

## The Pleasures and Pitfalls of a ‘Participatory’ Documentation Project: An Experience in Northwestern Amazonia

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This article adds a voice from Amazonia to the reflective discussion on documentation projects designed within a ‘participatory’ or ‘collaborative’ paradigm of language research. It offers a critical assessment of one such documentation project carried out from 2007-2011 with the Kotiria and Wa’ikhana (East Tukano) language communities, who live in the remote Vaupés basin of the northwest Amazon. It examines aspects of the four-year project that most approximated the participative ideals that inspired it, including community input throughout all phases of the project, a ‘team-based’ approach grounded in local partnerships, and efforts to establish a more equitable division of power and responsibility, as well as greater self-determination in the organization of documentation activities. It also points out some of the difficulties encountered along the way and raises questions related to expectations, unforeseen consequences, and sustainability, questions that still remain to be answered.

**1. INTRODUCTION.** In June, 2013, I had the extremely good fortune to be able to participate in the DOBES Conference *Language Documentation: Past – Present – Future*,<sup>1</sup> in which researchers involved in documentary efforts worldwide gathered to assess nearly a decade and a half of development in the field of documentary linguistics and to highlight new directions and questions for the upcoming phase in its evolution. Part of the conference was specifically devoted to presentations of researchers’ experiences, with panels representing broad geographic areas spotlighting a specific topic or aspect of language documentation in the region. I participated in the ‘Americas’ panel, which focused on documentation projects carried out within the ‘participatory’ or ‘community-based’ paradigm<sup>2</sup> which often have strong revitalization components.

Participatory projects are obviously not found exclusively in the Americas. More and more, language documentation projects around the world are attuned to the precepts of the

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Community-centered’ and ‘collaborative’ are other terms used to refer to the model, and for the sake of variety, I will employ them all interchangeably in this article, but should clarify that I do not use ‘collaborative’ in the sense found in Glenn (2009), which discusses interdisciplinary collaboration among researchers involved in a common project.

'empowerment model' of language research introduced in the early 1990s. This timing was rather fortuitous, as documentary linguistics was soon to make its appearance and provide fertile ground for implementation of community-centered language projects. The ideals of the participatory model, defined and discussed by numerous authors (Cameron et al. 1992; Grinevald 2003; Dwyer 2006; Yamada 2007; Czaykowska-Higgins 2009; Leonard & Haynes 2010; Austin 2010; Dobrin & Berson 2011; Rice 2011, to mention only a few) have increasingly permeated the area of linguistic fieldwork over the past two decades and are currently assumed by many researchers and funding agencies as the preferred guideline for language documentation efforts (but see Crippen & Robinson 2013 for a critical discussion of this assumption). Concrete experiences are rapidly accumulating worldwide, and reflective discussion related to those experiences can be found both in general resources on documentation (e.g. Gippert, Himmelmann, & Mosel 2006; Grenoble 2010; Austin & Sallabank 2011) and in numerous articles<sup>3</sup> in specialized journals such as *Language Documentation & Conservation* as well as *Language Documentation and Description* (edited by Peter Austin.)

The participatory paradigm and documentary linguistics are generally viewed as suited to each other in many ways. One point often raised is that it is much easier for community members to grasp and be mobilized by the basic empirical goal of documentary projects—to create representative, meaningful and lasting registers of linguistic and cultural practices and knowledge—than by the more esoteric, academically-oriented parallel objectives of language research.<sup>4</sup> Once this empirical objective is understood, envisioning practical applications for the materials gathered is only a short step further, and language communities rather quickly gain confidence in expressing their own desires and concerns, coming to 'own' the project as partners. The fact that equipment and tools used in documentation are becoming increasingly accessible and that documentary methodology is easily shared further facilitates community involvement in the execution of documentary activities.

From the researcher's perspective as well, when conditions for collaborative projects are appropriate,<sup>5</sup> projects with broad community participation can offer a number of advantages. Not least among these are the welcome opportunity such projects offer to fieldworkers seeking to expand on the classic Boasian model of documentation and who feel compelled to develop a new political and epistemological stance, who assume, as Czaykowska-Higgins puts it, that "doing research is not a neutral activity" (2009:34). The participatory paradigm presents us with the challenge of building long-term partnerships

<sup>3</sup> A number of which, but certainly not all, are cited in this paper. See Leonard & Haynes (2010) and Rice (2011) for more complete overviews of the literature.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the same observation holds true for non-linguists in general. Most people can identify with the need to preserve things like traditional narratives, a grandmother's description of life when she was a girl, or an expert's detailed explanation of how a cultural artifact is produced; it's much harder to get them revved up about the discovery of an uncommon grammatical category, a contrastive pitch contour, a pragmatically determined word order variation, or practically any of the countless other details of language that turn linguists on.

<sup>5</sup> There is certainly recognition in the literature that Western culture frames a number of the concepts central to the participatory paradigm, that the model may not always be suitable or feasible (Leonard & Haynes 2010:273), and that there is no 'single' or all-encompassing 'correct' way of accomplishing it (Rice 2011:202; Czaykowska-Higgins 2009:18). Crippen & Robinson (2013), on the other hand, discuss whether or not the model should be presumed to be the most inherently desirable.

'with' a language community—recognizing and respecting their rights, desires and needs, incorporating their modes of producing knowledge, and making sure that our research produces results that are relevant, useful, and will contribute to positive change<sup>6</sup>—and allows researchers to wear multiple hats, to be both language scientists and language *activists* in the 'Endangered Language Movement' that has been a mobilizing force for many. It moreover permits our research programs to focus not just on *task-fulfilling* goals but, more importantly, to fully embrace *relationship-building* as an essential component of our work (Dobrin 2005; Franchetto 2007, 2010; Florey 2008; Dobrin & Berson 2011). Finally, not to be forgotten are observations that this research model, which many view as 'politically and morally correct', has the potential to contribute to linguistic studies in unexpected ways and to produce data that is *better* in the sense of being richer and more complete, the final outcomes of such projects constituting a more faithful reflection of the language communities' expertise, needs, and desires for documentation—fruit enriched by empowerment and collective cultivation (see Rice 2011:191-198 for argumentation in this vein). In sum, collaborative research is a both an attractive and inspiring prospect, and where the model can be implemented, potentially represents a win-win deal for everyone involved.

The overview by Franchetto & Rice (this volume) shows that several of the original DOBES projects as well as many others receiving support through the *Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project* (HRELP/SOAS), the *National Science Foundation/ National Endowment for the Humanities Documenting Endangered Languages Program* (NSF/NEH-DEL), and the *Endangered Languages Foundation* (ELF), have been conducted in Brazil. As documentation efforts involving indigenous groups proliferate and language communities become more aware of their options and rights, it is increasingly the case in Brazil that communities themselves expect to play more active roles and have greater say-so in the design and implementation of research projects that have a documentary component. It is moreover significant that Brazil's pioneering *Documentation of Indigenous Languages and Cultures Program* (PRODOCLIN, Museu do Índio/FUNAI-RJ) places community involvement front and center, stating on its homepage that program efforts are underway in "105 villages [throughout Brazil] with the *participation and direct intervention* of the Indians, [representing] 39 different cultures and over 27 thousand indigenous people."<sup>7</sup> The program requires that all projects form indigenous research teams and offers training in documentary methods, use of equipment, annotation techniques, organization and management of recorded materials, elements of basic linguistic analysis and development of products for the community.

Of course, the nature of expectations of communities in regard to participation and the role of outside researcher-collaborators, as well as the practical aspects and conditions in which we conduct our projects reflect highly disparate contexts. Work with indigenous peoples in Brazil not only presents its own set of general particularities; there are also

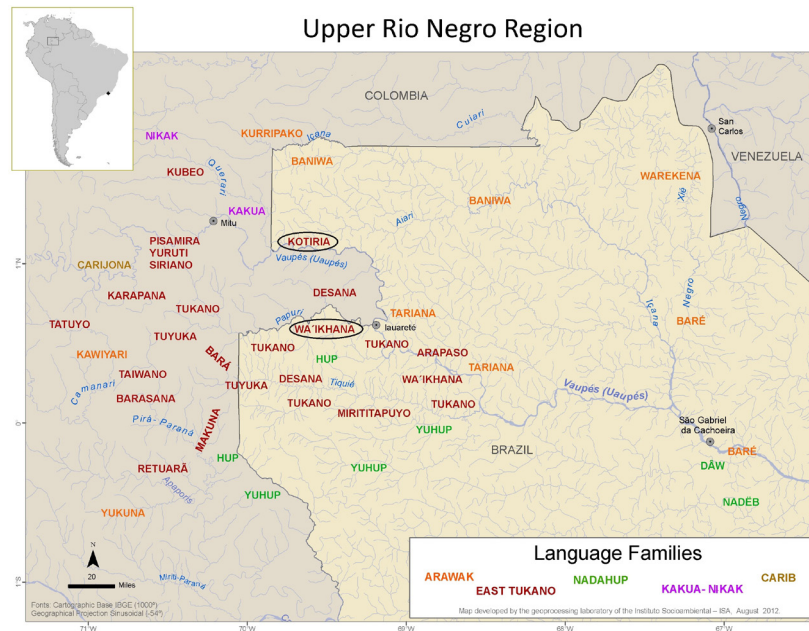
<sup>6</sup> Recognizing that long-term interaction will inevitably impact the community, I understand *positive* change in broad perspective as including 'return' to the community of tangible things such as archives or other materials that the community desires and deems useful, training and skills development among members of the community, as well as contributions to less tangible, but equally important efforts to increase the status and recognition of the language at local, regional, or national levels, and to encourage and validate speakers' initiatives, knowledge and progress.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://prodoc.museudoindio.gov.br> [accessed Jan 14, 2014, translation and emphasis mine]

significant regional contrasts and differences between indigenous groups even within the same region. It also varies in important ways from similar work with indigenous peoples in other geographic regions, particularly North America, which provided the contextual backdrop for a good part of the literature defining the precepts of community-based documentation. We should always keep in mind that ideals and guidelines appropriate and possible in one setting may be at odds with conditions and cultural values in another, as Dobrin (e.g. 2005) eloquently reminds us.

To date, there have been few published articles discussing participatory language documentation projects in Brazil, with the notable exception of Franchetto (2007, 2010) and Becquelin et al. (2008), thoughtful reflections on their experiences with the Kuikuro and the Trumai, respectively, in two of the original DOBES projects. My goal in this article is to contribute another voice to the discussion, offering a critical assessment of a participatory documentation project carried out from 2007 to 2011 with the Kotiria (Wanano) and Wa'ikhana (Piratapuyo),<sup>8</sup> two indigenous language communities of northwestern Amazonia. It offers what I intend to be an honest assessment of the aspects of the project that most approximated the participative ideals that inspired it, those that fell short, as well as a few of the questions that still remain.

2. LAYING THE GROUNDWORK.



MAP: The Upper Rio Negro region and locations of the Kotiria and Wa'ikhana communities. Source: Epps & Stenzel (2013)

<sup>8</sup> The Kotiria are also identified as Wanano/Guanano/Uanano and the Wa'ikhana as Piratapuyo. I adopt use of their traditional names: *Kotiria* 'water people' and *Wa'ikhana* 'fish people' at the request of community members with whom I work.

The Kotiria and Wa'ikhana indigenous peoples live in the Vaupés basin, in the Upper Rio Negro region of Brazil and Colombia in northwestern Amazonia. Access to their villages is only by water, a three-to-four day trip each way by motorized canoe, going upriver from the town of São Gabriel da Cachoeira in the state of Amazonas.<sup>9</sup>

The Vaupés is known as one of the most multilingual regions of Amazonia, home to some thirty ethno-linguistic groups from the East Tukano, Arawak, Nadahup and Kakua-Nikak language families. The Kotiria and Wa'ikhana are two of the sixteen East Tukano groups, who occupy the central part of the region along the Vaupés and Apaporis rivers and their major tributaries. The Arawak populations (with the exception of the Tariana) are located on the northeastern and southwestern fringes of the region, while the Nadahup and Kakua-Nikak populations live in the forested areas between the major rivers. Neighboring groups are in constant contact and maintain longstanding sociocultural relations that may include intermarriage, trade, and other forms of exchange (see the Introduction to Epps & Stenzel 2013 for an overview of cultural and linguistic interaction the region).

The Kotiria and Wa'ikhana populations—some 1,600 and 1,300, respectively— are quite close in geographic, linguistic, and ethno-cultural terms. We can see from the Map that their territories are relatively close to each other. The two languages together also form a distinct subgroup within the East Tukano family and speakers affirm that they can generally understand each other. The Wa'ikhana and Kotiria moreover consider themselves to be agnatic relatives, proscribed from intermarrying within the Vaupesian system of linguistic exogamy. Yet despite these proximities, the current situations for each group related to language use and vitality are quite distinct, a fact that contributed to shaping the organization and development of our documentation project (for more details and historical perspective on the situations of both groups, see Stenzel 2005).

The Kotiria live in a dozen or so villages in Brazil and Colombia, still occupying their traditional territory along the upper Vaupés, where Kotiria remains the primary language of everyday use. My main research site with the Kotiria is the village of Carurú Cachoeira, the largest Kotiria community in Brazil and site of the *Khumuno Wu'u Kotiria* Indigenous School, founded during our first language workshop in 2002. My research on the Kotiria language actually began in 2000 (in work with several different language consultants) but from early on, I envisioned both academic and community-related goals.<sup>10</sup> While still in the initial stages of work on a basic description and analysis of the language (my doctoral thesis project), I also became very involved in activities of a more applied nature after I was approached by a group of teachers from several different Kotiria villages looking to form an indigenous school and who needed help with a number of issues related to language use. Their primary concerns at that time were the development of a practical orthography and production of pedagogical materials for use in the indigenous school.

<sup>9</sup> The dot in the small insert map indicates the city of Rio de Janeiro, where I live. I include it to show that although I reside and do research in the same country, my field site is still a full continent away, an important factor in terms of time and budget considerations.

<sup>10</sup> Czaykowska-Higgins describes situations in which developing a community-based project entails “negotiating the often-contradictory demands and expectations of academic institutions and the goals and needs of the language-using community (2009:40).” I feel fortunate to have had, from the onset, the support of my academic department at the University of Colorado for both types of objectives and indeed, never felt that one detracted from the other.



Now, I'm quite sure the teachers were aware that I was not the most qualified person to help them with *all* their needs; nevertheless, I did have one kind of expertise that they were looking for. More importantly, I was *there*, willing and available to do whatever I could—and in a region where outside collaborators of any type are at a premium, the Indians tend to take a pragmatic view and make the best of whomever they have at hand, however 'green' that person may be.<sup>11</sup> For my part, I saw their invitation as an exceptional opportunity because, echoing Yamada's words regarding her work with the Cariban Kari'nja in Suriname, I too was "motivated by [the] desire to meet the needs of both [speech and academic] communities in a way that [would be] collaborative, mutually beneficial, reciprocal, non-exploitative, and that [would draw] on the strengths of all participants (2007:258)."



Group of participants in a Kotiria Language Workshop, 2004

Recognizing that we had shared interests and the potential to learn from each other, we formed a kind of Kotiria coalition, and within it, partnerships developed that continue to this day. The most significant of these has been with José Galves Trindade, then a young teacher and community leader on the rise. Being able to work in close collaboration with José, other teachers at the Kotiria school, and members of the community not only con-

<sup>11</sup> As Crippen and Robinson (2013:124) point out, documentary linguists are often unprepared to take on tasks specifically related to language revitalization and maintenance, and could "better serve communities interested in revitalization by putting them in contact with education specialists and other people skilled in language conservation methods." My response would have to be that we *know* this to be true, and if such resources were readily available, would certainly do just as they suggest. Unfortunately, there is an Amazonian-sized gap between this ideal scenario and the realities of our research situations, so we simply must do the best we can.

tributed to fulfilling what I saw as a moral and ethical imperative of my research, I am also firmly convinced that it has led to a better analysis and understanding of the Kotiria language (Stenzel 2013 being the most comprehensive work). Additionally, it laid the groundwork for establishing what Leonard & Haynes qualify as the “mutual relationship-building layer” of community-based fieldwork, the “major tenets of which are *time* and *trust*” (2010:288, emphasis mine). Indeed, this prior investment of time and establishment of trust were essential to the planning stage of our documentation project later on.



Working on the Kotiria orthography

My work with the Wa'ikhana began later, in 2005. By that time, I had been circulating on the Vaupés for a few years, had met people from other groups on my travels up and downriver (which always involves overnight stays in villages along the way), and, being one of very few linguists around in any case, was somewhat well known through the regional grapevine. So, when a linguist who intended to initiate work with the Wa'ikhana was unable to go forward with his project, Dorvalino Chagas, a Wa'ikhana teacher and anthropologist, approached me about helping them out. I went into the new project with the same combination of academic and applied goals that framed my work with the Kotiria, and from the beginning, recognized that Dorvalino himself would play a key role in developing community-based efforts. He had for years been involved in documenting Wa'ikhana history, mythology and 'origin stories' with elders in both Brazil and Colombia, and had been mobilizing members of the splintered community to revitalize aspects of Wa'ikhana cultural practices. He was now eager to focus their attention on strengthening language use as well.

Over the past few decades, migration has resulted in the Wa'ikhana population becoming more and more geographically dispersed. Our work together thus took place in three different locations: in Pohsaya Pito, one of the traditional (though now sparsely occupied) villages on the Papurí river; in Iauaretê, an indigenous town with a large mixed ethnic community to which a good part of the Wa'ikhana population from the Papuri has relocated; and in Bo'tea Pehta, a small Wa'ikhana village located just downstream from Iauaretê on the Vaupés. The dominant language both in Iauaretê and in Bo'tea Pehta is Tukano (a lingua franca in the Vaupés region), and among the Wa'ikhana who live in all these villages, a marked process of language shift is already underway. Currently, transmission of Wa'ikhana as a first language to children—even those living in traditional Wa'ikhana villages such as Pohsaya Pito—is very limited (Stenzel 2005 has further details).

My early fieldwork with the Wa'ikhana was divided between activities related to basic descriptive analysis of the language, documentation, and conducting community workshops together with Dorvalino. During our workshops, we collectively assessed the situation of the language, discussed strategies for strengthening language use, and initiated activities directed toward developing a practical orthography and pedagogical materials.



A group of elders at the 1<sup>st</sup> Wa'ikhana Language Workshop, 2005





Wa'ikhana boys writing texts, 2005

**3. BIRTH OF THE KOTIRIA / WA'IKHANA PROJECT.** Throughout 2005 and 2006, I discussed with both groups the prospect of organizing a larger documentation project, conceived within the participatory model as I understood it. Given the specific needs and concerns of each group and their very different language situations, and moreover wanting to build on the partnerships already established, as far as I was concerned it was the only type of project possible. Though it fell to me to investigate funding possibilities<sup>12</sup> and get the bureaucratic ball rolling, my primary partners, José and Dorvalino, were quick to grasp the general idea of what such a project might be like and begin explaining it as best they could to their communities.

It's important to say that in this very remote area of the Amazon rainforest, things like electricity, computers and internet access are to this day not part of everyday life in most villages. In fact, before the project began, none of the Indians involved had worked with a computer, and only teachers who spent time regularly in the town of São Gabriel had had any contact at all with the internet. So, it was naturally next to impossible for most people living in the villages to grasp the idea of what something like a 'digital archive'—indeed, what a digital *anything*—might be, and it was even more difficult for them to understand many of the issues related to 'access' that we obviously knew would need to be dealt with. These were topics we addressed together and returned to regularly and gradually; indeed, by the end the project, people felt comfortable discussing them and confident that they were making informed decisions.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> We were awarded a Major Documentation Project Grant from HRELP/SOAS in 2007.

<sup>13</sup> In the end, both groups opted to allow open access to their archives. Although perhaps never specifically articulated as such, it seems that the basic questions guiding their choice of subject matter throughout the project were ultimately rather simple: "What would we like people to know about us? What aspects of our culture, our history and our knowledge would we like to share?" Viewing the

On the other hand, I don't mean to imply that either population had been living in complete isolation. Both had had experiences—some positive, others less so—with outsiders working in the region. Though receptive to the prospect of new projects, they also expressed some concerns and resentment related to those previous research projects they felt had taken away more than they had given back, projects conducted with little local input, over which they felt they had little control. José, Dorvalino and I, instigators of discussions about this new project, of course had to be sensitive to those feelings or the project would never have gotten off the ground. So, our first task was to try to alleviate some of this 'research-project anxiety', capitalizing on the trust we had established and focusing more on the practical benefits—and, yes, the *fun* we could all have<sup>14</sup>—than on the more complex questions and technical aspects of the project, which we knew would all become clearer as the project progressed.

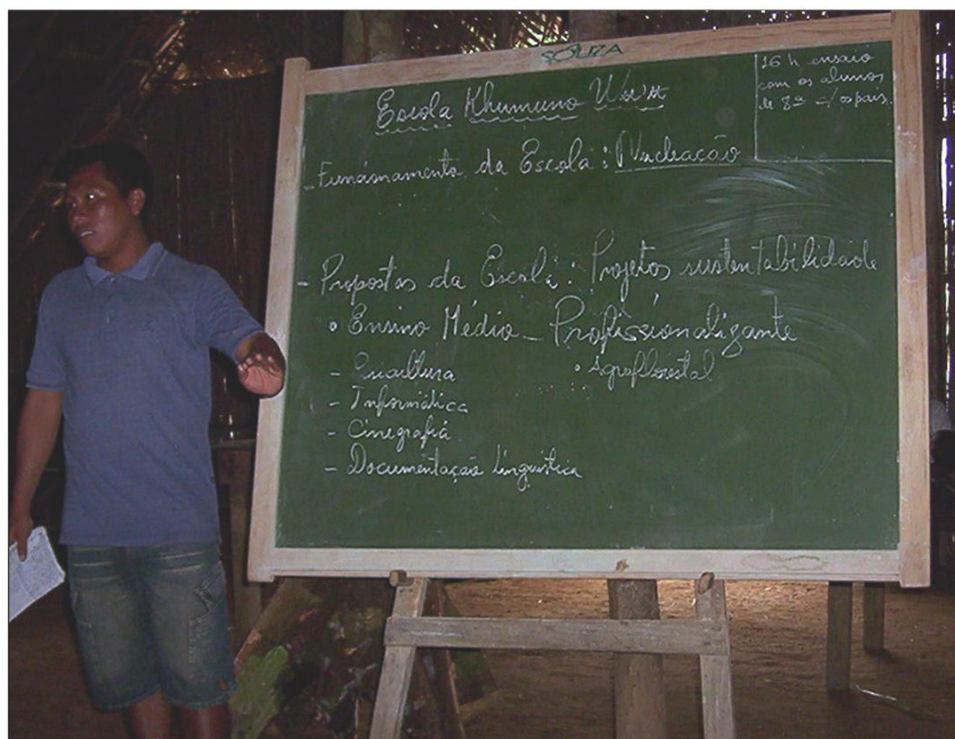
Once people were on board with the general idea—and I can't stress enough how crucial José and Dorvalino were to accomplishing this—our next task was to discuss an organizational plan and ideas for initial activities. My role was inevitably that of general coordinator, responsible for interface with the funding agency, and for overall budgetary and bureaucratic issues. At the ground level, though, I did my best to establish an equitable balance of power where it really counted: in the actual nitty-gritty activities of the documentation project. At this level, I tried to keep out of the limelight as much as possible and assume the role of 'collaborator' with the local documentation teams coordinated by José and Dorvalino, each team being itself accountable to a particular type of broader community assembly. This is where the unique profiles of each subproject really begin to emerge.

The Kotiria elected to carry out their documentation activities within the context of the *Khumuno Wu'u Kotiria* school. The project was presented to the school assembly in 2006, where it was officially adopted as an initiative for the high school, which was being inaugurated the following year. All activities were to be carried out by the school community, which included not just students and teachers, but also parents and residents of Carurú Cachoeira and other neighboring villages whose children studied at the school. Ours was actually just one of several research projects adopted by the school, all of which focused on aspects of Kotiria history, knowledge and traditions, the most important of which being their dance ceremonies. The Kotiria documentation team was composed of José, both a teacher and the project coordinator, and a group of four high school students who were selected by a local committee. Adoption of the Kotiria subproject by the school was a move that worked out well; it provided a home base of action, a local internal structure for organizing activities and making sure things got done, and endowed efforts with a legitimacy that came from within.

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project as an opportunity to create a bridge to the outside world, a way to become known and to share aspects of their culture, open access was a logical choice.

<sup>14</sup> I say this in all seriousness. I don't think there's any reason to downplay the 'fun factor' in research, particularly research of the collaborative type, so heavily dependent on relationship-building and creating an ambiance in which people feel comfortable with each other. In our case, the truth is that life is hard in the villages and people enjoyed themselves immensely taking a break from their usual routines to get together for project activities. This is not to say that we didn't work intensely and take our tasks seriously, but we did it with generous doses of laughter and comradery.



José Trindade presents the documentation project to the Kotiria school assembly in 2006

The Wa'ikhana partnership was of a relatively different sort and inevitably reflected the difficulties of their current situation. There was no already-established local institution, such as the Kotiria had in their school, to serve as a base for activities, so the Wa'ikhana subproject was much less internally structured. One of their overall goals, though, was to try to involve young people as much as possible, so the various participating Wa'ikhana villages each chose a young adult to represent them as a member of the official documentation team.<sup>15</sup> However, it was Dorvalino, as local coordinator, together with members of his network of older speakers, who were ultimately responsible for organizing activities. Because team members and the organizing group lived in different villages and weren't in contact with each other on a regular basis, they formed a less cohesive group overall and it was harder to make plans and maintain autonomous activities. For this reason, though documentation activities with both groups were always more intense when I was around, in general, my being there was a more important mobilizing factor with the Wa'ikhana than it was with the Kotiria.

As for the selection of topics for documentation, as mentioned above, the Kotiria subproject was developed within the school, which had several research projects linked to

<sup>15</sup> The Wa'ikhana team members were all in their twenties, two of the four already with young children, and all with adult work responsibilities. This led to some turnover in team membership: only one of the four original members remained with the team over the course of the entire project.

Kotiria culture—*mari ya* 'our ways, our customs'—underway at the same time. All of these, as well as new topics that came up over the years, would become themes for documentation within our own project. Likewise, the Wa'ikhana subproject also focused on investigating and registering aspects of Wa'ikhana culture and customs, in the hope that this would encourage greater interest in and use of the language, especially among younger people and the many ethnic Wa'ikhana who don't consider themselves fluent speakers. The point I want to stress is that foremost for the Wa'ikhana and Kotiria was documentation of *mari ya*, of which *mari durukua* 'our way of speaking, our language' is only one inextricable facet—an important thing to remember when we discuss what funding agencies, researchers and language communities understand 'language documentation' to be all about.<sup>16</sup>

**4. HOW THE 'PLEASURES' PLAYED OUT.** Our four-year project progressed fairly successfully through the expected phases, the first being primarily devoted to training the teams in use of computers and the different types of recording equipment (all of which they were coming into contact with for the very first time), video editing and transcription. After that, we entered into the specific rhythms of documentation established by each team and supporting community.

With the Kotiria, in most cases, the school determined the subject matter and organized documentation activities—often with invited speakers and an elaborate schedule of events—before I arrived on the scene. Then we'd work on them together according to their plan, but always reserving some time for more specific language-related activities, such as discussion of questions related to the orthography, or to the ongoing effort of dictionary-building. Among the topics they elected for focused documentation were the history of their dances and the many customs related to dance ceremonies, longhouse construction, geography, health habits, and the origin stories of different Kotiria sibs. They also made a number of documentaries, taking advantage of activities that were happening in the community. These materials, for the most part, were recorded when I wasn't there (though we ended up editing them together), and demonstrate the greater level of autonomy of the Kotiria documentation team.

With the Wa'ikhana, documentation undertakings rarely took place when I wasn't there, but were always intensely organized for the periods of my visits. Villages took turns hosting our workshops, and participants would elect subjects to be collectively 'researched'—which might entail conducting interviews with elders and listening to their stories, fieldtrips to important local sites or neighboring villages, demonstrations of techniques, writing and illustrating short texts, and public presentation of research results—all duly documented by the team. Workshops were thus both extremely productive and pleasant, but outside the workshop framework, the team had difficulty conducting self-directed efforts, besides tasks that could be done individually, such as transcription.

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<sup>16</sup> Franchetto (2010:62) makes a similar observation, stating that: "For the Kuikuro, speaking is an integral part of their *ügihiutu* or 'way of being', a term which can also be used to translate our notions of 'language' and 'culture.' [ ... ] It is no coincidence that the Kuikuro accepted a proposal to document their 'language' by transforming it into 'documenting songs' a project presented as a 'documentation of the culture.'"





Wa'ikhana team members practice recording



Kotiria team member Auxiliadora Figueiredo learns to use the Zoom



Dorvalino Chagas interviewing his mother, Cecilia Velasques



Kotiria team member Silvestre Trindade films a speech by Inês Galvão

Table 1 summarizes the tangible results of our project—the annotated sessions, DVD collections, dictionaries and other materials, some of which are complete while others are still in production.<sup>17</sup>

| Wa’ikhana   | Kotiria   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digital archive with wordlists, written texts and 40+ audio/video sessions, some 50% with basic annotation;</li> <li>• 10-DVDs compilations of full documentation materials, distributed to communities;</li> <li>• Multimedia dictionary with 1400+ entries, illustrations and recordings (work still ongoing);</li> <li>• Primer already in use in schools;</li> <li>• Publication with all texts produced in our language workshops, with seven thematic chapters and illustrations.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digital archive with wordlists, written texts and 70+ audio/video sessions, 100% with basic annotation)</li> <li>• 10-DVDs compilations of full documentation materials, distributed to communities;</li> <li>• Multimedia dictionary with 1500+ entries, illustrations and recordings (work still ongoing);</li> <li>• 100+ texts to be used in the production of a practical grammar (now underway);</li> <li>• Publication with bilingual monographs written by students graduating from the Kotiria School, with 27 chapters and illustrations.</li> </ul> |

TABLE 1. Materials produced through the Kotiria and Wa’ikhana Documentation Project

**5. NO, I DIDN’T FORGET ABOUT THE ‘PITFALLS’ . . .** During the course of our project, we naturally had our fair share of problems—logistical, technical, cultural, and philosophical. As ‘general coordinator’ an enormous amount of my time in the field was taken up with training, organization, problem solving and taking care of the logistical and technical difficulties inherent to work in such remote and climactically extreme region (Dwyer 2006:55 mentions these and other challenges inherent to cooperative arrangements). All our equipment suffered in the heat and humidity, and most items at some point required my transporting them back to Rio for maintenance or replacement; our solar panel system was blown out four times because of the lightning strikes endemic to equatorial Amazonia; our outboard motor broke down on more than one occasion, leaving us to float midriver until someone happened by to help us out; our boat itself escaped its mooring one night and after a frantic half-day search, was located—dented and with its rain cover torn—loll-

<sup>17</sup> Both digital archives were deposited in ELAR (SOAS, University of London) in 2011, and will also be accessible, with metadata in Portuguese, in 2014 through the PRODOCLIN Archive at the Museu do Índio/FUNAI in Rio de Janeiro. We are still working on the preparation of our multimedia dictionaries, but should soon be publishing the first digital versions. The books organized through our project are also slated to be published in 2014 by the Museu do Índio, in their series of works resulting from documentation projects. Meanwhile, data analysis is, of course, ongoing.



ing in an inlet several kilometers downstream; transportation of gasoline, foodstuffs and other materials for workshops was often delayed,<sup>18</sup> requiring last-minute adjustments to schedules and generally a good dose of 'winging it' until things arrived. Such scenarios, time consuming and problematic though they may be, come with the territory and simply have to be dealt with.

More importantly were the moments in which, often without realizing it, one or another partner or team and I had trouble, as Dwyer (2006:32) puts it: "mediating each other's cultural imperatives." When it comes to participatory research, we have to recognize that no matter how positive our relations are and how much we envision and work toward a project in partnership with the community, the 'project' and the ideals in the researcher's mind and the 'project' in the minds of our community partners are most likely (or perhaps most *certainly*) quite different things, as indeed are some of the goals each of the stakeholders hopes to accomplish. Knowing I had a funding agency to please, I was always more concerned than the Indians were about 'production'—I fretted about the quantity of materials we were producing, worried about details of quality control, and at times pushed too hard, scheduled too much. The Indians good-naturedly managed to appease me and at the same time satisfy their own agendas, more related (I believe) to 'representedness', to shaping the messages they wanted to convey through documentation. The point I want to make is that participatory projects are, by their very nature, *multiple* projects in which we work toward negotiating shared goals and hope to leave everybody reasonably satisfied. But we still do this while standing on the surface of our respective cultural icebergs, with many of the suppositions and concerns that orient our behavior and expectations hidden under the surface.

Dobrin (2009:43) aptly reminds us that "language documentation projects may mean something quite different to the community of speakers than they do to outside linguists, and that we need to take those differences seriously and respond to them as an integral aspect of our work." I would go a step further and say that though we may try our best to identify and respond to differences, there will inevitably be aspects of the endeavor that remain *unknown* and *unknowable* to the parties involved and that these may lead to points of frustration and dissatisfaction that are hard to put one's finger on.<sup>19</sup> At times, with both groups, I felt we had wandered into 'unknown and unknowable' cultural territories, and without going into the details, can say that there were moments in which I felt quite insecure as to what extent my partners and I were 'on the same page' regarding the project and

<sup>18</sup> A roundtrip journey (some 600 miles from São Gabriel to the villages and back) required purchase of at least 1000 liters of gasoline, 600 for our small motorboat and the rest for workshop participants from other villages, the documentation teams, and as emergency reserve. I also needed to purchase significant quantities of dried foodstuffs such as rice, beans, and macaroni (minimally 30 kilos of each) to complement whatever fish, wild game, fruit and manioc products we could obtain locally to feed workshop participants. Not being able to carry everything in our small boat, I had to arrange transportation of materials by barge as far as Iauaretê (the rapids there impede any further large-boat travel) and the teams would recruit a fleet of canoes to go and pick things up from there.

<sup>19</sup> This point is also emphasized in Becquelin et al. (2008:64), who recognize from their experiences with the Trumai that "attempting collaborative work between researchers and native people is clearly no simple task. Willingness is important, but it cannot solve all the problems that arise out of differences in points of view [regarding documentation, conservations of knowledge and documents, and] there are areas in which the divergences will inevitably prevail."



its ideals. We worked through those moments, listened to each other, laughed, regrouped—shifting directions when necessary—and found our way back to common ground, but grains of uncertainty nevertheless remain.

We meet less frequently now that the project is officially over, and I am particularly uncertain as to how we all look back on the project and assess things that happened. On the one hand, we do have a set of tangible 'products' to show for our efforts. The funding agency appears to be reasonably happy with the return on their investment, and as a language researcher, I know there is a lifetime's worth of fascinating data to explore. So the view from my iceberg is positive in many respects. But is the same thing true from the Indians' perspective? What do they think about our time and efforts together? At the project's end, I sensed that they were truly proud of our 'products' and viewed them as accomplishments. Moreover, particularly in the case of the Wa'ikhana (where language shift is a more serious threat), a number of people said that they felt their language use had really been strengthened by participation in the project, that they felt more confident and positive about the prospective for maintenance of the language. I hope, but do not know for sure, that this continues to be the case.

It moreover remains to be seen to what extent our project may have created other types of expectations or made promises, knowingly or unknowingly, of tangible or intangible nature, that remain unfulfilled. I am fairly sure that in some respects it did, and that as concrete outside resources dried up and project-related activities ceased to occur on a regular basis, both communities felt a certain sense of letdown and abandonment. Conversations with José, Dorvalino and other people from the villages I have met since the project's end hint at this, and alongside recognizing how much we all miss each other and the good times we shared, there is always the question of when and if I'll be returning. Perhaps this is an unavoidable phase in the evolution of projects intensely experienced, but inevitably finite.

So, I am left pondering some important questions related to certain tenets that my own project espoused. First, there is the question of continuity, or perhaps 'sustainability', the term in vogue. Like other participatory projects, ours invested heavily in training and other types of capacity building, worked toward transference of control and to making documentary efforts less dependent on the academic researcher and outside institutions. Yet, while it appears that in certain regions of the world documentation is truly becoming a more autonomous and sustainable activity (e.g. Indonesia, as Florey 2008 indicates), this is still not the case in Brazil. Regardless of how much training and equipment our projects provide, how much self-determination they attempt to foster, experiences—at least so far—indicate that communities often cannot continue documentary efforts without long-term outside assistance; or, they simply, and not infrequently, *do* not choose to keep them going. Our case appears to be following this tendency, and whatever the motivations may be, no continued independent documentation activities have been undertaken by either group in the time that has passed since the end of our project. For my part, during this same period, although I have continued work on still unfinished products for both groups, this has been mostly from a distance. Luckily, though, support has recently become available through PRODOCLIN for a new initiative—the development of pedagogical grammars—that will allow me to renew community-based work.<sup>20</sup> I confess that I am thrilled at the prospect.

<sup>20</sup> The first workshop on the Kotiria pedagogical grammar took place in March, 2014, and a second is being scheduled.

I believe that one of our greatest challenges is to better understand and deal with these 'post-project' contexts in ways that don't just leave our language communities hanging, which leads to a second related consideration. Rice (2011:202) reminds us that documentary projects must come to terms with new kinds of accountability, including accountability to people. Certainly, conceiving documentation projects in the collaborative mold is one way of promoting greater community-oriented accountability from the onset of a project and throughout its realization. Still, we do not know the array of consequences that our choice of research program really entails, the long-term outcomes of our (albeit well-intentioned) attempts to collaborate in processes of change. We will, nonetheless, eventually be held accountable for these as well.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, returning to the notion that participatory projects are most dearly invested in human relationships, I wonder if perhaps these don't take a much more central role than we realize. Dobrin observes that in Melanesia:

[It is] not independence but rather *relationality* [that] is the supreme cultural virtue [and that] the morally responsible expression of power is not to try to minimize it, but to show solicitude and care for those who have less of it through participation in a continuing relationship of interested engagement and generous "helping" that has material reciprocation as its moral and emotional focus. [Dobrin 2005:45, emphasis mine]

This is a powerful insight that seems quite applicable to my own Amazonian research context and that may prove equally valid for work with other indigenous peoples in Brazil. Franchetto, for example, has always emphasized the essential, above all, human and relational nature of documentation efforts with the Kuikuro, in words that also ring true to me:

'Working with' [the Kuikuro] meant trying to forge a real partnership, effect an exchange in the realm of the intangible and unknown. I say 'try' since at no point were we certain that we could free ourselves of an unequal relationship, latent distrust, and silent calculations of interest on both sides. We have tried, though, to be sincere, open, humble, solidary, and above all honest, while the Kuikuro 'repay' us with honesty, friendship, and above all a continuous effort to maintain and renew trust. [Franchetto 2010:58]

At the end of her 2009 article, Czaykowska-Higgins states that "it is a very *interesting*, exciting, and challenging time to be a linguist." Indeed it is! Despite doubts, frustrations and unanswered questions, when I recall days spent chugged my way through Amazonian waters, as I sat in the audience of the DOBES conference, fascinated and inspired by the work of documentary linguists from around the world, and as I struggle to wind up these thoughts on a research experience itself still far from being concluded, I know what a lucky linguist I am. If living in 'interesting' times is curse, then it's one I'm glad to be under.

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