THE WAICAN LANGUAGES

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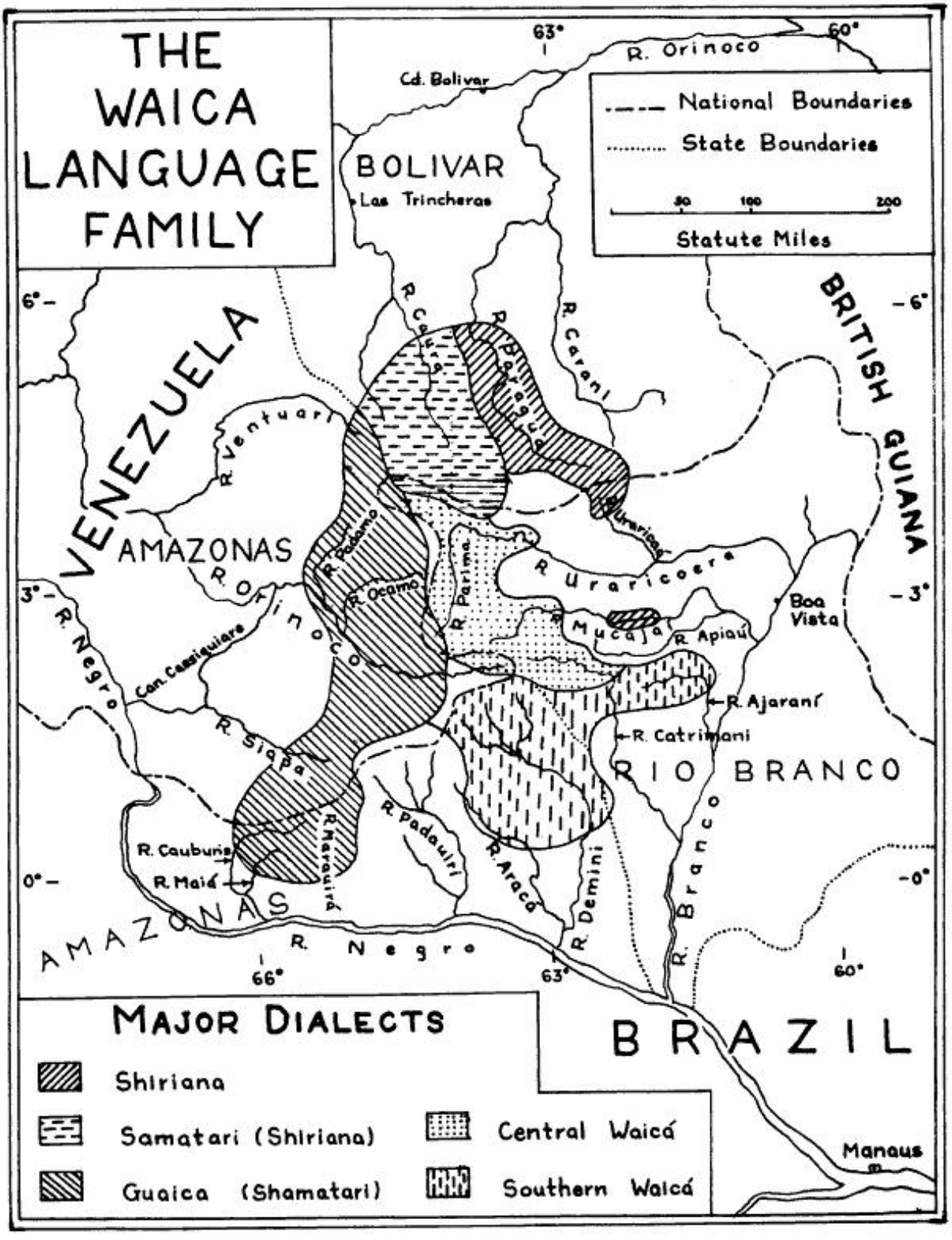
The Waican or Shirianan[1] languages are spoken in the neighborhood of the divide between the Amazon and Orinoco watersheds in Brazil and Venezuela, in an area centering around 3° north latitude and 64° west longitude. The accompanying map shows the geographical distribution determined to date by survey trips along most of the rivers in the area, by aerial surveys, and by elicitation from Waica speakers.

Shamatari and Central Waica form a nuclear group of mutually intelligible local dialects. Shiriana is not too divergent from them. Samatari and Southern Waica are still more divergent; Samatari is mutually unintelligible with many if not most of the dialects of Central Waica. A related language mutually unintelligible with the rest, Shirishana, was out of contact with other Waican speakers for about twenty years until 1960. This dialect is shown on the map as an island of Shiriana on the Mucajaí River.

Local nomenclature uses a cover term Waica (Uaica, Guaica, Waiká) for all Waica and Shiriana groups. Minor dialectical variations are distinguished according to the settlement or river associated with the dialect. Among the Central Waica there is a locally recognized division into the Waica proper, the Parahuri, and the Maita. The leader of the Maita identifies himself as the last of the Maracana, which could therefore be a local variant of the Maita subgroup of the Central Waica. Other local variants from the same region include the Parimiteri, the Marashiteri, the Aykamteri. The latter are in turn divided into the Tɏhɏnapteri, Rokoteri, Wɏtehayteri, Arakayteri, Shiteuteri, and Mayupteri;[2] some of the Aykamteri are related through marriage to the Maita. Other branches of Waican are likewise subdivided. The Parawateri are a subgroup of the Shiriana who live on the Paragua River in Venezuela. The Koatàteri, the Guaharibo, and the Mitiwari (Mitiwariteri) are subgroups of the Samatari. The Guaharibo and the Mitiwari live in the region of the headwaters of the Caura River in Venezuela.

The earliest mention of Waican groups accessible to us is Koch-Grünberg's description of an expedition into the Parima mountain area at the headwaters of the Orinoco in 1911-1913.[3] He gives a good word list of what he calls Shiriana, but which is apparently Samatari, together with a partial morpheme analysis.


THE WAICA LANGUAGE FAMILY
National Boundaries
State Boundaries
50 100 200
Statute Miles
Cd. Bolivar
R. Orinoco
BOLIVAR
Las Trincheras
VENEZUELA
AMAZONAS
BRITISH GUIANA
R. Caura
R. Paragua
R. Caroni
R. Ventuari
R. Padamo
R. Ocamo
R. Parima
R. Uraricoera
R. Mucajá
R. Apiaú
Boa Vista
R. Negro
Can. Casiquiare
R. Siapa
R. Ajaraní
R. Catrimani
RIO BRANCO
R. Caburís
R. Maiá
R. Marauiá
R. Padauiri
R. Araçá
R. Demini
R. Branco
AMAZONAS
R. Negro
BRAZIL
Manaus
MAJOR DIALECTS
Shiriana
Samatari (Shiriana)
Guaica (Shamatari)
Central Waicá
Southern Waicá

The Handbook of South American Indians mentions the Waica and Shiriana, but gives no linguistic information and very little ethnographic information.[4] Gheerbrant mentions the Guaharibo in his adventurer's account; but he writes the language off as a series of grunts and describes the customs in a way that fails to correspond with more recent observations.[5] McQuown classifies Chirianan, Uaica (Guaica), and Guaharibo under index number Z.15, while under Z.39, unclassified groups, he lists Parauana (857), Parauien (875), and Maracana (862); Parauien and Maracana are said to be extinct.[6] Parauana and Parauien may be variant forms of Parawateri, already mentioned as a Venezuelan subgroup of Shiriana. Maracana, as stated, may be a Maita subdialect. Migliazza and Grimes describe the phonological features of the dialect of Shiriana spoken on the Uraricaá River.[7] Borgman and Cue describe sentence and clause types of Central Waica.[8]

The classification of Waican languages and dialects given here reflects impressionistic judgments rather than the results of thorough comparison. It is noticeably more complex for the Central Waica area, where the first three authors have carried on sustained contacts over a period of more than four years. Perhaps in the outlying areas a similar intensity of contact would yield an equally fine classification in terms of local community names.

Besides the published sources already cited, in Central Waica and Shamatari work has been done on the phonological systems of several dialects, and there are word lists in several Central Waica and Shamatari dialects and in one Samatari dialect. Work has also been done on phonology, and word lists prepared, for Shirishana and Shiriana. Much of this material has been archived at the Museu Nacional in Rio de Janeiro, through the help of the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

NOTES

1. 'Waica' is the term used by speakers of the languages under discussion to identify members of groups whose speech is of the same language family as theirs, as distinct from groups who speak unrelated indigenous languages, Spanish, and Portuguese. McQuown, Norman A., The Indigenous Languages of Latin America, AA 57.501-570 (June, 1955), refers to the entire group as Shirianan; this designation, however, is less general than Waica.

The map presented here was prepared by Borgman, who has made extensive linguistic survey trips in the area, in consultation with Cue and Seeley at the 1962 workshop in linguistics of the Summer Institute of Linguistics at the University of Oklahoma under the supervision of Grimes. Albright added bibliographical data and some revisions in the tentative classification together with Grimes during the 1963 session of the workshop.

2. The suffix -teri people is a productive identifier for geographically based groups. It is paralleled by the less productive -yana of Cariban origin in names like Shiriana and Shirishana.

3. Koch-Grünberg, Theodor, Vom Roroima zum Orinoco, Verlag Strecker und Schröder, Stuttgart, 1928, pp. 202-248, 324-334.

4. Steward, Julian H., ed., Vol. 3, BAE-B 143, 1948, pp. 861-864.

5. Gheerbrant, Alain, Journey to the Far Amazon, tr. Edward Fitzgerald, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1954.

6. McQuown, op. cit.

7. Migliazza, Ernest, and Joseph E. Grimes, Shiriana Phonology, AL 3:6.31-41 (June, 1961).

8. Borgman, Donald M. and Sandra L. Cue, Sentence and Clause Types in Central Waica (Shiriana), IJAL 29.222-229 (July, 1963).