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Ulwa, the language of Karawala, eastern Nicaragua: its position and prospects in modern Nicaragua¹

THOMAS GREEN and KENNETH HALE

Abstract

Until 1950, Ulwa, or southern Sumu, was the primary language of the eastern Nicaraguan town of Karawala, population 935. In 1950, the Nolan Lumber Company came to Karawala, drastically changing the linguistic picture through the introduction of a sizable Miskitu-speaking work force. Since the people of Karawala were bilingual in Ulwa and Miskitu, the shift to Miskitu on the part of the whole town was not a hardship. But the shift had serious consequences for Ulwa. At this point, only 18 percent of the population under 20 years of age speaks Ulwa. This fact has not gone unnoticed by the Ulwa people of the town, and they have taken steps to address the matter, both by documenting the grammar, lexicon, and oral literature of the language and by giving serious consideration to measures that might be taken to stop the decline of Ulwa. This article describes the condition of Ulwa and the processes leading to its present state, as well as the work of linguistics and UYUTMUBAL, the six-member Ulwa Language Committee, to develop materials and strategies for strengthening the position of Ulwa in the Karawala community.

Introduction

On the banks of a small tributary, near the mouth of the Rio Grande de Matagalpa in the Southern Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAS) of Nicaragua, lies the indigenous community of Karawala. By appearances, it is just another one of dozens of similar Miskitu villages in the coastal region. Along the footpaths and in the churches, the school, the clinic, and most of the houses, somewhat over a hundred in number, the language of Karawala for young and old alike is Miskitu. However, ask anyone you meet and they will probably tell you they are Ulwa. And this is what separates Karawala from its neighbors and makes it unlike

any other town in the world. Today the Ulwa language lies dormant but by no means dead in the minds of hundreds of Karawala residents, mostly middle-aged and older, who learned it as their first language but have not used it regularly in decades.

By contrast, inside a small building on the northern side of town, the Ulwa language, once spoken by thousands of people throughout a huge area of central and eastern Nicaragua, reigns once again. This is the office and meeting house of the Ulwa Language Committee (called locally CODIUL, from the Spanish name *Comité del Idioma Ulwa*, and UYUTMUBAL, from the Ulwa name *Ulwah Yulka Tunak Muihka Balna* or 'head people of the Ulwa language'), whose members gather here each day in their continuing struggle to revive their mother tongue, documenting it with dictionary entries and texts, creating school materials for an eventual bilingual program, and coordinating the town's efforts to reincorporate the language into their daily lives. Only if the Karawala rescue project is successful will future Ulwa generations be able to carry on with full understanding and pride their pre-Columbian heritage.

Background and early history

Ulwa is the southern member of the Sumu language subfamily. It is not mutually intelligible with its northern sister, the Mayangna language, spoken in northeastern Nicaragua (in two dialects, Panamahka and Twahka) and in eastern Honduras (where it is known as Tawahka). The Sumu group as a whole is a relative of Miskitu, the dominant indigenous language of the Caribbean coastal regions of Nicaragua and Honduras. Miskitu and the two Sumu languages, Mayangna and Ulwa, are the living members of the small Misumalpan linguistic family. This family is not known to have any close linguistic relatives, though it is included in the Macro-Chibchan phylum by some scholars and thereby tenuously linked to Rama, the sole Chibchan language of Nicaragua (cf. Craig 1987).

It is impossible to determine with real accuracy the demographics of the native populations of Nicaragua at the time of European contact. However, from the sparse historical accounts available we can say with confidence that the Ulwa were an inland people, concentrated mainly along the river systems of the Río Grande and the Río Escondido and their large and important tributaries. Their territory covered most of the interior of what is now the RAAS. Their neighbors to the east were the coastal Kukra, now extinct, whose language shared enough features with Ulwa to permit us to assert that Ulwa and Kukra together constituted

the southern branch of the Sumu subfamily. To the west, Ulwa extended beyond the boundaries of the RAAS, into Chontales, Boaco, and Matagalpa. Direct linguistic records from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries — a handful of reliable wordlists collected along the western fringes of the region (Lehmann 1920; Kiene 1962; Froebel 1978 [1850]) — leave no doubt that the language spoken there was, at least during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an Ulwa strikingly close to the dialect that still exists today in Karawala.

We estimate that Ulwa country at the time of European contact covered an area of some 20,000 square kilometers of the Caribbean coastal plain, rising into the central highlands along the western fringe. The people were hunters, fishers, and expert river navigators, and they possessed an agricultural tradition that was based on the staple root crops sweet manioc and yautía, but also included maize, beans, and fruit trees such as papaya, avocado, guava, and the pijibay palm. There was no major hierarchical political structure; the various Ulwa bands lived seminomadically, following the game and fish supply while maintaining plantations and dwellings in multiple locations (Wickham 1894).

Although we cannot determine with accuracy the Ulwa population in the westernmost reaches of the territory attributed to them, recent estimates of precontact and colonial-period population densities in the Caribbean coastal plain of Nicaragua (Newson 1987) suggest that the Ulwa may have numbered 10,000 in that part of their domain. Adding to this an estimated 5,000 for the western sector, the total Ulwa population of the precontact period was approximately 16 times that of the present-day Ulwa town of Karawala (935 inhabitants). And, assuming the precontact estimate to represent the population actually using Ulwa as a first language, the number of speakers of Ulwa was then nearly 43 times the figure of 351 obtained in a language census recently carried out in Karawala by the Ulwa Language Committee (Green i.p.). It is not known how many Ulwa speakers live outside Karawala, generally viewed now as the principal, some say only, Ulwa-speaking community. Even in the unlikely event that the actual total number of Ulwa speakers is twice or even three times that of the Karawala census itself, this amounts to a drastic reduction in numbers, especially for a language that once predominated in an area the size of Massachusetts. Sadly, however, the fortunes of the Ulwa people and language do not represent an unusual circumstance in Central America or in the Western Hemisphere generally.

The historic period

The nature of the European influence on the Ulwa population following the first contact in the 1500s differed markedly on the Pacific and Atlantic

sides of the territory. Newson (1987: 105) estimates that in the early years of Spanish conquest from 1527 to 1542, the conquistadors exported 500,000 slaves from Nicaragua (nearly all from the Pacific or central highland region) to supply labor in the Caribbean islands, Panama, and the newly discovered Peru. The slave trade was then outlawed, and by the time the Spanish were making real incursions into the western part of Ulwa territory, their emphasis was on acquiring land for commercial agriculture and inducing the various roaming bands to accumulate into "reductions" or settlement camps so they could be more easily catholicized, taxed, and used for labor.

Meanwhile, the settlement of English traders on the Atlantic coast and the subsequent rise of the Miskitu as armed English allies and trading middlemen brought about great changes from the east. By the eighteenth century, frequent Miskitu slaving raids had forced the Ulwa to retreat far inland, especially those along the major Río Grande and Escondido systems. Their large expanse of inland territory allowed much of the Ulwa population to escape slavery, death by violence and disease, and Miskitu assimilation, while their Kukra kin along the coast were already approaching extinction by 1800 (Roberts 1966: 26). The nineteenth century, however, brought with it the end of the slave trade and the arrival of the Moravian missionaries and the North American banana, lumber, rubber, and chicle companies, and the Coast region became a safer place to live and more attractive economically. At the same time, the pressures of agricultural expansion from the west were becoming unupportable. The nonstationary subsistence lifestyle of the Ulwa left settlements and plantations vacant and unguarded during extended periods, making it all the more easy for advancing mestizo farmers to take over their lands. The following paragraph tells the story in the words of an Ulwa man whom Kiene (1962: 50) met along the Río Grande near the Olama River. Kiene's orthography is modified to conform to that used by the Ulwa Language Committee:

Yang andih asang âka tukwikda. Yang âka malai, wilis, waki, ingkinih, tisanak, saring, sûpa, sau tukwikda. Mâmâka as mâmâka bû, mâmâka mahka watah yang. Mâ as, muih luih yawikdana was araka yau dí kasnaka walna. Waiku bâs watdi wikdana asangki âkau una balna û yamdida, diki luih, amang aisau, luih îna.

'I used to work this land. I cultivated manioc, yautia, plantains, bananas, sugarcane, avocados, and pijibay here. I had this land for one year, two years, many years. One day, we all went downriver to look for food. Three months later when we got back, the Spanish had built a house here and taken possession of everything we had, without any respect or consideration.'

The experience related here, and certainly many others much worse, led some inland Ulwa groups to descend the rivers eastward seeking land and work. Such was the case with the initial settlers of Karawala, for, although it would seem that Karawala is the last stronghold of the Ulwa people, its coastal location is probably not within traditional Ulwa territory, and in any case, the current inhabitants are relative newcomers to the area. The oral history recorded by Knight (1991) maintains that the founders of Karawala were seven Ulwa families who, fleeing the "Spanish" (i.e. intruders from western Nicaragua), descended from the upper Río Grande in the 1890s. Palombieri (1967) notes also that at about the same time a parallel migration occurred from the headwaters of the Río Mico down to Mahogany Creek, a small southern affluent of the Escondido. This group may be the descendents of the people whom Froebel encountered to the west, in Chontales, in the nineteenth century (Froebel 1978 [1850]).

Although the historical record is not particularly detailed, the overall picture is clear. Like other inland peoples of eastern Nicaragua, the Ulwa experienced some pressure from the Spanish in the west during the early colonial period, although they largely escaped the forces that devastated the peoples of the Pacific Coast. Pressure from the east was ultimately greater, coming from the militarily powerful Miskitu allies of the English and forcing the Ulwa to keep to the isolated interior portions of their territory. Thus, in both cases, by virtue of the physical space available to them, the Ulwa were able to avoid the full impact of the effects of colonial-period slavery, violence, and disease. But their lands were reduced nonetheless, and they were not able to forestall for long domination by populations from elsewhere — Miskitu from the east, Spanish-speaking Nicaraguans from the west. The Olama text quoted above represents this last source of pressure. The net result of these pressures is the present-day circumstance that finds the largest concentration of Ulwa people in a town outside their original country and in possession of a language, Miskitu, not originally their own.

Karawala

The fact that Karawala is the only significant Ulwa population center with a coherent group of speakers suggests that it is the last hope for a revival of the language. However, the language of the town is effectively Miskitu, and moreover the townspeople show strong tendencies of conversion to Creole English. Hale (1991: 31) reports that a survey of Karawala schoolchildren determined that fewer than 20 percent of these

use Ulwa to communicate with any of their relatives or friends. According to preliminary results of a comprehensive census of the town taken by the Ulwa Language Committee in 1995, Karawala has 935 inhabitants, 85 percent of whom have some Ulwa “blood,” using this term in literal translation of the Ulwa *âwas*, the term used by the Committee to refer to the ethnic identity of a person as inherited from his or her parents and grandparents. Using the same measure, Miskitu ethnicity in Karawala is only slightly weaker, at 75 percent. Linguistically, however, Karawala is 96 percent Miskitu (with 896 speakers), and only 38 percent Ulwa (with 351 speakers). The relative linguistic dominance of Miskitu is not a static state, moreover. It reflects an ongoing shift in the linguistic practices of Karawala. Of Karawala residents aged 40 years and over, a full 79 percent are fluent Ulwa speakers, while only 18 percent of the younger population (under 20 years of age) speaks Ulwa. There is also a Mayangna neighborhood in Karawala, with 77 speakers.

This was not always so, of course. It is a relatively recent development, although from the very beginning, there were many factors promoting the use of Miskitu in Karawala — even the name of the town is of Miskitu origin (*kâra* ‘silkgrass’ and *wâla* ‘other’), an indicator of the Miskitu supremacy in the region at the time Karawala was named. Miskitu was and still is the principal language of the fairly densely populated zone around the mouth of the Río Grande, and it is the dominant indigenous language of the coast as a whole. As pointed out by many (cf. Gurdián and Salamanca 1991: 1; Norwood 1993: 56–58), the historical Miskitu association with the English gave them a higher position on the ethnic hierarchy of the Atlantic Coast, and use of the Miskitu language would have been a first step toward greater economic mobility for the Sumu, who found themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy along with the Rama. The Moravian missionaries used Miskitu in church and school services, which not only augmented its prestige but provided greater exposure to the language.

The linguistic turning point in Karawala history appears to have been in 1950, when the Nolan Lumber Company built a sawmill there and caused major alterations in the demographic and economic profile of the town. To better understand the changes that took place in the Nolan era, it is helpful to have a sketch of the linguistic situation in Karawala on the eve of the American company’s arrival.

Older residents say that Karawala had a population of approximately 400 before the arrival of the lumber company, and that at the time the primary language of the community was Ulwa. One of the members of the Ulwa Language Committee, Abanel Lacayo, provides us with an informative example. Lacayo, born in 1934, is of mixed Ulwa, Mayangna,

and Garifuna ancestry. Although his family spoke only Mayangna and Miskitu at home, and he grew up in the Mayangna neighborhood, he had become a fluent speaker of Ulwa before the age of 15 simply due to use of Ulwa in the course of everyday social contact outside the home. That would have been 1949, immediately before the arrival of Nolan.

By then, all men were fluent speakers of Miskitu. And after a half-century of Miskitu religious instruction and exposure to the language in other contexts, most women were fully proficient as well. Ulwa was, however, the dominant household language of the town. As many as 80 percent of all families used Ulwa as their primary language, and all children in these families spoke Ulwa with native proficiency. The sharp gender-based differences in labor practices and social mobility ensured that girls and women of these families remained strongly Ulwa-dominant, while boys would become proficient in Miskitu probably by the time they reached adolescence. Mayangna had a similar "family language" status for roughly 20 percent of the town. However, among the two Sumu languages of Karawala, Ulwa clearly prevailed, and its status was strong enough that even boys from non-Ulwa families learned it, as in Lacayo's case. The isolated setting of the community and the fact that the transmission of native language depended primarily on the mother leads us to believe that the situation as it stood before 1950 had reached a more or less stable state of bilingualism, similar to that which still holds today in many Mayangna Sumu villages to the north. The much-documented Sumu tradition of endogamy (Castillo and Zurita 1984: 29) would have helped to maintain the status quo.

A fateful year, 1950

In 1950, the Nolan Lumber Company (of US ownership) began an extensive operation in Karawala. A large steam-powered sawmill was set up near the landing of the Mayangna neighborhood, and a Miskitu and Creole labor force was brought in to supplement the local supply of workers. Logs of pine were cut from the large pine forests farther up the Río Grande and floated down from Makantaka (about 50 km upriver) to Karawala, where the sawmill worked 24 hours a day. The cut lumber was then shipped in flatboats out to a small group of islands some 15 km off the coast, known as the Man O'War Cays, to be loaded onto ocean-going vessels too large to enter the river. Karawala quickly became a bustling company town, with some ten shops, of which eight were of Chinese ownership, a cinema, and a constant flow of immigrants, mostly Miskitos and Creoles. An airstrip was cleared and commercial flights

landed three times a day; one could buy a plane ticket to fly to Karawala on the airline La Nica (Pataky 1956: 34).

The town was visited in 1953 by László Pataky, who wrote about it in his *Nicaragua Desconocida* (1956). As the sawmill was located in the Mayangna neighborhood, Pataky, noting the division, referred to the Ulwa section of the community (downstream) as “Karawala Viejo” ‘Old Karawala,’ with a population of 370, and considered the Mayangna end of town (“Karawala Nuevo”) to be simply a product of the lumber business. And this was basically correct, as the neighborhood had swelled to 140 houses and 800 people: “blacks, the so-called Spanish from the interior of Nicaragua, Mosquitos, Sumos and some 60 Chinese merchants, barkeepers and cooks” (Pataky 1956: 34).

Let us now consider the linguistic impact of Nolan’s arrival. First, the influx of workers increased the younger generation’s access to the Miskitu language. Second, and most important, the Sumu-speaking population was now a minority in their own town, and an economically subordinate one at that. The ethnic hierarchy that still holds strongly today in the region was probably the same in 1950, placing the Sumu (Ulwa and Mayangna) at the bottom.

The Sumu population of Karawala now had to confront their ethnic inferiority complex inside their own community as well as outside. They were ashamed to be Sumu and to speak their native Sumu languages, and their incipient bilingualism with Miskitu gave them a choice: become Miskitu and move up in the world, or remain Sumu and stay at the bottom. Many believed that their children would be better off not knowing Ulwa or Mayangna at all. A bilingual situation can remain stable indefinitely, but it also carries with it the potential of instant language death at the whim of the speakers, and this is basically what happened in Karawala. Miskitu was readily accessible, Creole English and Spanish (the next level higher than Miskitu) were not.

The Nolan era lasted only seven years in Karawala, after which the operation was moved up the Río Grande to Makantaka. The shops and cinema closed and the airplanes stopped arriving. Nearly all the immigrants who had been attracted to the sawmill moved on. But the linguistic damage had been done. The language of the town had become Miskitu and there was no will to turn back. Only in a few exceptional cases did Ulwa continue to be spoken. The younger three members of the project, Lorinda Martínez, Francisco Santiago, and Leonzo Knight, are examples of this type of exception. All were born during or after the Nolan years and are strongly native Ulwa speakers. Each grew up either with an especially strong mother figure who insisted on speaking Ulwa with her children, or with an exceptionally monolingual mother who had no

choice. And in the few cases that exist today in which children are learning Ulwa, it is likewise through the influence of an exceptional and determined mother.

Today in the same way that the Sumu town of the early 1900s gradually picked up Miskitu, the modern inhabitants of Karawala, always looking to climb to the next rung of the ladder, are slowly but surely acquiring Creole English and Spanish as second languages. Inter-marriage with other ethnic groups is now common and desired. In 1994, Green witnessed three marriages in Karawala, and in each case an Ulwa woman from Karawala married a Creole man from outside. The Miskitu-speaking Moravian and Anglican churches in the town are now receiving stiff competition from a Creole-speaking Evangelical group that arrived recently from the Creole-Miskitu town of Tasba Pauni, a community that was primarily Miskitu as late as the 1970s (Nietschmann 1973) but whose younger population is mostly Creole-speaking today. Ties with Tasba Pauni on the whole are becoming very strong, at the expense of relations with the neighboring Miskitu communities of Sandy Bay Sirpi and Kara.

It was against this backdrop in 1987 that certain members of the Ulwa population of Karawala decided to act. We dedicate the remainder of this paper to the Ulwa Language Committee and the projects they have undertaken to prevent the loss of their language.

The Ulwa Language Project

The Ulwa Language Project was first conceived of in the context of the autonomy movement of the Atlantic Coast region of Nicaragua (Hale 1991: 28). The Autonomy Statute was ratified into the Nicaraguan Constitution by the National Assembly in 1987, giving the various ethnic-minority groups in the Atlantic Coast region the right to preserve their language and culture and to teach these in the public schools, through the Program of Bilingual and Intercultural Education (PEBI) of Nicaragua's Ministry of Education. In that year the community of Karawala had sent a spokesman to the Regional Committee of the Sandinista government in Bluefields to solicit assistance in beginning a project to document and help rescue the Ulwa language. The request eventually reached one of the present authors, Hale, who was at the time involved in work on the Miskitu language and its use in bilingual education. In early 1988, Hale worked with Abanel Lacayo in Bluefields to begin investigating the language by assembling material for a preliminary dictionary of 500 words (Hale and Lacayo 1988). Lacayo had been

chosen in Karawala in a planning meeting by those members of the community concerned about the future of the Ulwa language, but there was as yet no formal group dedicated to work on the language. However, after many such community meetings over the course of the year 1988, a core group of six especially dedicated individuals began to form. Late in the year, this group officially became the Ulwa Language Committee (CODIUL/UYUTMUBAL); it is still made up of the six original members:

Leonzo Knight Julián	President
Lorinda Martínez Lacayo	Treasurer
Francisco Santiago William	Secretary
Abanel Lacayo Blanco	Elder, carpenter
Clementina Abraham Simón	Elder
Kandler Santiago Simón	Elder, nature consultant

All Committee members, with the exception of Abanel Lacayo, are native speakers of Ulwa. Lacayo's background was mentioned in the section above; he is a linguistically gifted individual whose perfect mastery of Ulwa is comparable to that of a native speaker. Although the group functions as a democracy, there is a meaningful division between the top and bottom three members on the list. Leonzo Knight, Lorinda Martínez, and Francisco Santiago are professional school teachers (although Martínez now dedicates full time to the Ulwa project), literate in Miskitu, Ulwa, and Spanish, and otherwise more educated than the three elders. Because of this division, the younger three work more regular hours and do all the written work in the project.

As soon as the Ulwa Language Committee had formed in 1988, they set about collecting more dictionary entries (which led to the appearance of a greatly expanded dictionary, CODIUL/UYUTMUBAL et al. 1989), documenting the history of Karawala (of which Knight 1991 is the first chapter), and collecting stories and ethnographic essays in Ulwa. Abanel Lacayo spent 1990 and 1991 building a house for the project, which serves as a meeting and work place as well as a dormitory for collaborators such as the authors. The "office" has proved to be indispensable in the work of the project, since private homes are extremely short of space and heavily populated by children. Perhaps more importantly, it has served as a beacon of publicity for the project; both within the community and elsewhere, the Ulwa language has earned recognition and respect simply by virtue of having an entire building dedicated to it. Even after the office was completed, however, work continued only sporadically, since funds were scarce and the committee members had to worry about survival first.

Finally, in 1993 the Ulwa Language Project received a two-year grant from the National Science Foundation. The grant paid travel and equipment expenses and overhead costs for the project's two support institutions, MIT and CIDCA,² and provided \$400 per month over the two-year period as compensation for the work done by committee members and other Karawala residents who help the project. The hourly wage that the project was thus able to pay to the committee staff and other consultants was slightly higher than that received by school teachers in the town. The amounts involved in this were, to be sure, by no means extravagant, but to pay more could have caused animosity toward the committee from other members of the community, thereby jeopardizing the project. In 1994 a constitution was drafted (CODIUL/UYUTMUBAL 1994), and plans are being made to obtain legal solicitorship, which will allow the group to apply for grants on their own now that the NSF funding has expired.

The eventual goal of the Ulwa Language Project is to restore the daily use of the Ulwa language and thereby ensure its survival for future generations. This goal must be approached from as many angles as possible, through linguistic documentation, education, propaganda, and incentive programs, economic and otherwise. In the ensuing paragraphs we enumerate some of the more specific objectives of the project and the progress that has been made in attaining them.

The dictionary

One of the first goals of the Ulwa Language Project was to compile a lexical database of useful size, at least 4,000 entries. As a bare minimum, each entry must associate an Ulwa morpheme, word, or expression with its equivalents in the three predominant languages of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua: Miskitu, Spanish, and English. A lexical entry must also encode information necessary for successful use of the Ulwa expression, both morphologically and syntactically. Generally this is reinforced by providing one or more example sentences with their translations into the three target languages.

A single computerized database of 4,000 entries now exists. It allows the production of various distinct types of printed dictionaries — one for each of the three target languages, including reverse dictionaries (Miskitu-Ulwa, Spanish-Ulwa, and English-Ulwa), abridged “pocket” editions to be distributed among school children, and a large quadrilingual volume. The database has also served to create a 160-page illustrated children's dictionary, now in its second edition (CODIUL/

UYUTMUBAL 1995). Since the project will not produce dictionaries that associate directly between Miskitu and Spanish or Miskitu and English, this will promote the use of Ulwa by school children even in the process of learning Spanish and English. For example, a child will have access to a Spanish-Ulwa dictionary and an Ulwa-Miskitu dictionary, but none for Spanish-Miskitu; to find the Miskitu translation of an unfamiliar Spanish word, then, the child must first find the Ulwa equivalent of the Spanish term and then look up the Ulwa form to find the Miskitu. A special feature of the dictionary is the documentation of Ulwa speakers' extensive knowledge of the flora and fauna of the area, resulting from several full-day expeditions into the wilderness surrounding Karawala.

Texts

Aside from compiling a dictionary, another objective of the project has been to create a body of literature in Ulwa as quickly as possible. So far the committee members have collected traditional legends, fables, and oral histories and have written historical and ethnographic essays and conversational dialogs. Several popular fables and short stories have also been translated from written Miskitu sources. Many of these are of common Miskitu/Sumu or of unknown origin and have the advantage that children are already familiar with them. Some of the short stories collected are original works conceived by committee members or solicited from elders in the community. Lorinda Martínez in particular has dedicated much of her time in the last year to writing stories directly from spoken Ulwa sources collected by herself and two of the elders of the committee, Clementina Simón and Kandler Santiago. We plan to publish a sizable compilation of short works of Ulwa fiction and nonfiction for use in the Karawala school.

The project also completed a larger work of literature translation. Leonzo Knight spent several months of 1994 translating a medium-sized pulp Western novel from Spanish into Ulwa. The result, *Sau Waska Dikuh ka* 'The Land is Thirsty' (from Keystone 1992), is a draft of 185 hand-written pages. It represents the first text of this size ever produced in Ulwa. The subject matter is directly accessible to the population, and after reading the Spanish version, committee members were extremely enthusiastic about translating it into Ulwa.

Autobiographical recordings

A “linguistic time-capsule” program was initiated in 1994, whereby selected elders of the community were each given one hour of tape time to record a message in Ulwa to their future descendents. The message preferably tells about their life and the lives of their parents and grandparents. We provide here excerpts from one such recording, made by Humberto Simón:

Mâdi dislah mûki, buhki balna, manna kau mâna yultayang. Yang îwing kau atrang bik, yulki balna yultayang âka daki atramna. Yang ayangki âka Humberto Simón, manna kau dâpayang yangna pâpanghki ayangka dadang ya Isa Simón. Yang laih alawing âka mâmahki kang lâwasing; yang baka palka yang kau îwang mâmahki. [...] Yang alawing ya dâkima disana ya, al as yâ alatang alas makun dadang. Alas tukwingka dadang; alas yaka kîdak dapi isparah alka dadang. Dî lauti malai, wilis, wakisah balna lauti yang yâ alatang. [...] Dâkima yaka alas ayangka ya Luastin Simón ...

‘This morning, my grandchildren and great-grandchildren, I am talking to you. Even if I am dead, you will still hear the words I am saying now. My name is Humberto Simón, and my father’s name was Isa Simón. I did not know my mother as I was growing up; she died when I was very little ... I was raised by my grandfather; he was very poor and he raised me. He was a worker, an axe and machete man. He raised me planting crops like manioc, yautía, and bananas ... My grandfather’s name was Luastin Simón’

Tukwai dadang ayangka yaka Wiyawas, alas yau kutwai dadang damaska pas yau. Alas yau kutwi dî balna, kusah, kataramah, yâ balna alati yangna yau (Wiyawas kau) yâ alatang. Yaupak yang bik dî isau taling baka yang katka. Yangna balna yaka dî isau yangna kâtang dâkima disana yaka, isparah, kîdak tusnaka balna; yang kau dî wâk, ulnaka balna laih yâtasa, yâ sumaltasa dadang katka, isparah, kîdak tukwanaka bîtah kauh laih amangka yang kâtang bahangh mâdi kat bik yang tâkit kau yapa yawayang yaka balna yamti. Yapa bik kûkahki disana bik tukwingka dadang alaska yaka damaska kau tukwai yaka dâkima disana karak. [...] Dî anakat kurhpi yau yawi yaka damaska yau yâmak kau yawi wilis, wabul balna kawatpi yâna pahkâti yangna yâ alatang. Yaka balna yaka mâdi yultayang yaka, mûki balna manna dahnamana, yangna yaka dîkina almuk balna kaupak ampa alawaning yaka, ampa yâ alana yaka.

‘He lived and worked in a place called Wiyawas [‘Paca river,’ now known as Sâni Tingni]. There he raised animals such as pigs and chickens, and he raised us in Wiyawas as well. I had already seen a lot of things even when I was still little. My grandfather showed us many things, clearing land with axe and machete and so forth; he didn’t teach me to read and write, I didn’t get that kind of an education, but he taught me plenty about working in the bush, and that is why I’m still doing that kind of work. My grandmother was also a hard worker; she worked in the bush with my grandfather ... She would feed us harvesting the

crops such as yautía, and making wabul [a beverage from boiled mashed bananas]. I am telling you all this today, my grandchildren, so you will hear how we grew up in the old days, how they raised me.'

Each tape was made in a sometimes several hour-long session in the home of the speaker, in the company of two committee members of the same sex as the speaker. The speaker was reimbursed for his or her time and promised a copy of the tape, as well as a written transcription in Ulwa. In the event that the speaker's descendents do not understand Ulwa, written translations in both Miskitu and Spanish will be provided. One master copy of each tape will be kept in the CIDCA library in Managua, and the speaker's descendents will be able to get additional copies of the tape from CIDCA by covering the cost of a blank tape. So far, ten such time-capsule tapes have been made, and the committee members have begun the considerable task of transcribing them.

The grammar

A reference grammar of the Ulwa language is also in preparation. It will provide the first detailed survey of all aspects of Ulwa grammar: phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. The final version of this grammar is expected to be complete in 1996.

Education

Complementary to the important goal of documenting the Ulwa language is that of actually restoring its use. For the latter objective to be met, the project faces the difficult, frustrating, and costly task of educating the younger generations. It is not simply a question of creating "another bilingual education program" analogous to PEBI-Miskitu and PEBI-Sumu (Mayangna) — PEBI refers to the Program in Bilingual and Intercultural Education of the Nicaraguan Ministry of Education. The unimpeachable rationale of these programs is to facilitate a child's overall education by carrying it out in his or her own language, at least until Spanish is gradually introduced in higher grades. If there is ever a PEBI-Ulwa in this sense, it will mean that the project has succeeded.

The Karawala school participates in the PEBI-Miskitu program, with partial Spanish instruction beginning in second grade and increasing until sixth grade, when all instruction is done in Spanish. The importance of Spanish for further education prospects is obvious, as is the need to use Miskitu in the earlier years. The question, then, is how to incorporate

an additional second language into this already demanding educational sequence. Once a workable scheme can be agreed upon by the community, the teachers, and the Ministry of Education, there will still be the need for new classroom materials and teacher training. These are currently the weakest areas in the project, not only because of funding and time limitations but also because the authors have no expertise in the field of education. Our strategy at the moment is to lay the groundwork by creating some teaching materials and making sure there is a good dictionary and grammar and an ample supply of texts ready for publishing in 1996, when the project will seek new funding exclusively for the purposes of education.

It is worth noting that the Karawala population is convinced that the children are already "almost" speakers of Ulwa, and that the entire Miskitu component of their schooling should simply be switched to Ulwa right away. There is a grain of truth to this belief, since the grammars of the two languages are indeed almost identical and, for a speaker of Miskitu, the task of gaining reasonable proficiency in Ulwa boils down to memorizing a new set of lexical items and morphological paradigms. The committee members are of the same opinion, and Francisco Santiago dedicated four months in 1994 to translating a first-grade literacy textbook developed by PEBI-Sumu (Mayangna) into Ulwa. Since the Sumu book had been written with a native-speaking audience in mind, it seems unlikely that Santiago's Ulwa translation will be usable without significant alteration and reorganization.

Fuller examination of the problems and prospects of introducing Ulwa into the Karawala classrooms go beyond the scope of this article. We close the discussion here, humbly noting that this is the area in which the Ulwa Language Project could most use extra outside help and collaboration.

Conclusion

In this paper we have introduced the Ulwa Language Project by first outlining some of the historical and geographical factors that led to the situation in which the Ulwa people find themselves today. The discussion here has no doubt raised more questions than it has answered. We hope that further research in the near future will fill some of these gaps.

It is the conviction of the project members that the Ulwa language can not only be rescued from extinction, but that it can be made stronger than ever by instilling pride in its speakers that was absent before. The Ulwa Language Project has begun to create a body of literary, scholarly

