

Language Documentation and Description

ISSN 1740-6234

This article appears in: *Language Documentation and Description*,
vol 17. Editor: Peter K. Austin

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Cite this article: Rosés Labrada, Jorge Emilio, Thiago Chacon & Francia Medina. 2020. Arutani (Venezuela and Brazil) – Language Snapshot. In Peter K. Austin (ed.) *Language Documentation and Description* 17, 170-177. London: EL Publishing.

Link to this article: <http://www.elpublishing.org/PID/193>

This electronic version first published: July 2020



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Arutani (Venezuela and Brazil) – Language Snapshot

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Language Name:	Arutani
Language Family:	isolate
ISO 639-3 Code:	atx
Glottolog Code:	arut1244
Speakers:	approximately 6
Location:	4.07, -62.87 (Venezuela) and 3.85, -62.58 (Brazil)
Vitality rating:	(nearly) dormant

Summary

Arutani is a language isolate traditionally spoken along the Paragua and Uraricáa rivers and their tributaries on the Venezuelan-Brazilian border. While the Arutani have been a small group since their first mention in the historical record, the population has dwindled significantly in the last few decades, and the number of speakers is now down to five (possibly six) individuals with varying degrees of fluency. Population and speaker number decreases are tied to introduced diseases and, possibly, prior interethnic conflicts as well as intermarriage with larger groups. Documentation and description of the language are scant, but current research has yielded a small corpus of audiovisual materials; of particular importance is connected speech recordings as prior materials consist only of isolated words and sentences.

1. Overview



Figure 1. Map of Upper Paragua and Upper Uraricaá rivers and current local indigenous communities.¹

For larger map see page 177.

Arutani is a language isolate now believed to be either dormant or gravely endangered.² It was once widely spoken along the Upper Paragua and Uraricaá rivers on the Venezuelan-Brazilian border (see Figure 1), and is also known in the literature as *Uruak* or *Awaké*, and their variants. *Arutani* is how our main consultant in Brazil, Juanita Martínez, refers to her language and ethnicity. Note, however, that Migliazza (1978) claims that this is an exonym from the Pemón (a local Cariban-speaking group); see also Coppens (2008) and Zamponi (forthcoming). All three authors use ‘Uruak’ instead for both the group and language, which they also mention is how the Arutani are called by

¹ GPS coordinates were taken for all communities visited; coordinates for Colibri were provided by Aimé Tillet. Coordinates for Fortuna, La Paragua, and Amajari come from Google Maps (DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.3903726).

² For a summary of previous assessments, see the Endangered Languages Catalogue: <http://www.endangeredlanguages.com/lang/667> (accessed 2019-09-01)

the Ninam/Shirián.³ The term ‘Awaké’ and its variants was used by early explorers (Almada 1861: 677; Koch-Grünberg 1913: 455-458; Lopes de Araujo 1884: 189; Schomburgk 1841: 402) to refer to a group on the Uraricaá and Caumé rivers. Juanita Martinez and members of the Uraricaá River Ninam communities assert that the Awaké and Arutani were two distinct ethnic groups, speaking different, but related, language varieties.⁴ Thus, our use of Arutani may be seen as a cover term for what may have been two distinct but related languages or two dialects of one language.

Today the Arutani are a small group and their language is only spoken by a few elders (see below). The 2011 census data for Venezuela mentions 20 self-identified Arutani people (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2015:30); of the 16 above age two years, only eight declared speaking the language (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2016). For Brazil there are no official (census) reports of Arutani speakers; during fieldwork among the Ninam in 2010 on the Erico River (tributary of the Uraricaá), Thiago Chacon and Ernest Migliazza were informed that there were some Arutani women living among them,⁵ one of whom was identified in our research (see below).⁶ The Arutani have been reported as having a small population since the time of first colonial contact (Almada 1861 [1787] mentions only three *malocas* ‘communal houses’), but comparisons with more recent reports (Armellada & Matallana 1942; Lopes de Araujo 1884: 189; Migliazza 1985: 49; Montoya Lirola 1956) suggest that there has been a significant decrease in both population and speaker numbers in the last few decades. This decrease was initially due to: (1) conflict with and displacement by other larger indigenous groups: first by the Marakaná, which Koch-Grünberg (1913:457) reports as the Arutani’s ‘mortal enemies’, and later by Cariban and Yanomaman groups; (2) slave raids by Carib groups (see Whitehead 2011: 259); and (3) epidemics (e.g. measles; see Armellada & Matallana 1942). More recently, there has also been

³ This group is known as Shirián on the Venezuelan side of the border and as Ninam, Xiriana, and Xirixana in Brazil. Their language (ISO 639-3: shb; glottocode: nina1238) belongs to the Yanomaman language family and is unrelated to Arutani.

⁴ Preliminary analysis and comparison of Koch-Grünberg’s (1913, 1928) Awaké wordlists with more recent Arutani sources (e.g. Migliazza 1978) seem to support this claim.

⁵ Gale Goodwin-Gomez (personal communication) was also told of one Arutani-speaking woman in Saúba during her 2010-2011 fieldwork in Ericó.

⁶ Additionally, there are reports of Arutani living in isolation in Brazil, possibly between the Upper Amajari River and Upper Txokotoi River, in a communal house, which has been seen by government officials flying over the region. According to the Ninam, it was created by Arutani from the Erico River.

intermarriage with the Shirián/Ninam and the Pemón, and subsequent shift to their languages (Armellada & Matallana 1942: 86; Coppens 2008: 768; Migliazza 1985: 49).

There is a significant dearth of language materials on Arutani, both print and audiovisual. The published literature consists primarily of wordlists: (1) 273 words and 25 (mostly one-word) short sentences from 1911 (Koch-Grünberg 1928: 308-313); (2) 200 words and some short phrases from 1940 (Armellada & Matallana 1942: 101-110); (3) 100 words from 1963-64 and 1974 (Migliazza 1978: 136-138); and (4) 21 words from 1970 (Coppens 2008). There are also two unpublished wordlists: a 200-item Swadesh list by Walter Coppens from 1970 (Zamponi forthcoming) and a wordlist with 86 items, five verb forms, and 10 sentences by Félix Cardona i Puig from the 1930-1940s (archived in Spain). The only existing linguistic description is a phoneme inventory in Migliazza (1978), and a consonant inventory and some discussion of the vowels in Zamponi (forthcoming). Migliazza audio-recorded some words, including those in the wordlist published in Migliazza (1978), and sentences with two Arutani speakers (one male, one female) in 1963-64. These audio recordings, totalling 2h:31m:27s, are in the *Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America* (AILLA). Other audiovisual materials may have been collected but are today inaccessible and/or lost, e.g., Montoya Lirola (1956:75) mentions films.

2. Current Situation and Research

Starting in 2017 with funding from the *Jacobs Research Fund* and the University of Brasilia, the authors began an ongoing research project on Arutani. The initial goals were: (1) to identify any remaining (semi-)speakers of Arutani; (2) if any (semi-)speakers or rememberers remain, to gather linguistic data; and (3) to gather sociolinguistic and ethnographic information about the Arutani with local indigenous populations.

During trips to the Upper Paragua by Rosés Labrada and Medina in 2017 and to the Upper Uraricaá by Chacon in 2017-2018, we were able to identify one speaker living in Saúba in Brazil⁷ and five (semi-)speakers living in the Upper Paragua (three in Kosoiba and two in Kavaimaken) in Venezuela, with reports of another speaker living in Colibri, a Shirián community on the Lower Paragua. Unfortunately, one of the Kavaimaken speakers passed away in 2019. Thus, while the language is not dormant, as previously believed, it is in a dire situation. Further, the Arutani live in primarily

⁷ She was born in Venezuela and moved some 20 years ago to Saúba. She periodically visits her family in Kavaimakén, Venezuela.

Shirián/Ninam communities and the few remaining speakers use the language of this group in their everyday interactions. Additionally, Arutani is not used in education or media. However, the remaining speakers and many other community members have a positive attitude towards their language, and the declaration of Arutani as an official language of Venezuela in 2008 (República Bolivariana de Venezuela 2008) make it possible to advocate for its inclusion Venezuela's Intercultural Bilingual Education school system.

As part of our current project, we have collected language data from four speakers, now partly deposited with AILLA. The Venezuela recordings amount to 5h:06m:36s and include two Swadesh wordlists: a first list with a female speaker from Kavaimakén and a second one with two speakers from Kosoiba who are brother and sister and which also includes some limited connected speech. In Brazil, Chacon recorded 17h:28m:50s with the Arutani speaker from Saúba in 2017, and more recently, with support from *Museu do Índio* and UNESCO, almost 35 additional hours. These recordings include lexical and grammatical elicitation, as well as numerous short texts. Of crucial importance here is the nearly five hours of naturalistic connected speech (autobiographical, narrative, instructional, and descriptive texts) as prior documentation only included isolated words and some short phrases.

In Juanita Martínez's speech, Arutani has five phonemic vowels (a, e, i, o, u) and 12 phonemic consonants (p, t, k, ts, s, ʃ [ʃ] ~ [ʂ], h, r, m, n, w, j [j] ~ [ɲ]). The syllabic template is (C)V(C), where V can be a single vowel or diphthong. Stress is usually final but occasionally penultimate (*toari* [toa'ri] 'dog' and *majkati* [maj'kati] '1sg'); there are no lexical tones. SV/AOV is the most frequent word order, there is an alienable/inalienable distinction and instrumental/ergative case for nouns, and most grammatical categories are marked via suffixes, enclitics or clause-final particles (person-marking on verbs and possessed nouns is exceptionally prefixal: *ma*= '1.sg', *to*= '1.pl', *ka*= '2', *ki*= ~ Ø '3').

Currently, we are working with the materials collected in 2017-2020 for analysis and publication, and on an Arutani-Ninam-Portuguese-Spanish dictionary.

Acknowledgements

Rosés Labrada and Medina thank the members of the Shirián communities of the Upper and Lower Paragua River for their help and hospitality, and especially Agustín Ojeda for his invaluable help planning and carrying out our field trip. They are also grateful to Aimé Tillett who accompanied them on the 2017 field trip to the Upper Paragua. Chacon thanks Albino Xiriana and Júnior Sousa for working with him in Brazil, as well as friends in Boa Vista,

Roraima, for their fundamental logistical support: Maria Odileiz Sousa Cruz, Elder Lanes, and Pedrinho Macuxi. Most importantly, we thank all the Arutani speakers who have worked with us: Apoto, Juanita, Makia, and Sira.

We would also like to acknowledge the financial support our work has received from the Jacobs Research Fund, the University of Brasilia, the University of Alberta, and the *Museu do Índio/UNESCO*. The *Museu do Índio/UNESCO* funding comes from a larger project to document and create multimedia lexica of several Amazonian indigenous languages spoken by recently-contacted groups living in the border areas of Brazil and other South American countries (*Salvaguarda do Patrimônio Linguístico e Cultural de Povos Indígenas Transfronteiriços e de Recente Contato na Região Amazônica*, project 914BRZ4019).

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Figure 1. Map of Upper Paragua and Upper Uraricaá rivers and current local indigenous communities.

See in text page 171.