



## THE HARVARD PROJECT ON AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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John F. Kennedy School of Government • Harvard University

### HONORING NATIONS: 2003 HONOREE

#### **Cherokee National Youth Choir Cherokee Nation (Tahlequah, OK)**

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*Formed in 2000 as a component of the Nation's comprehensive language program, the Cherokee National Youth Choir performs traditional and contemporary songs in the Cherokee language. Comprised of forty youth between the ages of thirteen and eighteen, the award-winning Choir performs at venues in Cherokee communities and across the country. More importantly, the Choir has proven itself to be an effective tool for inspiring Cherokee youth to learn their language, culture, and history giving real hope that the sacred gifts of language and song will never be lost.*

Valued as gifts from the Creator, the Cherokee people consider their traditional language and songs sacred. The language, in fact, sustained the Cherokee during one of Native America's darkest periods. The 1838 removal of the Cherokee people from their traditional eastern homelands to the present-day Oklahoma was a devastating journey. Over one third of the twelve thousand Cherokee died in the infamous Nunna dual Tsuny, or Trail of Tears. During this terrible trek, families sang songs in the traditional language to locate their kin and to bring comfort to the grieving. The Cherokee language and songs held their people together.

These sacred gifts have been threatened for decades. Although Cherokee history is filled with stories of success, resilience, and flexibility in the face of adversity, language use has been on the decline for generations. Forced relocations, boarding schools that forbade students from speaking their Native tongue, and other pressures of assimilation have taken their toll. Whereas speaking the Cherokee language was once both expected and necessary, over time, its importance as a primary means of communication has diminished. Some elders believe that learning the language is unnecessary. Some particularly those raised in boarding schools or who experienced discrimination for speaking their Native tongue even say that learning the Cherokee language can hinder the youth's ability to prosper in modern American society. Sadly, by the late 1990s, the Cherokee language was in danger of extinction. In fact, studies revealed that no Cherokee under the age of forty possessed mastery of the language!

The government of the Cherokee Nation took a resolute stand against this threat: it would not allow the Cherokee language or songs to die. This stance reflected the tribal leadership's conviction that the health of the nation is strongly correlated with the health of the nation's language. As one Cherokee leader warned, "When you lose your language, you lose your identity as a sovereign nation." The tribal leadership declared a national emergency.

The Nation took action in 1999 by assembling a task force comprised of Cherokee speakers,

elders, educators, and concerned citizens. The task force was charged with developing a comprehensive language program that would protect, preserve, and promote the Cherokee language. Drawing upon lessons learned from other successful language revitalization programs in Hawaii, the task force worked with the tribal government's Education Division to build three preschool language immersion classrooms and implement a system to monitor young students' progress. It certified current Cherokee speakers in language instruction and established language courses in the tribally administered Sequoyah High School. Given a need to teach the language to parents, older students, and other Cherokee citizens, the tribal government also took steps to make Cherokee language part of everyday life. For example, it began infusing Cherokee language into government activities and made language instruction available on the Nation's official website, [www.cherokee.org](http://www.cherokee.org).

The Cherokee leadership and public servants knew that while essential, these interventions were not enough. They had to do more. Specifically, they needed to find a mechanism for getting young Cherokee citizens interested in learning the language in the first place a challenge that many Indian nations grapple with. Despite big investments in programming and infrastructure, educators and language instructors throughout Indian Country often find it difficult to get young people interested in learning their Native tongue. The reality is that most youth do not see the connection between the health of the language and the health of the nation. Inspiring youth to want to learn the language can be a frustrating exercise. The Cherokee tribal government knew that this challenge must be overcome.

In October 2000, the Nation discovered a powerful source of inspiration singing. So it launched the Cherokee National Youth Choir. As a critical component of the Nation's comprehensive language program, the Choir sings songs and hymns in the Cherokee language. Now comprised of forty Cherokee youth between the ages of thirteen and eighteen, the Choir seeks to interest the youth in learning their Native tongue, assist in the first steps toward proficiency, and to promote language use through ceremonies and performance. Besides exposing current youth to Cherokee history, language, and culture, the Choir embraces a long-term goal: to inspire current youth to one day teach their children and grandchildren the language and traditions.

The Choir succeeds on many fronts. Advancing its original purpose, the Choir inspires broad interest in the Cherokee language and drives greater participation in the Cherokee Language Program. Even though the Choir itself is relatively small, its activities touch thousands. Every hour of rehearsal and performance exposes the Choir members, their families, and their audiences to the Cherokee language. The Choir provides the youth both a purpose and inspiration for learning. The songs give the youth a compelling reason for learning their Native tongue and allow them to practice what they have learned through other components of the Cherokee Language Program. Further, the Choir is a highly valued institution. Younger siblings look up to their brothers and sisters and look forward to the day when they can join. Adults and elders relish hearing their language in the youth's voice. Importantly, the Choir is changing attitudes and raising awareness about the importance of the Cherokee language. Although the language remains threatened, the language and songs are once again being viewed as sacred treasures that must be both protected and used in everyday life.

The Choir's popularity or perhaps more appropriately, fame bolsters its effectiveness as a force for language revitalization. The Choir's first album, *Voices of the Creator's Children*, was an instant success and won a prestigious Grammy for Best Gospel/Christian Recording at the Native American Music Awards (NAMA) in 2002. The album includes songs from the Trail of Tears and hymns translated into Cherokee. The Choir's second album, *Building One Fire*, won another Grammy for Best Gospel/Christian Recording in 2003 and was one of the

NAMA's five nominees for Album of the Year. These awards, while a source of tremendous pride for the Choir and the tribal government, are secondary to the impact the Choir has as a source of community pride. The Choir's songs are heard regularly on the radio, on home stereos, at community gatherings, in church services, and at public ceremonies across the Cherokee Nation. Tens of thousands of CDs are in circulation.

More than just musically talented youth, members of the Choir serve as ambassadors of the Cherokee Nation. They have to be. The Choir is regularly called upon to perform at venues throughout the state of Oklahoma and across the US. For example, the Choir was featured at the Annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, DC and at the Smithsonian's George Gustav Heye Center in New York City. Additionally, the youth sang at the opening of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. At each venue, the audience learns about the Cherokee people, their rich history, and their unique culture. The Choir is also an agent of healing. Because its repertoire includes songs and hymns once used to comfort individuals and families walking the "Trail of Tears," the Choir is even called upon to perform at memorial services; among them was a moving performance at Ground Zero in New York City.

Many Indian nations face the unfortunate reality that their Native language will die unless immediate and effective intervention takes place. Many believe that the stakes could not be higher, as language is a fundamental expression of culture. The Cherokee Nation is taking on the challenge of language preservation head-on, and is making significant investments to ensure that its 250,000 citizens will never see the day that the language is gone. The Cherokee National Youth Choir is one such critical investment. The Choir exhibits to its audiences the resiliency and power of a people committed, in the presence of great difficulties, to their culture and language. It stands as a symbol to all Native nations struggling to preserve their precious languages through strategies as simple and beautiful as singing the sacred songs that have sustained them over centuries.

#### Lessons:

- Organizations like the Cherokee National Youth Choir serve an important ambassadorial function for Native America; they are a visible and uplifting reminder that American Indian nations and their cultures have survived and remain strong.
- Tribal governments can enrich both existing and new programs and initiatives by investing in related programmatic efforts. For example, the Choir specifically complements the Cherokee Nation Language Preservation Program, and draws strength from and provides support to an array of the Nation's other cultural and educational efforts.
- Tribal programs that are able to demonstrate success in visible or tangible ways are better able to gain support from tribal citizens, politicians, and the American public at-large.