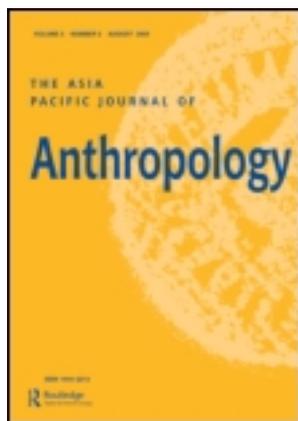


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## The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rtap20>

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Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald

Version of record first published: 12 Mar 2013.

To cite this article: Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald (2013): A Story of Love and Debt: The Give and the Take of Linguistic Fieldwork, The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology, 14:2, 172-182

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2013.769118>

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# A Story of Love and Debt: The Give and the Take of Linguistic Fieldwork

Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald

*When a linguist goes into the field to work with a previously undescribed language, they aim at discovering what the language is like. What we linguists take away is knowledge—reflected in our publications, presentations and scholarly reputation. What we also get is the feeling of love for the languages and for the people, and the sense of indebtedness for what we learn and get given. The language communities expect us to produce dictionaries, story books and pedagogical materials. Academia and the communities place different expectations on linguists engaged in fieldwork research. I examine these, using the example of my own fieldwork with the Tariana, an Arawak-speaking group in the multilingual area of the Vaupés River Basin in north-west Amazonia (Brazil). The focus of the paper is a pedagogical workshop jointly run by myself with my Tariana-speaking adopted family.*

*Keywords: Multilingualism; Amazonian Languages; Fieldwork; Arawak Languages; Language and Identity*

## Why fieldwork?

When a linguist goes into the field to work with a previously undescribed or a poorly-known language, what do they expect to receive, to retain and to give back? A major reason for doing linguistic fieldwork is purely intellectual: to discover what previously undescribed languages are like, to understand the history of a language family or of a linguistic area and to try to get an insight into how the world can be viewed through, and expressed in, a new language. And, in view of rampant language endangerment and loss, it is nowadays an urgent matter to devote all possible efforts to recording languages which are under imminent threat and likely to disappear within a generation or two (see Dixon 2010).

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Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald is Distinguished Professor and Australian Laureate Fellow at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, JCU. Correspondence to: Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald, Distinguished Professor, Cairns Institute – JCU, McGregor Road, Cairns, Queensland 4870 Australia. Email: [Alexandra.Aikhenvald@jcu.edu.au](mailto:Alexandra.Aikhenvald@jcu.edu.au) or [a.y.aikhenvald@live.com](mailto:a.y.aikhenvald@live.com)

What we linguists take away is knowledge—reflected in our publications, presentations and scholarly reputation. What we also get is the feeling of love for the languages and for the people, and the sense of indebtedness for what we learn and get given.

What we try to give back is what we write—reference grammars, and especially dictionaries (often under-valued by academic communities but highly appreciated by communities of speakers), in addition to numerous ‘by-products’—readers, story books and pedagogical materials. Having a book published in their language often boosts people’s pride, making them feel somehow special. When Jovino Brito saw a 700-page grammar of his native Tariana, an Arawak language from north-west Amazonia in Brazil, he could not believe his eyes, and asked me: ‘So my language has all that?’ Having an international linguist working with a community is a status symbol in many places across the world—and especially in South America (see, for example, Hornberger and King 2001, 184–5).

The primary goal of linguistic fieldwork appears rather straightforward—record and document a language so that as much as possible is available for future generations. In Mithun’s (2007, 43) words, proper language documentation involves ‘documenting the language as it is used for speakers in various settings from everyday conversation to formal oratory’. This involves providing a detailed analytic grammar, a dictionary and a collection of texts—as a basic minimum (see Dixon 2007, 2010; Samarin 1967; and a summary in Aikhenvald 2007).

Different outcomes are oriented towards different audiences. As Mithun (2007, 42) points out, ‘earlier in the history of our discipline it was sometimes assumed that the primary audience for linguistic documentation would be other linguists’. But now, as linguistic knowledge is on the wane among so many peoples of the world, communities themselves turn to linguists in their quest to capture what would otherwise be irretrievably lost. A linguist comes to work together with community members, to try to meet their current needs and to foreshadow the needs of future generations.<sup>1</sup>

How does this actually work? I will now turn to my experience with a linguistic community into which I was adopted through their classificatory kinship system—the Tariana of north-western Amazonia in Brazil. Tariana is spoken by fewer than 100 people in the multilingual area of the Vaupés River Basin in Brazil (the number of ethnic Tariana who have lost their language is over 2000). In this area, knowing a language, and knowing it well (that is, being able to fully speak it) is highly valued.<sup>2</sup> Linguistic identity (inherited through one’s father) is the basis for linguistic exogamy (whereby one is required to marry a person who identifies themselves with a different language). Losing a language is a tragedy. And a linguist—like myself—is expected to help the language survive. This is an opportunity for a linguist to give something back (in the spirit of Mithun 2007 and Dorian 2010a, 2010b).

When in July 1991 the late Graciliano Sánchez Brito appeared at a make-shift house in the township of São Gabriel da Cachoeira (state of Amazonas, Brazil) that I was sharing with a few students from the Federal University of Santa Catarina, little

could I suspect what impact he, his family and his language would have on my life—academic and personal—and I on his. He was to become my main teacher of Tariana, and then my classificatory older brother. But what is so special about Tariana?

### **The intellectual lure, and the intellectual gain**

Amazonia is known to most as the exotic land of impenetrable rainforest, colourful wildlife and a hotspot of biological diversity. Adventurers of the colonial times looked upon it as the land of El Dorado, a trove of gold and gemstones. ‘Even more precious stones are found—not beneath its soil—but within its indigenous languages’, as David Weber puts it in his preface to Paul Frank’s grammar of Ika (1990). And indeed, the languages of the Amazon basin are among the most fascinating, from a linguist’s perspective. This is where one finds unusual sounds, unexpected ways of classifying nouns, elaborate ways of saying ‘how you know things’ (termed ‘evidentials’), to name just a few features (see Aikhenvald 2000a on classifiers and Aikhenvald 2004 on evidentials). Most Amazonian languages have been in contact with each other for many generations. Many people are multilingual, and the unusual patterns of multilingualism have given rise to fascinating patterns of language contact, large linguistic areas and numerous shared features (a snapshot is in Aikhenvald 2012).

Amazonian languages comprise six large and about fifteen smaller families, in addition to a fair number of isolates. The Arawak language family is the largest and the most extensive language family in South America: over forty languages are spread across Amazonia, into Central America and formerly as far south as Argentina and Paraguay. The first indigenous people encountered by Columbus in 1492 were the Arawak-speaking Taino. These, and many others, soon became extinct. The area of the Upper Rio Negro in the Amazonian north-west in Brazil boasts a major concentration of Arawak languages. It is widely believed to be the place from where the Arawak peoples dispersed across the whole continent. Sadly, most of these languages are on their way to extinction—such as Warekena of Xié (Aikhenvald 1998)—or already gone, such as Bare, Yabaana, Mandawaka and many more (Aikhenvald 1995, 1999b).

The multilingual Vaupés River Basin (spanning adjacent areas of Brazil and Colombia) lies within the Upper Rio Negro Basin. This now well-established linguistic area is particularly fascinating. Its major feature is an obligatory societal multilingualism which follows the principle of linguistic exogamy: ‘those who speak the same language with us are our brothers, and we do not marry our sisters’. Marrying someone who belongs to the same language group is considered akin to incest and referred to as ‘this is what dogs do’. Language affiliation is inherited from one’s father, and is a badge of identity for each person.

The Vaupés River Basin is perhaps the most multilingual area in the world. In traditional times, each person knew several languages: their father’s (which is the language they identify with), their mother’s, their wife’s and languages of other

relatives and other members of the community. Now things are gradually changing, and people keep complaining about the multilingual paradise which is being lost. Tucano is becoming a lingua franca of the region, and is rapidly replacing most languages, Tariana among them.

Languages traditionally spoken in the area belong to three unrelated genetic groups: Tucanoan, Arawak and Makú. Speakers of East Tucanoan languages (Tucano, Wanano, Desano, Tuyuca, Barasano, Piratapuya and a few others), and of one Arawak language, Tariana, participate in the exogamous marriage network which ensures obligatory multilingualism.

A striking feature of the Vaupés linguistic area is a strong cultural inhibition against language mixing viewed in terms of borrowing morphemes. Long-term interaction based on institutionalised multilingualism between East Tucanoan languages and Tariana has resulted in the rampant diffusion of grammatical and semantic patterns (though not so much of forms) and calquing of categories. As a result, the Vaupés area provides a unique laboratory for investigating how contact-induced changes take place, which categories are more prone to diffusion and which are likely to remain intact. And, in addition, one says 'I speak the language, and dares speak it, only if one speaks it *fully*. The 'linguistic etiquette' is such that there is no such thing as a broken, or 'semi-speaker' of Tariana (or Tucano, or Desano).

The Colombian part of the Vaupés River Basin—where only Tucanoan languages are spoken—was first described by Sorensen (1967/1972). Tucanoan languages are as close to each other as Western Romance languages (such as Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Catalan and French). If they are also in contact with each other, it is hard to know whether a similarity is due to their shared origin, or to day-to-day interaction. In contrast, Tucanoan groups on the Brazilian side of the Vaupés—which had not been addressed by anyone before me—could intermarry with the Tariana, from a completely different linguistic family. The most fascinating question I had in mind was: how would an Arawak language, Tariana, change if spoken by people who would also speak a number of Tucanoan languages?<sup>3</sup>

Most Tucanoan languages are still spoken by a fair number of people. Tariana—the only Arawak language in the region—has a dwindling number of speakers. But there are around 2000 people who identify as Tariana, and those who have lost the language want to learn it back: it is a shameful thing to speak a 'borrowed' language instead of that of one's ancestors.

The Tariana moved to the area of the Vaupés rather recently (perhaps within the last 200 or so years). The language is now spoken only by two clan-groups 'lower down' in the hierarchy (we return to this briefly in the next section).<sup>4</sup> Having worked on three other Arawak languages outside the area (Baré, now extinct; Warekena of Xié, now severely endangered; and Baniwa of Içana), I had the opportunity to compare Tariana with these three, and find out how Tariana has been affected by language contact. This is one of the most crucial issues in modern linguistics.

In its phonetic and phonological make-up, Tariana sounds like a Tucanoan language. Tariana has acquired many categories from Tucanoan languages: these

include cases (which no other Arawak language has), evidentials, various ways of putting verbs together, to name but a few (see Aikhenvald 2002b, 2006, 2010). Tariana is very complicated and has numerous linguistic phenomena which are truly exotic—among these are classifiers and genders, evidentials, serial verb constructions and imperatives. To get to grips with these, I had to undertake a thorough typological study which helped me write the grammar of Tariana as best I could. The Tariana language ‘opened my eyes’ to new and interesting phenomena in the world’s languages. This is what I ‘gained’, through working on, and learning, the language itself.

### **The Practical Side: On ‘Giving Back’**

As an integral part of my fieldwork, I got adopted into the Wamiarikune clan of Tariana, and was given a ‘blessing name’ (Kumatharo). I acquired an extended family and life-long commitments—to help and support my nuclear family (something one can never do enough of). My inclusion has prompted admiration from many Tariana. Adão Oliveira, from a different group of Tariana, commented once that since my partner is English, and I am an adopted Tariana, their men can now legitimately marry English girls: this would follow the traditional marriage patterns and bring the Tariana some benefits. But not everyone was happy.

The Tariana clans used to have a hierarchical organisation. The Wamiarikune were among the lowest ranking ones. The highest ranking lost their language to the dominating Tucano (also promoted by Salesian priests, still influential in the area) pretty early in the game. By the early twentieth century, the high-ranking Tariana in Ipanoré did not use the language in their everyday life (see Koch-Grünberg 1911). The Wamiarikune were delighted to have their variety of Tariana learnt, described and promoted by a foreign linguist. As Galdino Pinheiro commented, ‘Doesn’t the Bible say that those who had nothing will come on top? So we, the Wamiarikune, are on top now!’. But members of other groups were less than pleased: they had lost their language, but were not prepared to learn the variety spoken by the ‘underlings’. One of them was the then President of a powerful indigenous organisation, FOIRN (Federation of Indigenous Organisations of the Rio Negro), Pedro García. There was little he could do to stop us—but he did as much as he could (spreading rumours, denying us facilities and so on).<sup>5</sup>

The Wamiarikune live in a far-away location, close to the border between Brazil and Colombia. Before I start my travel, I usually write to the Tariana Indians, most of whom live in Iauaretê and in the neighbouring villages of Santa Rosa and Periquitos (a few days’ trip up the Vaupés river in an open canoe) to make sure they can meet me in the township of São Gabriel da Cachoeira. I have to fly by jet to the city of Manaus, the capital of the Brazilian state of Amazonas, a city of a couple of million people, and then by small plane to the town of São Gabriel da Cachoeira. My Tariana family are usually there before me, with their open canoe with an outboard motor. Then we have to buy food supplies for the whole family I usually stay with and get

ourselves ready for the four-day trip upriver to Iauaretê. We travel in the daytime only—even when the river is full, which is the case in June–July when I try to be there, the rapids are still dangerous, and the trip requires great concentration on the part of our guide. At night we sleep in hammocks strung between two trees on the bank and keep our fire lit—to warn jaguars and other animals away. Sometimes we sleep in Indian villages—very simple houses with no other furniture than hammocks and maybe a little bench or two where they serve us extremely hot fish called pepper pot with some hard and dry manioc bread.

But the most daunting place of all is the famous rapids of Ipanoré which are impossible to pass through in a canoe full of people and goods at any time of the year. These rapids are known as the ‘Navel of the world’ among the Indians—this is where the first people are supposed to have come from. Before the white people ever touched the Amazonian soil, Indians used to simply drag their wooden canoes along a track to the small settlement of Urubuquara on the other side of the rapids. Nowadays there is a half-broken truck which is supposed to take people around by the terrifying road full of snakes and holes, and one feels very lucky when the truck is there! On our way back it was there all right, but someone had taken the key away. So we had to walk for twelve kilometres, carrying all our stuff, dragging the canoe along the road, just like back in the old days.

Finally, after four days of travel, we arrive at the port of Iauaretê—which is nothing but a riverbank overgrown with greenery and so slippery that one wonders how not to break one’s neck while climbing after a bath. Iauaretê itself is a safe place but it is just across the river from Colombia and sometimes at night one hears gunfire from the guerrillas on the other side. The Tariana always tell me that nowadays guerrillas are not as bad as they used to be—but we still have to be careful and keep friendly with the Brazilian frontier guards who are in charge of the whole area.

The villages of Santa Rosa and Periquitos have no electricity, so I rely on battery-operated recorders and paper notebooks. Taking a laptop into those places is not a good idea: I cannot imagine wasting my time looking after a laptop when I’d rather learn the language and write down the stories. Plus, a laptop and a video camera—as potential symbols of Western-style prosperity—would set me apart from other members of the community, and more so than my white skin already does.

We started with recording stories, me learning to speak the language and use it on a day-to-day basis. Over more than a decade, we devised a writing system (which is still in use now), produced an alphabet book, two volumes of texts, a 400-page dictionary and a pedagogical grammar. I worked on these back in Australia and shipped and took copies back to the Tariana (defying the luggage limits of the airlines).

During my stays in the village, I spoke only Tariana to the ethnic Tariana (no Portuguese or Tucano). Some were at a loss—they did not feel confident enough to open their mouths. All of a sudden one of them, Juvenal Brito, offered to tell me a story, and started speaking—haltingly, but coherently. Everyone in the village was stunned: Juvenal was regarded as a non-speaker. I felt I had an impact: we gained one

more dedicated Tariana. Juvenal was one of the teachers in the Tariana school program in the area until his death in 2012.

Following the speakers' wishes, in 2000 I organised a Tariana-teaching workshop. This was part of a general trend advocated by the Federation of Indigenous Organisations of the Rio Negro (FOIRN), to implement indigenous schools. Our aim was to establish a Tariana-teaching school. The workshop was to be a first step towards it. It was partly supported by a grant from WennerGren Foundation for Anthropological Research and partly by the Instituto Socioambiental in Brasília. The Federation of Indigenous Organisations of the Upper Rio Negro provided grudging support. The Salesian missionaries stationed in Iauaretê did everything they could to help.

Our course was a great success. We had over 350 students of all ages, from nine year-olds to ninety year-olds (who had some difficulties in seeing what was written on the blackboard). Was it because they were illiterate? Or they were too old? In fact, we had over 1000 participants: most of the people who came from remote settlements—the famous rapids of Ipanoré, Urubuquara, Cigarro, Santa Rosa, Periquitos—brought their wives, numerous children and other members of the household with them (including dogs and chickens!). Indians hardly ever travel on their own. Everyone was full of enthusiasm, including Catholic priests and nuns, whose predecessors had helped destroy the multilingual culture of the Vaupés early in the twentieth century. They are now eager to restore the language and start teaching it at school.

As a result, on my way back through the Ipanoré rapids, everyone, from little kids to old decrepit elders, greeted me in Tariana. The language had not been used there for at least a hundred years—so this perhaps was a minor victory.

Following on from the course, a Tariana teaching program was established in the local school, and was run by José Luis Brito for five years. It has now expanded: it is run in at least seven locations, supervised by Rafael da Silva Brito (one of the youngest speakers of Tariana). Our practical grammar and the dictionary are in high demand. Rafael is asking for more lessons for the practical grammar. I feel this is something I am 'giving back' to the Tariana community in return for them teaching me their language and allowing a glimpse into one of the most multilingual situations in the world and the mechanisms of its evolution.

In a way, the course could be a model for other communities, and other linguists eager to 'give back' the fruits of their learning. And this is where the 'conflicting values' in our lives as academics and as adopted members of linguistic communities come in.

### **Conflicting Values**

In building one's academic career and planning what one does, one needs to prioritise—what to do first, and what to put on the back burner. And this is where a linguist encounters conflicting priorities. What is valued by the academic community

(including the Australian Research Council) is different from what is valued by communities of language speakers.

A word on the structure of the Tariana-Portuguese dictionary (Aikhenvald 2002a) is in order. The dictionary contains a Tariana-Portuguese and Portuguese-Tariana list. Its major component is a thesaurus organised by semantic fields so that speakers, learners and scholars alike can find terms for body parts, human classification, birds, snakes, and so on. Every entry is accompanied by two or three examples of how it is used in texts or conversations. Examples are translated into Portuguese (but not glossed, to save space). The dictionary is intended for multiple audiences.

Table 1 summarises, in the order of merit from A–E, what is highly prized, and what is less so, in academia.

Table 2 summarises what the community—in this case, the Tariana community—values most, and what least.

The overall balance is puzzling. My academic work appears to be at odds with my work for the community: academia tends to discard what the Tariana value. As a result, the more I succeed academically, the more unfulfilled debt I feel with respect to what I ought to do for the remaining Tariana speakers, my Tariana family. There is never enough.

My experience with other indigenous languages elsewhere in the world points towards the same direction. The Manambu of the East Sepik Province in Papua New Guinea value their language as much as do the Tariana (though they differ in the type of knowledge that is especially precious). Throughout the world, language is a badge of identity and losing it is akin to a tragedy. And most people value what the Tariana value—dictionaries, collections of stories and teaching materials. So, the relationship I established with the Tariana can be in a certain sense treated as a generic model.

**Table 1** What is valued by the academia

What the academic community (including the ARC) values (in order of priority)	How do I oblige?
A = Studies of general value and impact, which shed light on the mechanisms of human cognition and cognitive capacity	Numerous typological monographs (e.g. Aikhenvald 2000a, 2004, 2010), papers, essays
A = General monographs and papers on typological topics, language contact and language change	A comprehensive monograph on language contact (Aikhenvald 2002b) plus numerous essays and papers
B Reference grammars of languages	Aikhenvald (2003, 1995, 1998)
C?? Maintaining languages by creating pedagogical grammars, other materials, school and social work	Aikhenvald (2000b, 2000c)
D?? Publishing dictionaries and text collections (especially not in English)	Aikhenvald (2002a, 1999a, 2000c)
E??? Creating web-based resources	Tariana site: <a href="http://www.aikhenvaldlinguistics.com/tariana-language">http://www.aikhenvaldlinguistics.com/tariana-language</a> ; <a href="https://eresearch.jcu.edu.au/spaces/TLA">https://eresearch.jcu.edu.au/spaces/TLA</a>

**Table 2** What is valued by the Tariana community

What the Tariana community values	What has been done, and the community's reaction
A = Publishing dictionaries and text collections	Two collections—one published, one mimeographed, read by everyone in the communities One 5000-entry dictionary—very popular
A = Language maintenance by creating pedagogical grammars, other materials, school and social work	Tariana-teaching workshop was a success; the pedagogical grammar is in use
B Reference grammar	Aikhenvald (2003) was greeted with momentary delight but not more than that
D?? General monographs, studies of language and cognition . . .	This is not really valued
E Web-based resources	Web-based resources ( <a href="https://eresearch.jcu.edu.au/spaces/TLA">https://eresearch.jcu.edu.au/spaces/TLA</a> ) can be effectively used only by those few who have access to the Internet. However, nowadays having a website is appreciated as a 'status symbol'

### The 'Give' and the 'Take': How to Find a Balance

A 'give' and 'take' is part and parcel of linguistic fieldwork. When I give back what I can to the speakers' community—in the form of a dictionary, practical grammar and books of stories (to say nothing of an outboard motor and so many gifts of other kinds)—this boosts speakers' pride in the language and creates opportunities for a continuity of tradition, and for the interest in language and culture among young people. Our course attracted crowds. Juvenal Brito started speaking the language, not only to me, but to his children. But one can never give enough. The course also created some unrealistic expectations—that we will have enough money to run similar courses year after year, that from now on the low-ranking Tariana are on top and that the Tariana Association will be run by them. This did not happen: non-Tariana speaking Tariana from higher ranked clans took charge. Many were frustrated.

What a linguist 'gets' as a result of fieldwork is knowledge of language(s) and culture(s) and also an experience and often a new family. And there is a feeling of eternal commitment and debt which seems to grow as years go by. One is torn between different sets of values: what the community considers a success, academia would frown upon. An optimum balance between conflicting values is hard to strike.

### Notes

- [1] There is now a large body of literature concerning the issues of interrelationships between an academic linguist and the community, and ethics in linguistic fieldwork and various ways of storing, archiving and presenting data, e.g. Chang (2010), Dorian (1987, 1994, 2010a, 2010b) and references there. Mithun (2007) nicely captures most issues.

- [2] Different linguistic communities value different kinds of linguistic knowledge. For the Manambu of the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea (where I am also adopted kin), the most important knowledge is that of ‘names’ (see Harrison 1990; Aikhenvald 2008). The Tariana are very different: those who can only name things, but cannot produce a coherent discourse, are pitied.
- [3] The area has been made ‘famous’ by anthropologists such as Stephen Hugh-Jones, Christine Hugh-Jones, Jean Jackson, G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, Janet Chernela. None of them touched on Tariana!
- [4] The clans who still speak Tariana are the Wamiarikune (who reside in Santa Rosa, or Juquiraponta, Periquito and Iauaretê) and the Kumandene (most of whom reside in Santa Terezinha, on the Iauarí river off the Vaupés). Most of my fieldwork, published materials and pedagogical materials are based on the Wamiarikune Tariana (the work started in 1991). The Wamiarikune Tariana is now being taught at the Tariana school ‘Enu irine idakini’ in Iauaretê, and an additional pedagogical workshop was run by myself and Rafael Brito in April–May 2012. The Kumandene Tariana is influenced by Hohôdene Baniwa; pedagogical and other materials on the language are currently in preparation.
- [5] Some details are in Aikhenvald (2002b).

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