

Language Documentation and Description

ISSN 1740-6234

This article appears in: *Language Documentation and Description*,
vol 16. Editor: Peter K. Austin

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JORGE EMILIO ROSÉS LABRADA & FRANCIA MEDINA

Cite this article: Jorge Emilio Rosés Labrada & Francia Medina
(2019). Sapé (Venezuela) — Language Snapshot. In Peter K. Austin
(ed.) *Language Documentation and Description*, vol 16. London: EL
Publishing. pp. 169-175

Link to this article: <http://www.elpublishing.org/PID/172>

This electronic version first published: August 2019



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Sapé (Venezuela) – Language Snapshot

Jorge Emilio Rosés Labrada & Francia Medina

University of Alberta & Universidad Central de Venezuela

Language Name:	Sapé
Language Family:	isolate
ISO 639-3 Code:	spc
Glottolog Code:	sape1238
Population:	9
Location:	5.0033, -63.5449
Vitality rating:	(nearly) Dormant

Summary:

Sapé is a language isolate traditionally spoken along the Karún and Upper Paragua rivers and their tributaries in the Bolívar State of Venezuela. While the Sapé have been a small group since their first mention in the historical record, the population has dwindled in the last few decades and as of 2011, only nine individuals self-identified as Sapé. The causes for this decrease are tied to intermarriages with larger groups in the area as well as to (introduced) diseases and, possibly, prior interethnic conflicts. Documentation of the language is scant but recent work has uncovered unpublished materials that might enrich the record. Fieldwork carried out in 2017 established that, in addition to two unconfirmed semi-speakers, there remained only one speaker of Sapé; it also expanded on previously-collected materials and gathered additional data. There may be other (semi-)speakers along the Karún River but this is still unconfirmed.

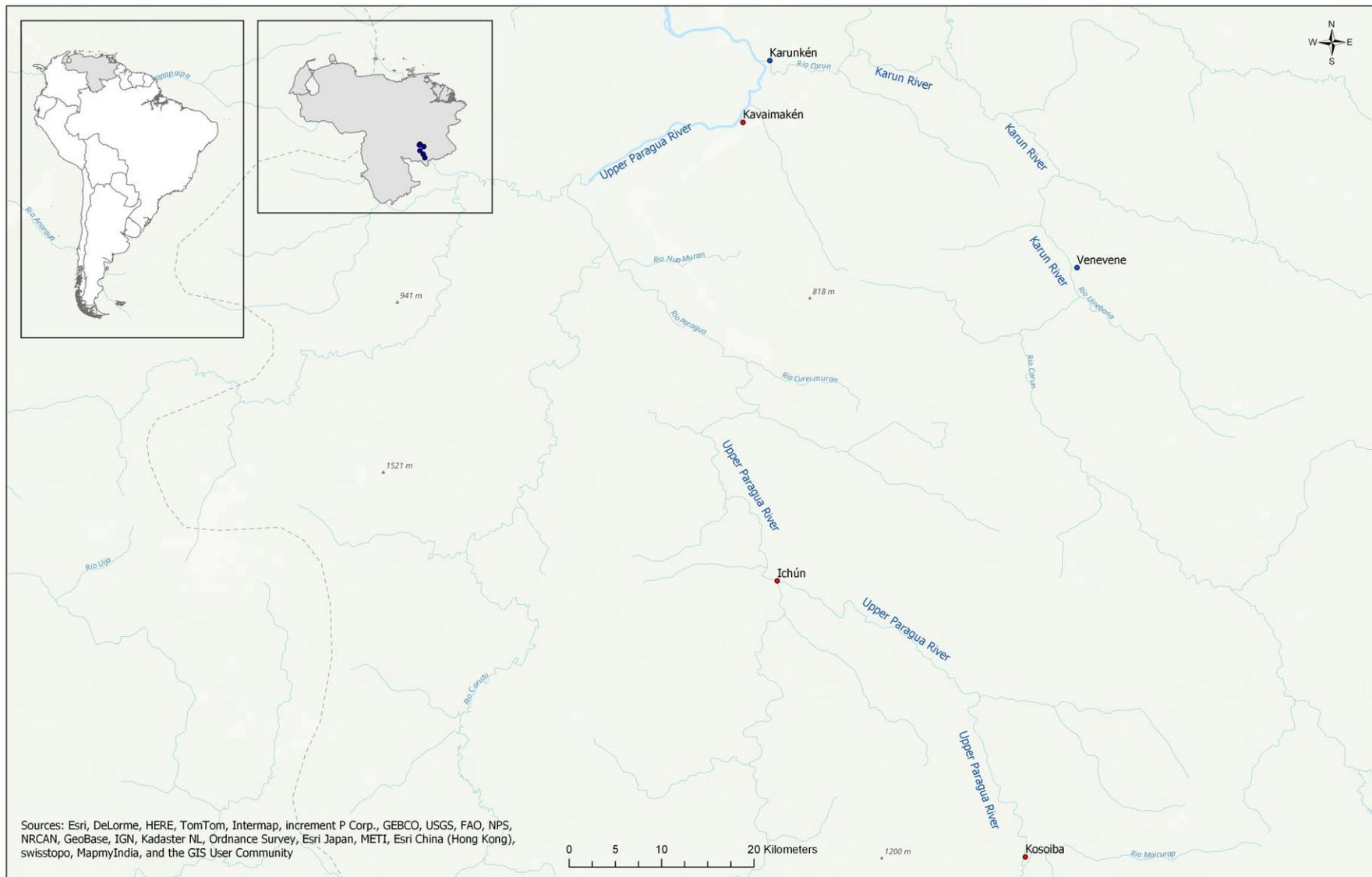


Figure: Map of the Upper Paragua and Karun rivers and current indigenous communities in the area.

1. Overview

Sapé [ISO 639-3: spc] is a language isolate, also known as Kaliana or Kariana, that was once widely spoken along the Karún and Upper Paragua rivers and their tributaries in the Venezuelan State of Bolívar (see Figure 1, Map of the Upper Paragua and Karún rivers¹). It has been claimed to be either dormant or critically endangered.²

The Sapé were already a small group by the time of initial reports by explorers and missionaries at the beginning of the 20th century. Their numbers continued to decrease over the following decades, probably due to conflict with and displacement by other larger Indigenous groups (primarily Cariban and Yanomaman), to epidemics (e.g. measles; see Armellada & Matallana 1942), and to intermarriages (see Armellada & Matallana 1942:86). Armellada and Matallana (1942) encountered 30-40 Sapé, and Montoya Lirola (1958:168) describes them as a small tribe. It is unclear from these two reports whether the language was still spoken by the members of the group. In 1964, Migliazza—without visiting the Karún River—counted 27 Sapé on the Paragua River, of whom “only ten adults could speak ‘some’ Sapé” (Migliazza 1978:135). By 1970, Coppens (2008[1983]), who worked in a community called Oroytepë, estimated the overall group not to exceed 15 people and mentioned that, out of the 18 people there, only the head of the family was a Sapé speaker. However, based on his description, it seems that this consultant was in fact a semi-speaker of the language (see Coppens 2008[1983]:728). By 1992, 28 people identified as Sapé in the Venezuelan census. While the data in Mosonyi (2003:133) and Mattéi-Müller (2006:292) suggests that the majority of the 25 Sapé (3+ years old) reported in the 1992 census spoke ‘their indigenous language’; it is difficult to say whether this was Sapé or one of the other indigenous languages of the region. However, there were no Sapé people reported in the 2001 census (Medina 2008:740). The situation changed with the 2011 census when nine people self-identified as Sapé. According to a special report by the Venezuelan *Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas* (see INE 2016), five of these declared that they spoke Sapé. Medina (2008:740) reports that the last fluent speaker (Mrs. Elena Lezama) passed away in 2004. Additionally, Perozo (2008:175-176) states that her team found four speakers of the language (two in Karunkén, one in Boca de Ichún, and one in Kavamaikén) and that they were able to collect 44 words and five short

¹ GPS coordinates were taken for all communities visited; the coordinates for Venevené were taken from Perozo et al. (2008:304). ‘Red’ means the community is primarily a Shirián community while ‘green’ means the community is largely Pemón.

² For a summary of previous assessments, see the Endangered Languages Catalogue: <http://www.endangeredlanguages.com/lang/2749> (accessed 2018-10-29).

phrases. Finally, in a short documentary about the Sapé (see Román 2006), a descendant (Mr. Lorenzo Lezama) mentions knowing part of his language (e.g. terms for birds, animals and rivers).

In terms of documentation, we know very little about Sapé. They were first mentioned by Koch-Grünberg (1913:456) who, in 1911, encountered a Sapé teenager living among a group of Shirián on the Uraricuera River in Brazil. This young Sapé, however, came from the Upper Paragua River, which is their traditional territory (Coppens 2008[1983]:710). Koch-Grünberg succeeded in collecting some linguistic data (~165 words; see Koch-Grünberg 1913:458; 1917-1923, V. 1: 171, 176; V. 3: 12; V. 4: 313-317). Armellada & Matallana (1942) undertook an exploratory trip along the Paragua River and encountered several Sapé families in 1940, both on the Paragua and Karun rivers. These authors published a 200-item wordlist and some short phrases (pp. 101-110). Ernest Migliazza visited the area in 1963-1964 and 1974, and published a phoneme inventory and a 100-item Swadesh wordlist in 1978, as well as providing a phoneme inventory (Migliazza 1978). Walter Coppens also visited the Sapé in 1970 and published an ethnographic description in 1983 (Coppens 2008[1983]), which includes 12 kinship terms. From this trip by Coppens, there is also an unpublished vocabulary of approximately 200 words (see Zamponi n.d. [2015]). There are also two sources of unpublished materials: (1) the field notebooks of Félix Cardona i Puig, a Catalan explorer who visited the Paragua River many times during his years in Venezuela (Grases 1983, Casanova 2012), which are currently archived in Malgrat de Mer (Spain); and (2) Medina's fieldwork with Mrs. Elena Lezama in 1999, when she gathered a short vocabulary (140 words, being the 100-item Swadesh list and additional terms for local fauna and material culture items).

2. Current Research

Starting in 2017 and with funding from the Endangered Language Fund, the authors began an ongoing research project on Sapé. The initial goals of this project were: (1) to identify any remaining (semi-)speakers of Sapé as soon as possible; and (2) should any (semi-)speakers or rememberers remain, to gather linguistic data.

We visited the Shirián³ and Pemón communities in the Upper Paragua River (6-14 April 2017) where possible (semi-)speakers had been reported

³ We thank the members of the Shirián communities of the Upper (and Lower) Paragua River for their help and hospitality. We owe special thanks to Agustín Ojeda for his invaluable help planning and carrying out this trip. We would also like to thank Aimé Tillett who accompanied us on this trip.

and we were able to locate and work with the previously mentioned speaker from Boca de Ichún, Mr. Ramón Quimillo Lezama, known as Quimillo.⁴ The speaker from Kavaimakén was (possibly) the late Margarita Lezama (Quimillo's sister) who has now passed away, while the two reported speakers from Karunkén were (possibly) Lorenzo Lezama and his sister (the children of the late Elena Lezama). We have so far been unable to work with Lorezo Lezama and his sister, both of whom have left Karunkén and settled in a new community called Yuwapí Merú (located on the Middle Paragua River, about two days by boat from where we were).

We worked with Ramón Quimillo Lezama for two days (7th and 9th April 2017), focusing on the transcription of a 16 min 06 sec recording collected by Migliazza in 1963-1964 (consisting of short sentences and a short narrative) for which Migliazza had been unable to obtain a translation.⁵ In total, the translation process (Sapé to Shirián to Spanish) took roughly 4 hours and 15 minutes. During this translation process, additional data on Sapé was collected using some of the intonation units in the original recording as elicitation prompts to obtain other sentences. In addition to the translation of this recording, we also did a sociolinguistic interview with Quimillo and elicited a Swadesh list.⁶

Other goals of our project are to investigate all available evidence about the current and past situation of the Sapé, such as: (1) sociocultural and demographic information about present-day Sapé individuals; (2) local oral history about the Sapé, whether from remaining Sapé or from the Shirián or Pemón; and (3) other ethnolinguistic information that may shed light on the past and current presence of this ethnic group in the area. Therefore, in addition to the linguistic work carried out with Quimillo, we also visited the Karunkén community to learn more about the history of the Sapé. In Karunkén, we spoke with KM⁷ about the communities on the Karún River and its tributaries, traditional Sapé territory. According to

⁴ Post-scriptum: Unfortunately, Ramón Quimillo Lezama passed away in November 2018, after the writing of this article.

⁵ This material is archived in the Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America (AILLA) but was not accessible at the time of our fieldwork. We obtained a copy through Raoul Zamponi, who consulted with Migliazza. The recording obtained is only a fragment of the original, which also includes a Swadesh list.

⁶ These materials are now archived at AILLA:
<https://www.ailla.utexas.org/islandora/object/ailla%3A255861> (accessed 2018-10-29).

⁷ This was an informal conversation and no informed consent was gathered; therefore, initials are used here to preserve the anonymity of the individual.

KM, there are a number of Pemón communities on the Karún and its tributaries; two have Sapé descendants:

- Karunkén: located where the Karún River meets the Paragua, this was a large Pemón community until recently, but almost half moved to Yuwapí Merú (on the Middle Paragua River) not too long ago. Many are descendants of the Sapé but the community languages are now Pemón and Spanish.
- Venevené or Benebené (listed as Veneveken in Perozo et al. 2008): this community is about 2.5 hours upriver (by boat) from Karunkén, and amounts to about 150-200 people, many of whom are descendants of the Sapé (from a former community on the Waiwöto River). The community languages are Pemón and Spanish.

It is possible that there are individuals in Venevené that may be (semi-) speakers or rememberers of Sapé, and who may hold important information about people who used to live on the Waiwöto River.

Currently, we are working with the materials collected in 2017 as well as with the Cardona materials, which we hope to re-elicite with the help of Mr. Lorenzo Lezama on a future field trip, and prepare them for publication.

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