



Highlights from the documentation of five Amazonian languages: drum communication and elaborate ritual texts

Who are the People of the Center

The “People of the Center” (or “Children of coca, tobacco and sweet manioc”) encompasses seven ethnolinguistic groups, five of which we documented in over 2,000 recording sessions (see Table 1). Their traditional territory spans over six million hectares in south-eastern Colombia and northern Peru (see Map 1).

They share cultural traits and social organization, based on geographically located patrilineages living traditionally in *malocas* (multifamily roundhouses). They have a rich ceremonial life around the consumption of coca and tobacco and the ritual discourses called generically the “Word of tobacco and coca”.

They form a single society with a shared ceremonial order, allowing for exchanges among ritual masters and singers of different linguistic backgrounds. In the early 20th century rubber companies committed a holocaust of slavery, murder and forced resettlements among the People of the Center, leading also to language endangerment and extinction.



Map 1: Location of the languages of the People of the Center in the Colombian and Peruvian Amazon. Cartographic base of main map: (c)2012 Google, MapLink. Source of location map: Butler, R.A. “Map of the Amazon.” *Mongabay.com* / *A Place Out of Time: Tropical Rainforests and the Perils They Face*. December 2012. http://rainforests.mongabay.com/amazon/amazon_map.html

Language	Family	Number of speakers	Sessions in corpus
Huitoto	Witotoan	6,000	239
Nonuya	Witotoan	2	121
Okaina	Witotoan	50	729
Resigaró	Arawakan	2	256
Bora-Miraña	Boran	1,000	659
Muinane	Boran	100	/
Andoque	isolate	50	/

Table 1: The Languages of the People of the Center and their documentation



Figure 1: A pair of *manguaré* signal drums, photo by Julien Meyer and Laure Dentel



Figure 3: Elements of an indigenous world view in the work of the young Huitoto painter Brus Rubio, photo by Jürg Gasché

Bora drum communication

The People of the Center use pairs of wooden slit drums, locally called *manguaré*, for long-distance communication of up to 20 kilometers (see Figure 1).

Among the Bora, sequences of *manguaré* beats encode messages by representing two prosodic features of spoken Bora utterances:

- high vs. low phonological tones: In Figure 2, *áh* is represented by a beat on the small drum with a higher pitch (blue dotted line) and *ak* by a beat on the big drum with lower pitch.
- duration of intervals: In Figure 2, the interval representing *áh*g (two consonants) is longer than the one representing *ún* (one consonant) and *o* (no consonant).

This intricate system allows to efficiently communicate a wide variety of messages, within pre-defined schemes for message types.

Huitoto classifiers and philosophical categories

Grammatical elements of the Huitoto language surface as abstract philosophical concepts in ritual texts.

The Huitoto people preserve a number of completely memorized ritual texts that last up to three hours and are recited during the preparation of important festivals. They employ a ritual language that is incomprehensible with everyday Huitoto.

Through the recitation of one of them, the ceremonial master re-enacts the formation of the world by the Creator (compare St. John: “In the beginning was the word”).

The Huitoto philosophical categories discussed in this text mirror categories of Huitoto grammar, namely those of the nominal classifier suffixes.

Huitoto classifiers refer to physical shape in everyday Huitoto (e.g. “long”, “flat”, “round”), but in this text they are employed to express about ten abstract categories. Each describes one constitutive and general form of the things of the world, which were progressively conceived by the Father-Creator.

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Figure 4: Scene from a festival celebrated by Boras, Huitoto, Okainas, and Resigaró together in a traditional *maloca* (roundhouse), photo by Frank Seifart

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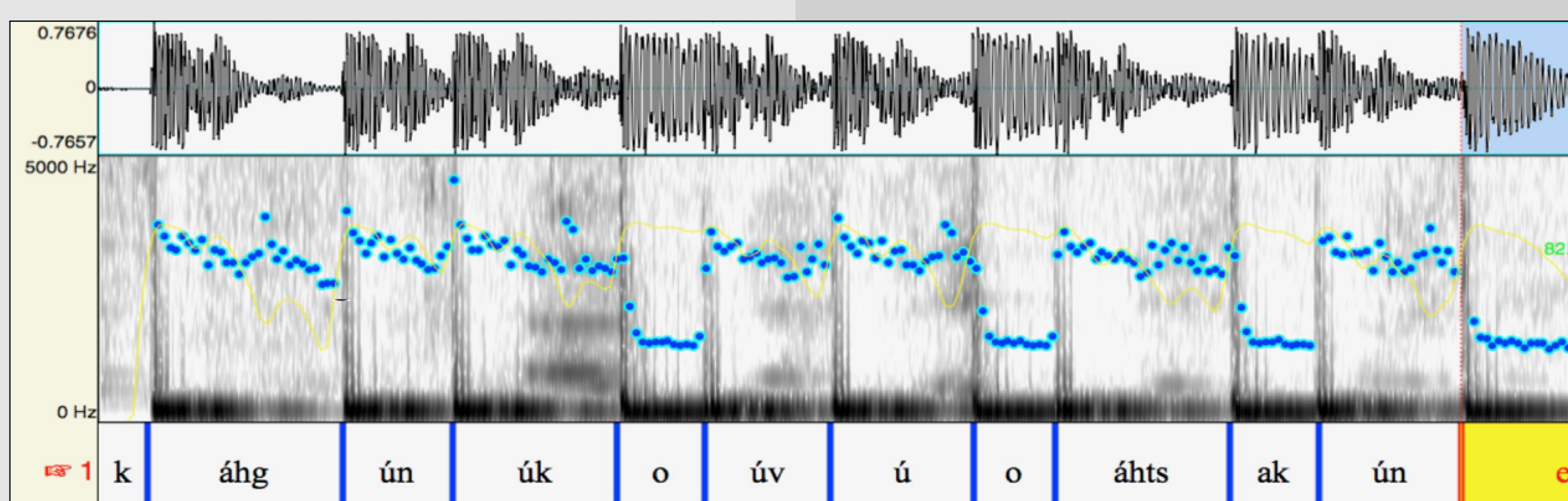


Figure 2: Drummed Bora sentence *káhgúnúúúú o áhtsakúne* ‘I am finishing the cahuana (manioc drink)’