

Historical, social, and political context for the Iquito Language Documentation Project

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The Iquito Language Documentation Project is being carried out in a complex historical, social and political context. Understanding the origins of the Iquito Project, its organization and activities, and the challenges it faces, depends in part on understanding this context. In my talk I will discuss some of the important contextual factors that have shaped the project, which will hopefully illuminate the reasons the project came into being and taken the form it has.

Probably the single most important factor shaping the Iquito Project is the long historical process of language loss among the Iquito people and the recent emergence of a movement among the people of San Antonio aimed at stemming and reversing this process. The factors that lead to language loss are known to be complex, and the Iquito case is no different. However, it is clear that economic and political subjugation at the hands of Europeans and mestizos, and massive population loss due to disease and genocide, played a central role in the Iquito case.

Iquito oral history indicates that prior to the arrival of Europeans, the territory of Iquito people encompassed much of what is now the northeastern department of Loreto. There were at least 10,000 speakers of Iquito at this time, and possibly considerably more. Both Iquito oral history and Jesuit records suggest that the Iquito people were able to largely avoid Europeans until the early 18th century, at which point the Jesuits began an aggressive campaign of creating Iquito 'reducciones', or mission settlements.

Historically, The dispersed settlement patterns of most Amazonian peoples, like the Iquito, posed difficulties for Europeans' political and economic ambitions, as it made it possible for indigenous groups to effectively resist European rule and coercion. The counterstrategy developed by Europeans was to force dispersed indigenous populations to settle in concentrated settlements. Jesuit records mention the creation of eight Iquito reducciones between 1740 and 1770, but Iquito resistance to this forced resettlement was substantial, and all eight were abandoned within a few years. It is likely that the loss of Iquito life in this period was immense.

Iquito oral history indicates that by the end of the 18th century, the majority of the Iquito population had retired to the headwaters regions of the Rio Nanay and Rio Pintuyacu. By relocating away from the major riverways, the Iquito, like many other indigenous groups, were able resist mestizo and European oppression for another century. This situation changed dramatically in the 1880s, however, when the rubber boom hit the Amazon basin.

The rubber boom was a period of about 35 years during which the demand for rubber in industrializing Europe drove the intense harvesting of rubber throughout the Amazon basin. Unfortunately, rubber had to be harvested from widely scattered wild-growing plants, a labor-intensive activity that required a huge work force. The so-called 'rubber barons' who directed the large-scale extraction of rubber met this need by enslaving entire indigenous groups.

The city of Iquitos became one of the major centers of the rubber trade in the Western Amazon, and the Iquito people were quickly swept up into it. Iquito oral history mentions several middle-level rubber traders, called *patrones*, who worked the area in which the Iquito lived, but one figure eventually came to dominate the area, Elías Güimack.

Elias Güimack apparently established his dominance by simple brutality. One Iquito narrative describes the massacre of everyone in a particular Iquito community because Elias Güimack merely *suspected* that they might not cooperate with him. Two men who were out hunting at the time were the only survivors from this community, and they were thereafter captured and enslaved by Elias Güimack. In roughly 1900, Elías Güimack founded San Antonio and settled most of the remaining Iquito people there. There were fewer than 200 Iquito at this time, all under the domination of a single man who did not hesitate to kill them when he saw fit.

The rubber boom collapsed in 1914, but Elias Güimack, like many other *patrones*, responded to this turn of events not by leaving the Amazon Basin, but by adapting his exploitation of indigenous peoples to new circumstances. The new system of exploitation that developed was debt-peonage, by which a patron monopolized both the sale of manufactured products to an indigenous population and the purchase of rainforest products from them. This system relied on

the perpetual indebtedness of the indigenous population, ensured by the patron's monopolistic price-fixing, and the cooperation of the local government, church, and military in forcing indigenous 'debtors' to work under threat of imprisonment. Older Iquitos who remember the system have described the intimate cooperation of local government and church authorities *with* Elias Güimack and his descendants in maintaining the subjugation of the Iquito people.

It was in this context that Iquito language loss occurred rapidly. Monolingualism in Iquito was apparently the norm until about 1920, but all children born after 1920 grew up as bilinguals, and *many* children born after 1940 grew up as monolingual Spanish speakers. The youngest living fluent Iquito speaker was born in about 1950. The shift from Iquito monolingualism to Spanish monolingualism among the young was thus completed in a brief 30 year period.

By 1950 the use of Iquito among bilinguals had contracted to contexts in which mestizos were unlikely to hear it being used, such as within the home, and to communicate with older monolinguals. By this time, however, bilinguals had already ceased using Iquito to communicate with their children, even within the home.

After 1950 the number of speakers shrank as older speakers died. By the 1980s Iquito mostly ceased to be heard in the community as the numbers of monolingual speakers dwindled, and then dropped suddenly to a single monolingual speaker in the mid-1990s, when a series of malaria outbreaks killed a majority of the elderly speakers, both monolingual and bilingual.

Many people who hear the history of Iquito language loss are very curious about why it happened. An understanding of the mechanisms at play is not merely a sop to curiosity, however, but is important for the development and success of the project. I now turn to a discussion of our present understanding of the process.

Substantial Iquito language loss apparently began not with the beginning of slavery in the late 19th century, but rather soon after the implementation of the debt-peonage system after 1914. The rapid shift to Spanish monolingualism appears to be linked to the central role of race in the

debt-peonage system, and the importance of language for indigenous identity in the Amazon Basin.

Simply put, the debt-peonage system was aimed at subjugating indigenous people. It was aimed at controlling members of a particular race. The concept of race in the Peruvian Amazon basin, however, differs from in some important ways from the form it takes in North America, for example. Most mestizos, who form the politically and economically dominant racial group in the Peruvian Amazon Basin, are of partially, or even entirely indigenous ancestry. Consequently, phenotypic characteristics, which loom so large in indexing race in many parts of the world, play a relatively minor role in the Amazon Basin. In their place, social practices loom large as an index of race. To be seen as mestizo is to a large degree to act as mestizo: to eat certain foods in particular ways, to wear clothes in certain ways, to present one's body in certain ways, and critically, to speak Spanish, and *only* Spanish.

That Iquito individuals ceased speaking Iquito can thus be seen as a strategic response to a racist economic and political system that identified its targets in large part by language use. By ceasing to speak Iquito it became possible to either pass as mestizo or become mestizo. The converse of this, of course, is that speaking an indigenous language makes one an indigenous person, an important point we will return to below.

The legacy of racism and its link to the Iquito language have left a deep mark on the remaining speakers of Iquito. Iquito speakers describe the racist mockery that the use of their language in the presence of mestizos incurred, and some speak of the feeling of shame that speaking Iquito brings even now, although at the conscious level they are proud of the language and are working to see that the language survives. The embodied effects of racism as linked to the Iquito language are a major challenge with which the Iquito project must contend.

The link between the Iquito language and anti-indigenous racism also produces a complex topography of individual attitudes towards the language among the residents of San Antonio, especially among those with mestizo family members.

While language loss is a complex process, the reasons that an indigenous group pursues language revitalization are no less so. Our present understanding of the emergence of a language revitalization movement in San Antonio suggests that it was critically dependent on a re-evaluation of indigenous identity in the community in the 1980s and 1990s. This reevaluation appears to have taken place in no small part because of an opening created by shifting attitudes towards indigenous identity in Loreto as a whole. We now turn to this issue.

The city of Iquitos has always occupied an ambiguous position with respect to the rest of Peru. Until the advent of air travel, journeys between Iquitos and Lima took several dangerous weeks, a state of affairs that led to considerable regional independence from the central government. It is a widespread belief among the residents of the city of Iquitos that their city and region are significantly different from the rest of Peru, and that they are both ignored and exploited by the central government in Lima.

By the mid-1970s this attitude led to the development of strong local political parties that supporting regional autonomy, and to the crystallization of a regional intelligencia that sought to construct a robust local identity rooted in a distinct regional history and culture.

Interestingly, many members of this intelligencia turned to indigenous peoples as an important basis for this regional distinctiveness. In this context, they quickly recognized that the city was named after an indigenous people. The Iquito were subsequently designated the founders of the city of Iquitos, guaranteeing, one might suppose, a distinct, uniquely regional, origin for the city.

This provoked intermittent searches for the Iquito in the surrounding region, leading to the eventual and ironic 'discovery' of the Iquito in San Antonio. Government officials and local intellectuals were delighted to have located the founders of Iquitos, but were, at the same time, alarmed by the dire state of the Iquito language.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the local government and local intellectuals proclaimed the urgency of saving Iquito language and culture, but no concrete steps were taken. Nevertheless, this perceptible shift in attitude towards Iquito culture and language on the part of certain

elements of mestizo society does appear to have played an important role in opening a space for a public discourse in San Antonio about a positive modern indigenous identity.

The local government's recent support of Iquito language and cultural revitalization is both extremely unusual and very helpful to the Iquito project. In Peru, local governments are frequently the most virulently opposed to indigenous rights, and to any support of indigenous language or culture. After all, Local governments are for the most part controlled by local mestizos who have everything to gain by dominating local indigenous groups.

The head of the department of culture and education of the city of Iquitos, Gabel Sotil, has been a strong supporter of the project and is playing an indispensable role in the infrastructure of the project, as Chris will describe.

The mayor of Iquitos, Ivan Vasquez, even came to San Antonio to inaugurate the Iquito Language Center in July, bringing a group of newspaper and radio reporters to cover the event. This event was the occasion for an intense performance of indigenous identity by the residents of San Antonio and was a significant boost to the project and the prestige of the language more generally.

Returning to the historical narrative, the viability of indigenous identity in San Antonio received a huge boost in 1994, when San Antonio obtained a legal title as a *comunidad nativa*, giving the residents of San Antonio legal control over their lands and a governance structure backed by the force of Peruvian law. This move both required an official commitment to some form of indigenous identity and provided concrete and substantial benefits as a consequence, the first such benefit that the Iquito people had ever received from the Peruvian state.

At around the same time, however, the community was struck by a series of malaria epidemics, which resulted in the deaths of a significant fraction of the speakers of Iquito. This catastrophe appears to have shocked many politically prominent members of the community into focusing on the dire state of the Iquito language.

In discussions with Iquito speakers, they clearly articulate that their language is **the** basis of their being Iquito. This position appears to scale up to the level of discourses about the identity of the community, in which it is expressed in various ways that being a community in which Iquito is spoken what makes the community an Iquito community, and more generically, an indigenous community.

Consequently, in this new context, in which an indigenous community identity came to be seen in an increasingly positive light, the foreseeable disappearance of the Iquito language came to be seen as a threat to the community itself.

Very quickly the community leadership, at that time headed by Gabriel Paima, decided that it was imperative to reinstitute bilingual education in San Antonio. Gabriel and other members of the community went to the municipal government to press their case, and found the government very enthusiastic about the idea.

At first, however, the national Ministry of Education was quite resistant to starting a bilingual education program for the Iquito, who did not even show up on the national census of indigenous communities. Iquitos city officials placed heavy and continuous pressure on the Ministerio de Educación, leading in 1999 to the conversion of the primary school in San Antonio to a bilingual one, and the creation of a bilingual high school. At the urging of Gabriel and others, the municipality also paid for the reprinting of bilingual school texts prepared by the SIL in the late 1950s. Furthermore, the municipal government was able to convince the Ministerio de Educación to hire a young Iquito man, *Ciro Panduro Güimack*, as a bilingual schoolteacher, and paid for his training as a teacher during the vacation months. It should be noted that *Ciro* is not a speaker of Iquito, but rather obtained his position in virtue of his self-identification as Iquito.

In a few short years, then, the community made huge strides in putting into place an infrastructure for bilingual education, and my impression is that the mood in 1999 was quite buoyant in the community.

By 2000, however, cracks and strains had begun to show in this infrastructure, and bilingual education in San Antonio became the focus of increasingly intense conflict within the community. In the eyes of the community the basic problem was that school children were not learning to speak Iquito, and they attributed this primarily to the fact that the bilingual schoolteacher himself did not speak Iquito.

This conflict was also fueled by the fact that *Ciro Panduro Güimack* is a descendant of the very *Güimacks* who had enslaved the Iquito. The fact that now one of the *Güimacks* was spearheading the revitalization of the Iquito language did not sit well with many of the remaining speakers of the language. As one speaker said: ‘First the *Güimacks* told us to that we had to stop speaking our language, and now they are telling us that we have to start speaking it again.’ This led them to essentially refuse to work with *Ciro* in the bilingual school or to help him learn Iquito, further imperiling the bilingual education program.

The *Güimack/ non-Güimack* split is a basic feature of the political landscape in San Antonio, and one that we have had to be careful to straddle in carrying out the project. As *Chris* will discuss in her talk, setting up a democratic steering body for the project that gives equal voice to both segments of the community was an important response to this potentially difficult situation.

By the time *Chris* and I arrived in San Antonio in July 2001, progress in bilingual education in the community had essentially ground to a halt, and criticisms of *Ciro Panduro* were mounting. At the same time that the bilingual education became the focus of increasing criticism, however, it had become a basic presupposition in the community discourse about that bilingual education that its survival, and the maintenance of the Iquito language, was of critical importance.

In retrospect, I believe that the difficulties of the bilingual school in San Antonio played a major role in the community’s enthusiastic response to our offer of linguistic assistance. There was widespread support for bilingual education, and at the same time, a sense that the community lacked the resources to make bilingual education effective. In our offer of technical support, the community saw the opportunity to obtain the resources it needed for successful bilingual education. Consequently, in the agreement between the community and *Cabeceras Aid Project*,

and in the decisions made by the project steering body, which Chris will be discussing shortly, the emphasis is placed on the preparation of useful materials and the teaching of Iquito to community members – especially the young.

When Chris Beier, Lynda De Jong, Mark Brown, and I arrived in San Antonio this June, the disputes over bilingual education had become even more severe, and we at times had to exert great care in managing our own position with respect to the contending groups within the community. Nevertheless, there was enthusiastic and almost unanimous support for the project from everyone in the community. Thus, although there was substantial disagreement about the bilingual school, there was a broad consensus that the Iquito project was a huge step forward in securing the survival of the Iquito language. Consequently, although there was intense maneuvering with respect to the project by differing segments of the community, there was never any wavering of support for the goals of the project.

In conclusion, it is possible to see the Iquito Project as shaped by 4 major factors:

- 1) The legacy of anti-indigenous racism – which includes Iquito language loss and the significant political splits within the community
- 2) The ongoing revalorization of indigenous identity in San Antonio and the associated support for language revitalization
- 3) Regional support for Iquito language and culture
- 4) The continuing challenge of implementing effective bilingual education in San Antonio

These factors will no doubt continue exert their influences on the progress of the Iquito project, and probably in some unexpected ways. Chris, Lynda, Mark, and I are very optimistic about the future of the project, however, and perhaps this time next year we can bring you all up to date on how the project has evolved.