special measures to protect, preserve, and promote their cultural heritage and traditional way of life, and recognize their land rights" (United Nations Human Rights Committee 2008).

simultaneously engaging in modern capitalist activities.

Within existing definitions of Indigenous peoples, (e.g., those mobilized by the United Nations), Indigenous language shift results in eradication of Indigenous claims to distinct identity (Lightfoot and Macdonald 2020). In research going back decades, language shift has been understood as a result of language contact, a by-product of political oppression and economic inequality and a form of genocide that results from colonization (Dalby 2003), capitalist neoliberalism (Harvey, 2003), economic development (Hornberger 1998, Nakagawa 2026) and education (Wong Fillmore 1991). Recognizing the importance of preserving Indigenous languages not only in terms of the global project of halting Indigenous language death (Crystal 2002, 2018), but also preventing consequent losses of biodiversity (Abley 2003, Dalby 2003, Frainer 2020), environmental sustainability (Evans 2011, Skutnabb-Kangas 2000), land and water stewardship (Khawaja 2021, World Bank 2005) and food security (UN DESA 2023, UN 2004), on which human and non-human beings are dependent for survival (Goodyear-Ka‘Ōpua 2013, Liboiron 2021), linguists have documented the stages (Fishman 2000), processes, and consequences of language shift, enabling education policy makers to plan for revitalization.

Despite the increased attention by linguists and language teachers, and decades of research attention, language shift continues, resulting in widespread Indigenous language death, and ultimately necropolitics (Mbembe 2019, Roche 2022). However, despite the growing mountain of research papers on Indigenous language shift and loss, from an Indigenous perspective, these are usually framed in traditionally Western capitalist ideas, ideals, and theories, while Indigenous language is grounded in relationships between human and non-human beings, land, water, histories, spirits, ancestors, and futures (Nakagawa and Kouritzin 2021, 2024, Macgregor 2018, Mccarty *et al.* 2022, Nakagawa 2013, Simpson 2014).

Language and Culture Revitalization Efforts

As documented throughout, since 2006 we have examined Tokunoshima *Shimanchu* language, culture, identity and ethical relationships. Throughout the years, many participants in our research projects, as well as respected Elders and community members have suggested that even though *Shimaguchi* belonged in the household and on the land, the language needs also (perhaps primarily) to be taught in the school system in order to survive (Nakagawa 2013). Even though most of older generations were capable of speaking and fully communicating in Shimaguchi, they nonetheless expressed concerns that the younger generations were less and less able to communicate in *Shimaguchi* and had little desire to do so. The older generations in that study are now in their 60s and 70s, or even older. Even at that time, few of them remained in the childbearing or childrearing group.

In recent years, there have been increases in the number of movements on Tokunoshima to revitalize the language and culture, often led by interest in traditional cultural forms that involve community and cultural integration such as *Togyu* (bull fighting) and *Shimauta* (island songs). Both of these activities are now recognized and practiced as junior high school

activities, as are several other cultural movements such as maintaining *Sen-nin Odori* or *Inokawa Natsume Odori*, and introducing educational events led by local folklore museums. Some communities have established festivals or teach local tales in elementary schools.

It is ironic that intergenerational transmission of *Shimaguchi* was interrupted by formal education, but that it now seems almost a commonplace in Indigenous thinking, including that of *Shimanchu*, that formal education is necessary to teach Indigenous languages to future generations and achieve healing through the process (Mckinley and Smith 2019). Such beliefs beg the question for language revitalization processes: Why are we asking for the colonizer's school system to teach our languages to future generations? This phenomenon is seen worldwide, accepted as one of the gold standards in language and cultural revitalization movements, even by those who experienced the auto-colonization of language self-muting (above) and who do not have a good memory of that experience (Nakagawa 2021).

Standard assessments of whether specific Indigenous languages will survive beyond 2050 are usually based on the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS), developed by Lewis and Simons (2010) as a revision of Fishman's original GIDS from 1991. It considers, among other things, measures of language vitality such as the number of speakers and the stability of that population, the connection with cultural identity, the use of other languages in those populations, whether the language is studied as a second language, attitudes, ages of speakers, domains of use, official recognition, intergenerational transmission, and the connection to economic opportunity. Languages are then classified as dead, endangered, dying, in trouble, stable, or institutional, reflecting a world order that is unknown to Indigenous peoples whose oral languages have never been used as instruments of oppression or control, who have only ever had small communities of speakers, and who have never desired accumulation in the Marxist sense. Fishman (2012) himself recognized in reference to Indigenous languages that the spiritual link to tradition, the self-concept and the identity of the populations themselves and their psychological links to ancestral and historical lands, lakes and mountains have very generally been undervalued by leading Western circles who have essentially become products of the landless culture of territorially detached globalism. (p.13)

Neither EGIDS nor any other scale based on the ideas of the modern nation state recognize that both language and identity are local, linked to the land and therefore to the food supply, and are challenged but not extinguished when Indigenous peoples are removed from their own land or control of their land is wrested from them. Specifically, Western views expressed by EGIDS of the connection between language and identity are related to capitalist ideology as well as physical and empirical colonialism; alternately, Indigenous conceptions stress that both language and identity come from the land. If not for the consequences of contact, Indigenous peoples would have no need of "identity."

Linguistic and Other Ecosystems: Challenging Traditions

Therefore, an analogy between linguistic ecosystems and other ecosystems seems

appropriate. In 2025, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) determined that more than 28% of all species (i.e., 47,000 species) are threatened with extinction (IUCN 2025), resulting in a Red List Category from Extinct, to Extinct in the wild, to those of Least Concern, but also acknowledging that many species were not evaluated or were under-evaluated. The resulting scale was similar to that for the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale for endangered Languages (EGIDS). Both contain elements of measuring numbers of populations and judging from those measures the ability to pass genetics and knowledges to following generations.

One key difference is that measurements are taken of endangered species of animals in both domestic (captured) and wild environments without much differentiation. It is essential to consider whether the ecosystems animal species require to sustain their lives in the wild are relevant to whether a species is endangered not. For example, silkworms[3] are dependent on humans. The silkworm (*B. mori*) was domesticated and developed by human-driven selection from a wild origin since ancient times (Hăbeanu *et al.* 2023). Silkworms do not have great capability to hang from the trees and are unable to fly in adult form (Wang *et al.* 2025). In other words, humans may have changed silkworms' ability to sustain themselves or to survive in wild. Despite silkworms' inability to sustain their lives in the wild on their own, they are in strong demand by humans and are not listed as endangered species. Is the absolute number of silkworms the ultimate decision maker in terms examining the threats to a species' existence? Is being self-sustainable considered in the equation? Since no consideration of species' vocalisms or identities distinct from their bodies is entertained, then it raises the question: "Why are any of these arbiters of linguistic vitality, especially when there are no measures of the survivability of a given language when it is still intact in its own ecosystem?"

When we talk about environmental conditions that allow for human and more-than human life, we tend to think of the earth's crust, land, soil, water, air, weather, and all other external manifestations of Nature or our ecosystems. What we believe is also essential are the human components that also belong to the ecosystem: ideology, ontology, worldview, and perspective. While animals do not accumulate capital as their source of survival (with some notable exceptions such as squirrels or bees), humans have created a society based on reverence for non-perishable representations of extraction known as capital. Globally, humans have come to view capital as necessary to ensuring and sustaining survival.

On the other hand, intact Indigenous communities have always depended on the Land and her ecosystems. Indigenous peoples have, for millennia, been borne on their Land, fed from her, lived with her, and then returned to her after death, decaying into the soil that raised the next generation (Nakagawa, 2020). Indigenous languages were used in such Indigenous social orders to sustainably access the gifts of the Land in harmonious accord (Nakagawa 2008) with all other human and non-human beings. However, in the current era, most Indigenous peoples can no longer live peacefully on their own lands with their own

3 We have chosen this particular example because of the importance of silkworms on Tokunoshima. Those who are interested should look up Oshima-tsumugi, the mud-dyed silk of the region.

languages. They have been conquered and colonized. They have been epistemologically colonized, coerced through the education system to believe that they want a convenient sophisticated urban lifestyle. They leave their communities, and from Tokunoshima island they migrate to urban centers. Urban centers receive food, material, and other resources relocated from the periphery, where they are consumed by the urbanites who have relocated there. However, post-consumption significant material waste remains, rendered into garbage, shipped outside the city, the remaining nutrients not returned to their origins but instead cycled into the local soils of other places, serving the process of metabolic rift (attributed to Marx by Foster 1999). By this process, Indigenous *Shimanchu* ancestors feed the ancestors of others (Nakagawa 2020) while in Tokunoshima, food is imported from other lands and peoples, nourished by the remains of non-island ancestors.

At the same time, *Shimanchu* who remain on the island are exposed to a new order as the capitalist lifestyle makes deep fissures in the foundation of Tokunoshima (e.g., Nakagawa 2023). It is time, we suggest, to consider how *Shimaguchi* might still be useful to sustain *Shimanchu* on the land in this new order. The accepted global norm is one promoted by non-Indigenous linguists, activists, anthropologists, language teachers and other experts who have made careers out of developing and proliferating language documentation and revitalization programs (Nakagawa and Kouritzin 2021, 2024, Land 2015, Sarkar 2017, Smith 2008). Focused on linguistic systems rather than on community use of Indigenous languages, such language revitalization documentation and archiving practices have been characterized as being by linguists for linguists (Czaykowaska-Higgins 2009). We suggest that language documentation initiatives and language revitalization movements endeavour to re-establish Indigenous, ancestral and local languages in their original forms. Those, the normative thinking goes, were the languages that sustained human life in harmonious accord with the Land and Nature in the past. Language revitalization programs therefore focus on replacing dominant languages with standardized forms of the original Indigenous languages and then using those cyborg Indigenous languages to participate in and proliferate capitalist systems. Why, we ask, would *Shimanchu* exert effort to learn *Shimaguchi* if it does not come with financial benefit in the current world order? Or why would *Shimanchu* learn *Shimaguchi* just to participate in hegemonic capitalist social structures in a less convenient language, one not designed for capitalist enterprise? *Shimanchu* do not have the social environment or natural environment to foster the use of *Shimaguchi*, so why would *Shimanchu* choose to learn a standardized variant of their community languages? Why would they choose to learn a language that a) is not ancestral, and b) is not officially recognized within the formal education system? *Shimanchu* are not so eager to fail exams that they would allow themselves to be judged fluent or non-fluent speakers of a standardized non-ancestral form of their own languages.

We suggest that re-establishing Indigenous languages and cultures in their original forms requires that original ecosystems, ideologies, and worldviews need also to be restored to their original forms, otherwise the core values expressed by Indigenous languages will become mute. Yet, as we referenced above, the residues of modern capitalism have been contaminating Land on a global scale for a long time; physical reminders of ideological

change have overtaken us in the form of garbage. We are all surrounded by ideological and physical garbage of our own making and we are looking for solutions using similar logics.

Working from the ideology of global capitalism, researchers and activists appear to embrace the concept of sustainable development,[4] with its emphasis on waste reduction through reducing, re-using, recycling. Applied to Indigenous Languages, teaching streamlined, standardized Indigenous languages that have been derived from multiple local languages (reduce language varieties), without change over time (reuse one standardized form recognized as the original), taught through pedagogies designed for dominant written languages in formal education systems (recycle pedagogies and previously developed materials) would give the most efficient result from a neoliberal cost-benefit perspective. Reduce, reuse, recycle principles would allow specialists from outside Indigenous communities to guide the establishment of standards for Indigenous language fluency, grammatical norms, orthography, digitization, pedagogy and advocacy (Guay 2023, Kroskrity 2009), as well as to lead Indigenous communities in documentation, standardization, archiving, and teaching Indigenous languages. This is already happening, even in remote Tokunoshima.

In fact, globally, Indigenous peoples are having their lives, lands, and identities converted to job opportunities for Western academics, as is evidenced in this call from non-Indigenous applied linguists to other non-Indigenous researchers:

> Specialists are also needed—linguists (applied or other), education experts, curriculum developers, and media experts. Frequently, more specific fields of knowledge can play a role as well: naturalists, geologists, and geographers can help communities enhance their relationship to their homeland; archivists and librarians help with gaining access to publications and unpublished materials on their language, culture, and history; map-makers may be called upon to help with mapping place names and territorial boundaries. The list goes on and on. (Hinton *et al.* 2018: p.xxv)

Yet, Indigenous peoples worldwide have been transmitting their oral languages for millenia without the input of linguists or other specialists who wish to write them down to gain academic credit for themselves (Nakagawa and Kouritzin 2021, 2024). Indigenous communities require no help from outsiders to enhance their relationships with their Lands. Indigenous peoples are aware of, but currently powerless to prevent, such invocations to engage in epistemic, structural, and slow violence.

Indigenous Language Emancipation: "Rewilding" Indigenous language

Going back to the analogy with animal species, when originally native species are released into the wild as a conservation effort (rewilding) but their ecosystems have been changed, then rewilding efforts are likely not to be successful. Parallel to this idea, we suggest that original Indigenous languages require their original, local, social and natural

4 This is a reference to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals established by the United Nations. With reference to Indigenous Language revitalization: SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), balanced within SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production).

environments to be effectively useful for community survival. Therefore, we argue that rewilding *Shimaguchi*, (restoring its use in its natural ecosystem) requires language emancipation not language revitalization. Language emancipation means permitting change over time and space, natural development without outside interference. On Tokunoshima rewilding *Shimaguchi* would include allowing degraded landscapes and foodways (e.g., Nakagawa 2026) to naturally recover in multiple ways, including returning to ancestral burial practices instead of cremation, removing dams, permitting flooding, and recognizing humans as part of the ecosystem. It means allowing those landscapes to adapt over time because the Land, unable to escape climate change, must embrace it. It means allowing Indigenous Lands and languages to regain their dynamic relationship, without codification.

Getting to a state of language emancipation is a more difficult task. Indigenous peoples must be granted local autonomy to decide the future of their own languages and to be honoured and respected for the choices they make. Those choices do not need to be encoded in mission statements or policies or pedagogical frameworks, not do those choices need to be explained. Indigenous languages need rather to be freed from colonizer ideologies and allowed to reemerge in new forms that center local Indigenous worldviews and lifeways. Language emancipation means living relationships with Land, with human and non-human beings, outside of Western views of time, and with ancestors, and communicating in ways that emerge; it does not mean being shackled to original forms. Led by Elders, Indigenous language emancipation ties an evolving Indigenous language use to healing and regenerative processes, and most importantly to the Land.

I (Nakagawa) have always been told that the future is behind me, not in front of me. We can see the past, but we cannot see the future, even as we advance into it. Like all *Shimanchu* before me and after me, I must be proud to be a backwards boy, learning from the past, accepting what cannot be changed, and advancing slowly so that I do not trip.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Tokunoshima islanders past, present and future for all of their shared wisdom. All mistakes are entirely our own.

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