

**GRASS-ROOTS LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION VIA SOCIAL MEDIA:
"[LETS LEARN SHIYEYI](#)" on [Facebook](#)**

By

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The challenge of language endangerment is increasingly becoming prominent in the awareness of the linguistics community. The goal of those who are engaged in Bible translation work is to invest in the production of Scripture that will be used; language death in the course of a translation effort nullifies the potential for use of the end product of translation. Much of the response to language endangerment has been focused on language documentation by academics. The results of this documentation, however, are often primarily available to those in academia as the contexts in which these languages are spoken are usually remote areas with limited access to publications. Even when language materials are produced locally, the logistical difficulty in encouraging their use on a broad scale may limit their impact on language shift, particularly in the case of the diaspora of young adults of the language community for educational and/or employment purposes. While the language may be "preserved" in an documentary sense, it may not be preserved in its most critical sense: the knowledge base of the language community. Developments in pervasive communication via the internet present novel opportunities for language communities to access and promote the use of their own language. This case study highlights the effort of Wayeyi youth, both in Botswana and abroad, to encourage the use of the Shiyeyi language by their peers using the Facebook social media platform.

Conference Sub-theme:

Engagement and Impact

What follows are the notes from the audio-visual version of my presentation as given at the 2nd Department of African Languages and Literature International Conference at the University of Botswana in Gaborone, Botswana, on July 14, 2012. The case study covers the first year of the group's existence. A few updates have been added as footnotes, such as the current group membership numbers (page 6) and group-type change (page 5). I have included a few salient images from the projected presentation. Feel free to contact me with any questions or comments.

[Eshinee Veith](#)

August 23, 2013

Good morning, everyone; my name is Eshinee Veith. I am originally from Canada but am now living in Maun, on the edge of the Okavango Delta here in Botswana. I work for the [Bible Society of Botswana](#) in the [Wayeyi Bible Translation Project](#) as a project coordinator and exegete for the Greek New Testament, which is the source text for our translation work into the [Shiyeyi](#) language. My supporting organization is [Lutheran Bible Translators](#), based in the United States. Lutheran Bible Translators (LBT) has been involved in translation work and language development in Botswana for almost 20 years, in partnership with local organizations. While LBT has been involved in the development of the Shiyeyi language for many years, I was first introduced to the Shiyeyi language project when I arrived in Botswana in 2007. In the years since then, I was assigned to work on developing the translation project in partnership with the Bible Society and interested members of the Wayeyi community. While my purpose here in Botswana is not to conduct academic research, part of my work is to learn Shiyeyi in order to become a more effective exegete for the Shiyeyi translation team. In the course of this language learning process, I found a Shiyeyi language Facebook group during an internet search for published materials on Shiyeyi. During my involvement with this group over the past year, it occurred to me that the story of this group was something worth sharing with others, especially with those who are concerned with heritage languages in need of revitalization. Therefore, I put together a closer look at this internet-based language group on an internet-based social network which has, in the short time since its inception, already begun to have an impact in the real-world language community.

It seems to be a inherent characteristic of the internet to give rise to micro-cultures that are geographically disparate yet intensely focused in scope of interest. One of the great challenges in language maintenance today is the displacement of potential heritage language speakers from the geographical region where this language is primarily spoken, both through education systems and employment patterns. The internet and websites such as Facebook can help to overcome part of the geographical displacement challenge faced by the speakers of languages that are in need of revitalization by creating a virtual space for people's birth culture to be reinforced as an internet micro-culture.

Shiyeyi is a Zone R Bantu language spoken in the Caprivi region of Namibia and of Ngamiland in Botswana.¹² The language has an estimated 57,000 speakers combined.³ While considered a stable language in the Caprivi region, it has been classified as an endangered language. Language documentation and revitalization work has been taking place here in Botswana. Over past decades, language revitalization efforts have been primarily instigated by organizations, both expatriate, such as Lutheran Bible Translators,

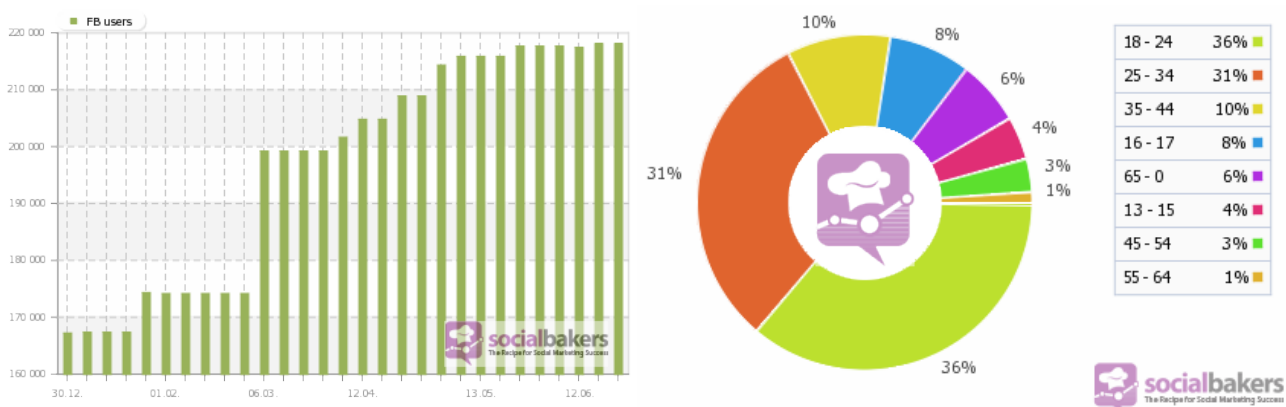
¹ Maho, Jouni. 2003. *A classification of the Bantu languages: An update of Guthrie's referential system*. The Bantu languages, ed. by Derek Nurse & Gérard Philippson, 639-51. London: Routledge.

² Westphal, Ernst O.J. 1963. *The linguistic prehistory of southern Africa: Bush, Kwadi, Hottentot, and Bantu linguistic relationships*. Africa 33(4). 237-65.

³ Lukusa, Stephen T.M. 2009. *Shiyeyi-English dictionary*. xv-xvi. Muenchen: LINCOM.

and indigenous, such as the Kamanakao Association. The project that I am going to share with you today is a notable exception to this pattern. It is a fully grassroots project which is both timely in its use of modern communication methods and natural in its community-driven content and direction. This project is the “[Lets Learn Shiyeyi](#)” group on Facebook.

Facebook is a social networking site which was founded in 2004. Their stated mission is to “make the world more open and connected.”⁴ Since 2004, they have grown to more than 900 million users, 80% of these users being located outside of North America.



The number of Facebook users in Botswana as of June 2012 is 223,640, about 11% of the total population. 56,340 joined Facebook within the last 6 months, a growth rate of more than 33%. 79% of Facebook users are under the age of 35, or 176,675 youth.⁵

This is significant in that the recent survey work conducted by Hasselbring, Segatlhe and Munch indicates that most speakers who use Shiyeyi actively are over age 40.⁶ This would suggest that those Wayeyi in the under 35 age group are the ones who would be most in need of language revitalization support. Using the population projection data given by Virginia Sebekedi in her 2008 report, the youth of Botswana population in the age range of 15-34 should be more than 740,000 by this time.⁷ If that is the case, the ratio of Facebook users in the under 35 years of age category could be as high as 1 in 4, or 25% of the youth population. If the current user growth of 33% per every 6 months were to continue among this population, all of the youth of this age group would be Facebook users within the next 3 years. I share this information so that the potential impact of a Facebook language revitalization movement may be more clearly imagined.

⁴ <http://newsroom.fb.com/content/default.aspx?NewsAreaId=22>

⁵ <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/>

⁶ Hasselbring, Sue, Segatlhe, Thabiso, and Munch, Julie. 2000. *A sociolinguistic survey of the languages of Botswana*. 54.

⁷ Sebekedi, Virginia. 2008. *Population projections for Botswana: 2001-2031*. http://www.ub.bw/ip/documents/2008_Population%20Projections.pdf

Facebook encourages connection by providing a platform for users to share information about themselves, in the form of both text and visual media. The profile is most commonly modified through the posting of status updates. Users post short statements or comments, and upload photos or videos. These photos and other postings will then show up in folders on the profile for friends to view. Users can modify privacy settings to limit who has access to what information.



The News Feed forms the hub of a user's Facebook experience. This consists of the status updates or profile activities of your Facebook friends. For example, if someone updates their profile photo, that can show up in the News Feed of their friends, as can be seen here. At the bottom of this photo there are two words in blue: Like and Comment. A Like is the basic form of affirmation on Facebook. If something makes you smile, laugh, think, or agree with the content of the posting, you click Like. Comments are the other form of interaction with postings. They can be made by clicking on the blue word Comment beneath the posting or by typing directly into the dialogue box beneath the posting, as you will see in further screenshots. This communication system of Post - Like - Comment is the foundation of Facebook interaction.

The part of Facebook that is relevant to our topic today is the Groups platform. The group that I am focusing on is the LETS LEARN SHIYEYI group. Groups are described on the Facebook site as “private spaces within Facebook for people to discuss common interests.”⁸ The three types of groups that can be created are Secret, in which only members can see who is in the group and what is being posted, Closed, which means that anyone can see who is in the group but only members can see posts, and Open or public, which means that anyone can see the group, who's in it, and what members post. The LETS LEARN SHIYEYI group is an Open group.⁹

A Group page looks similar to a News Feed page; both have a posting entry form at the top of the page where a variety of types of postings are possible. I will be focusing mostly on the written posts as those are the most commonly made postings in this group. Most of the activity on LLS consists of writing something. What is written then appears on the Group webpage or wall, identifiable by the profile photo and name of the author of the posting. This example post has been Liked by 2 people. People can then comment on the post.

The LETS LEARN SHIYEYI group on Facebook was started by [Gopolang Otukiseng Maropamabi Sakuze](#). Sakuze, a Mueyeyi from Seronga, is a graduate from the University of Botswana, having studied in the fields of psychology, human geography, and archives and records management. He works in the Department of Out of School Education and Training as a records officer.

When I asked him about the genesis of the group, he told me of his childhood in Seronga, when most people there still primarily spoke Shiyeyi. In his late teens, he noticed that his generation communicated poorly in Shiyeyi. He himself found it difficult to articulate and pronounce Shiyeyi so he usually spoke in Setswana, even though he understood Shiyeyi. In 2009, he developed an idea to use information technology as a language revival tool. One day, the idea of using Facebook came to mind. He thought that there were a lot of young people eager to learn the language, if only there were a platform for others to teach it. He said, “LLS group was meant to [be] a platform where young people could learn Shiyeyi with the help of other members of the group who are more conversant and articulate in Shiyeyi than others. Since most people use Facebook, I thought if people visit the group as often as they use it for other reasons they would contribute a word or share a Shiyeyi phrase, sentence, [or] riddle that could accelerate Shiyeyi acquisition and learning among eager learners. Simple posts like ‘Nitishire wakwanga; Narasharaa wa'Mbiya’ and many others that are posted on daily basis attract comments asking their meanings or as a response by those who understand their meanings. In the same process some of our group members are able to learn basic Shiyeyi.”¹⁰

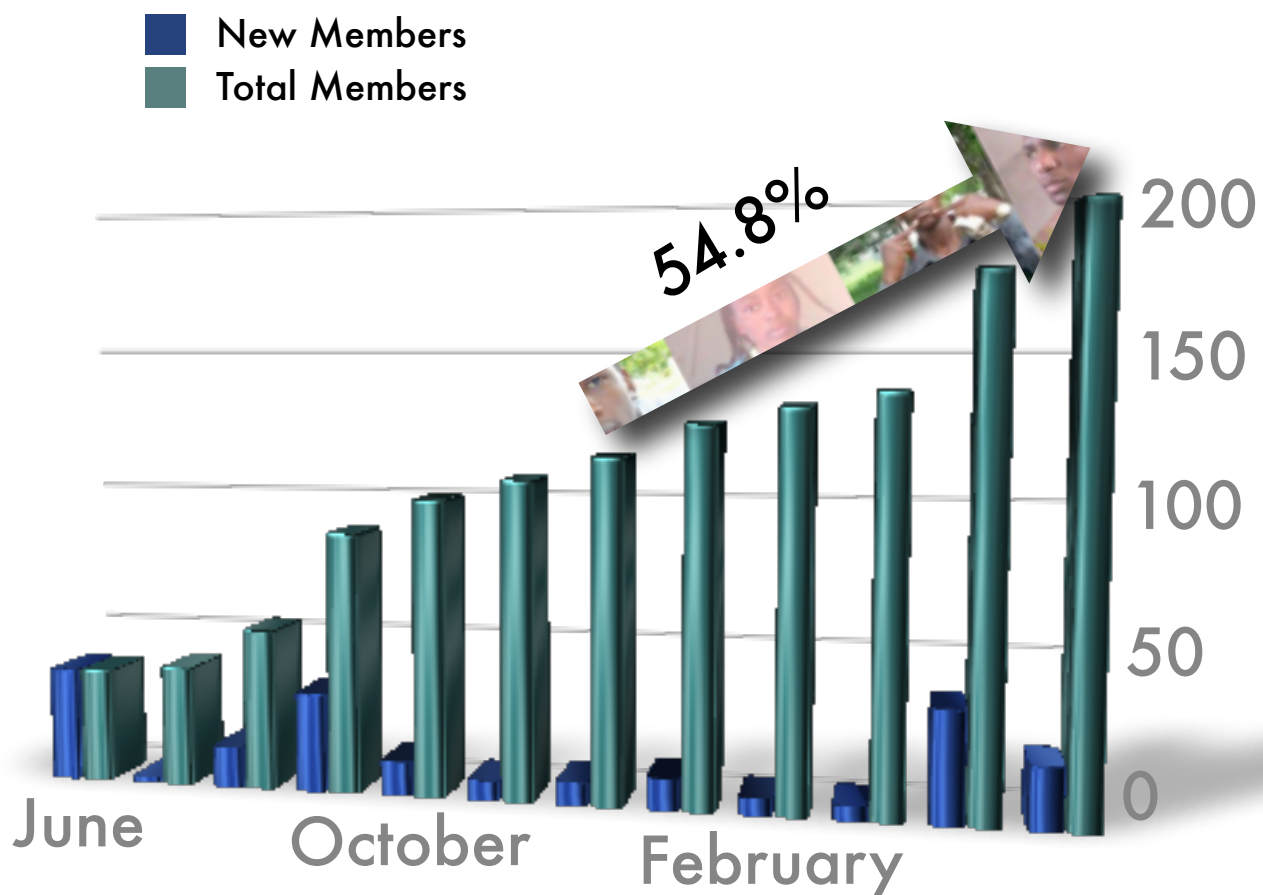
⁸ <http://newsroom.fb.com/content/default.aspx?NewsArealid=19>

⁹ The group was changed to a Closed group in late 2012.

¹⁰ Sakuze, Gopolang. 2012. email communication, June 22, 2012.

When I asked how the group has met his expectations, he said, “Currently, I feel LLS has really grown with 215 members who are both learners and teachers of Shiyeyi. Some members have really contributed beyond my initial imagination and expectation.”

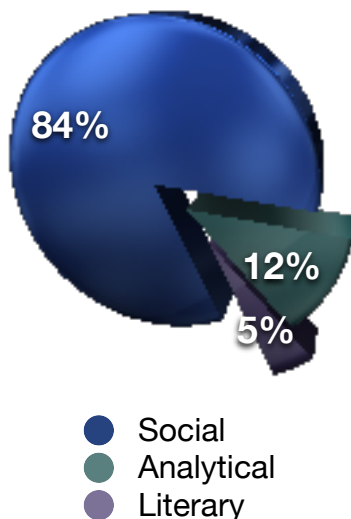
The group was created by Sakuze on June 8, 2011. He began by adding 9 of his Facebook friends and clearly stating his intent for the group: “No English... Setswana... let’s communicate in Shiyeyi and help each other learn the language.” He followed with his first Shiyeyi content, “Nitishire wa mbiya, wakwanga... ko qho molduwo moku me.” (Greetings friends, my people... I don’t have a problem.) Throughout the first day, he added 6 more friends. In the week that followed, he added 5 more. In that same week, however, people whom he had added began to add their own friends. By July 12, 2011, scarcely more than a month later, the group had 55 members. By September 6, there were 81 members. On November 16, there were 129 members. Just over a year after the group was started, as of June 21, 2012, the membership stood at 216.¹¹



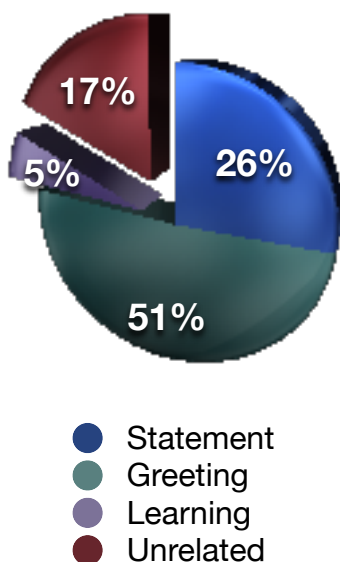
This chart shows the growth in members of the LLS group over the past year. I would like to highlight that the growth in the past 6 months was from 108 members in November to 197

¹¹ On August 25, 2013, the membership was 538; the group doubled in size over a 14 month period.

by the end of May. That's an increase of 54.8% which is impressive, if you compare that to the growth rate of Facebook users as a whole in the same time period (33.7%).



The posting content of LLS could be broadly categorized as either social, analytical or literary. The postings that I am categorizing as social are those which have the characteristics of oral conversations. Read aloud, they can be imagined to be happening in real time, similar to standard SMS or text messaging communications. The analytical postings are those that involve the translatability of Shiyeyi. The posters are either requesting or offering translations or definitions, both out of and into Shiyeyi. Literary postings include any Shiyeyi language materials that could be considered to be artistic or cultural creations that are faithfully replicated in form or concept. For example, a poem, in which the words are generally repeated exactly as they were composed by the original author, would be a creation replicated in form. A joke, in which the essential plot elements and punchline remain the same or similar but the telling varies slightly by post author, would be a creation that is replicated in concept, though not necessarily identical in form to telling of the original joke.



Most postings on LLS can be classified as social. In keeping with the learning theme of the group, these greetings are primarily in Shiyeyi, though there are occasionally greetings posted in Setswana or English as well. These Shiyeyi postings usually begin as a greeting, sometimes followed by a statement about one's own well-being or a hope for the well-being of others. These account for half of all social postings. Responses by fellow group members can vary from a simple clicking of the Like button to a returned greeting or even an extended conversation, such as might occur if the members were to meet on the street. The remainder of the Shiyeyi social postings are statements or questions. These account for a further quarter of social postings and are more like continuations of a conversation than the beginnings of one. While this is not a reflection of standard oral communication practices, it is a pattern that reflects standard Facebook communication norms. From my experience with my

friends on Facebook, both from Botswana and elsewhere, the most common text-based postings on their profile page are statements designed to generate either Likes or Comments by those reading the posts. The last quarter of social postings happen in languages other than Shiyeyi, namely English and Setswana. A small number of these are related to learning Shiyeyi in some way. Many of these include expressions of delight in the existence of the group or dismay at the personal challenges faced in trying to learn Shiyeyi.

Weblinks to external Shiyeyi language resources, such as the Shiyeyi dictionary produced by Stephen Lukusa, or invitations to in-person language and culture learning opportunities, such as the Kamanakao workshops and festivals, are also included in this category. The remainder of the social postings in other languages are unrelated to the explicit goal of this group, which is to learn Shiyeyi. They include such diverse topics as the importance of keeping the Sabbath, football scores, and looking for rides to Maun. These were 50 posts total in the last 6 months and it's worth noting that, while this group has not had any kind of official monitoring for relevant content, nearly half of these unrelated posts (23) were unofficially converted to learning opportunities as the group members commenting on these posts did so in Shiyeyi.

The postings that I call analytical are ones where a poster is either Requesting a translation or definition or Providing them under their own initiative. This is a very small fraction of the overall posting content, only 12%. Of these types of postings, about half are related to translations of complete phrases, sentences, or even larger discourse units, such as the Lord's Prayer, pictured below. The other half are simple definitions of single words.



These postings can also be categorized by the goal of the poster. 3 out of 4 of these postings are requesting a translation or definition. The remainder are providing unsolicited translations or definitions.

The literary postings in this category include Riddles, Proverbs, Jokes, Poems, Songs, and Stories. The excerpt shown here is the punchline of a joke. There are only a few of each of these types, about 5% of all postings altogether, but they are worth mentioning as they indicate a specific focus of value for some members of the LLS group.

I asked Sakuze what involvement in the language development work of the Kamananakao Association he had prior to starting the LLS group and if he had access to the books or cds they had published, or take part in any of their workshops. He responded, “I have never been involved in Kamanakao although I harboured an ambition of being part of it. I read some of the booklets they wrote and to some extent their publications contributed the idea that led to the establishment of LLS... I also met Kelebogile Shomana a member of Kamanakao who inspired me with his rich Shiyeyi vocabulary sometime in 2006.”¹²

I would add to this that his grandfather who raised him was an active member of Kamanakao and a significant contributor to their Shiyeyi language development efforts. So, while the LLS group is not a program of the more structured language development efforts of Kamanakao, one can definitely see how Shiyeyi fruit has been borne in his life and, now, is being re-seeded into the lives of other Wayeyi youth. It has deep roots in both the efforts of Kamanakao as an organization and of the personal commitment of individual Kamanakao members. But this development of Shiyeyi is not limited to the work of Kamanakao bearing fruit in the LLS group. This past year saw a joint effort arise between the two groups, LLS and Kamanakao. This is the ongoing Bird Book project, which was begun in the LLS group and further refined and supported by the Kamanakao Shiyeyi writers group. It began as an interest of one of the group members, [Kenosi Nkape](#).

Nkape works at the Department of Wildlife and National Parks. He has studied at both the University of Botswana and University of the Witwatersrand, in the fields of ecology, biology, and tourism. He was added to the LLS group by his sister Oteng Nkape on December 20, 2011. He immediately became a regular contributor and post responder, often correcting and encouraging others. His earliest posts were related to his field of interest - the natural world - and he both shared and asked for information on various animals in Shiyeyi. One of his popular posts in January was related to the unyanda or bubblefish; this posting had 18 responses, with the total interaction involving 6 group members. On January 18, he added a picture of a bird, the cwambaldya (saddle-billed stork). On January 27, he found about the upcoming writers workshop which would begin on April 4 (organized by Kamanakao) through an event posting in the LLS group. He continued over the next few months to contribute Shiyeyi material to the group, including proverbs, a riddle, and poetry. On April 1, he specifically requested that group members contribute something in Shiyeyi to bring to the writers workshop: a list of bird names in Shiyeyi with translation into Setswana and English. This request had 23 responses, providing the names of 24 birds in all 3 languages. Kenosi then tracked down pictures of the birds on the internet, compiled a draft of a bird book, and brought a printout of this to the workshop for editing by the Kamanakao writers.

¹² Sakuze, Gopolang. 2012. email communication, June 22, 2012.

While the workshop was originally scheduled for the translation of a numeracy textbook into Shiyeyi, the editing of Kenosi's bird document was incorporated into the schedule on the last day of the workshop. The bird names were checked against the photos and their spelling adjusted to conform to the standardized orthography. It is worth noting that of the 21 participants at this workshop, 7 were LLS members, some of these attending a Kamanakao organized Shiyeyi language workshop for the first time.

After the workshop, I found some photos of the birds on the Flickr photo-sharing website. I reposted these in [an album on the LLS group](#), along with links to the original photographers' pictures. This phase of the bird project was completed on April 18, 2011. Since then, group members have been viewing and interacting with the photos that were posted. Furthermore, the interest in birds in general seems to have been awakened in the group. There was a conversation in June about a type of bird that is rarely seen anymore; the post generated 18 responses. Of those 18 responses, 16 were written using only Shiyeyi. A possible further step would be to publish this result in a physical booklet and/or as a pdf, which could be made available in the files section of the group.

The LLS group is not the only Facebook group that represents the languages of Botswana. Other languages actively in use there include Ikalanga (the largest group is [Ikalanga Social Group](#), with 4087 members), Thimbukushu (its largest group is [Mbukushu Online](#), with 375 members), Otjiherero and the Mbanderu language ([OVITJITUA MO TJUANA TJO MBANDERU/HERERO](#) "activities within the Mbanderu/Herero culture"¹³ - 151 members), Shekgalagari ("[Let's speak Shekgalagari](#)" in 2 dialects¹⁴ - 27 members), and Birwa ([BA BIRWA](#), 21 members).

While the long-term effectiveness of such strategies is yet to be seen and the limitations of text-based language learning are self-evident, I hope that this presentation may inspire the speakers and promoters of other heritage languages to make use of internet-based opportunities as they would any tool; as needed and in conjunction with other tools for the restoration of a solid language foundation for future generations. Thank you for your attention. Ni kare naqa.¹⁵

¹³ Translation from [Wasa Wasanapi Kapii](#), personal communication on June 28, 2012.

¹⁴ Translation from [Rich Rudowske](#), personal communication on June 28, 2012.

¹⁵ "May you stay well" in Shiyeyi.