

# **Linguistic Diversity and Cultural Identity: Unraveling the Complexities of the Murui-Muina Dialect Continuum in the Colombian Amazon**

Katarzyna I. Wojtylak  
(University of Warsaw)

**Keywords:** <linguistic diversity, cultural identity, Murui-Muina, Colombian Amazon, dialect continuum>

This study investigates the linguistic diversity and cultural dynamics of the Murui-Muina people in the Colombian Amazon, focusing on what in the literature has been called "Witoto" language (Aikhenvald 2012). The research question addresses the classification of the Murui-Muina dialect continuum (spoken by some 3,000 people) as a family of dialects or languages, and the implications of this classification on their cultural identity (Petersen de Piñeros, 1994, Echeverri 1997, Wojtylak 2020).

Against the backdrop of identity politics in South America, where indigenous communities strive to reclaim their language and identity, the Murui-Muina present a unique case. Unlike the trend of unification seen in other indigenous groups (i.e. creating a standardized language to promote unity), the Murui-Muina acknowledge their common cultural identity while embracing four ethnolinguistic identities—Murui, Míka, Miníka, and Nipode. The paper delves into the historical context of the Murui-Muina, tracing their roots to the Amazonian Rubber Boom period and the subsequent Colombo-Peruvian border conflict (e.g., Hardenburg, 1912, Gómez, Lesmes and Rocha, 1995). It explores the impact of external influences, such as missionary activities and European languages, on the indigenous communities of Northwest Amazonia (e.g., von Martius 1867, Whiffen, 1915, Bonilla, 1972, Burgos, 1994, Fagua Rincón 2015). The Murui-Muina's response to today's identity politics involves seeking an internal division into distinct ethnolinguistic groups at the national level, while unifying on the clan level through the standardization of clanolectal variation (cf. Watters, 2019).

This study addresses key topics: language policy regarding minority languages in South America, the historical context of the Murui-Muina, their traditional views on cultural and ethnic identity, and the challenges of reclaiming language identity in the face of external pressures. The approach involves a comprehensive analysis of the historical, environmental, and socio-political factors influencing the linguistic and cultural landscape of the Murui-Muina community within Colombia. The method includes first-hand ethnographic fieldwork, linguistic data analysis, and linguistic documentation of traditional narratives. The data comprises linguistic corpora and historical records to provide a holistic understanding of the Murui-Muina community. The expected results aim to shed light on the intricate relationship between linguistic diversity, cultural identity, and environmental and economic factors, offering valuable insights into the complex dynamics of the Murui-Muina community in the Colombian Amazon. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the Murui-Muina community's linguistic and cultural heritage, providing a foundation for future research and policy initiatives aimed at preserving their unique cultural and linguistic traditions.

## **Acknowledgments**

This work was supported by a SONATA 16 grant, National Science Centre (NCN) Grant no. 2020/39/D/HS2/00783.

## References

Aikhenvald, Alexandra Y. 2012. *The languages of the Amazon*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bonilla, Víctor Daniel. 1972. *Servants of God or masters of men? The story of a Capuchin mission in Amazonia*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Burgos, Manuel. 1994. "The Witotos and the Rubber Boom: The silent genocide. A Study through the *Chronicles of Explorers of the Amazon Basin*." In *The Amazonian Chronicles*, edited by J. Meunier and A. M. Savarin. San Francisco: Mercury House.

Echeverri, Juan Alvaro. 1997. "The people of the center of the world. A study in culture, history and orality in the Colombian Amazon." PhD dissertation, New School for Social Research.

Fagua Rincón, Doris. 2015. "Documentación de las prácticas lingüísticas y socioculturales de la Gente de centro, Amazonia noroccidental." *Mundo Amazónico* 6 (1):129-146.

Gómez, Augusto, Ana Cristina Lesmes, and Claudia Rocha. 1995. *Caucherías y conflicto colomboperuano: Testimonios 1904-1934*. Santafé de Bogotá: Disloque Editores.

Hardenbough, Walter Ernest. 1912. *The Putumayo: The Devil's Paradise. Travels in the Peruvian Amazon region and an account of the atrocities committed upon the Indians therein*. London: T. Fisher Unwin.

Petersen de Piñeros, Gabriele. 1994. *La lengua uitoto en la obra de K. Th. Preuss: Aspectos fonológicos y morfosintácticos*. Bogotá: Editorial Universidad Nacional.

von Martius, Karl Friedrich Philip. 1867. *Beiträge zur Ethnographie und Sprachenkunde Amerikas zumal Brasiliens. Glossaria linguarum Brasiliensium*. Vol. II. Leipzig: Friedrich Fleischer.

Watters, Stephen. 2019. "Linguistic Identity and Dialect Diversity: A Conundrum with Regard to Magar Kham." In *Language and Identity in a Multilingual, Migrating World*, edited by J. Stephen Quakenbush and Gary F Simons.

Whiffen, Thomas. 1915. *The North-West Amazon: Notes of some months spent among cannibal tribes*. London: Constable and Company.

Wojtylak, Katarzyna I. (2020). *A Grammar of Murui (Bue): A Witotoan Language from Northwest Amazonia*. Leiden: Brill.