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## Revitalizing Endangered Heritage: Community Mentoring for Local Language Preservation and Indigenous Knowledge Documentation in Remote Madagascar

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### ABSTRACT

This community service project documents a two-year mentoring initiative aimed at preserving the Mikea language and indigenous knowledge systems in southwestern Madagascar's remote Mikea Forest region. The Mikea people, one of Madagascar's most isolated communities, face accelerating linguistic and cultural erosion due to environmental pressures and external influences. Our collaborative approach engaged 43 community elders and 87 youth participants in systematic documentation of traditional ecological knowledge, medicinal practices, and oral histories while developing bilingual educational materials. Utilizing participatory methodology, the project created audio-visual archives, illustrated lexicons, and intergenerational knowledge transfer programs. Results demonstrate significant improvements in youth language proficiency and cultural identity, with 78 percent of participants showing measurable language skill enhancement. The initiative established sustainable community-

led structures for ongoing preservation efforts, demonstrating how external facilitation combined with community agency can address cultural heritage endangerment in marginalized populations.

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## INTRODUCTION

Language extinction represents one of humanity's most critical yet underrecognized crises, with linguists estimating that approximately half of the world's 7,000 languages will disappear by century's end if current trends continue. Indigenous and minority languages face particularly acute threats, especially in least developed countries where economic pressures, educational policies favoring dominant languages, and environmental degradation combine to accelerate cultural erosion. According to UNESCO (2019), a language disappears every two weeks, taking with it irreplaceable knowledge systems, worldviews, and cultural practices accumulated over millennia. These losses extend beyond linguistic diversity to encompass traditional ecological knowledge, medicinal practices, agricultural techniques, and social structures that have sustained communities through generations. The Mikea people of southwestern Madagascar exemplify this crisis, with their unique hunter-gatherer culture and distinctive language facing existential threats from deforestation, agricultural expansion, and integration pressures.

Madagascar's extraordinary biodiversity extends to its linguistic landscape, with numerous regional languages and dialects reflecting the island's complex settlement history and geographical diversity. The Mikea language, spoken by approximately 1,200 remaining forest-dwelling communities, represents a particularly endangered linguistic heritage. Crystal (2014) emphasizes that language endangerment disproportionately affects small, isolated populations whose economic marginalization and geographical remoteness make them vulnerable to assimilation pressures. The Mikea have historically maintained semi-nomadic lifestyles in the spiny forest region, developing sophisticated ecological knowledge enabling survival in one of Earth's most challenging environments. However, recent decades have witnessed accelerating settlement, with many Mikea adopting sedentary agriculture and abandoning traditional practices. Younger generations increasingly speak only Malagasy, the national language, while elders observe traditional knowledge disappearing with each passing generation.

The relationship between language preservation and indigenous knowledge conservation has received growing scholarly attention, with researchers recognizing that linguistic diversity and biocultural diversity are inextricably linked. Traditional ecological knowledge encoded in indigenous languages encompasses detailed understanding of local ecosystems, species relationships, seasonal patterns, and sustainable resource management practices developed through centuries of intimate environmental interaction. According to Maffi (2005), indigenous languages contain specialized vocabularies and conceptual frameworks for understanding local

environments that disappear when languages are lost, representing irretrievable losses for both cultural heritage and environmental conservation. The Mikea language, for instance, contains over 300 plant names with specific ecological and medicinal information that have no equivalents in Malagasy or French, Madagascar's official languages. This specialized knowledge proves increasingly relevant as climate change and environmental degradation demand diverse approaches to sustainable resource management.

Language revitalization efforts worldwide demonstrate that community-driven approaches produce more sustainable outcomes than external preservation initiatives (Muhsyanur, Suharti, et al., 2022). Top-down documentation projects that extract knowledge without empowering communities to maintain their languages often create archives that communities cannot access or utilize. Hinton and Hale (2001) argue that successful language revitalization requires community ownership, intergenerational transmission, and creation of domains where endangered languages remain relevant to contemporary life. This participatory approach recognizes that languages exist as living communication systems rather than static artifacts, requiring active use in meaningful contexts to remain vital. Effective interventions therefore emphasize creating opportunities for language practice, developing educational materials reflecting community priorities, and supporting community-led initiatives rather than imposing external preservation agendas.

Indigenous knowledge systems encompass far more than discrete facts about plants, animals, or ecological processes, representing instead holistic worldviews integrating spiritual, social, and practical dimensions (Muhsyanur, 2023). Traditional Mikea knowledge includes sophisticated hunting and gathering techniques, seasonal calendars governing resource use, medicinal plant preparation methods, navigation skills, and social practices maintaining community cohesion. Berkes (2018) emphasizes that indigenous knowledge constitutes adaptive management systems continuously refined through observation and experience over generations, offering insights valuable for contemporary sustainability challenges. However, this knowledge remains largely oral, transmitted through apprenticeship relationships and ceremonial contexts that modernization processes disrupt. Documentation efforts must therefore capture not merely factual information but also the contextual frameworks and transmission practices that give indigenous knowledge meaning and utility.

The concept of intergenerational knowledge transmission provides crucial theoretical grounding for understanding cultural continuity and change in indigenous communities (Muhsyanur, 2024). Traditional societies typically transmit knowledge through immersive participation where children learn by observing and practicing alongside elders in authentic contexts. According to Rogoff (2003), this apprenticeship model differs fundamentally from formal schooling approaches, emphasizing learning through legitimate peripheral participation in community activities. However, contemporary pressures including formal education requirements, economic changes necessitating wage labor, and environmental

degradation limiting traditional activities have disrupted these transmission pathways. Youth spend less time with knowledge-holding elders, while traditional activities become economically unviable or practically impossible due to resource depletion. Effective preservation initiatives must therefore create new contexts for intergenerational interaction while addressing structural barriers preventing traditional knowledge transmission.

This community service initiative emerged from consultations with Mikea elders expressing profound concern about cultural loss and requesting assistance in transmitting knowledge to younger generations increasingly disconnected from traditional lifeways. Rather than external researchers extracting knowledge for archival purposes, the project adopted a mentoring model where university team members facilitated community-led documentation and transmission processes. Our approach emphasized building community capacity for ongoing preservation efforts while creating resources supporting language maintenance and knowledge transmission. This article documents the methodology, outcomes, and lessons learned from this two-year initiative, contributing to broader understanding of effective approaches for supporting endangered language communities in least developed country contexts.

## **METHOD**

This community service project employed participatory action research methodology conducted over 24 months from August 2022 through July 2024 in five Mikea communities in the Andranomavo region of southwestern Madagascar. The research design integrated ethnographic methods, collaborative documentation processes, and intergenerational mentoring programs to simultaneously document endangered knowledge while strengthening community transmission capacity. According to Reason and Bradbury (2008) and (Muhsyanur, Larisu, et al., 2022), action research in indigenous contexts requires researchers to position themselves as facilitators rather than experts, supporting community-defined goals through collaborative inquiry processes (Muhsyanur et al., 2021). Our approach centered community agency throughout project design, implementation, and evaluation phases, with elders maintaining authority over what knowledge could be shared, how it should be documented, and who could access resulting materials. Initial project planning involved three months of community consultation establishing priorities, protocols, and participation structures ensuring cultural appropriateness and community benefit.

Participant recruitment employed purposive sampling identifying knowledge holders recognized by communities as custodians of traditional knowledge, including 43 elders aged 55-82 years with expertise in specific domains such as medicinal plants, hunting techniques, forest navigation, or oral histories. Youth participants aged 12-25 years were recruited through community meetings and school visits, ultimately engaging 87 individuals representing approximately 40 percent of this age cohort across participating communities. Documentation

activities utilized multiple methods appropriate to different knowledge types and participant preferences. Audio recordings captured oral histories, traditional songs, and linguistic data for language analysis, while video documentation recorded practical activities such as medicinal plant preparation, tool making, and navigation techniques requiring visual demonstration. Photography supported botanical specimen documentation linking Mikea plant names with scientific identifications. According to Thieberger (2004), multimedia documentation proves essential for endangered languages, capturing not merely lexical information but also contextual usage, pronunciation, and cultural practices surrounding language use. Our documentation prioritized quality over quantity, ensuring proper metadata, community review, and appropriate storage rather than maximizing volume of recorded material.

Intergenerational mentoring formed the project's core intervention, with structured programs creating regular opportunities for elders and youth to interact around traditional knowledge domains. Weekly forest expeditions brought together small groups of youth with elder mentors who demonstrated plant identification, traditional harvesting techniques, and sustainable resource management practices. Monthly workshop sessions focused on specific topics such as medicinal plant preparation, traditional navigation, or oral history documentation, with elders teaching and youth practicing under guidance. Language instruction occurred both incidentally during practical activities and through dedicated sessions developing literacy in Mikea language using orthography collaboratively developed with community input. These mentoring activities simultaneously served documentation and transmission purposes, with youth participants gaining knowledge while contributing to project documentation through note-taking, photography, and interview assistance. The mentoring model also addressed economic barriers to participation by providing modest stipends compensating elders for their time while ensuring youth participation did not conflict with income-generating activities or schooling.

Educational material development constituted another major project component, creating resources supporting continued language use and knowledge transmission beyond the project period. Community members collaboratively produced an illustrated Mikea-Malagasy-French lexicon containing 1,847 entries with phonetic transcriptions, example sentences, and illustrations or photographs where appropriate. The lexicon prioritized culturally significant vocabulary including plant and animal names, ecological terms, and cultural concepts without direct translations. Bilingual children's storybooks based on traditional oral narratives provided age-appropriate reading materials in Mikea language, addressing the complete absence of children's literature in this endangered language. According to Grenoble and Whaley (2006), creating functional literacy resources constitutes a crucial component of language revitalization, providing domains for language use beyond oral communication while demonstrating language vitality and contemporary relevance. Educational materials underwent

extensive community review ensuring accuracy, cultural appropriateness, and accessibility before finalization.

Data collection for evaluating project impacts employed mixed methods including pre- and post-intervention language proficiency assessments, knowledge tests, surveys measuring attitudes and practices, and qualitative interviews exploring perceived impacts. Language proficiency assessments utilized standardized protocols adapted from UNESCO language vitality assessment frameworks, measuring youth participants' receptive and productive abilities in Mikea language across domains including basic conversation, ecological vocabulary, and cultural concepts. Knowledge assessments evaluated participants' understanding of documented traditional knowledge in domains such as medicinal plants, traditional navigation, and cultural practices. Surveys administered to both participants and broader community members examined language use patterns, attitudes toward cultural preservation, and perceived project impacts. Focus group discussions and individual interviews provided deeper exploration of participants' experiences and perceived changes in community dynamics regarding language and knowledge transmission. All research activities received approval from the University of Antananarivo Ethics Committee and followed protocols developed collaboratively with community leaders ensuring cultural appropriateness and informed consent.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The community mentoring initiative produced substantial outcomes across linguistic, cultural, and social domains while revealing important insights regarding sustainable approaches to language preservation and indigenous knowledge conservation in resource-limited contexts. Comprehensive documentation created an archive containing 187 hours of audio recordings, 94 hours of video footage, 3,421 photographs, and detailed field notes providing unprecedented record of Mikea language and traditional knowledge. More importantly, the mentoring process itself strengthened intergenerational relationships and created ongoing transmission structures with potential for sustaining preservation efforts beyond external facilitation. Community response exceeded initial expectations, with participation remaining consistently high throughout the project period and communities expressing strong ownership over project outcomes and direction.

### **Language Revitalization and Youth Proficiency Development**

Language proficiency assessments demonstrated significant improvements in youth participants' Mikea language abilities across all measured domains. Pre-intervention assessments revealed that 89 percent of youth participants under age 18 possessed only basic receptive abilities in Mikea, understanding simple household conversation but lacking productive fluency or knowledge of specialized vocabulary. Post-intervention assessments showed that 78 percent of participants achieved measurable proficiency improvements, with 34 percent demonstrating

functional conversational ability and 44 percent showing intermediate receptive skills with emerging productive capabilities. These improvements proved most pronounced in ecological and cultural vocabulary domains directly addressed through mentoring activities, with youth participants learning an average of 287 Mikea terms for plants, animals, and ecological features. According to Fishman (2001), language revitalization requires creating new speakers among younger generations rather than merely documenting language with elderly speakers, making youth proficiency development the most critical indicator of preservation success.

The mentoring approach proved particularly effective for language transmission by embedding language learning within meaningful cultural activities rather than treating language as abstract academic subject. Youth participants reported greater motivation to learn Mikea when language instruction occurred during forest expeditions or traditional practice demonstrations where language use had immediate practical relevance. One 16-year-old participant explained that learning plant names in Mikea while actually collecting and preparing plants with her grandmother felt completely different from memorizing vocabulary lists, noting "the words stick in my mind because I see and touch the plants while learning." This experiential approach aligns with indigenous pedagogical traditions emphasizing learning through participation. Hinton (2013) documents that language revitalization programs integrating language with cultural activities demonstrate superior outcomes compared to classroom-based instruction, as learners acquire language through authentic communication rather than artificial exercises.

Intergenerational language dynamics within participating families showed notable shifts, with several households reporting increased Mikea language use after youth participants began practicing newly acquired language skills. Parents and grandparents expressed surprise and pleasure when youth initiated conversations in Mikea or asked about proper terms for objects and practices. This reversal of typical language shift patterns, where youth adoption increases language status and use, represents a crucial development. Previously, many elders had ceased speaking Mikea with younger family members because youth responded in Malagasy, leading to pragmatic shifts toward the dominant language. Youth proficiency development created new opportunities for Mikea language use within families, potentially strengthening language transmission in domestic domains. However, participants also noted challenges including limited contexts for language use beyond specific cultural domains, lack of Mikea-speaking peers outside project activities, and absence of Mikea in educational settings that consume much of youth time and attention.

Orthography development and literacy instruction introduced new dimensions to language preservation while raising important questions about written language impacts on oral traditions. The collaboratively developed Mikea orthography utilized French-based conventions familiar to community members through Malagasy literacy while adapting to Mikea phonology's specific requirements.

Literacy instruction enabled youth participants to write in Mikea, creating new possibilities for language documentation and use through text messaging, note-taking, and creative writing. Several participants composed original poems and stories in written Mikea, forms of linguistic creativity previously impossible. However, elder participants expressed mixed feelings about literacy, with some welcoming written Mikea as strengthening language preservation while others worried that writing might diminish oral tradition importance or crystallize language in ways preventing natural evolution. Woodbury (2011) notes such tensions frequently emerge in language documentation projects, requiring negotiation between preservation goals and respecting communities' relationships with their languages.

### **Indigenous Knowledge Documentation and Transmission**

Traditional ecological knowledge documentation produced comprehensive records across multiple domains while revealing the sophistication and contemporary relevance of Mikea knowledge systems. Medicinal plant knowledge represented the most extensively documented domain, with elder participants identifying 214 plant species used for treating 68 distinct health conditions ranging from common ailments like diarrhea and skin infections to complex conditions including diabetes and respiratory diseases. Each plant entry included Mikea name, botanical identification where possible, preparation methods, administration protocols, and contraindications or precautions. This documentation revealed systematic experimentation and observation underlying Mikea medicinal knowledge rather than random trial and error, with elders explaining how they distinguish effective treatments through careful observation of patient responses over time. According to Vandebroek and Balick (2012), indigenous medicinal knowledge represents valuable biocultural heritage deserving preservation both for cultural reasons and potential contributions to pharmaceutical development, though emphasizing that documentation must respect community intellectual property rights.

Seasonal ecological calendars documented through elder interviews and participant observation revealed intricate understanding of forest phenology and resource availability guiding traditional resource management. Mikea elders described 13 named seasons defined not by weather patterns alone but by complex combinations of fruiting patterns, animal behavior, honey availability, and astronomical observations. These calendars governed when and where to harvest specific resources, integrating practical knowledge with spiritual beliefs about proper relationships with forest entities. One elder explained that certain tubers could only be harvested during specific moon phases to avoid angering forest spirits, a practice that elder botanists noted coincides with periods when tubers reach peak nutritional content before entering dormancy. This convergence between spiritual protocols and ecological optimization exemplifies how indigenous knowledge systems integrate practical and cosmological dimensions. Berkes (2018) emphasizes

that indigenous knowledge constitutes adaptive management systems refined over generations, offering insights for contemporary sustainability challenges including climate change adaptation.

Traditional navigation techniques documented through forest expeditions revealed remarkable spatial knowledge and orientation abilities using subtle environmental cues. Mikea elders navigate dense forest without trails using combinations of tree species distributions, subtle topographic variations, wind patterns, sun positions, and memory of landmark trees or rock formations. Youth participants initially struggled to perceive the environmental features elders used for navigation, highlighting how such perceptual abilities develop through sustained immersion in forest environments. After repeated expeditions with elder mentors, several youth participants developed basic navigation capabilities, though all acknowledged requiring years of practice to achieve elder expertise. This documentation challenged assumptions that satellite-based navigation technology renders traditional wayfinding obsolete, as Mikea navigation techniques function in dense canopy conditions where GPS signals prove unreliable while providing ecological knowledge GPS cannot offer.

Knowledge transmission assessment revealed concerning gaps between what elders knew and what younger generations were learning, even among project participants. Table 1 presents comparative data on traditional knowledge retention across age cohorts, demonstrating accelerating knowledge erosion with each generation. While project participants showed improved knowledge compared to non-participants in their age cohorts, substantial gaps persisted especially in complex domains requiring years of apprenticeship such as medicinal plant preparation or advanced hunting techniques. These findings underscore that while documentation projects preserve knowledge in archives, they cannot fully substitute for the years of immersive learning characterizing traditional transmission. However, elders expressed satisfaction that project documentation ensured knowledge survival even if youth lack immediate practical expertise, providing resources that future generations could consult if desired.

**Table 1.** Traditional Knowledge Retention Across Generations (N=156)

Knowledge Domain	Elders (55+ years) % Proficient	Middle-aged (35-54 years) % Proficient	Youth Participants (12-25 years) % Proficient	Youth Non-participants (12-25 years) % Proficient
Plant identification (100+ species)	95	72	41	12
Medicinal plant preparation	88	58	23	6
Traditional hunting techniques	91	64	28	9
Forest navigation	93	69	31	8

Knowledge Domain	Elders (55+ years) % Proficient	Middle-aged (35-54 years) % Proficient	Youth Participants (12-25 years) % Proficient	Youth Non-participants (12-25 years) % Proficient
without trails				
Seasonal calendar knowledge	89	71	48	15
Oral history recitation	84	52	34	11
Traditional craft skills	86	67	45	18
Sacred site locations/protocols	90	61	19	4

Note. Proficiency defined as demonstrating functional knowledge sufficient for independent practice or teaching others. Data collected through practical assessments and elder evaluation of participant abilities.

### **Community Empowerment and Sustainable Structures**

Perhaps the most significant project outcome involved establishing community-led structures for ongoing preservation efforts, demonstrating capacity for sustainable cultural maintenance beyond external facilitation. Participating communities formed cultural committees with elected leadership responsible for coordinating preservation activities, managing project materials, and making decisions about knowledge sharing and documentation priorities. These committees organized monthly intergenerational activities continuing the mentoring model, secured modest local government funding for preservation programs, and began negotiating with regional education authorities about incorporating Mikea language instruction in local schools. This institutional development represents crucial progress toward self-sustaining preservation efforts. According to McCarty and Nicholas (2014), community capacity development constitutes the most critical outcome for language revitalization projects, as external support inevitably proves temporary while communities must sustain preservation efforts over decades.

Youth participants demonstrated remarkable agency and initiative, with several assuming leadership roles in preservation efforts and developing innovative approaches to cultural promotion. A group of youth participants created social media accounts sharing Mikea cultural content including videos demonstrating traditional practices, plant identification guides, and brief language lessons reaching audiences beyond their immediate communities. While elders initially expressed concern about sharing traditional knowledge through public platforms, youth participants explained how they carefully selected appropriate content while protecting sacred or sensitive knowledge. This youth-led digital advocacy increased

Mikea cultural visibility while challenging stereotypes portraying Mikea as primitive or backward. Several youth participants reported that project involvement strengthened their cultural identity and pride, countering shame they previously felt about their heritage. One 19-year-old participant explained that learning to see Mikea knowledge through outsiders' appreciation helped him recognize its value rather than viewing it as inferior to formal education.

Broader community attitudes toward cultural preservation shifted notably during the project period, with surveys indicating increased valuing of traditional knowledge and language. Pre-intervention surveys found that 64 percent of community members under 40 considered traditional knowledge irrelevant to contemporary life, while post-intervention surveys showed this declining to 31 percent. Similarly, the proportion of parents expressing desire for their children to learn Mikea language increased from 47 percent to 79 percent. Focus group discussions suggested that visible documentation activities and youth participation convinced community members that traditional knowledge possessed genuine value rather than representing merely nostalgic attachment to disappearing ways of life. These attitudinal shifts prove crucial for preservation sustainability, as communities must actively value cultural heritage to sustain transmission efforts. However, participants also noted that economic pressures and practical life demands still constrained traditional practice regardless of attitudes, highlighting how cultural preservation requires addressing structural barriers beyond awareness.

The project also generated unexpected economic opportunities related to cultural heritage, with several participants developing cultural tourism programs and traditional craft production for external markets. Elder participants partnered with youth who possessed language and technological skills to develop guided forest walks explaining traditional ecological knowledge to visiting tourists. Traditional basket weaving and wood carving found new markets through youth participants' online marketing efforts, providing elders with income while maintaining traditional skills. While some anthropologists express concern that commodifying culture transforms authentic practices into performances, participating elders expressed satisfaction that cultural knowledge could provide livelihoods reducing pressures to abandon traditions. These developments illustrate how preservation efforts can align with economic sustainability rather than requiring communities to choose between cultural maintenance and economic survival.

## **CONCLUSION**

This community mentoring initiative demonstrates that culturally appropriate, community-led approaches can successfully address language endangerment and indigenous knowledge erosion even in resource-limited contexts characterized by extreme marginalization and environmental pressures. The two-year project with Mikea communities in remote southwestern Madagascar produced substantial documentation of endangered linguistic and cultural heritage while strengthening

intergenerational transmission structures and building community capacity for sustained preservation efforts. Critical success factors included prioritizing community agency throughout project design and implementation, creating meaningful contexts for language use and knowledge transmission rather than abstract documentation, supporting youth leadership and innovation while respecting elder authority, and addressing economic barriers enabling participation without conflicting with livelihood requirements.

The project establishes a replicable model for supporting endangered language communities, emphasizing facilitation rather than extraction and capacity building rather than dependency creation. However, findings also underscore that preservation initiatives cannot fully address underlying structural pressures driving language shift and cultural erosion, including economic marginalization, environmental degradation, educational policies privileging dominant languages, and broader development patterns that devalue indigenous knowledge. Sustainable preservation therefore requires complementary efforts addressing these structural dimensions while supporting community-led cultural maintenance. Future research should examine long-term preservation outcomes as communities maintain programs independently, investigate strategies for integrating indigenous languages into formal education systems, and explore how cultural preservation efforts can contribute to broader development goals including environmental conservation, social cohesion, and cultural diversity maintenance that benefit both indigenous communities and humanity collectively.

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