

Cabeceras Aid Project Field Report

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Project: Maihuna Pilot Visit

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Project dates: 14 – 21 May 2006

Locations: Departamento de Loreto, Perú. Sucusari y Yanayacu Rivers, tributaries of the Napo River. Community of Sucusari, on the Sucusari River; Communities of Puerto Huaman and Nueva Vida on the Yanayacu River.

Costs: Transportation S/. 644.00; Food/Lodging/Supplies S/. 234.54; Consultants S/. 15.00.
Total = S/. 893.54 (\$1 = S/. 3.30) = **\$271**

Project Goal

Between May 14 and 21, 2006, Chris and Lev made a brief trip to the Sucusari and Yanayacu Rivers in order to seek out speakers of Maihuna. What little published information there is on Maihuna dates from the 1970s and 1980s, so the principal purpose of this trip was to identify *if* and *where* there presently are speakers of Maihuna, and if possible, to assess their interest in collaborating on language work.

Background Information

Maihuna is a Western Tukanoan language, most closely related to Secoya/Airo Pai. Maihuna is also known as Mai Huna, Orejón, Coto, Koto, Payoguaje, Payagua, and Tutapisco. Alain Fabre's online *Diccionario etnolingüístico y guía bibliográfica de los pueblos indígenas sudamericanos* (2005) includes the following statistics: 300 speakers (Bellier 1983); 190-300 persons (Gasché 1983).

The SIL calls the language Orejón; its Ethnologue code is ORE. This name reflects the custom, no longer practiced, of piercing men's earlobes, stretching them and adorning them with balsawood plugs. At present, speakers of the language and members of the ethnic group express a strong preference for the name Maihuna (from *mai*, 'gente' or 'person'; *huna*, 'varios' or 'group').

From a linguist's perspective, the language is as yet undescribed. Maihuna received some attention from Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL; or ILV, Instituto Lingüístico de Verano) missionaries Daniel and Virginia Velie in the 1960s and 70s, and an orthography was designed. The Velies and SIL produced a short *Vocabulario Orejón* (Velie 1981) and a sketch of the language, focusing on Maihuna phonology (Velie 1975), both of which are available at www.ethnologue.com. The former appears to be a short but otherwise passable dictionary. The latter is brief and superficial and, when it comes to morphology and syntax, of minimal utility. In addition, the anthropologist Irène Bellier did some work with Maihuna in the early 1980s. Fabre provides a bibliography in his *Diccionario etnolingüístico*; see <http://www.tut.fi/~fabre/BookInternetVersio/Dic=Tukano.pdf>

Logistical information

We identified the following locations using Google Earth.

Boca Sucusari: 3° 16' S 72° 55' W

Boca Yanayacu: 3° 6' S 73° 08'40" W

Mazan (located at Boca Mazan): 3° 30' S 73° 06' W

Estrecho (located on the Putumayo River): 2° 27' S 72° 40' W

Totoya (an educated guess, based on cleared areas on the Algodon River) 2° 36'40" S 72° 49'26" W

We measured the following distances using Google Earth.
Iquitos to Orellana ~76km; Orellana to Boca Sucusari ~52km; Orellana to Boca Yanayacu ~150km.
Mazan to Boca Sucusari: ~38.5km; Mazan to Boca Yanayacu: ~59.5km.

Fabre (2005) indicates the presence of large Maihuna settlements on the Sucusari, Yanayacu, and Algodon Rivers in Perú. The Sucusari and Yanayacu are tributaries of the Napo, while the Algodon is a tributary of the Putumayo. The distance to the Algodon made a visit there impossible at this time, but the Sucusari and Yanayacu rivers are within a reasonable distance of Iquitos.

The Sucusari River is relatively well-known in the region because the Explorama ExplorNapo Lodge is located on it; however, the Yanayacu is not well-known, nor is much information available about this river on the internet. Therefore, we decided to travel from Iquitos to Orellana at the mouth of the Napo River, and seek transportation to the Sucusari River, knowing that any Maihunas there would be able to tell us more about the Yanayacu.

We learned from Maihunas that the community on the Algodon River is called Totoya, or San Pablo de Totolla. Maihunas say that it is an 8-hour walk from the town of Estrecho on the Putumayo; a two-day walk from the headwaters of the Yanayacu; and a week-long walk from Sucusari.

The most direct route between Iquitos and the Maihuna communities in the Napo river basin is to travel downriver from Iquitos to Timicurillo (a 45-minute trip; there are express boats several times a day that leave from Puerto Los Productores), then cross over to Mazan on the *pista*, which is basically a triple-wide sidewalk (10-minute trip by mototaxi), then once in Mazan hire a motor and boat to either Sucusari or Yanayacu. This route is only feasible for passengers traveling light, however; cargo would have to go the whole way by river (down the Amazon, then up the Napo) on a sufficiently large boat.

River travel time estimates

Orellana to Sucusari, 5-meter wooden boat and 5HP peke motor: 5 hours, ~4 gallons round trip.

Sucusari to Mazan, 6-meter wooden boat and 9HP peke motor: said to be 3 hours, ~3 gallons one way.

Since our motor broke down, it took us 5 hours.

Mazan to Puerto Huaman, tiny speedboat and 15HP outboard motor: 2 hours 20 minutes upriver and 2 hours downriver; 19 gallons round trip.

Huaman to Nueva Vida: 15 minutes by tiny speedboat and 15HP outboard motor.

Current speaker estimates, based on our pilot investigation

The following figures are based on information provided by the two Maihuna schoolteachers, Ederson Ríos and Romero Ríos (they are brothers), and by various community members, combined with our own observations of language use during our visits in the communities. Since we did not go to Totoya, the estimate of speakers for that community is very speculative.

General vitality: In both Sucusari and Huaman, many community members expressed concern that Maihuna is disappearing. They attributed language loss to the presence of *mestizo* teachers and schools in recent decades; however, it seems that small children (not yet of school age) are not learning Maihuna at home in any of the three Napo communities, so the school isn't the only factor. On several occasions, we observed mothers speak to each other in Maihuna yet speak to their small children in castellano.

It is noteworthy that we observed two gender-related phenomena. On the one hand, most of the Maihuna we heard spoken was between women; on the other hand, only men actively engaged us in conversation about language issues, and women were never mentioned by name by the men as speakers of Maihuna. At the end of our visit, we had the distinct sense that women are to some degree 'invisible' in the domain of Maihuna ideas of fluency. This inclines us to think that there are actually

more speakers of the language than Maihuna men estimate, since the men only counted other men as speakers.

Sucusari: total population ~130; about 5 speakers over 50 years old.

Speakers identified by name: Sebastian, Severino, Victorino, Felipe.

We suspect that an elderly woman, who we saw but didn't meet, is also a speaker. The schoolteacher here, Ederson, says he is "60% competent" in Maihuna and is using the SIL *Vocabulario Orejón* in the classroom.

Puerto Huaman: total population ~140; maybe as many as 20 speakers over 20 years old.

Fluent speakers identified by name: Balbino, Jorge, Julio.

We observed various women conversing in Maihuna, as well as several couples.

Juan (~22?), Arquemides (27), Hugo (~35?) enthusiastically taught us a small set of words in Maihuna. Ester, Ester's mother (?), Teodora, seem to speak Maihuna preferentially. Both of the schoolteachers here, Romero Ríos and Arquemides, are partial speakers and are attempting to use the SIL *Vocabulario Orejón* in the classroom, but they are frustrated by its limitations and expressed a keen interest in new educational materials.

Nueva Vida: total population ~150; maybe as many as 40 speakers over 20 years old.

Fluent speakers identified by name: Alberto, Liberato.

We observed a group of five women conversing at length in Maihuna (one of them was visiting from Totoya), and during the community meeting held on our behalf, several women were making comments and joking in Maihuna. We didn't speak to the schoolteacher here.

Totoya: total population ~100; maybe as many as 50 speakers or more; everyone characterized Totoya as the most traditional community with the most speakers, although no one reported that children were learning Maihuna there. Romero reported to us that families have been leaving the community to go to Estrecho in order to put their children in school, and that many of the families end up settling in Estrecho and not returning to Totoya.

Political Climate

Two of the schoolteachers, Ederson in Sucusari and Romero in Yanayacu, are heavily involved in efforts to establish a Maihuna political federation, with a good deal of help and inspiration from a North American ethnobotanist who did dissertation research in Sucusari in 2003-04. The federation, FECONAMAI (Federación de Comunidades Nativas Maihunas), is meant to unite the four Maihuna communities politically in order to help them better reach their common social goals and political interests; Romero is the current president. Included among the fundamental goals of the federation, according to Romero, is documentation and recuperation of the language. (It warrants mention that at present, the Maihunas have no connection to FORMABIAP.) Other goals include the establishment of a secondary school in one of the communities, to provide local access to further education (three of the communities have primary schools); finding a source for scholarships to university for Maihuna youths; expanding and defending each community's territorial rights; and generally improving the economic prospects of Maihunas. Woodcutting is the principal economy on both the Sucusari and the Yanayacu, and the Maihunas want to impede outsiders' access to wood on these rivers. We ourselves saw many groups of woodcutters either in or passing by each Maihuna community during our brief visit.

In our view, the federation is still very much in its infancy, and as a result has many organizational and administrative hurdles ahead of it in realizing its wide-ranging goals. This said, the level of awareness and concern in the communities regarding language loss and its implications is quite high, and is closely linked to local efforts to found the federation. It is clear that many people are thinking in great detail about the future of their communities and the role that their heritage language and culture will play in that future. As a result, we were received in each community with quite a bit of enthusiasm. All in all, right now the political climate is extremely favorable to launching a language documentation project.

Site Report

As mentioned, we visited three of the four Maihuna communities, and while in each community, we considered the feasibility of establishing a project center there, along the lines of the Centro del Idioma Iquito in San Antonio. For a variety of reasons, which are summarized below, Nueva Vida seems to be by far the best choice. Any decision, of course, will be made after extensive consultation with Maihuna community members in 2007.

The community of Sucusari is very small and is situated on a small piece of very uneven land. As a result, all the best high ground is already occupied by houses. Moreover, the community has free-ranging cows, which bestow upon the community massive amounts of dung and jeopardize water quality, as well as providing sustenance to a vast number of biting insects: the mosquitoes, gnats, and *isango* mites are fierce there. While Sucusari is the most accessible community from Iquitos, with only five speakers and such unfavorable site conditions, it is not a good location for a project center.

The community of Puerto Huaman is also located on a small piece of not very high land, and much of the village is inundated or marshy at this time of year (the high water season), with the result that there is no obvious place to put a project center. Similar to the situation in Sucusari, the insect population is supported by lots of free-ranging pigs and water quality would be a concern. On the positive side, there are many speakers of Maihuna in Huaman; but all in all, it is not a good location for a project center.

The community of Totoya is likely to have the largest number of fluent speakers of Maihuna, which means we are certain to work in this community at some point. However, the easiest way to get to Totoya would involve a charter plane to Estrecho and then an eight-hour walk through the forest, which makes it untenable as a site for a project center.

The community of Nueva Vida is the newest settlement of the four, founded less than 20 years ago. Of the three Maihuna communities in the Napo basin, it is the most distant from Iquitos, but only about 15 minutes farther than Huaman by 15HP motor. The site was well-chosen and the community is located on a quite large piece of not very high but very flat land. There are no free-ranging cows or pigs, and in terms of water quality, it is the uprivermost human settlement on the Yanayacu River. In addition, we estimate that there are upwards of 40 speakers of Maihuna in Nueva Vida, and the social connections with Totoya are strongest there. As a result, Nueva Vida appears to be an excellent site for a project center.

Summary of Future Prospects

During each community meeting that was held in honor of our visit, we described the Iquito Project in some detail, in order to convey a sense of how we have done language work before, and how a Maihuna project might work. We emphasized the importance of teamwork and the crucial role of the community linguists and language specialists in generating language materials. In the course of our discussions during these meetings, it was suggested and all agreed that it would be best to train at least one community linguist from each of the communities, perhaps two, as well as to involve between one and three specialists from each community. (Several people were sensitive to historical, dialectal, and stylistic differences across the communities).

As a result of the positive response we received in all three communities, we promised that we would return in May of 2007 and spend about a week in each community, in order to develop a work plan, hammer out temporal and logistical details, and then negotiate a formal agreement that would govern a multi-year, team-based, collaborative language documentation and revitalization project. We made it clear that only subsequent to establishing a mutually satisfactory formal agreement would we begin to seek financial support for the project, and that work on the project would likely begin in earnest in 2008.

Detailed Trip Narrative

We left Iquitos at 12:30pm on May 14 on the riverboat *Orbita de Dios*. After a slow journey with numerous stops, we disembarked at 6pm in Orellana – which, it turns out, is a very small town of perhaps 500 people. There are very few motors or boats there; gasoline costs S/11 a gallon (compare with S/8 in Iquitos); all commodities are limited and expensive; and the town has electricity in the evenings only if

there is diesel to run the generator (which there wasn't during our visit). There is one hostel, located on the town's disproportionately huge *plaza de armas*. Orellana is definitely not an appropriate staging point for a project on the Napo. We stayed one day, in order to gather information and arrange transportation to Sucusari.

While in Orellana, we were referred to Vicente Ríos, a Maihuna from Sucusari. We sought him out and he spoke with us for several hours. Vicente was involved with the Velies and the SIL's work during the 60s and went to Yarina Cocha for bible translation training. Subsequently, Vicente received training as a nurse and left Sucusari more than 20 years ago to pursue his career; he has worked in various healthposts in the region, and for the last five years has worked as a nurse in Orellana.

Very early on in our conversation, Vicente expressed disappointment that the Velies never learned to speak more than a few phrases in Maihuna, and contrasted them with other groups' *lingüistas* (i.e. SIL missionaries) who became fluent speakers. He also told us that he hasn't spoken Maihuna in decades, and that his children do not speak the language. Overall, he himself seems largely disinterested in the issues of Maihuna language and heritage. He says he still has family members living in Sucusari and visits at least once a year. His daughter, Norma, helped us arrange transportation to Sucusari and accompanied us there.

On the morning of May 16, we hired a small wooden boat with a 5HP peke motor from a local merchant, and we made the trip from Orellana to Sucusari in five hours. Oddly enough, by the time we arrived in Sucusari, we had upwards of 40 small fish that had leapt into the boat as we traveled along; apparently, the sound of the motor startles the fish, they panic and leap... and a good number of them end up right in the boat!

Once in Sucusari, on the afternoon of May 16, we were introduced to the schoolteacher there, Ederson Ríos, and we spoke with him at length. He told us a bit about his career, and gave us his perspective on the need for language documentation and revitalization as part of the broader Maihuna political unification project. He arranged for us to stay in a vacant hut, and some helpful youngsters made sure we had firewood to cook with.

Ederson called a meeting for us to present ourselves to the community on the morning of May 17, and eight men attended. All responded very positively to our presence and our presentation, and expressed interest in collaborating on a project with us. After the meeting, Severino, a speaker of Maihuna, spent several hours with us, chatting and teaching us Maihuna vocabulary. Late in the afternoon, we made the acquaintance of Michael Gilmore, a recent PhD from Miami U in Ohio, who did ethnobotanical research in Sucusari in 2003 and 2004. He is clearly a motivating force in establishing the Maihuna federation, and was very enthused to meet us and talk about the possibility of a language project. He is in the region briefly with a group of students, and they are based at the ExplorNapo Lodge, so he left the community shortly after talking with us. We hope to speak with him again back in Iquitos. Ederson told us that we could easily find transportation to the Yanayacu River communities from Mazan, a settlement at the mouth of the Mazan River, so we arranged to go to Mazan the next morning.

We left Sucusari for Mazan at 7am on May 17, in Ederson's wooden boat with a 9HP peke motor that belongs to the community. He told us it would be a three hour trip. Unfortunately, however, the motor hadn't had an oil change in forever, and so as the journey progressed, the motor stalled more and more frequently, until it finally wouldn't run at all. Fortunately, a passing boat agreed to tow us the last half hour to Mazan, and so we finally arrived (soaked from a torrential downpour) at noon. Mazan is quite large, and looks nice from a distance, but the town's commercial center (where the two hostals are located) is dismal – it was the most wretched place we've stayed yet in South America, if that gives you any idea! Electricity came on at dusk, and there was lots radio and mototaxi noise until 11pm. On the up side, because Mazan is an important commercial center for the region, as well as the point of departure for the *varadero*, or crossing point, to the Amazon River, we were able to arrange transportation to the Yanayacu very easily.

We left Mazan for Puerto Huaman at 6:40am on May 18, in a rented *chalupa* (a tiny metal speedboat) with a 15HP outboard motor, and arrived in Huaman at 9 am. It turned out that all of the community *autoridades* had just left for a meeting in Tutapisco, at the mouth of the Yanayacu, so there was no one around to receive us 'officially'. As luck had it, though, a bunch of community members were about to set

off for a *minga*, or work party, at a nearby chacra, and they invited us along. I think they were joking, but we gladly accepted. So we spent the day harvesting and peeling yuca, and drinking *masato* with a large group of Maihunas. This was an excellent turn of events, because it meant we were able to observe and overhear people's language use under normal and natural circumstances, without our presence mattering much. In addition, our enthusiasm for taking part in everything that the *minga* entailed (including our ability to drink *masato* like locals) made a very good impression on people, so we definitely made some friends.

Once the *autoridades* got back, at about 5pm, we had a long talk with Romero Ríos, who is both a schoolteacher and the first president of the new federation FECONAMAI. He is a very thoughtful and energetic person, so we learned a great deal from our conversation with him. He invited us to stay in his house, which is huge by jungle standards. He too arranged a community meeting for us for the next morning, so that we could present ourselves and our interests. Only six people attended, but all were enthusiastic about our presentation.

Since some of the people who had gone to the meeting in Tutapisco were *autoridades* from Nueva Vida, we had the chance, while they were in Huaman, to ask if we might visit them the next day. They welcomed us and suggested we arrive at 8am, just as a community work party would end; that way, we'd have a large potential audience for an impromptu meeting in the schoolhouse. So this is what we did, and about 15 people attended the meeting, and again were enthusiastic about our presentation. Notably, at least five of the attendees were fluent speakers of Maihuna, and at the end of the meeting, one self-possessed woman took it upon herself to give us nicknames: *boshishi*, or squirrel monkey, for Lev, no doubt thanks to his goatee; and *maibaro*, or white sloth, for me, no doubt due to my coloring and the presently very fuzzy state of my hair.

After this meeting, we were invited to Alberto's house, to drink *+ne ono*, or *pifuayo masato*, which is delicious indeed. While there, Maihuna was spoken by most of the adults. We got back to Huaman by 11am and spent the rest of the day chatting with people and having a nice long language lesson with Balbino, a 46 year old fluent Maihuna speaker.

We left Huaman at 6am on May 21 and were in Mazan by 8am. After settling up for the motor rental, we hopped into a mototaxi, crossed the *varadero* to the Amazon, hopped onto a *rápido* (an express boat), and were in Iquitos by 10am. Indeed, our exit from Maihuna territory was dazzlingly fast compared to our entrance – but then, that was exactly the plan. We learned a great deal, and made excellent steps toward establishing a collaborative project; this was a first rate research trip.

References

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