

WHEN THE NORTH AND SOUTH MEET IN THE TECHNOLOGY WORLD

MAYAN COMMUNITIES OF YUCATÁN (MEXICO) AND
FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES OF BRITISH COLUMBIA (CANADA)

FirstVoices



ELP

Endangered
Languages
Project

INTRODUCTION

Language revitalization is a crucial process for Indigenous communities all around the world. The loss of language not only affects the cultural identity of Indigenous communities but also erodes their connection with their ancestors, histories, and lands. With the help of digital technology, language revitalization has become easier to use and more accessible to Indigenous communities. To discuss these issues, a three-day online workshop was organized, focusing on language revitalization work and technology in two areas of the world - Yucatec Maya communities from Yucatán, Mexico and First Nations communities from British Columbia. The aim of the conference was to create a space where these two sides could learn from each other and share their experiences of language revitalization and technology. This report provides an overview of the discussions and insights shared during the conference.

SESSION 1

“we are NOT DOING
THIS TO BE FAMOUS
BUT TO SPREAD MAYAN
LANGUAGE AND
CULTURE.”

– LOOLBEJ

In the first session, Gabriela Loolbej Sánchez Chan discussed her experiences with creating and developing the Chóoltej podcast, which aims to promote Mayan language and culture. She began by providing some background on the Mayan community, including the fact that it is composed of settled, non-nomadic communities with diverse cultures and histories. This presentation focused specifically on the Yucatec Mayans, who are the primary group they aim to serve with their podcast.

Gabriela showed a video of the hosts of the Chóoltej podcast and then explained how the podcast came to be. They had previously been involved with a cultural center that focused on promoting the Mayan language and cul-

ture through various activities for Mayan people living in cities. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the center was forced to close. In response, the hosts decided to start a podcast as a way to continue promoting Mayan culture and language. They started recording themselves having conversations about their lives and experiences as Mayan people and publishing them on various platforms, including Spotify and YouTube. The podcast was initially called “Chóoltej,” which means “untangling” in Yucatec Mayan, as they wanted to untangle and share their experiences with others. They quickly realized that their conversations were resonating with many people, and they began to receive positive feedback and requests for more content.

As they continued to create episodes, they experimented with different formats and topics, trying to find what worked best for them and their audience. They eventually settled on a format that focused on simple and personal stories related to Mayan culture and language, such as childhood memories, traditional foods, and cultural rituals. They found that these topics generated a lot of interest and interaction from their audience, which included many women and people living outside of Mexico.

Over time, the podcast began to gain more support, and the hosts were able to secure funding for professional equipment and a Mayan producer. They also began to make connections with other Mayan people and organizations, attending cultural events and even a digital language summit.

Throughout the episode, the hosts emphasized that their goal is not to become famous, but to promote Mayan language and culture. They also discussed the challenges they face, including technical issues and the need to involve more youth in the effort to revitalize the language and culture. However, they remain optimistic and encouraged by the positive impact they have already had on their community.

Overall, the podcast is a testament to the power of storytelling and community building. Through their conversations, the hosts were able to connect with others and share their experiences in a way that promotes understanding and appreciation for Mayan culture and language.

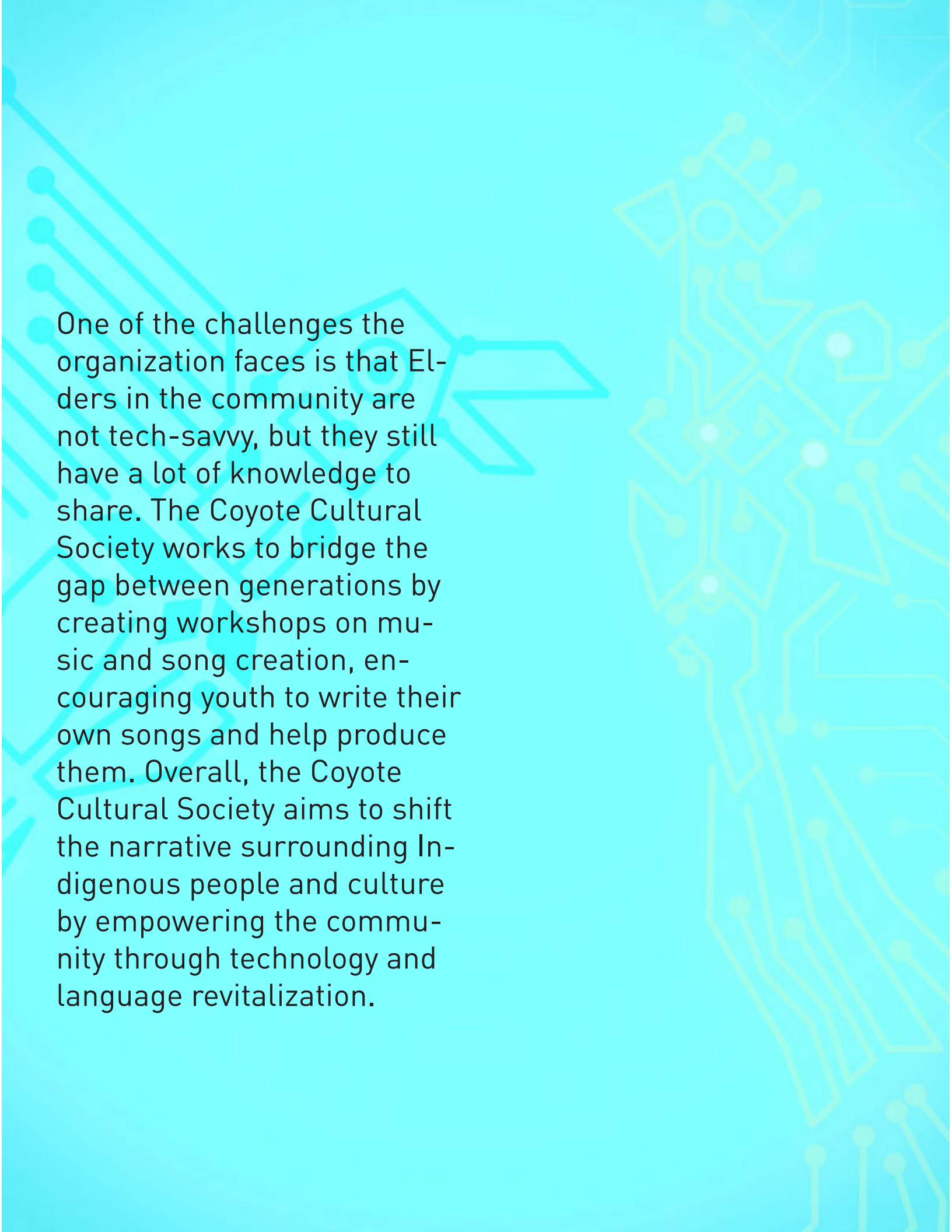
SESSION 2

“IT BRINGS TEARS TO MY EYES TO SEE MY DAUGHTER BEING RAISED WITH HER PEOPLE AND HER CULTURE.”

– Leeland Askew

In the afternoon session, Leeland Askew and Ryan Johnston from the Coyote Cultural Society spoke about their mission to empower Indigenous culture through technology. The organization, which grew out of a desire to preserve the Skwxwú7mesh language, has been operating for 15 years and focuses on recording, filming, and editing videos related to Indigenous culture. The organization's mandate is to encourage people to go out into the world and learn about different technologies and resources, then come back and share that knowledge with the community. They believe that technology can be used as a tool to empower Indigenous people and help pass down traditional knowledge from Elders to younger generations.

The Coyote Cultural Society's main focus is on language revitalization. They aim to train multimedia language producers and help other communities with similar goals. They believe that oral traditions are essential to Indigenous culture, and that the Elders have a lot of wisdom that needs to be passed down. Leeland Askew has a strong interest in inspiring youth through musical talents and life experience. The organization uses various media, such as videos and podcasts, to share the stories and traditions of Indigenous people. They document recordings, archives, and word and picture/video pairs to accommodate different learning styles. They also use interactive games to engage people in the language revitalization process.



One of the challenges the organization faces is that Elders in the community are not tech-savvy, but they still have a lot of knowledge to share. The Coyote Cultural Society works to bridge the gap between generations by creating workshops on music and song creation, encouraging youth to write their own songs and help produce them. Overall, the Coyote Cultural Society aims to shift the narrative surrounding Indigenous people and culture by empowering the community through technology and language revitalization.

SESSION 3

“our Land is the foundation of who we are as Ts’msyen people. Keeping this in mind grounds us in the work that we need to do for our future generations.”

– DEBBIE LEIGHTON-STEPHENS


On second day, Debbie Leighton-Stephens and Lindsay Reeve started by introducing themselves in their language, Sm'algyax, from the Ts'msyen territory. Lindsay became a Ts'msyen language teacher while learning Ts'msyen alongside. Debbie, even though retired 89 years ago, her work with Ts'msyen language has continued.

Sm'algyax means 'real language', as the language connects the speakers to the land and water, to those who have gone before, and to each other.

All the work they do with the Ts'msyen communities must follow their protocols, involving groups such as the Ts'msyen Sm'algyax Language Authority, Sm'algyax Committee, and Indigenous Education Council. A reflection question was posed to

all the participants: "What are your protocol processes, successes and Challenges?" The second discussion point they brought up was the dialect identification process within the territory. The Ts'msyen knowledge holders had to come into agreement with things like lexical comparison deciding the dialects. Debbie and Lindsay also shed light on other important issues: "How are the traditional narratives of your territories honored today? Are the resources shared with your communities? If so, how?" Participants discussed the importance of ownership and copyright over language, language materials and traditional narratives.

Rodrigo from the Mayan side asked Lindsay and Debbie: "You have developed valuable grammar and a dictionary.

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Have you incorporated things like hand/body gestures and their meanings into your language teaching material?

” Debbie replied, “That is a great suggestion and we will definitely consider incorporating this into our language teaching material. Thank you for the suggestion.”

SESSION 4

“YOU DON'T NEED THE BACKGROUND, YOU DON'T NEED THE SKILLS, YOU JUST NEED THE DRIVE.”

– VICENTE CANCHÉ MOO

During the afternoon session of the second day, Vicente Canché Moo discussed the decreasing number of speakers of the Mayan language. From 1990 to 2020, there was a 23.7% decrease in the number of speakers, with the current number standing at 525,092. Mr. Canché Moo expressed concern that globalization and other factors were causing a decline in the number of speakers. Yet, he expressed how much he felt inspired to hear the successful stories of language revitalization work from the language champions of BC, saying, “it motivates us to continue working with children, involving adults as well...”

Vicente Canché Moo shared his personal experience of becoming a temporary Mayan language teacher, instead of accepting a more stable job. He learned technical skills

through YouTube videos, trial and error, and interactive language lessons on CDs. He produced two CDs in 2002 and 2008, which were later digitized onto YouTube as karaoke videos in 2011. During the pandemic in 2020, they taught an online course with the help of others. One of the things Vicente Canché Moo kept repeating was the importance of being self-sufficient and having a willingness to learn on your own, as he has traversed from being a language teacher to a sophisticated multimedia content creator to an App developer. He learned all these skills from watching Youtube videos and asking people around him. He further posed the question: “Why is it so strange for indigenous people to use digital media?” “What’s strange about this! We need to create content by ourselves for what we want.”

Despite acknowledging the importance of technology in preserving Mayan culture and language and digitizing them, Vicente Canché Moo also expressed the worries of losing website access, changes in the government, and a decreasing number of schools with access to their language resources. Additionally, the small market for their products is a challenge, as they often end up spending more than they earn to sustain their language work.

During the Q&A session, it was discussed that the digital world for Indigenous communities is very segmented, and the content is often searched for in Spanish. There is a need to treat culture/language as a business, address the need rather than what we want, and conduct market research before creating any content/product. The speakers also discussed the im-

portance of collaboration and the challenges they face in their respective communities. They emphasized the need for patience and persistence in their language revitalization efforts. Both sides of the speakers agreed that the single most important thing to takeaway is that, “We are not alone,” and they feel heard and seen.

A participant from the Mayan side said, “You do collectively. We haven’t learned that way. We do individual work.” The BC responded, “You think we all get along, but we don’t. We are willing to fight for it. Toughness of spirit. Let’s create a FB [Facebook] group and continue our sharings.” A speaker from the BC side invited the Mayan speakers with great hospitality, “Take a trip up to Canada, you will certainly benefit from it. [There are] large Mexican communities up here as well.”

SESSION 5

“everyone has to do
their little part to
continue our language.”

– Maria Pat Chulim

The participants discussed the challenges faced by the Mayan language and acknowledged that despite being a strong language, the relatively large number of speakers doesn't reflect the reality of the youngest two generations. They believe this is due to the shame associated with the language, a colonial narrative that portrays it negatively, and policies that favor major languages.

Maria Pat Chulim shared her experience of starting to teach Mayan during the pandemic. She began making digital stickers (graphics which can be used in chat applications like WhatsApp) in Mayan, and created talking stickers using common Mayan phrases. She found teaching different age groups challenging, but with the help of her nieces, she started making stickers as an ed-

ucational tool. She emphasized the importance of making traditional proverbs and sayings come alive through technology and pop culture, and changing the narrative to show that the language is current and relevant.

Another speaker, Múul Kaambal mentioned that not all speakers or learners have internet access, so he recorded videos of language teaching with the help of his niece as the camera person. He highlighted the need to gain students' attention, otherwise the efforts put in will be in vain.

In the Q&A, the participants discussed the new possibilities (and challenges) that AI could bring to creating arts and other language teaching material in Indigenous communities where the lack of materials is a problem.

SESSION 6

“our ULTIMATE GOAL IS TO
create Language
FAMILIES, BRING OUR
Language BACK TO THE
NATURAL FORM OF
Transition.”

– Frances Brown

This session focused on the revitalization of the **Haítzaqv** (Heiltsuk) language, **Haítzaqv!a**, which is a living language that expresses the worldview and way of life of the **Haítzaqv** people. The mission is to restore the natural transmission of the language by increasing speaking, understanding, reading, and writing of **Haítzaqv!a** by all **Haítzaqv** people. The approach follows a holistic language model grounded in **Haítzaqv** values, culture, and worldview, with an emphasis on respect, reciprocity, and resilience.

The immersion school has been successful with pilot projects, culturally relevant learning materials, teaching from Elders, youth **Haítzaqv** instructors, and place-based learning. However, there are challenges such as lack of

space for recording, and unsafe exterior access into the Big House for Elders. There are also challenges with policy development, the high cost of language revitalization, and the need for dedicated space for a language nest.

Future planning includes teacher training, and partnering with universities to promote the immersion school. Digital activism work has also been done through the creation of a Reachable dictionary, keyboard, interactive alphabet charts, interactive storybook, QR codes for various language learning resources, and other digital tools.

CONCLUSION

“THERE IS NO PERFECT PERSON TO DO LANGUAGE WORK. YOU ARE THE PERFECT PERSON TO DO LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION WORK.”

– CHUUTSQA LAYLA RORICK

The Eagle and Condor prophecy, which predicts the re-union of Indigenous peoples of North America (represented by an eagle) and South America (represented by a condor), leading to the opening of a new path for humanity, has been a powerful source of inspiration for many Indigenous activists and culture keepers across the Western hemisphere. As Leeland Askew explained during the workshop, the prophecy reflects the shared struggles and aspirations of Indigenous communities across the Americas – and was alluded to in René González Pizarro’s graphic design for the workshop, which brought together a raven (representing BC First Nations communities) and a quetzal (representing Mayan communities).

The workshop brought together two Indigenous communities from vastly

different regions: Yucatec Mayan language champions from Yucatán, Mexico, and language champions from First Nations in British Columbia, to discuss their language revitalization efforts and the role of technology in their work. Both communities shared a deep commitment to preserving their languages and cultures and highlighted the importance of creating natural spaces for languages, and shifting the holistic language ecology of daily life, for effective revitalization strategies. While the Yucatec Mayan participants emphasized the value of workshops and teaching programs for children and adults (including opportunities to teach and reclaim Mayan glyphs), the First Nations participants especially stressed the urgency of documenting and reclaiming their languages before they fall silent.

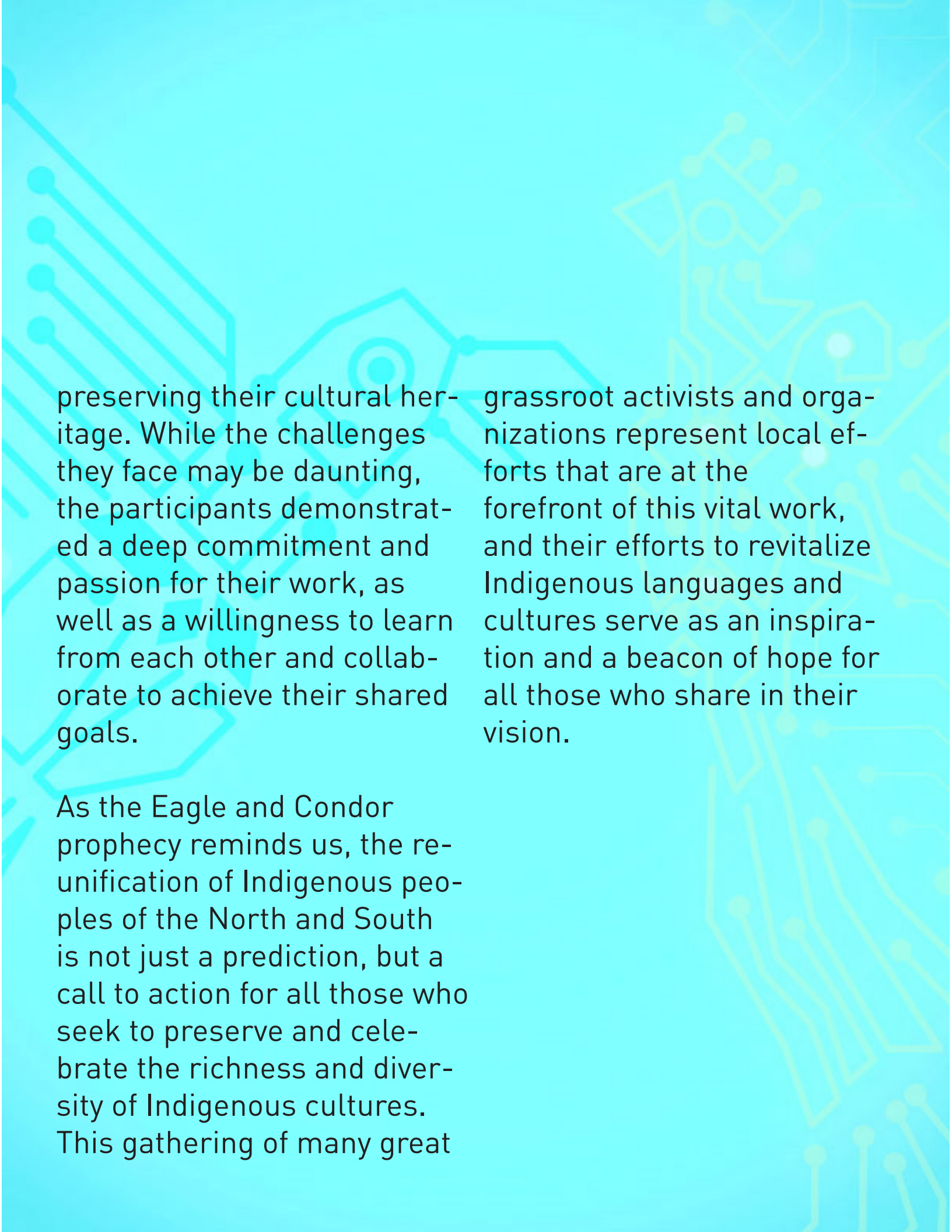
Despite their differences, both communities shared enormous commonalities: in their joy and fulfillment in their work, the importance of humor, and the feeling of connectedness to their identities, histories and ancestors. They also recognized the need to deconstruct colonial narratives that have marginalized Indigenous languages and cultures. Dr. Debbie Leighton-Stephens, an expert in language revitalization, underscored the importance of learner-teachers working alongside fluent speakers, as well as mentorship programs to support learners in their language revitalization efforts.

Throughout the webinar, the participants emphasized the need for collaboration and learning from each other, as they strive to reclaim their cultural heritage and em-

power their communities. As Maria Pat Chulim, a Yucatec Mayan language champion noted, “It’s a matter of showing, not just speaking about it.” The participants acknowledged the challenges and obstacles that they face in their work, such as lack of resources and the difficulty of building Indigenous communities in urban environments.

However, they also expressed a sense of empowerment and solidarity in their shared struggle to preserve and celebrate their languages and cultures.

In conclusion, this workshop on language revitalization and technology provided a powerful platform for Indigenous communities from different parts of the world to come together and share their experiences and strategies for

The background of the entire page is a light blue color. Overlaid on this background is a large, stylized graphic of an eagle, likely representing a Native American tribe. The eagle is depicted in a dark blue or black color, with its wings spread wide. The feathers of the wings and tail are represented by a series of interconnected lines and dots, giving it a circuit-like or digital appearance. The eagle's head is turned to the right, and its beak is pointed. The overall design is modern and tech-oriented, blending traditional Native American symbolism with contemporary digital aesthetics.

preserving their cultural heritage. While the challenges they face may be daunting, the participants demonstrated a deep commitment and passion for their work, as well as a willingness to learn from each other and collaborate to achieve their shared goals.

grassroot activists and organizations represent local efforts that are at the forefront of this vital work, and their efforts to revitalize Indigenous languages and cultures serve as an inspiration and a beacon of hope for all those who share in their vision.

As the Eagle and Condor prophecy reminds us, the reunification of Indigenous peoples of the North and South is not just a prediction, but a call to action for all those who seek to preserve and celebrate the richness and diversity of Indigenous cultures. This gathering of many great

