

Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America (www.ailla.org)

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Abstract

The goal of ailla (Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America) is to archive forms of discourse, especially literature, from Native Latin America, for scholarly and research as well as pedagogical purposes. The archive includes stories, myths, chants, and songs that are now extinct or in great danger of becoming extinct. The aim is to make these materials widely acceptable, while at the same time protecting indigenous and researcher's intellectual property rights. The archive has been able to obtain materials of good quality from extinct or almost extinct languages, as well as from robust languages, while at the same time learning of materials that have been lost or damaged. The history of ailla is presented, along with a discussion of the oral literature of the Kuna Indians of Panama, which provided an inspiration for creating the archive.

Background

The idea for an archive of the oral literatures of the indigenous languages of Latin America emerged in the 1980s and 1990s with several conferences held at the University of Texas and subsequent books dealing with Native American discourse and literature (Sherzer & Woodbury, 1987; Sherzer & Urban, 1986; Sammons & Sherzer, 2000). The participants in these events discussed ways to archive Native American literature and make it available and accessible to a broad audience.

With these discussions and experiences in mind, a group of individuals at the University of Texas decided several years ago to create a web based archive of forms of discourse from the indigenous languages of Latin America. The primary goal of the archive is to preserve recordings of discourse in endangered languages of Latin America. We are committed to supporting activities that improve the understanding and appreciation of these languages, and to promote their survival. Since this archive emerged in part out of my own experience with the Kuna Indians of Panama, I will spend some time discussing Kuna oral literature, its relation to Kuna culture and society.

Kuna Perspective

My research among the Kuna Indians of Panama is focused on the recording, transcribing, translation, and analysis of forms of Kuna discourse, with a focus on Kuna oral literature. As a background and to illustrate concretely my discussion here I will present some

moments in the use of the Kuna language that I have observed during the thirty years I have been carrying out research among the Kuna. While I did not always realize it when I observed and participated in these moments, I have now come to realize that they were critical moments, for their ethnographic, linguistic, and sometimes political significance. They represent for me a kind of personal discourse-centered ethnography of speaking of the Kuna. But at the same time they clearly reflect and indeed represent the central role of oral literature in Kuna life, the changes this discourse and this life is undergoing, and especially the increasing endangerment of many forms and aspects of it.

1. In 1970, while I was living on the island of Mulatuppu on the eastern end of Kuna Yala, one of the chiefs of Mulatuppu, Mastaletat, came to my house and asked me if I wanted to accompany him to the nearby island of Tupwala, where he would attend an evening gathering (political meeting) and perform a traditional chant. I jumped at the opportunity. We crossed over in a motor boat in the setting sun and were greeted by Tupwala officials who served us a plate of avocado and rice as we sat outside in front of the gathering house. Then as evening began we entered the gathering house. Mastaletat sat down in a hammock in the center of the house, next to a very elderly chief in the next hammock. This was Yapilikinya, then first cacique of all Kuna. I was told to sit in a nearby hammock, also in the center of the place, a hammock usually reserved for chiefs. Yapilikinya and Mastaletat chatted as gradually men and women entered.

After a while Mastaletat began to tell a Kuna traditional story. It was the lobster story. The lobster was called not by his ordinary name, *tulup*, but by his traditional, ritual name, *olopiskaliler*. The audience loved the telling and I did too, but was sorry I did not have my tape recorder with me. I had recently arrived in Kuna Yala and even though I was easily granted permission and indeed invited to tape record this kind of event in Mulatuppu, I was cautious about taking my tape recorder to the gathering house of the traditional island of Tupwala. I told this to my good friend Mastaletat later and he promised that one day he would tell me the story of *olopiskaliler*, and I could tape it. After the telling of the story, Mastaletat chanted a traditional chant for the gathered audience and then we went back by motor boat to Mulatuppu. As it turns out Mastaletat never did tell me the story of *olopiskaliler*. The

occasion never presented itself and he is no longer living. And I have never found anyone else who knows it. It seems as though it disappeared along with Mastaletat. But fortunately, Mastaletat's voice still exists. He was an extremely knowledgeable and generous person and wanted to share his knowledge with others. I recorded several of his chants and speeches. In particular, that same year, I recorded the extremely long *inna sopet ikar* "the way of making chicha," which he performed in order to ensure that the chicha, prepared under his direction for girls' puberty rites, fermented properly.

As far as I know I am the only person to have recorded this very important Kuna chant. In spite of the fact that Yapilikinya was a well known Kuna leader no tape recording of his voice, his speeches, or his chants, exists to my knowledge. He died many years ago. I now realize that what happened on that ordinary evening was a cultural, expressive, and indeed political act of identity for the Kuna. It was an expression and affirmation, through the Kuna language and especially through its discourse of who the Kuna are and what makes them special. And, also of political, as well as historical significance, that critical moment of Kuna life is now lost forever. We do not have and will never have a record of it.

2. Also in 1970, on the island of Mulatuppu, one night a man who was working in the mainland jungle was bitten by a snake. He was brought back to the island and for several days a traditional cure was performed for him. In addition to the use of medicinal plants, this cure involved special chants and a community wide interdiction on making noise. Outboard motors were silenced, people walked barefoot so that their rubber thongs did not make flapping noises, and the usually talkative Kuna kept their voices in low tones. At night a curfew was in place and in the evening gathering men made speeches in a whisper.

It turns out that the traditional curing was not successful. After a few days the family of the stricken man took him at night to the island of Ailikanti by motor boat to be treated in the missionary run hospital. This western treatment was successful and the man returned, fully cured, to Mulatuppu. Ironically, during this same time a well known traditional curing specialist from Mulatuppu, Olowiktinappi, had been given funds from the village to travel to the Bayano region of the Darien in order to study snake bite curing practices. On his return to Mulatuppu he gave a gathering house speech reporting on his trip. On this occasion I made a tape recording of this artistically performed, valuable ethnographic document which describes in detail Kuna learning and teaching curing practices (Sherzer, 1990: chapter 5). Mulatuppu then

had a snake bite curing specialist ready in case another person was bitten by a snake. We have here a playing out of the clash between two world views and sets of practices – western and Kuna. While what is at stake is curing, the issue is also political. In the end both sides won.

3. Again in 1970, on the occasion of a local holiday, many people in Mulatuppu spent the day in the gathering house instead of working in the jungle. In addition to talking and joking, traditional stories were told. Chief Muristo Pérez told the entire cycle of the Agouti story, and I recorded it (Sherzer, 1990: chapter 7). While this story can be told for humorous purposes it can also be chanted and used metaphorically as part of political discourse. These events, gatherings for talk, joking, story telling, and political discourse, are Kuna acts of identity and thus political as well as expressive.

4. Again in 1970, and also on the occasion of an all day gathering in which much story telling was going on, Chief's Spokesman Pedro Arias told *muu ipya kwakwenna*, the story of the one-eyed woman. This story, which I recorded is fascinating in that somehow it became constructed out of a combination of European folktales, including, most obviously, Hansel and Gretel, and completely rendered into a Kuna social and cultural and performance context, to such a degree that no Kuna I have ever talked to about it ever thought that it was anything but Kuna, an expression of Kuna verbal art and identity, and of great interest to them. While some Kuna I have spoken with remember this story as having been told to them by their parents, there is no published version of it and as far as I know I am the only one to have ever recorded it. I have played it in seminars with Kuna in Panama City who find it very enjoyable. It is now archived on ailla and can be listened to and read there.

5. In 1971, on the occasion of the visit of a chief from another island, Chief Mastayans of Mulatuppu told *kaa kwento*, the hot pepper story, to the visitor, in the gathering house, in front of an audience. This is a complicated story, with possible European and Caribbean origins, and apparently a set of contradictory messages, couched in metaphor. I recorded this story (Sherzer 1990: chapter 6). The messages of the story, concerning what to do with babies born out of wedlock, or with birth defects, or albinos, under changing Kuna ideologies, under the influence of the outside, are highly political.

6. In 1970, Kuna visitors to Mulatuppu from the island of Niatuppu, where a close friend and colleague of mine, James Howe, was working, came to see me to tell me the bad news that he was very sick. I quickly readied myself to go see him by boat when they

informed me that they were only joking. The event became more elaborate when the Niatuppu visitors returned to their village and reported the whole episode in the form of a Kuna trickster tale transforming me and Howe into two animal protagonists. Howe recorded this telling (Howe & Sherzer, 1986). Through this event I came to realize the significance of Kuna joking and trickster behavior as a way of dealing with outsiders. Kuna living in Panama City have reported to me that this important feature of Kuna verbal and social life, and identity, is disappearing in the urban environment.

Role of Literature in Kuna Life

These moments in Kuna life that I have observed and studied from an ethnographic and (socio)linguistic perspective also have relevance with regard to the situation of the Kuna in Panama today, in general, and with regard to language in particular. There is not a tradition of killing Indians and attempting to eliminate their language and culture (But see Howe, 1998). The Kuna have survived remarkably well in Panama and continue to do so today. They are a presence in Panama City that cannot be missed and they basically control their territory in Kuna Yala. At the same time, between the Kuna and the nation state of Panama, as well as the modern world more generally, there is a clash of cultures, mentalities, and political economies.

The Kuna language is not endangered in the sense that many American Indian languages, in both North and South America, are endangered. There are probably many more than 50,000 speakers of Kuna and this number is on the increase. And there are speakers of all ages, which is a good sign of the vitality of a language. But this situation can change in the space of a single generation, as we have recently seen with the Navajo. And the pressure on Kuna, to speak Spanish instead of Kuna is intense, especially in Panama City, where the migration, often permanent, in the last decade has been increasing greatly. My sense is that the use of the Kuna language is a central defining feature of Kuna identity. This is surely a major factor in its maintenance and survival. Were this to change, what would separate the Kuna from other ethnic groups in Panama City? This is a question I am sure the Kuna themselves wonder about.

But at the same time, there is more to a language than being able to speak it, even fluently. Languages are not monolithic entities. All languages have more than one style, and are used in more than one speech event. The Kuna language is particularly rich and complex in its diversity and variation in vocabulary, verbal styles (which include morphology and syntax), and discourse genres and patterns. In addition to everyday, colloquial Kuna, there is a style used in curing rituals, another in

political oratory, another in the chanting of myths and history in the gathering house, another in puberty rites, and another in the telling of stories. There are many myths and stories, about animals, plants, and humans. And there are many curing chants, for headaches, high fever, mental derangement, and difficulty in childbirth. And all of this is considered to be verbally artistic, i.e. literature (Sherzer, 1983, 1990).

While the Kuna language itself might be vibrant, and in fact, especially in Panama City, new styles and words are emerging (De Gerdes, 1995), the traditional styles and forms of discourse, as well as vocabulary in such areas as ecology, which figures prominently in this discourse, are clearly in danger. Several of the moments I described above were actual instances of the disappearance of significant forms of Kuna discourse. And many Kuna, who view these styles and forms as important expressions of what it means to be Kuna, as well, especially in the case of curing chants, as being of importance in their lives, are concerned about this.

Archiving and Documenting Kuna Language and Discourse

Concerned with the danger of losing forever their own discourse, the myths, stories, and chants that are so much a part of Kuna tradition, various Kuna, individuals and groups, have become involved in trying to do something about it. I have often encountered Kuna who have tape recorded their fathers, grandfathers, or other relatives, sometimes to have a personal record of their voices and knowledge, sometimes in order to themselves learn a particular chant. Others have written down certain chants, in order to learn them. There are probably many such cases and unfortunately all too often the tapes and/or paper get lost or destroyed. This is of course doubly tragic, since the knowledge and/or myth or chant died first with the death of the elder who knew it and then again with the loss or destruction of the tape or paper. There is a saying widespread in indigenous America, which is apt here. It goes as follows: "*Cuando muere un indio se quema una biblioteca entera (or se pierde una página de literatura).*"

Other actions involving archiving and documentation are more organized. The *Congreso general de la cultura Kuna* and especially its research unit, *koskun kalu*, has been involved for several years in creating a library of published and unpublished works about the Kuna and in collecting tape recordings of myths, stories, and chants. They too, like all of us who do this work, must worry constantly about the preservation of materials and their protection from heat, humidity, fire, and theft. In the office of the *Congreso general de la cultura Kuna* there is a blackboard which has written on

it the list of Kuna therapeutic curing chants and in which villages there are still individuals who know them. The word therapeutic by the way has become a Kuna word, borrowed from scholars who have applied it to Kuna curing chants. There is great concern about the immanent disappearance of several of these, among them *nia ikar* (the way of the devil), which is very effective in curing individuals who are mentally deranged.

Another activity of *koskun kalu* and other Kuna intellectuals is the production of books, journals, and articles, often with political import and/or educational value, and in conjunction with Kuna artists and illustrators. Many of these draw on traditional chants, myths, and stories, but are rewritten and transformed by the author (Kungiler, 1997).

I have personally been involved in the archiving and documentation of Kuna language, culture, and discourse since 1970, becoming increasingly aware of the urgency as well as the political significance of this enterprise. My approach to language and culture is "discourse centered," which means that I record, transcribe, and translate myths, stories, chants, speeches, and conversations and make these the centerpiece of my ethnographic and linguistic investigations. This work takes several forms. There are the tape recordings, which I back up and keep in several places, and share with the Kuna performers and their families. The same goes for the transcriptions and translations, which are in notebooks, typescripts, computer disks, and publications.

Ten years ago, I became much more systematic about the archiving and documentation of my Kuna materials. I backed up all of my tape recordings on video cassette as well as several audio cassettes and sent the original recordings to Indiana University's Archives of Traditional Music, one of the leading centers for archiving and documentation of recorded materials. All of this is intended to create a permanent record of Kuna discourse, at least that subset of it that I have recorded.

I am also collaborating with various Kuna, including the artist Ologuagdi, in the preparation of bi and trilingual texts which will demonstrate the cultural and literary value and vitality of Kuna discourse and also be used in Kuna bilingual education programs. In addition to providing forms of discourse and actual texts that are otherwise no longer in practice, these recordings and texts contain information of particular value culturally and linguistically -- play languages and other forms of verbal play, ecological vocabulary no longer in active use, metaphorical and other forms of artistic language, and a variety of verbal styles.

Ailla

Ailla's goals are to archive forms of discourse, especially literature, from Native Latin America, for scholarly and research as well as pedagogical purposes. Materials include recordings as old as 50 years and recently created poetry. We aim to make these materials widely acceptable, while at the same time protecting indigenous and researcher's intellectual property rights. The archive has been able to obtain materials of good quality from extinct or almost extinct languages, as well as from robust languages, while at the same time learning of materials that have been lost or damaged. Our plans are to expand the archive to include contemporary as well as traditional literature, and literature of pedagogical value, such as children's stories and coloring books.

Although the project is quite technical, the material is easily accessible and user friendly. Anthropologists and linguists interested in indigenous languages are able to download the discourse forms, as well as the accompanying transcriptions and translations. Indigenous peoples concerned with the loss of forms of discourse will be to archive them as well as download them and hear them. The material is of great value to an understanding of the history, ecology, and anthropology of Latin America, as well as its linguistic features.

This project has generally been met with enthusiasm, by the Kuna, Maya, and other indigenous groups. At the same, there are issues of ethics, access, use, politics, and economics that must be attended to. Our goal is to maintain the archive as technologically sophisticated as is currently possible and at the same time as user friendly as possible, especially for people who might not have access to the latest technology. This is a crucial aspect of the political viewpoint of the organizers of the project. But this also means that magical, curing, and therapeutic chants, as well as potentially sensitive political discourse, from indigenous communities all over Latin America, will be easily accessible. Who should have access to this material? Only the original performers? The families of the performers? The children and grandchildren of the performers? Should access be controlled by tribal governments? By indigenous organizations such as the *Congreso general de la cultura Kuna* or *koskun kalu*? Is an ethics committee or an advisory committee, including representatives of indigenous communities, needed to decide such issues? And how can it be guaranteed that any financial gain from use of materials on the archive (which we doubt) be given to the performers or their families? More generally, who owns these materials, now and in the future? And finally, how do economics/class and gender relate to all this? These are all questions of

intellectual property rights and are deeply embedded in politics. As part of our project we have developed a system of graded access and control which takes into account all of these issues to the degree that is humanly possible.

I think it is important to realize that all of us who have made and continue to make recordings, transcriptions, and translations of indigenous Latin American discourse are faced with a very serious choice. It is now possible, with relatively inexpensive equipment, to make studio-quality recordings of naturally occurring discourse. It is also possible, with existing technology, to archive this material on the web and make it accessible to a broad audience and preserve it for as close to posterity as we now know how to do. Many individuals for many reasons, have not carefully archived this important and valuable material, and it is being lost. I cannot tell you how many people have told me of recordings they have lost or have allowed to become damaged or how many times I have seen shelves in offices full of tapes improperly and carelessly kept.

As time goes by, scholars as well as indigenous communities will regret more and more the loss of such materials and value those cases in which it was properly archived, preserved, and made available to others. While I would be the first to recognize that archiving such material involves ethical and political issues which must be carefully attended to, not to archive and preserve such material is also an ethical and political act which in many cases can never be undone.

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