

The Seneca language is a member of the Iroquoian language family, spoken primarily in the western region of New York, specifically on and around the Allegany and Cattaraugus reservations. According to multiple sources, it's a critically endangered language, with around 100 or fewer fluent speakers (Borgia 2010; Golla et al. 2008; UNESCO 2010). In this profile, I will discuss the notable cultural and religious practices of the tribe, the language itself and its characterization, the history of oppression, and the countermeasures taken against it in modern times. In doing so, I intend to make the case that the Seneca language is not only able to be revived but is worthy of it due to the rich history and culture it holds, which have been sequestered for centuries by colonialism.

Arthur C. Parker, nephew of Ely S. Parker, thus a Seneca himself, went on to write extensively about the culture during the 20th century (Parker 1919). Specifically, his compilation volume, *Seneca Myths and Folk Tales*, is of prime importance as it displays the basic ideas and particular stories in the ample Seneca mythology. For example, he details some of the foundations of the myths as follows: "All nature is conscious... All living creatures have souls... Dreams are experiences of the soul as it leaves the body during sleep..." and so on (Parker 1923). These premises are a good way of extrapolating the social and ethical aspects of Seneca philosophy even now; that is, beliefs such as nature's being conscious lead to certain interactions between humans and nature that wouldn't occur otherwise. Perhaps the Seneca people find themselves closer to nature than much of western thought does. If Parker hadn't recorded this comprehensive list of myths, we may have lost a large part of the culture simply due to the elders no longer passing down stories verbally to children, which we will find was largely caused by the coercion of settlers. Furthermore, the Seneca had a vast list of medicinal and cultural practices and rituals that may have been lost to time if not for anthropologists. William Fenton

tells us of a variety of societies within the Seneca who would wear various masks for different purposes, the False Face Society, associated with medicinal tobacco; the Husk Faces with agriculture; and the Long Nose meant for child rearing (Fenton 1937). These practices could reveal what may have been desired and undesired traits for the Seneca or possibly have been meant to connect them with their actions in nature. Parker, on the other hand, goes into detail on medicinal rituals in his *Secret Medicine Societies of the Seneca*. For example, he mentions the *Niganēga''a' oä'no'* (*The Little Water Company*) and the *Dewanindiiso'daik'ta'* (*The Pygmy Society*), detailing the ceremonies of the societies, the way they function, and the phrases they use in and out of ceremonies. Interestingly, in the Little Water Company, it's against the rules to “admit members having a quarrel unless they are willing to forgive and forget”, exemplifying the social aspects of these societies (Parker 1909). Additionally, it seems to be that the Seneca have, or at least had, several “communities of practice”, a concept examined by Ahearn, within their ranks—indicative of them due to the “mutual engagement” in these rituals, ceremonies, and social actions (Ahearn 2021).

The language itself, too, is a valuable resource for exploring the ways the Seneca interact with the world around them. Luckily, a lot of the morphology, grammar, and definition of the language has been written down; extensive work to record these has been done by linguistic experts, which is important for revitalization efforts. Notably, a common greeting in Seneca, “Nya:wēh sgē:nö”, translates to “I am thankful you are well”, exhibiting the emphasis on gratitude, health, and well-being in the language (Delgado 2023). A passage in *ONONDOWA'GA:' GAWE:NO'*, a dictionary done by a Seneca elder, exhibits some of the character of the language. She describes the evolution of the language, examining the ways in which time was viewed through natural occurrences; for example, she tells us that white corn

was timed to plant when the Juneberry trees blossomed. However, this soon began to change when settlers started coming to the western hemisphere. She describes that the language evolved to incorporate “clock”, which would replace the use of the sun to determine the time of day, and some Seneca had begun learning English (Bardeau 2002).

The colonization and destruction of the Seneca culture go back to the first French explorers, typically missionaries, who had the goal of “acculturating” and “improving” the Seneca people. Therefore, the mission was to civilize the Seneca through assimilation, primarily through language, which Fenton details from the journals of Asher Wright. This was done through the use of missionary schools. Here, Seneca children were forced to speak English and punished severely for speaking Seneca, which led parents to stop teaching their children Seneca (Fenton 1956; Bardeau 2002). This created an unwelcome, coerced evolution in the language, leaving it now unrecognizable to those who spoke it before. Despite this fact, there have been many revitalization efforts made, especially in recent times, where children and adults alike are being taught Seneca in schools and at home by those who are fluent and using the works of the linguists who’ve recorded the language; thereby reclaiming their cultures and identities that had been stolen from them (Evans 2022). Additionally, there’re a number of websites meant to assist in learning the Seneca language and culture. This exhibits the viability of revitalizing the language; why it *should* be saved is made plain by the preceding discussion of the culture that would be lost at the loss of Seneca. The only ethical quandary remaining, would be whether the people of the language agree to the preservation of their language. Yet this is manifest as all of the current efforts have largely originated within the Seneca people. As such, I believe it is clear that, given the importance of the history and culture and the efforts already being made, Seneca can be and is worthy of being revitalized.

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