Yaminawa Language Documentation Project

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María Luisa has painted her face in the traditional patterns in getting ready for dinner, but with a Sharpie marker rather than the pigments she used in her youth. Due to the heat of the evening and the exertions of cooking, most of the painted lines have been wiped away with sweat. The traditional Yaminawa repast she has prepared, a rich quinoa chicken soup and molded plantain *patarashcas* wrapped in banana leaves, will be my last meal in Sepahua before beginning my trip back to the United States.

María Luisa Garcegan Álvarez is one of approximately 30 speakers of Yaminawa living in Sepahua, a new settlement in the province of Atalaya in central-eastern Peru. Founded only about 30 years ago, the town now has a population of approximately 7,000, due in large part to active efforts on the part of the Peruvian government to consolidate far-flung indigenous people into urban areas. As the community standard, Spanish is rapidly displacing the dozens of languages that were spoken in the region for hundreds of years. Current estimates suggest that Yaminawa is now spoken by less than 1,600 people, including native speakers of other indigenous languages who have learned the language through contact with the Yaminawa. Even fewer still use the related and mutually intelligible languages of Sharanawa, estimated at 450 total speakers, and Nahua (also called Yoranahua or Yora), with less than 180 remaining speakers. Very few of these speakers are new learners: of the 40-odd children living in Barrio Centro America, the predominantly indigenous neighborhood outside the center of Sepahua, only one uses any of these languages as her native tongue.

Language death must be considered a global trend in the modern age. Of the 5,000 to 8,000 languages spoken in the world today, well over half are expected to be extinct within the next century, with another 40 percent projected to disappear in the following century. While revitalization efforts in some parts of the world have succeeded in halting this trend for some languages, such as Navajo, or at least in slowing the rate of language loss, as with Irish, changing societal pressures often lead to rapid abandonment of minority languages on a large scale. This is clearly happening with Yaminawa as more and more speakers move to urban areas and leave their old languages behind. Economic incentives and social stigmatization both act as powerful motivators for the wholesale adoption of Spanish. The social stigma is particularly prevalent among young men, some of whom refuse to acknowledge in public that they speak an indigenous language.

Despite the eager shift away from these endangered languages, Yaminawa cultural identity is in no such immediate danger. José Ramirez Rios, an accomplished storyteller and shaman as well as the oldest Yaminawa speaker in Barrio Centro America, still shows off his oratorical skills regularly in narrating traditional folktales, although he uses a mix of Yaminawa, Sharanawa, and Spanish to do so. The neighborhood's young girls still leap to the coveted responsibility of serving food and drink at social events. Customs regarding gift-giving and food-sharing continue unabated.

While language and culture are often deeply intertwined, cultural identity is frequently independent of the language in which it is expressed. While José identifies himself as Sharanawa, he predominantly speaks Yaminawa and Spanish, although he does use Sharanawa dialectal features (for example, the deletion of *k* sounds in the middle of words) more often when discussing culturally important topics such as stories.

While the rest of the local Yaminawa live about four kilometers outside of Sepahua, María Luisa and her husband own a two-story house just across the bridge from the grid of streets marking the heart of the town. As a young girl, María Luisa can recall the slaughter of her entire family during a raid by the Amahuaca, another Amazonian tribe that formerly bordered the Yaminawa; the litany of kinship terms she recites as she numbers their deaths goes on for over a minute. María Luisa lived with the Amahuaca who kidnapped her for 12 years before being kidnapped back by another family of Yaminawa who recognized her. Although she now lives in the same town as her only living relative, they rarely talk; all of her modern life is conducted in Spanish.

Despite all of this turmoil, María Luisa's pride in her culture is evident. In agreeing to work with us in documenting Yaminawa, she repeatedly stressed how important it was to her that, as she said in Spanish, “our children can know about us, how we live, what we think.” The Yaminawa language is almost certainly going to be extinct within the span of two more generations. It remains to be seen whether Yaminawa culture, and Yaminawa cultural identity, can persist for longer.