Popularization of a standardized Arawak orthography

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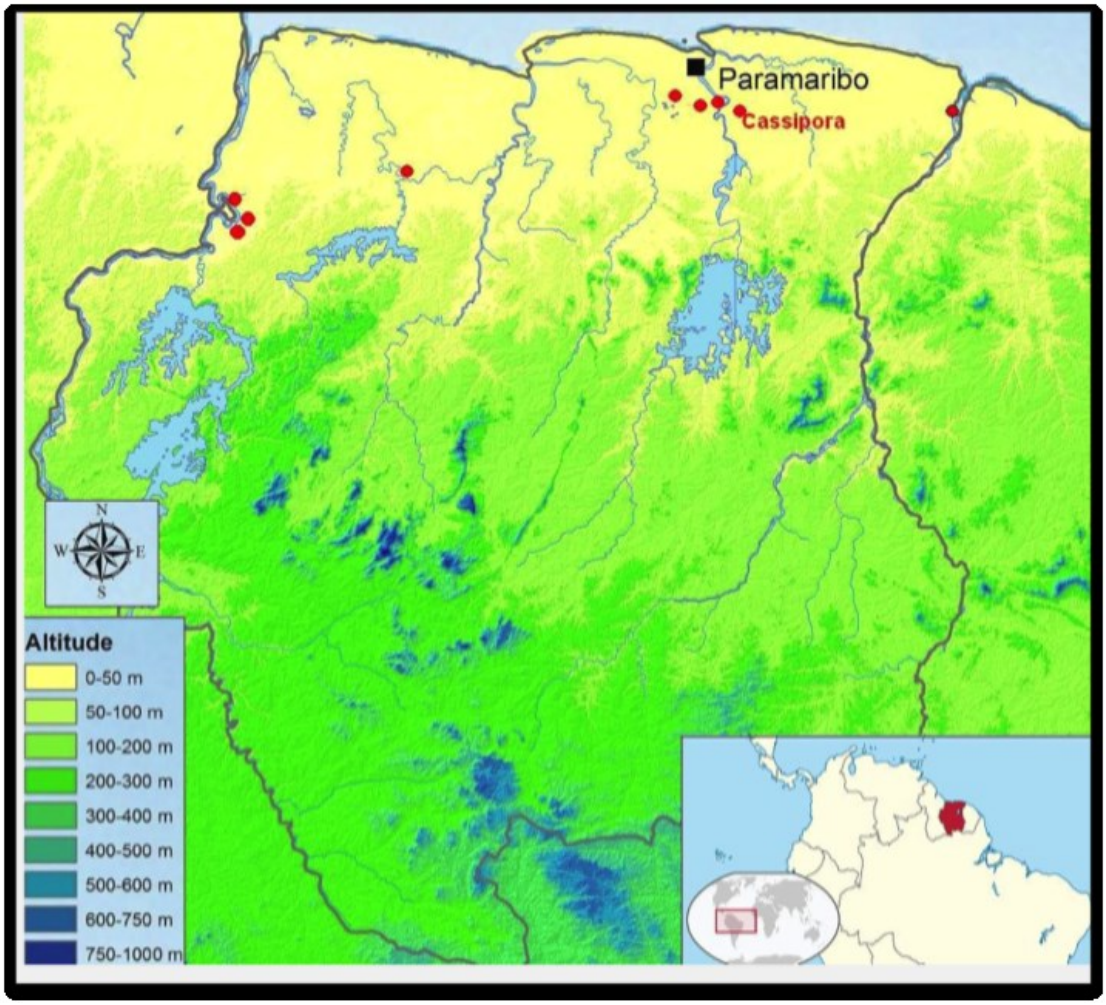
Introduction: the Arawak context.

Arawak, also known as Lokono Dian (or Lokono-Arawak), is a highly endangered Arawakan language spoken in French Guiana, Suriname and Guyana. Though ethnically the Arawak are a numerous people, the number of native speakers is incomparably small. In Suriname, the population of native speakers is dramatically decreasing, with the estimated number oscillating somewhere between one hundred fifty and two hundred. A great majority of the speakers are multilingual in Arawak, Sranan Tongo (the *lingua franca*) and usually Dutch (the official language). The moribund status of the language is evident from the fact that the speakers are on average more than 50 years old. The younger generations have already shifted to Dutch and Sranan Tongo, though there is a sizable community of semi-speakers boasting various levels of passive and/or active knowledge of the vernacular. The situation in French-Guiana and Guyana is identical. Except for a dozen language activists and Bible translators very few people write Arawak, and all those who do, write it in an idiosyncratic way, often influenced by the writing system they are accustomed to (Dutch, English, French).



Map 1. *Arawak villages in Suriname (red) and the location of Cassipora.*

However, with the renewed interest in Amerindian cultural heritage attempts are being made by the community to revitalize Arawak. As an example, the Association of the Indigenous Village Leaders in Suriname (VIDS), the Association of Saramaccan Authorities and the Rutu Foundation are now piloting a bilingual math project in two primary schools in Arawak villages in Suriname. Konrad Rybka and others involved in the project are helping transliterate the educational materials into the standardized Arawak orthography. It is however feared that such attempts might not reach their full potential because the children will receive little support from their parents who do not write Arawak. The Arawak themselves see the lack of a common orthographic standard as the major obstacle to such activities. It is therefore precisely at this time that the community would benefit most from popularizing the writing system, so that such educational projects can have a solid base to fall back on within the community at large. It is this assumption that drove members of Keyeno, a Arawak organization in French Guiana, to work on the Arawak writing standard.

History of the project and related projects

The book that we printed is the outcome of a two-year-long collaboration of different Arawak villages and a linguist, Konrad Rybka, who has been working on the Arawak language for the past four years. In 2010, after finishing his fieldwork-based MA thesis on Arawak, did a six month long internship at Kayeno, a Arawak cultural association located in French Guiana. During that time, the members of *Kayeno*, representing three Arawak villages in French Guiana, asked him to help them work on the Arawak writing system. After a few months of weekly orthography sessions, the first draft of the book appeared, first in English, then in a Dutch translation (the Arawak in French Guiana are recent migrants from Suriname so adults more often than not speak Dutch as well).

Photograph 1. Members of *Kayeno* working on the writing system. In pink, Msr. Ursula-Visser Biswane – the president of *Kayeno*.

Subsequently, a week-long workshop was organized in Suriname to present the orthography to the Arawak living there. During the workshop in Powaka in 2011, feedback from the representatives of three Surinamese Arawak villages was incorporated into the new version of the orthography. Two representatives of the VIDS, who were at the time working on their bilingual educational program, were also invited, so that they could familiarize themselves with the budding standard. At the same time, workshop participants from six different villages in Suriname and French Guiana decided to set up a foundation to preserve their linguistic and cultural heritage, called *Wadian Bokotothi* 'lit. those who are holding fast our language'. Mr. Martin Purci, the former captain of the Cassipora village, was chosen as president of the foundation. The inhabitants of Cassipora also had a tremendous influence on the book, as Konrad Rybka spent most of his research time there and learned the language from many of the villagers.

Photograph 2. Orthography workshop in Powakka, 2011 with members of Arawak villages from Suriname and French Guiana.

In June 2012, the members of *Wadian Bokotothi* together with Rybka, and supported by the Guyanese Ministry of Amerindian Affairs and the Walter Roth Museum, visited the capital of (English) Guyana, where a workshop was organized to present the orthography to the Guyanese Arawak. The received feedback showed that, although the Guyanese dialect is more conservative, and influenced by English phonetics, it can still be included in the standard orthography. In the future a similar publication will appear in English for the Guyanese Arawak. Another workshop was organized in St. Cuthbert Mission, a Arawak village in Guyana and later that year in Cassipora, Suriname, to promote the orthography. At that time, plans were made to finalize the publication of the book in Dutch.

The GBS-funded project

As described above, the present project is one of the phases of a larger chain of activities aimed at standardizing and popularizing Arawak orthography in particular and revitalizing the language in general. The GBS-funded project was clearly defined by two activities: the publication and distribution of the orthography standard in Suriname. After quite some negotiation, 1200 hundred copies of the book were printed in Suriname. Subsequently, the books were distributed by the members of the *Wadian Bokotothi* foundation and Konrad Rybka in the Arawak villages; two village-complexes are still waiting for the book.

Village	Date
Alfonsdorp	10th July 2013
Marijkedorp	11th July 2014
Mata	13th July 2013
Hollandse Kamp	14th July 2013
Cassipora	15th July 2013
Powakka	22nd July 2013
Washabo-Section-Apoera	in planning
Taporhipa-Post Utrecht	in planning

In each village, a one-day workshop was organized explaining the orthography – the village captains were informed beforehand and asked to invite the villageres to the workshop. The workshop was given by Konrad Rybka together with the two Arawak specialists Mr. Martin Purci, the president of *Wadian Bokotothi,* and Mr. Melvin Mackintosh, an adviosr. Mr. Martin explained to the origin of the book while Mr. Rybka explained what is in the book – the format and the type of solutions that the authors have arrived at. Mr. Mackintosh translated the most important bits from Dutch into Sranan Tongo, for those in the audience who were less fluent in Dutch. On these occasions, the participants were given a copy of the book. The rest of the books was handed over to the village chiefs who took it on themselves to distribute it among the inhabitants of their villages.

Photograph 3. Workshop in Hollandse Kamp.

Photograph 4. Workshop in Alfonsdorp. Left: Martin Purci, right: Harold Galgren, the captain of Alfonsdorp.

Photograph 5. Konrad Rybka during a workshop in Mata, explaining dialectal differences in Arawak.

The timing of the distribution was chosen to coincide with the Surinamese Indigenous Day in order to get more attention not only from the Arawak audience but also from the general Surinamese audience. For this reason, the book was also presented at the monthly meetings of the Surinamese Writers' Club and a certain amount of copies was put aside to be handed over to the university, the ministry of culture and a number of other institutions. Simultaneously, an article about the project and the Arawak language has

appeared in the biggest Surinamese newspaper to spread the message about the project even further. The book was also immediately made available online for download, for those Arawaks who have (mostly mobile) access to the Internet.

dinsdag 20 augustus 2013 DWT A5

ALGEMEEN / ADVERTENTIES

INTERVIEW

Nieuwe spelling voor bedreigde taal

Poolse wetenschapper wil Arowaks helpen behouden

Het boekje 'Samen Arowaks schrijven' van Konrad Rybka moet het uitsterven van die taal helpen voorkomen. De Pool onderzoekt hoe het landschap doorklinkt in het Arowaks.

Tekst: Ewout Lamé
Beeld: Jason Leyner

Lees deze twee woorden. Woord één: *'tsjádêng'*. Woord twee: *'thiadun'*. Misschien moeilijk voor te stellen, maar het gaat om twee spelwijzen van hetzelfde woord, dat 'steken' betekent in de inheemse taal Arowaks. Tot nu toe zijn er verschillende manieren om Arowaks op te schrijven. Als het aan de jonge Poolse taalkundige Konrad Rybka (29) ligt komt er daar een einde aan.

Rybka doet al enkele jaren wetenschappelijk onderzoek naar Arowaktalen. In samenwerking met de Arowakse gemeenschap ontwikkelde hij op basis van verschillende bestaande schrijfwijzen een vereenvoudigde spelling van het Lokono Dian, zoals Arowakken hun taal noemen. De voorbije maanden was hij in het land om de spelling, uitgelegd in het boekje 'Samen schrijven in het Arowaks', te presenteren in verschillende dorpen.

Makkelijker

"Op zich maakt het niet uit welke spelling je gebruikt, maar hopelijk is deze makkelijker en regelmatiger", legt Rybka uit. Bestaande spellingsregels gingen uit van hoe klanken in het Nederlands, Frans of Engels worden opgeschreven.

Zoals 'tsjádêng', dat de spelling van de Nederlander Peter van Baarle uit de jaren tachtig volgt. "Van Baarles boek over het Arowaks is een superwerk, zeker als cursus", prijst Rybka. "Maar zijn spelling is vermoeiend en verwarrend voor Arowakken zelf."

Een makkelijke spelling kan cruciaal zijn voor het Arowaks: de taal dreigt uit te sterven. Er zijn af en toe projecten om Arowaks nieuw leven in te blazen. Maar omdat die projecten ieder van een andere spelling gebruik maakten, konden alleen de deelnemers van één project daarvan profiteren. Rybka: "Dat slaat nergens op."

Het project was een idee van de stichting Kayeno, actief onder Arowakken in Frans-Guyana. Rybka liep stage bij Kayeno. Hij kreeg feedback van verschillende dorpen. Soms hebben dorpelingen gestemd over welke oplossing voor een woord moest worden gekozen. "Ze kozen altijd voor de meest logische oplossing", lacht de Pool tevreden.

Met subsidie van een Duitse stichting drukte Rybka 1.200 exemplaren van 'Samen schrijven in het Arowaks'. Met de stichting Wadian Bokotothi wil hij de inheemse gemeenschap 'bombarderen', met de boekjes. "Als een soort Bijbel kan iedereen er eentje in huis hebben."

De informatie komt ook gratis op internet te staan. Rybka: "Wat ze er verder mee willen doen, is hun eigen ding." Wel wil hij zelf in ieder geval een kruiswoordraadsel maken in 'Lokono Dian'.

Onder druk

Het Arowaks in Suriname staat onder druk van het Nederlands en Sranantongo. Ouders geven de taal soms bewust niet door aan hun kinderen. "Ze denken dat de kinderen nooit goed Nederlands zullen leren als ze thuis Arowaks praten", zegt Rybka. "Dat is niet waar." Meertaligheid zit inheemsen in het bloed, vindt hij.

Maar in Suriname zijn de mogelijkheden om de eigen taal én het Nederlands goed aan te leren beperkt. "Dat is niet alleen een probleem voor inheemsen; dat speelt evengoed in Flora", benadrukt de wetenschapper. Er zijn bijvoorbeeld geen media of boeken beschikbaar in de eigen taal, terwijl het onderwijs er geen rekening mee houdt dat niet alle kinderen van huis uit goed Nederlands spreken.

Vandaar het belang van spelling. Rybka: "Een taal heeft geen schrift nodig om te bestaan. Er zijn duizenden talen op de wereld waarin niet eens een boek is verschenen. Maar als een taal het moeilijk heeft, moet je op alle mogelijke manieren proberen hem te beoefenen."

'Meertaligheid zit inheemsen in het bloed'

Rybka studeerde Engels en taalwetenschap in Polen, en rolde in het onderzoek naar bedreigde talen na een uitwisselingsjaar in Amsterdam. Voor uitstervende talen is nou eenmaal het meeste onderzoeksgeld beschikbaar. "Taalkundigen moeten prioriteiten stellen: talen die in gevaar zijn moeten we als eerste optekenen."

Rituele fluiten

Inmiddels werkt hij voor de Universiteit van Amsterdam en spreekt hij Nederlands met een charmant Oost-Europees accent. Zijn eerste onderzoek draaide om een uitstervende taal in Sri Lanka, en hij wilde aanvankelijk naar Azië. "Ergens met palmbomen en strand." Via een docent die zich had gespecialiseerd in de Guyana's kwam hij bij de Arowakken terecht.

Hoewel Rybka al een paar jaar met de taal bezig is, had hij pas tijdens dit bezoek het gevoel dat hij makkelijk een praatje kon maken. Eén van de opvallende eigenschappen van Arowaks: de werkwoorden zijn erg lang. 'Ik wil iets groter laten maken' is één woord. "Dat maakt het heel anders dan Europese talen."

Rybka doet onderzoek naar de relatie tussen taal en landschap: wat voor woorden Arowakken gebruiken om het landschap te benoemen. De taalwetenschapper wil zijn informatie uitwerken in een speciale kaart van het gebied rond het dorp Cassipora, waar hij vooral onderzoek deed.

Speciale aandacht heeft hij voor plaatsnamen. Een voorbeeld is Beyokhowkili: de plaatsnaam verwijst naar een plaats waar vroeger bamboe werd gekapt voor rituele fluiten. "Het is verbazingwekkend hoeveel informatie over natuur en cultuur er in de plaatsnamen zit", zegt Rybka enthousiast. "Arowakse woorden getuigen van een grote kennis van het bos."

Op sommige plaatsnamen rust zelfs een taboe, als ze verwijzen naar een bepaalde geest. "Er kan veel met je gebeuren als je zo'n plaats noemt onder de verkeerde omstandigheden."

Konrad Rybka bladert door zijn publicatie. Hij hoopt dat zijn werk ertoe helpt bijdragen dat het Arowaks niet uitsterft.

As a follow up of the project, the Martin Purci's team is now working on an article about the initiative written in both Arawak and Dutch that will be published in Maraka, an Amerindian quarterly, using the standardized orthography. Konrad Rybka on the other hand is experimenting with crosswords, as a way to teach Arawak via Facebook. In October, the book will be also presented on a week long workshop about the Arawak language organized in French Guiana by Kayeno. It is hoped that arrangements can be made to translate the book into French and publish it in French Guiana as well. Recently, at the beginning of September, we called all the captains to check how the distribution of the book in the villages went – all the books are said to have been handed out in the villages or plans have been made to distribute them in the nearest future.

Description of the book

The physical outcome of the current project is a book titled "Samen Schrijven in het Arowaks" (Writing together in Arawak), standardizing the Arawak orthography. It was printed in 1200 copies, in Dutch, and distributed among the inhabitants of the Arawak villages. The book was also deposited online, so that it can be always downloaded free of charge in the future. The target group is those Arawaks who speak the language and know how to pronounce Arawak words for themselves; hence there is no accompanying CD. The book includes exercises, tables with letters and examples and little summaries of the most important rules. The whole book can be downloaded here. Many people have contributed to the book, the key participants in the project were:

text:	Konrad Rybka
translation:	Josine Laarakker
corrections:	Melvin Mackintosh, Didi van Dijk, Moira van Dijk, Femmy Admiraal
design:	Edoardo Costa
cover:	Edoardo Costa
data:	Ursula Visser-Biswane, Hubert Biswane, Octave Biswana, Gertruida Jubithana, Purci Martin, Sonia Orassie and others

The book consists of two sections. The first section explains why this book was written and what the obstacles and aims were, as well as for whom it was written. The aim of this section is to inform the reader that this is a truly Arawak enterprise, as opposed to previous works, and that it has been verified by the representatives of many villages. It also clarifies what the problem is - not the fact that there is no orthography, but the fact that each previous author used his own idiosyncratic way of writing Arawak, often without explaining it and without making any attempts at popularizing it. The upshot of it all being that nobody can write Arawak and reading other previous publications requires constant learning of new writing conventions, hence discouraging the potential Arawak reader. It also explains in general terms what an orthography is and what is a good orthography and introduces two notions: that of a letter and that of a sound, which is all the "theory" that we use in the book. The aim of this section is predominantly to inform the reader about the existence of many factors that play a role in choosing one convention over another, so that he or she can better understand the choices we have made, and that some choices remain arbitrary.

The second section presents the writing system in two subsections (vowels and consonants) and explains the orthographic decisions made that became points of dispute during the workshops. For example, a lot of attention is devoted to the question of allophones and palatalization (obviously without the technical terminology). Many subsections in this part contain little summaries of the most important information (marked by a toucan – the Arawak symbol of knowledge) and simple exercises where the reader is asked to write down the translations of Dutch words (mostly fairly well known lexical items and expressions). The key is provided at the end of the book.

Funding

The GBS funding (1500 euros) was used to print the book and to distribute it. The costs can be divided into the following categories.

Cost type	**Amount**
Printing of 1200 copies of the book	1000
Distribution - petrol for cars - taxi - food and drink during workshops - workshop materials (paper, highlaters) - phone cards	500