

Collection of the Oral Traditions of the Katuena (Tunayana) of Suriname

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Introduction: The Katuena context

The Katuena (Tunayana) are an indigenous Amerindian group living in southern Suriname, northern Brazil and Guyana. About 80 Katuena live in the multi-ethnic village of Kwamalasamutu, Suriname, which is situated on the Sipaliwini River and is populated by a fluctuating population of 800-1000 inhabitants.

Katuena is a Cariban language. Only a dozen speakers of the language remain however, as this group has largely been incorporated into Waiwai communities. The Waiwai group itself is an amalgamation of several different ethnic groups, and although its members speak dialects of the same language, Waiwai (which itself is critically endangered, according to the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger¹), there is a strong awareness of the distinctions between the different ethnic origins of the people that make up this group, as well as the different dialects spoken. Despite this, and although there is a distinction between the Katuena and the Tunayana, whether one is a subgroup of the other, or whether they are simply two groups speaking the same language is still unclear. The Katuena (Tunayana) now overwhelmingly speak Waiwai and/or Trio (the dominant language of Kwamalasamutu), and the Katuena language is no longer being transmitted to the younger generation. The Katuena language is thus severely endangered, even moribund, and very little documentation of the language, culture and traditions of these people has been undertaken.

This project aimed to make the first steps towards remedying this situation, through the translation of Katuena myths into English and the collating of these into a book containing both the Katuena and English versions. Although the Katuena language will soon disappear, this project has resulted in the creation of a permanent record of both the language and a few of the myths of the Katuena people. These will now be available for both the Katuena themselves and for anyone interested in Amerindian language and culture to consult.

GBS-funded project

The book that is currently being printed is the result of work spanning about 8 years. The Katuena stories it contains were recorded by Roland Hemmauer during fieldwork trips to Kwamalasamutu in January-March 2006 and February-April 2007, forming part of an NWO endangered languages project (no. ELP-05-01) entitled 'Giving them back their languages: The endangered Amerindian



¹ <http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/en/atlasmap.html>

languages of the Guianas'² running from 2005 to 2009. Texts were partially transcribed by Roland Hemmauer with the help of the narrators themselves. When Hemmauer left the project prior to completion, all recordings and texts fell to the remaining project member, Eithne Carlin, and were stored at Leiden University until such a time as they could be worked on again. The chairman of the Katuena foundation 'Stichting Xarwoto' contacted Carlin again in 2011 to ask for the texts in a printed version. In 2012, I proposed to continue the documentation of the Katuena language as part of my Research Master in linguistics at Leiden University, and to translate some of the Katuena myths that formed a part of the data for my research.

With the help of the GBS, I was able to undertake fieldwork in Kwamalasamutu and translate these narratives with the help of Aisa, a Katuena man who speaks English. Both Misho Kwachimana, the storyteller, and another elderly Katuena speaker, Waniya, were consulted to verify translations.



Katuena storytellers Misho & Waniya, and Aisa, who assisted in translating the texts

This work was undertaken in conjunction with an analysis of Katuena ideophones, which, under the supervision of Dr. Eithne B. Carlin of Leiden University, resulted in a Research MA thesis entitled *Me:ruru, φoku, and tfitowif: An analysis of ideophones in Katuena (Tunayana)*. Ideophones are sound-symbolic words depicting sensory imagery which frequently occur in storytelling, but which in Katuena also occur in everyday conversations. The current project therefore aided the researcher in undertaking a more comprehensive investigation of the role played by ideophones in Katuena oral traditions as well as in the Katuena language more generally.

Katuena myths are not considered sacred texts, and need no special occasion for their recitation. They deal with supernatural acts occurring in a distant past, and often explain the creation of humans, plants and animals, as well as their relationships with humans, and their appearance. The existence of other natural phenomena such as the moon and menstruation, as well as cultural customs regarding all aspects of life also find their explanations in myths. Despite the deeper significance of these narratives, the immediate importance of their value as entertainment must be emphasized. The current 76-page collection includes the following myths:

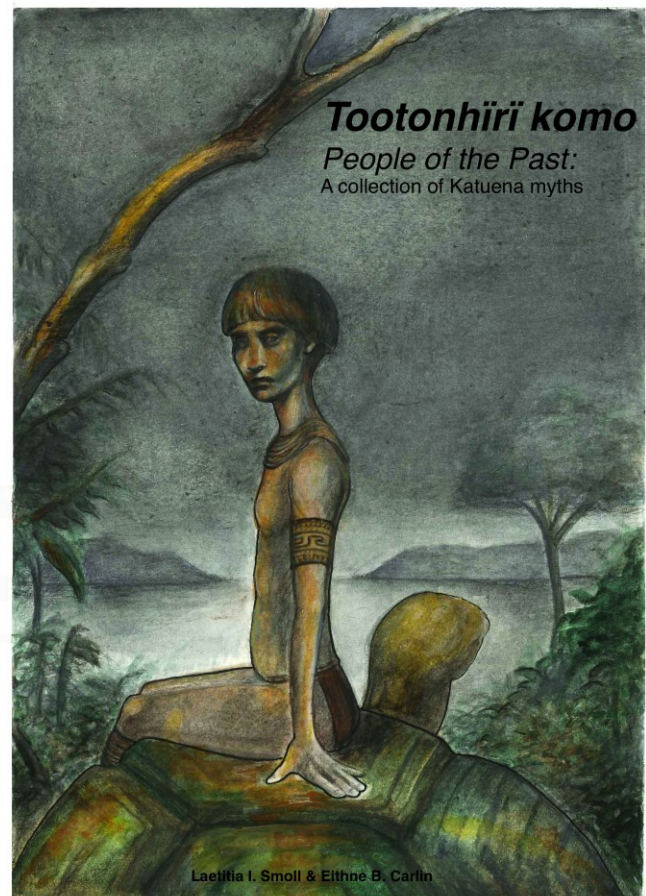
- **Nuuñe** – Moon, the story of the origin of the moon
- **Waatafuru** – Forest Monster, a tale about shamanism
- **Mašimašima** – Mawari's Father, a tale of bewitchment
- **Kwahšari & Ifikoyimo** – Flood & Inferno, another origin myth about a massive flood and a fire

² under the supervision of the applicants, Prof. Dr. Willem Adelaar & Dr. Eithne B. Carlin

As Katuena is an oral language, it was also necessary to work on an orthography. Considering the relationship between Waiwai and Katuena and the fact that most speakers can read Waiwai, it was decided to follow the Waiwai orthography as closely as possible, though a few differences had to be taken into account, such as the occurrence of the implosive consonants /b/ and /d/ in Katuena (these were represented as 'b' and 'd' respectively).

Finally, an Italian artist offered to depict a scene from the book for the cover of the book. Care was taken to accurately represent a traditionally dressed Katuena man sitting on the back of a large tortoise, a scene taken from the origin myth entitled *Kwahšari' & Ifikoyimo*. In addition, drawings made by schoolchildren in Kwamalasamutu will be included on a few pages inside the book.

This project has resulted in a truly beautiful book containing wonderful stories that are of great cultural importance not only to the Katuena people themselves, but also to those studying the cultures and languages of Amerindian, and more specifically, Amazonian people.



Book cover

Fieldwork

In addition to producing a lasting record of the Katuena language and myths for the Katuena people themselves, the opportunity to conduct fieldwork made possible by the funding provided by the GBS also enabled this researcher to improve her skills as a field linguist and gain valuable experience in the field of descriptive linguistics, but also in linguistic anthropology, translation, and narratology.



The airstrip in Kwamalasamutu

The fieldwork for this project was conducted in a large village in southern Suriname that is only accessible by small airplane. Kwamalasamutu is located in an incredibly beautiful area of the Amazon basin. The Sipaliwini river, along which the village is situated, is stunning, and my favourite daily activity was bathing and swimming in the river with the village children.

I was warmly welcomed by Sakman and Retya, my Katuena hosts, and within 5 minutes of arriving at the hut that was to be my home for the duration of my fieldwork, the whole family was joining in and singing songs while I played the ukulele I had brought with me.

Everyone was quite curious about the work I was doing, and many times, while working on the translations with an informant, both children and adults would sit and listen to the recordings of their elders telling stories. When not working or studying, I spent my time giving ukulele lessons as well as teaching some classes (English, music and gym) at the village school. I also got the chance to explore the forest with a guide and see the 5000 year old petroglyphs at the Werehpai site. As this site is not open to tourists, I feel extremely privileged to have been taken there. In fact, I feel extremely privileged and grateful for this entire experience. I sincerely hope to have made the Katuena proud with the final product of all of our hard work.



A few homes in Kwamalasamutu



My host Retya with her daughter Feina and a friend



Katuena boys during a rainy day ukulele lesson



The Sipaliwini river



My host Sakman telling me 'big rain'
is coming



My home in Kwamalasamutu

Funding

The funding generously provided by the GBS was spent as follows:

Cost type	Cost (EUR)
Printing costs (50 copies, 60 pages, A5, black-white, colour cover, bound)	512.50
Transportation costs (return flights Paramaribo-Kwamalasamutu)	400
Informant compensation (5€/hour, 2 informants/day, 2 hours/day, 4 days/week for 4 weeks) ³	320
Obligatory village tax	150
Distribution costs (standard shipping, The Hague – Paramaribo)	110
TOTAL	1492.5

Acknowledgements

I would like to offer my sincerest gratitude to the GBS for their help in the production of this book. It goes without saying that it would not have been possible without their funding. I would also like to thank Eithne B. Carlin for her hard work helping with the translations and orthographic considerations. I am also grateful to Eva Rosetti for her beautiful cover illustration. Last, but certainly not least, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Granman Asonko for allowing me to conduct research in Kwamalasamutu, and the Katuena community for warmly inviting me into their lives. In particular, I would like to thank Aisa for his help and unending patience while working on the translations of these stories, as well as the elderly storytellers who shared their knowledge and language with me in order for it to be committed to writing, shared, and passed on, hopefully for a very long time.



³ Two additional days a week were reserved for work on the applicant's thesis investigating the role of ideophones in Tunayana narratives and everyday conversation. Informant compensation for these days was covered by a small grant provided by the Leiden University Fund (LUF).