



SUR LE BOUT DE LA LANGUE

ON THE TIP OF THE TONGUE

A film by VINCENT BONNAY

THE PROJECT

“AwA’ahdah”, “iishuh”, “ilah qe’xleh”. These forgotten words are coming from the other side of the world, and almost lost all of their meaning, even to their own people.

In Alaska, the Eyak language died in 2008.

Is there a life after death? The Eyak people want to believe so. The last native speaker, Marie Smith Jones, had a dream before she died: someone from far away would come to help her people. Two years later, hope, personified as Guillaume Leduey, a 21 years old Frenchman, arrived by ferry. Passionate about native languages since his early teenage years, he set foot in Alaska, the land of a people whom he had learned the language, alone, in his hometown of Le Havre, France.

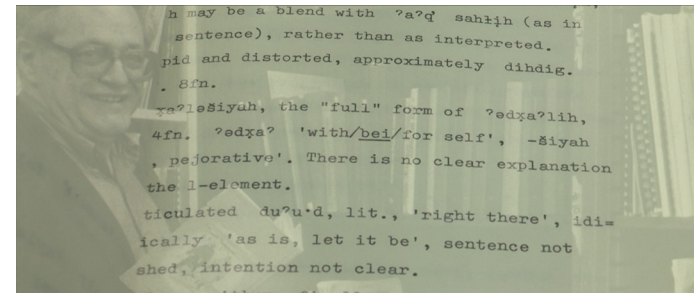
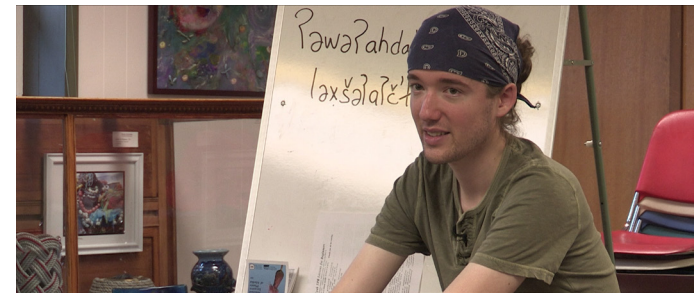
For decades, native people were oppressed by white men domination, assimilation policies and violence. This led to fear and shame and soon, native languages were forgotten.

Today, Native Americans want to take back what is theirs, including their languages, and proudly claim who they are. There is no will of independence in this process, only the need to exist and try to get to know themselves better, to rekindle a culture that was deeply buried in their memories, so they can start to reconnect with their roots.

Standing on their side, Guillaume is the living proof that everything is possible: if he has done it, so can they. Today, while living in France, he works full time for the University of Fairbanks, Alaska. Linguist and professor Michael Krauss found in Guillaume his worthy successor, meant to document, and more importantly, pass on the Eyak language to the descendants of these people.

Every year, Guillaume goes to Cordova, Alaska, the ancestral land of the Eyaks where descendants gather to learn their language. All this thanks to Guillaume, the most Alaskan of the French people, and to his improbable yet priceless knowledge.

In Cordova, they live a few days in a chalet, at the foot of Mont Eyak and share their hopes, their wounds and their common will to revitalize their language during their much needed annual cultural camp.



STATEMENT OF INTENT

In the world, a language dies every two weeks. According to the UNESCO, half of the 6,000 to 7,000 spoken languages in the world will disappear at the end of this century. Aware of this threat, the General Assembly of the UN adopted a resolution proclaiming 2019 the “International Year of Indigenous Language”.

In spite of this first step, the battle is slow to produce results: many words lack for this fight. But still, the Eyak battle is a warning sign: cultural pluralism faces danger and the disappearance of one of the smallest Alaskan people is a tragedy that no one should ignore.

Why the fight? Because a language that vanishes is a part of humanity that goes away. A price the Eyaks are not ready to pay and a threat not to underestimate. Is this a lost battle? Isn't evolution a natural process? Is it possible to still speak an indigenous language in a country where English is well established as the official language? But above all, how did a young Frenchman become, in a few years, the best hope for a people in quest of his identity?

These are the many issues I tried to address in this documentary. To do so, I gave voice to the people concerned, the ones who decided to fight in order to save the Eyak language and their traditions. I immersed myself into their fights and their fears in order to have a better understanding of the issues they are facing. Beyond the disappearance of a language, culture and tradition fade away, leading indigenous people to become withdrawn. Guillaume is a triggering factor in resurrecting the language, but he is also the starting point of a new page of Eyak history. A history I am trying to explore and narrate in this film, even though it is just at its beginnings.

When Guillaume started to learn the Eyak language, he had no idea how important this decision would become. The first time I got on a plane to meet with him in Alaska, I could not imagine how big this project would turn to be. I spent six years of my life filming this incredible story, I took many trips to Alaska, making thousands of miles by plane, car, ferry and even kayak! Their battles became also mine, year after year, I was there, even trying to learn a few words of Eyak. With or without my camera, I shared these moments between laughs, tears and hard working times. People you will see in this film have become, for some of them, my friends, my family from the other end of the world and thanks to that bond, I had a better understanding of what they were going through. This film had to exist, this story needed to be told before it was too late, before the words were to remain... on the tip of their tongue.



WHO ARE WE?

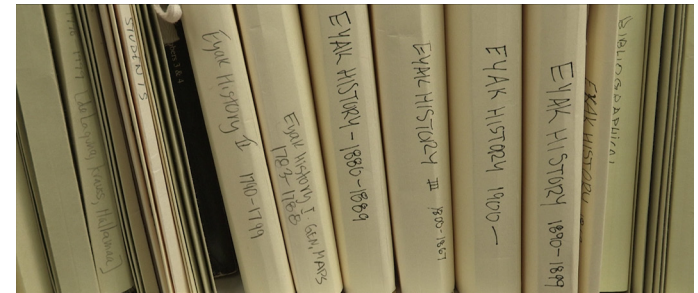
VINCENT BONNAY is a journalist, chief operator and filmmaker. After obtaining his diploma and working as a freelancer in Paris, his appetite for new horizons brought him to the United States where he settled in New York for three years. While there, he worked for many different French and international channels. After going back to Paris in 2017, he decided to move to Canada in October 2018.

At 13 though, Vincent had another dream in mind: with a real passion for the ocean, he pictured himself as a lighthouse keeper, a job on the verge of disappearance, mysterious and almost unattainable. When he turned 18, he managed to become a part time lighthouse keeper in the oldest and most beautiful lighthouse in France: Cordouan. In spite of this incredible experience, he chose to turn to his other passion: telling stories with the help of powerful images.

When **GUILLAUME LEDUEY** was 13 years old, he discovered the Eyak people and language by reading an online encyclopedia. He saw that there was only one speaker left and a crazy idea crossed his mind at that moment: he would learn the language of this far away Alaskan people because he refuses to see it disappear.

So began his almost impossible mission: learning an incredibly complex language with the help of only a few books. When he learned, a few years later, that the last native speaker, Marie Smith Jones, had just died, bringing with her the knowledge of the Eyak language, he got in touch with a journalist living in Alaska, Laura Bliss Spaan. She is the one who recorded a few interviews between Marie Smith Jones and Michael Krauss, an American linguist. He asked for this material to help him learn Eyak, that was now considered to be “dead”. Laura, who felt inspired and impressed by his knowledge, decided, alongside Dr Michael Krauss, to invite him to Alaska.

Eight years later, Guillaume Leduey is considered to be one of the two people on earth who have the knowledge of the Eyak language (the other one being Dr Michael Krauss). He was offered a scholarship from the University of Fairbanks to write an Eyak to English dictionary...from his home in Le Havre, France. He writes eight hours a day, with passion, trying to handle the time difference between France and Alaska. This enormous work was first started by Michael Krauss and now counts more than 3,500 pages.



In 2012, both Vincent and Guillaume are grown ups. When the first discovered the work of the later, he tried to get in touch with him, and they instantaneously got along together. They met two months later in Cordova, Alaska. A sincere friendship blossomed between the journalist and the young self-taught linguist. They share their desire to tell the Eyak story.

Every summer, Vincent and Guillaume meet at the Eyak Camp, where for a few days Guillaume teaches the language to the descendants of the Eyaks and Vincent captures this incredible journey through the lenses of his camera, in order to share it with the world.

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