

# INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN COSTA RICA: THE CASE OF BORUCA

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## ABSTRACT

The number of indigenous languages through out the world gets reduced everyday despite the effort of authorities, indigenous groups and other people who are interested in preserving them. In Costa Rica there are 6 indigenous groups which exhibit very different conditions in terms of their use of the language, their traditions and their number of speakers, among others. In 1995, The Board of Education in Costa Rica created a Department of Indigenous Education. This Department is in charge of dealing with all matters related to the teaching and learning of these languages in this country. Although there have been efforts trying to maintain and strengthen the languages, these efforts have met endogenous and exogenous difficulties that result in weakening and even loss of the languages. This explains what happened to Boruca, one of the indigenous languages of Costa Rica which can now be considered an extinct language. In spite of the efforts from institutions and researchers, this language has not been able to survive the pressure of the Spanish influence and now can be added to the list of languages that disappear. A lot of effort is required so that the other languages in the area do not face this same situation.

Although the Costa Rican territory is said to be small when compared with other Latin American countries, we still enjoy an interesting variety of indigenous languages. Six indigenous languages are officially acknowledged in Costa Rica: maleku in the northern part of the country, bribri and cabecar in the southern Caribbean region and guaymí, terraba and boruca in the Southern Pacific. It should be acknowledged that there is a group of miskitos who have migrated to the country and also there is a group of bugles who people tend to associate with the guaymí, although they clearly represent a different group.

These various groups enjoy different degrees of vitality in their languages. Among the groups, you can find languages that are still very strong like is the case of the guaymí, cabecar and bribri. These languages still exhibit a very strong condition that is evident through the use of the languages even by the youngest generation and through the use of their traditional outfit by men and women in the case of guaymí. At the other end of the continuum you find the case of Boruca, a language that is already considered a dead language. In this case, the language is not spoken in the community, there are only a few people who can, with some difficulty, read texts written in Boruca, or create simple, isolated sentences using this language.

In the last decades, there has been a more serious attempt on the part of the national authorities in relation to the teaching of indigenous languages in Costa Rica. In the late 1990s, the University of Costa Rica started a program in the Boruca community with the idea of teaching Boruca to its members. Then, in 1995 the Department of Indigenous Education was created as part of the Board of Education and they have, since then, assumed the role of facilitating and coordinating all matters related to the teaching and learning of indigenous languages through out the country. In Costa Rica there is a total of 24 indigenous territories. In this moment, the

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Board of Education works in such a way that most of these territories have access to some type of education in their indigenous language. As mentioned above, the conditions vary from one territory to the other and from one kid to the next. Carmen Rojas (2006: 268)<sup>1</sup> mentions that in some cases the kids speak only their native indigenous language, others might be bilingual (in two indigenous languages), others might speak only Spanish or they might speak an indigenous language and be able to understand some Spanish; and so on.

This year there is a total of 107 teachers working with this program through out the country. Students have access to 5 lessons (of 40 minutes each) a week. From these lessons 3 are “language lessons” and two are “indigenous culture” lessons, which are also taught in the native language.<sup>2</sup> The chart below presents different information related to the teaching of indigenous languages in the different indigenous territories. In the first column you see the name of the indigenous group, in the second column you see the population in each group and the last two columns show the distribution of teachers and the number of schools that are part of this program.

Language	Population <sup>1</sup>	Number of Teachers <sup>2</sup>	Schools
Cabecar	9861	51	71
Bribri	9636	31	49
Guaymi	2563	15	24
Boruca	2017	4	9
Terraba	621	2	3
Malecu	460	2	2
Huetar	1006	1	4
Chorotega	868	1	2
Total	27032	107	164

The information about population that is given in this chart is taken from the last census which took place in 2000 and it refers to the number of indigenous people who live inside the indigenous reserves. The exact number of speakers of each language is not given, some numbers have been found to be inaccurate; mainly if considered the fact that some of the responses that were given cannot be true; for example, having a number of speakers for Huetar or Chorotega; both languages that have been extinct for sometime now. The information in columns 3 and 4 corresponds to the current number of teachers and schools which are part of the program in 2007; it includes both language and culture teachers. As the chart shows the number of teachers does not always match the number of schools, meaning that sometimes teachers have to work in more than one school.

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1 Rojas, Carmen. (2006). Actitudes hacia la enseñanza de las lenguas indígenas. LETRAS, 39.

2 <http://www.unesco.or.cr/portalcultural/lenguas1.pdf>. Retrieved October 2, 2007, 8:35 a.m.

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Rojas (2006) mentions some of the main characteristics that the program has. It many times comes as a response to explicit requests from the members of the communities who want to preserve/learn the language. This has resulted in a positive attitude from the participants (kids mostly). Another important aspect is that most of the teachers who are part of the program are fluent speakers of the language and are aware of the culture and traditions of the group, although unfortunately in most cases they do not have academic background and do not have a degree in teaching. This takes us to some of the downfalls that Rojas (2006) pinpoints: some parents complain that the teachers are not fully qualified to teach the language, some say that the teachers do not speak the language “correctly” (maybe due to dialectal variation), some others are afraid that the kids will not learn enough Spanish or that they might not receive an adequate number of lessons in the other subjects, which they consider to be unnecessary since their kids already speak the indigenous language.

So, it is evident that there have been some efforts in relation to the teaching and preservation of indigenous languages in Costa Rica. However, there is still a lot to be done in this regards. A clear example for that is the case of Boruca, which despite the efforts of some people, can now be considered an extinct language.

### The case of Boruca

The Boruca indigenous group is located south of Costa Rica, in the province of Puntarenas, area of Buenos Aires. The people are divided mainly in two reserves: Boruca and Curré. The language once spoken by the Boruca people is now considered a dead language, despite the efforts.

Even when the access to the reserve during the rainy season can be somewhat difficult, many changes have reached the town of Boruca. With the growth in population, urbanization is clearly evident in the area, also giving way to a more modern infrastructure. A series of governmental urbanization projects have resulted in proliferation of cemented houses that offer all types of comfort. **Ranchos** are not commonly seen but they can still be found around the Boruca community and they are used so that the families can enjoy a cool space during the hot months. One in particular stands out; it is the one where the Museo Comunitario Indígena de Boruca is located. There, the proud Borucas exhibit their artcrafts and show the visitors that some of their traditions and customs are still alive today.

As has been the tradition in this group, the most important economic activity is associated to their artcrafts. The Borucas consider themselves very good artists. They are very proud of their craftsmanship and many make a decent living out of it. Sometimes, entire families work together to create souvenirs that are later sold to visitors, sent to San Jose or distributed among some of

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the resorts in the area. Women, mainly, work hand-woven products: bags, purses, hats, belts and others. Men, on the other hand, work the wood. They create wooden masks and other wooden products that are also sold in the national market. When asked about the main occupation for the people in the town, one Boruca woman said, that some people also work in education and older people dedicate their time to the land. This can be confirmed in the landscape and in their diet. Many of the families harvest most of the products they consume such as beans and corn, along with many of the traditional roots that are common in their diet, such as *yuca*, *tiquisque* and sweet potato. Another traditional activity that they still practice on December 31<sup>st</sup> in their *Fiesta de los Diablitos* ('Little Devils Festival'), in which they celebrate "their belief in the mythological god Tatica Kuasran and his son Sancrawa."<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, this tradition and their famous crafts are the only representatives from their past.

In terms of the family dynamics, these are clearly marked by a patriarchal relation. Men are more respected than women and have the final word in family matters. Marriage is not the only type of relation that is observed. Couples decide whether they want to officially get married or if they live together before getting married. In terms of religion, most people are catholic although some people participate of evangelical/ protestant services. There is no evidence for original Boruca religious practices. The oldest Boruca semi-speakers say they have always been Catholic.

Regarding genetic affiliation of the language, Boruca is a Chibchan language. The original territory of this family was the present-day Costa Rican-Panama border zone; along the Talamanca mountain range. Due to north and southbound migratory movements this territory has expanded (Constenla, 1991 and Fonseca and Cooke, 1993)<sup>4</sup>, although, not affecting the Boruca original location. According to Quesada (2007:31-40)<sup>5</sup>, the Chibchan family is a large language family that is now distributed along the countries of Honduras, Nicaragua, most of Costa Rica, and areas of Panamá, Colombia and Venezuela. The Chibchan family is in turn divided into the Paya and the Southern languages. The latter are split into the Pota, Isthmian and Magdalenian languages. The Boruca language comes from the Isthmian branch and, like Teribe and Cuna, has no immediate sister languages. According to Quesada (2007), the other members of the Isthmian branch are the Bribri and Cabécar (in the Viceita branch), the Guaymí and Bocotá (in the Guaymian branch) and the deceased Chánguena and Dorasque (in the Doracic branch). Except for the Cunas and the members of the Doracic branch, the rest of languages are spoken in Costa Rican territory (plus the Guatuso, from the Pota group).<sup>6</sup>

3 INEC. Instituto Nacional en Estadística y Censo. Censo 2000.

4 Departamento de Educación Indígena. Ministerio de Educación Pública. October, 2007.

5 <http://www.workingabroad.com/page/30/kan-tan-costa-rica.htm>

6 Constenla Adolfo. 1991. *Las lenguas del Área Intermedia*. San José: Editorial Universidad de Costa Rica. Fonseca, Oscar & Richard Cooke. 1993. *El sur de América Central: contribución al estudio de la región histórica chibcha*, in Carmack, Robert (ed). *Historia General de Centroamérica*. Vol. 1:217-282. Madrid: FLAC-SO.

Several people have done research about Boruca in the past. There exists some variety of literature pertinent to Boruca, its language and culture. It basically consists of a few descriptive studies related to linguistic aspects of the language and a series of compilations of narrative works. Espíritu Santo Maroto, a native speaker of the language was as a self-taught linguist. His efforts to keep the language alive were evident through his constant compilation of grammatical aspects and traditional legends of Boruca, written both in Spanish and Boruca and which resulted in the publication of a book.<sup>7</sup> He also worked as an informant to linguists from the University of Costa Rica and other researchers interested in Boruca; like is the case of Constenla, who also contributed to the preservation of the language and culture through his publication *Leyendas y Tradiciones Borucas* (1986)<sup>8</sup>. Other work was done by Quesada Pacheco, a non-native, fluent Boruca speaker himself. In 1995, he published a small book that offers a compact course of Boruca.<sup>9</sup> Along with Quesada<sup>10</sup> he also wrote a linguistic analysis of the particle *ki* (*qui*) and its various uses in Boruca; he worked in the compilation of Boruca legends in his *Narraciones Borucas*,<sup>11</sup> he also wrote an article on adjective use<sup>12</sup> and together with Rojas, he published a Boruca- Spanish/ Spanish Boruca dictionary.<sup>13</sup>

The latest linguistic work has been done by Quesada and it represents various topics that go from topicality<sup>14</sup> to subject coding<sup>15</sup> and grammaticalization<sup>16</sup> among others. In his article, *Adiós Boruca, Sibú ki ba wí'ra moreng*,<sup>17</sup> a description of Boruca related literature is given.

In terms of the sociolinguistics of the language, the last native speaker of the language died in 2003, which means that the language reached the highest point in its way to extinction. Currently there are only two semi-speakers of the language. These elder, semi-speakers grew up having some type of contact with the language; however it was not strong enough for this

7 Quesada, P., J. Diego. *The Chibchan Languages*. (Cartago: Editorial Tecnológica de Costa Rica, 2007).

8 For further, detailed information see Quesada 2007.

9 Maroto, Rojas, Espíritu Santo. *Lengua o dialecto Boruca*. (Miguel Quesada Pacheco, Ed). (San José, Editorial Universidad de Costa Rica, 1999)

10 Constenla, Adolfo y Espíritu Santo Maroto. *Leyendas y tradiciones borucas*. (San José: Editorial Universidad de Costa Rica, 1986)

11 Quesada P., Miguel A. *Hablemos Boruca: (Chá din div tégat tegrá)*. (Ministerio de Educación Pública, Departamento de Educación Indígena, 1995)

12 Quesada, J. Diego y Miguel A. Quesada Pacheco. (1995). "Boruca ki: de definido a específico y la hipótesis de las funciones contiguas". *Estudios de Lingüística Chibcha* 14: 89-99.

13 Quesada P., Miguel A. *Shán rojc brúncajc rójc: Narraciones Borucas*. (San José, Editorial Universidad de Costa Rica, 1996)

14 Quesada Pacheco, Miguel. (1997-1998). "El adjetivo boruca". *Estudios de Lingüística Chibcha* 16-17: 157-165.

15 Quesada P., Miguel A., and Rojas, Carmen. *Diccionario Boruca- Español, Español- Boruca*. (San José: Editorial de la Universidad de Costa Rica, 1999)

16 Quesada, J. Diego. (1996) "Topicalidad y enfoque en boruca: el caso de ang." *Estudios de Lingüística Chibcha* 15: 43-58.

17 \_\_\_\_\_ . (2001). "En route to subject-coding: Evidence from Boruca". *Theoretical Linguistics* 27: 55-86.

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language to be the first and most important mean of oral communication. These semi-speakers are: Don Nemesio González (age 82) and Doña Angela González (74), whom, according to the former, “does not speak the language correctly.” In the particular case of Don Nemesio for a long time he had the support of his wife Doña Eligia, who passed away in August 2007. Sadly, many people in the community who claim to understand the language still cannot produce sentences or even phrases in Boruca. Spanish is, by far, the language they prefer to use. Throughout the years there seems to have existed a sense of shame towards Boruca. As was mentioned before, some efforts have been made to maintain the language but they have not been enough. With a big smile on his face Don Nemesio recalls how, whenever his teacher caught him speaking Boruca, the teacher would punish him, to the point that Don Nemesio had to escape from him so that this did not happen. Now, students are given the chance to learn the language and it is them who try to “escape” from this situation.

Before I have used the term semi-speaker to refer to the surviving speakers of Boruca. For Quesada (2000)<sup>18</sup> a semi-speaker is defined as an individual who shows “an imperfect command of the language because it was not the first and more/most important language in early infancy”. If we think of anecdote mentioned above we could conclude that even when Boruca was an important language for the semi-speakers, they had to use Spanish to satisfy the demands of the people in higher ranking positions. According to Fasold (1984: 213)<sup>19</sup>, “language death occurs when a community shifts to a new language totally so that the old language is not longer used.” This author goes on to mention some causes for the occurrence of language shift; these include such things as governmental and school policies, which can be reflected in fewer youngsters using the language in opposition to larger numbers of elders. This leads us to type of death that took place in Boruca. Quesada, along the lines of Campbell & Muntzel (1989), describes this death as a **radical death**, which is reached when “the speakers stop using their language as a means of self defense” (p. 6), like seem to have been the situation in the Boruca.

The constant use of Spanish reflects the attitude of the Borucas towards their former language. They feel it is normal for everybody there to speak Spanish and that they think that they really do not need Boruca to succeed in any field. Interestingly enough, what is new now is the fact that the language has been given a new function: the Boruca language is used as **secret code**. The semispeakers Don Nemesio and Doña Eligia said that they know there are people in their community who understand the language, so they use it with these people when they do not want others to know what they are saying. She recalled a situation where they saw a man trying

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18 \_\_\_\_\_, (2000b). “The grammaticalization of SPECIFICITY (and beyond) in Boruca”. *International Journal of American Linguistics (IJAL)* 66 (3): 549-562.

19 \_\_\_\_\_, (2001-2). “Adiós boruca: Sibú ki ba wí?ra moréng...” *Estudios de Lingüística Chibcha* 20-21: 55-64.

20 Quesada, Juan Diego. (2000a). “Synopsis of a Boruca terminal speaker”. *Amerindia* 25: 65-86.

21 Fasold, Ralph. (1984). *The sociolinguistics of Society*. New York: Basil Blackwell Inc.

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to pickpocket a lady friend from the community and by using Boruca they warned the victim in order to stop the mugging. While being in the reserve I experienced this use of the language by the younger generations who used the language to name actions /objects. Several words are used in Boruca when outsiders are present and they want to stop them from understanding their conversation.

Even when, as mentioned earlier, there are language and culture classes in the elementary school, this has not been enough for children to become fully identified with the language and so they still use Spanish constantly. This, added to the fact that they receive Boruca lessons in elementary school but not in high school where they rather take English classes anyway; specially if they consider the fact that their products are bought by tourists mainly. In summary, as we have seen, various aspects led to the extinction of the Boruca language, a lot of work needs to be done so that this does not happen to the other languages in Costa Rica.