

## WHY SPEAKERS SHIFT AND LANGUAGES DIE: AN ACCOUNT OF LANGUAGE DEATH IN AMAZONIAN BOLIVIA<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years the issue of language endangerment and language death in South America has received quite some attention through linguistic publications (Adelaar 1991, 1998, forthcoming; Crevels & Adelaar 2000-2002, 2001; Grinevald 1998; Grinevald Craig 1997; Moore forthcoming), and fortunately also through non-linguistic channels, such as, for instance, James Geary's article in *Time* (July 7, 1997), or the VPRO Dutch television documentary *Verloren taal*<sup>2</sup> (May 2001).

In this paper I will try to give some possible factors for the extremely alarming situation of the native languages of the lowland Department of Beni<sup>3</sup> in north-eastern Amazonian Bolivia. Section 2 sketches the historical background against which the colonization of the region took place, Section 3 gives an overview of the current status of the region's indigenous languages, Section 4 discusses some possible causes of the deplorable state of some of these languages, and in Section 5, finally, a tentative conclusion is drawn.

### 2. Historical background

In the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, when the Spaniards first arrived in the region, the area was populated by some 400 groups or tribes with an estimated total of 350,000 individuals who spoke about 39 different languages, most of which belonged to the Arawakan family (Baptista Morales 1995: 71). Nowadays only three Arawakan languages are spoken in the Department of Beni: seriously endangered Baure, the Mojo language<sup>4</sup>, and Machineri<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is dedicated to Don Desiderio Espindola, who has done his utmost to help me in my search for the last traces of the Canichana language, and to my dear consultants Don Ignacio Aulo († 2000), Don Lauro Chanato, Don Ascensio Cacharana, Don Manuel Guasase, Doña Juanita Volome, and Doña Concha Gualu († 2001), the last speakers of Itonama. Furthermore, I would like to thank Willem Adelaar, Laércio Bacelar, Peter Bakker, Simon van de Kerke, and Hein van der Voort for reading a prefinal version of this paper and commenting on it.

<sup>2</sup> 'Lost language'

<sup>3</sup> The Spaniards called this region Gran Mojos, but it was also known as Gran Paititi, El Dorado, Isla de la Canela, Tierra de Enín, or Candire. Nowadays it is also known as the Llanos de Moxos (the Moxos Plains).

<sup>4</sup> The Mojo language consists of the two subgroups Trinitario and Ignaciano. Although the differences between the two subgroups are minimal, speakers of Trinitario and Ignaciano claim that they do not understand each other (Fr. Enrique Jordá, S.J., p.c., San Ignacio de Moxos, June 2000). In this paper both subgroups are treated as varieties of the same language.

<sup>5</sup> Machineri is spoken by a small group that, due to the negative social pressure with which it had to deal in Brazil, moved in 1985 from the State of Acre (Brazil) into the Department of Pando (Bolivia).

The first Spaniards who came to the area discovered that it was not the savage and inhospitable land of their imagination. They encountered many villages and farms, and even the remains of great hydraulic works, which provided a clear token of the technical and organizational skills of the indigenous people of the region. Thousands and thousands of artificial hills with a height up to 60 feet marked the landscape, along with hundreds of artificial rectangular ponds up to three feet deep, all part of a system of cultivation and irrigation. The built-up high ground was used for farming purposes and canals were dug to connect ponds and rivers that caught water in this flood-prone region (Fr. Enrique Jordá p.c. 2000).<sup>6</sup>

The colonization process of the Gran Mojos area was not an easy task for the Spaniards. Protected by its clouds of insects, its extreme climate and its inhabitants' fierce reputation, it was one of the last regions in South America reached by Europeans. From 1536-1537 onwards the first expeditions took place from what is now Cuzco in Peru to the legendary region of Gran Mojos, also known at that time as Gran Paitití. Many adventurers had long dreamed of conquering this land, because it was rumored to house the fabulous golden city of El Dorado. Finally, in 1617, a group of explorers established that El Dorado did not, in fact, exist in the Gran Mojos area.

### 2.1. *The Jesuit Missions*<sup>7</sup>

In 1569 the Jesuits first arrived in Lima, and in 1587 Governor Lorenzo Suárez de Figueroa called them to Santa Cruz de la Sierra<sup>8</sup> —mainly to evangelize the Chiriguano, a belligerent Tupian group from eastern Bolivia—. All the intents to establish reductions<sup>9</sup> among the Chiriguano failed, mainly because of the continuous war between the Chiriguano and the Spaniards. On the other hand, they were able to establish flourishing reductions among the inhabitants of the Mojos area, the *Mojeños*, and the Chiquitano.

Thus, in 1595, Jerónimo de Andi6n was the first Jesuit to reach the area with one of the expeditions organized by Governor Lorenzo Suárez de Figueroa. Jesuits also joined the expeditions of 1602, 1617, and 1624, but it would take almost 74 years until a Jesuit community was founded in Trinidad, today the capital of the Department of Beni. In 1668 the *Mojeños* asked the authorities of Santa Cruz de la

<sup>6</sup> William Denevan's 1961 discovery of the massive prehispanic earthworks over broad areas in the eastern lowlands of Bolivia, led to a drastic change in perspective regarding cultural development in the Amazon basin. A traditional archaeological approach of the Amazon points out the environmental limitations to cultural development, predominance of simple societies (bands and tribes), and subsistence systems based on hunting, gathering, and fishing with some limited agriculture in the form of slash and burn (cf. Steward 1963). However, the type of prehispanic raised field agriculture as documented in Denevan (1966), demonstrates that intensive agriculture was indeed possible and that large, dense populations were supported in these areas.

<sup>7</sup> See Block (1994), Baptista Morales (1995) and Menacho (1995) for a detailed account of the establishment of the Jesuit missions in the Mojos area and the subsequent expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767.

<sup>8</sup> The foundation of Santa Cruz de la Sierra by Ñuflo de Chávez in 1561 was initially inspired by the idea of having a staging post for the conquistadors who came in search for the riches of the empire of Candire.

<sup>9</sup> Congregated settlements in which large numbers of Indians of different ethnic groups were brought together.

Sierra for protection against the belligerent Cañacuras and subsequently an expedition of 80 soldiers under the command of Captain Juan de la Hoz y Ojalora was sent into the Mojos area. The Jesuits José Bermudo and Juan de Soto joined this expedition and once the area had been reached, an encampment called Santísima Trinidad was established. From here on Pedro Marbán, Cipriano Barace, and José del Castillo founded El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora de Loreto in 1682, the first Jesuit reduction of Mojos and the cradle of the Catholic church in Beni. In the following years the Jesuits founded 26 other settlements along the upper courses of the rivers Mamoré, Iténez (Guaporé), and Beni, all three tributaries of the Madera River (cf. Map 1). Eventually, many of these settlements were relocated or simply abandoned due to floods, epidemics, or attacks by the *mamelucos*<sup>10</sup>. In the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> and in the 17<sup>th</sup> century continuous raids had taken place from the Santa Cruz area into the territories of the missions, and as a result hundreds of Mojos' native inhabitants had been captured and taken away as slaves. The presence of the Jesuits diminished but in no way made an end to the slavery expeditions. In 1720, the Jesuits were able to prohibit by royal decree the entrance of Spaniards into the reductions. Nevertheless, the advance and attacks of inhabitants of Brazil, who were protected by the Portuguese authorities, proved to be an even major threat. In 1767, when the expulsion of the Jesuits from all the domains of King Charles III of Spain began, only 15 settlements were left. Table 1 gives an overview of these settlements.

Mission	Main ethnic group	Linguistic family	Foundation
Loreto	Mojo	Arawakan	1682
Trinidad	Mojo	Arawakan	1686
San Ignacio	Mojo	Arawakan	1689
San F. Javier	Mojo	Arawakan	1691
San F. Borja	Chimane	Unclassified	1693
San Pedro	Canichana	Unclassified	1697
Concepción	Baure	Arawakan	1708
San Lorenzo	Movima	Unclassified	1709
Exaltación	Cayubaba	Unclassified	1709
San Joaquín	Baure	Arawakan	1709
San Reyes	Maropa (Reyesano)	Tacana	1710
San Martín	Baure	Arawakan	1717
Santa Ana	Movima	Unclassified	1719
Magdalena	Itonama	Unclassified	1720
San Simón	Baure	Arawakan	1744

Table 1. Jesuit missions in Mojos in 1767

As Block (1994: 179) points out, the Jesuit mission system caused important as well as painful changes in the lives of the Indians. Possibly, one of the most painful

<sup>10</sup> Brazilian mestizos.

changes was the concentration of formerly dispersed villages into central settlements. Thus, the native people became not only fully exposed to epidemic disease but also to cohabitation with their former aboriginal rivals. In the long run, however, mission populations emerged with a significant resistance to disease.



Map 1. (Re-)locations of the Jesuit Missions in Mojos 1682-1767 (copy of Lehm Ardaya 1999: 29)

At the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the linguistic policy of the Jesuits was initially aimed at using only the Spanish and the Mojo language for educational and religious purposes. Thus, an effort was made to replace all the different languages that were

spoken in the region at that time by a single *lengua general*<sup>11</sup>, the Mojo language. Concentrating members of different ethnic groups in the same settlement supported this goal.<sup>12</sup> Eventually, however, as the Jesuit settlements expanded more to the east, at least six other *lenguas generales* were recognized: Canichana, Movima, Cayubaba, Itonama, Baure, and Sapive. Once the missions had a solid base and were functioning smoothly, the Jesuits –realizing that their linguistic policy had only succeeded partly– started focusing on education in the native languages. As a result a number of grammars and religious tracts were produced in the Mojo language, Baure, Movima, Cayubaba, Itonama, Canichana and a few other languages. The principle works that are still accessible today are Pedro Marban’s *Arte de la lengua Moxa con su vocabulario y catecismo* (1701) and Antonio Magio’s *Arte de la lengua de los indios Baures de la provincia de los Moxos* (1749).

During the Jesuit era the economic focus in the missions of Mojos was still on subsistence production. Apart from traditional food crops such as manioc, yams and maize, new crops were introduced, like rice, cotton, cacao and sugarcane. The biggest change, however, was brought about in 1682 by the introduction of cattle raising, which to this day still is one of the major sources of income in the Department of Beni.

After their expulsion in 1767, the missions were turned over to civil administrators and *curas*<sup>13</sup>, most of whom were more or less recruited in the streets of Santa Cruz and other districts of the Audiencia of Charcas<sup>14</sup>. Generally these *curas* had close ties with secular Spanish society and were completely ignorant of the ways in which the Jesuits used to manage the missions. This led to a turning point in the history of mission culture in Mojos. Block (1994: 125) describes the situation in the missions at the time of the expulsion as follows:

“When the Jesuits departed the savanna in 1767, they left behind a resilient mission culture based on firm foundations. The population was resistant to European diseases and cohesively organized into small urban communities. A native political elite, enjoying popular support, had gained valuable experience during the Jesuit years. By 1767 members of the communities had become fluent in Spanish and showed remarkable skill in European arts and industries. The missions also retained a considerable material base. Although deprived of their access to Jesuit coffers, the Indians inherited the sumptuously appointed churches, well-equipped workrooms, and, most important, the riverfront lands and cattle herds amassed during the Jesuit century. But as the Jesuits left their posts, they were replaced by men of a different stripe.”

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<sup>11</sup> ‘lingua franca’

<sup>12</sup> On the basis of the data provided by Eguiluz (1884), Métraux (1942: 54-55) points out that, even though Mojo was becoming the official and compulsory language in all the missions except San Francisco Borja, Mojo Indians actually were to be found only in Loreto, San F. Javier, and perhaps in Trinidad.

<sup>13</sup> Spanish curates.

<sup>14</sup> Administrative unit for the eastern territories founded in 1559 by King Felipe II of Spain.

Whereas the different missions functioned quite autonomously during the Jesuit era and, as pointed out above, economic activities were mainly aimed at subsistence production, this situation changed radically after the Jesuits' departure. According to Block (1994: 177), after 1767 commercially viable activities became the order of the day. Thus, cacao cultivation pushed manioc gardens far from central settlements, cotton textiles replaced feather weaving, and no more additions were made to the sumptuary inventories of the mission churches. This economic reorientation converted the missions into revenue producers of the Spanish Crown, which inevitably led to the decline of the mission riches.

During his travels in Bolivia the French savant Alcides d'Orbigny visited the Canichana Mission of San Pedro in 1832. He described the bloom and decline of the mission, which used to be the most prosperous of all missions, as follows (1958: 774-75):

“[...] los jesuitas establecieron la Misión de San Pedro, cuya posición central la convirtió muy pronto en capital de la provincia. Concentraron en ella todas sus riquezas, todas sus grandezas y por sus monumentos, por el número de sus estatuas de santos, por las joyas que adornaban a sus Vírgenes y a sus Niños de Jesús, por las planchas de plata que decoraban sus altares y, más que nada, por las hermosas tallas de madera de su iglesia, San Pedro no tardó en rivalizar no sólo con las catedrales de Europa, sino también con las más ricas iglesias del Perú. [...].

San Pedro fué dilapidada bajo el régimen de los curas, primero, y luego bajo el de los gobernadores. Lo mismo ocurrió bajo los administradores. [...] la redujeron a la mayor miseria, y no hay duda que hoy es la más pobre de todas.”<sup>15</sup>

The new secular and economic orientation made the Indians easy victims to all sorts of abusive practices, either by the *curas* or the administrators. D'Orbigny's travels in Bolivia also brought him in 1832 to the Mission of El Carmen<sup>16</sup>, where he was able to observe the deplorable situation of the native Baure (d'Orbigny 1958: 751):

“[...] Basta para prueba la paciencia con que soportaron durante largos años la infame conducta de sus administradores y de su cura, quienes, habiéndose

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<sup>15</sup> “[...] the Jesuits established the Mission of San Pedro, which due to its central position soon became the capital of the province. They concentrated in the mission all their riches, all their great works and because of its monuments, because of its number of statues of saints, because of the jewels that adorned its Virgins and its Christ-children, because of the silver plates that decorated its altars and, more than anything, because of the beautiful wooden sculptures of its church, it was not long before San Pedro not only competed with the cathedrals of Europe, but also with the richest churches of Peru. [...].

San Pedro was first wasted under the rule of the curas, and then under that of the governors. The same happened under the administrators. [...] they reduced it to the greatest misery, and there is no doubt that today it is the poorest of all.” [Translation MC].

<sup>16</sup> The Mission of El Carmen was founded in the Baure territory with Baure and Guarayo Indians after the expulsion of the Jesuits.

repartido la Misión como un harén común, se hacían traer sucesivamente a todas las indiecitas en cuanto habían llegado a la edad de ocho o diez años, bajo la pena de cincuenta azotes. No reproduciré ni el número de víctimas de esos monstruos ni otros horrendos detalles que supe de labios mismos de los intérpretes; hacen estremecer a la Humanidad. [...].”<sup>17</sup>

Sharp conflicts arose between the Indians, the *curas* and the civil administrators, and in 1810 the populations of the missions of Trinidad and Loreto revolted against the Spanish tyranny. When the Bolivian Republic was proclaimed in 1825, mission culture still existed in Mojos, but in the next fifty years political and economic changes would end it. In 1842 President José Ballivián formed the new Department of Beni by combining Mojos with the area of Caupolicán in the Andean rain forest.

## 2.2. *The rubber boom*

Halfway the 19<sup>th</sup> century the new Department of Beni slowly started to open up to commerce. This implied the settlement of some mestizos and criollos<sup>18</sup> in the former reductions, the progressive creation of farming and cattle raising establishments in their immediate surroundings and a growing demand for indigenous workforce. Since the Indians traditionally worked on their own *chacos*<sup>19</sup> and since indigenous workforce therefore was scarce, new ways of recruiting workforce were thought of. One of these ways was called *el concierto*<sup>20</sup>. It implied that the proprietors of the big farming and cattle raising establishments provided the Indians with an advance in goods and/or money for which the Indians committed themselves to work exclusively for the proprietor who had given the advance (cf. Vaca Díez 1989: 27).

Around 1870, the exploitation of rubber was still limited to some areas on the upper Beni, the Madera and the lower Mamoré. However, from 1880 onwards –when the confluence of the Beni and the Mamoré rivers was discovered by the American physician and explorer Edwin Heath and the fluvial transportation route Reyes-Madera-Amazon came into use– rubber activities were expanded more to the north and started to play an important economic role. The rubber boom resulted in a massive invasion of the Beni territory by criollos and mestizos. Whereas in 1832 d’Orbigny (1845: 299) recorded 57 white residents in the Mojos settlements, Heath (1882), who explored the lower Beni River, observed 200 non-indigenous rubber workers in the region. Only a few months later this number had increased to 1,000-2,000. With the expansion of the rubber activities the *enganche*<sup>21</sup> recruiting system of

<sup>17</sup> ‘[...] Proof enough is the patience with which they bore during long years the infamous behaviour of their administrators and of their priest, who, having divided among themselves the mission as a joint harem, had brought to them successively all the Indian girls as soon as these reached the age of eight or ten years, on penalty of fifty lashes. I will neither reproduce the number of victims of those monsters nor other horrendous details I came to know from the very lips of the interpreters; they make Humanity shudder.’ [Translation MC].

<sup>18</sup> Persons of Spanish extraction

<sup>19</sup> Piece of arable land where consumption goods such as manioc, yams and maize are cultivated.

<sup>20</sup> ‘the agreement’

<sup>21</sup> ‘bait’, ‘hook’, ‘recruitment’

indigenous workers became common practice in the Department of Beni. Commercial companies such as *Casa Suárez Hnos* provided advances in money, provisions and goods to the so-called *enganchadores*<sup>22</sup> who, in turn, went to the indigenous villages to deliver the advances and subsequently move the Indians to the rubber plantations (cf. Lehm Ardaya 1999: 51). Many went by their own free will, but others were forced. Moreover, uncontacted groups of Indians were taken prisoner and forced to work in the extraction of rubber sap. Initially young and adult males from all ethnic groups in the Beni were recruited. This was effectuated to such an extent that some villages that once had a numerous population were only left with old men, women and children. Thus, in 1874, the village of El Carmen had 750 female and 15 male inhabitants (cf. Moreno 1973: 74). With the removal of large numbers of adult males from the indigenous villages, not only their proper base, but also their demographic and social structure were deeply affected.

The rubber plantations with their life-threatening malarial fevers, the deadly rapids that made transportation of the shipments of rubber moulds extremely complicated, the very harsh regime that only worked in favor of the masters, all this in combination with the workers' debts that never got paid off and even passed on from father to son, turned out to be devastating to the indigenous workforce that had landed in this maelstrom of exploitation, violence, terror, adventure, fortune, mystery and alcohol (cf. Lijerón Casanovas 1998: 84). In the years of the rubber boom (1870-1910) the population of the Department of Beni was decimated. As a member of the Arvid Hernmarckschen Expedition to Bolivia (1908-1909) the Swedish zoologist and anthropologist Erland Nordenskiöld visited the Beni. He described the dissolution of all ethnic and cultural ties of the indigenous groups under the rubber barracks regime as follows (1922: 123):

“Hier kann man nicht mehr von Indianern verschiedener Stämme sprechen, sondern nur noch von Kautschukarbeitern. Chiquitanos, Baure, Itonama, Mestize, alle sind unter ein Dach zusammengebracht. Sie wohnen in Baracken. Jeden Familienband ist gelöst. Sie haben keinen selbständigen Ackerbau, keinen selbständigen Haushalt. Nur wenige sind verheiratet. Die meiste haben ungebundene Frauen, die von einem Arm in den anderen wandern. Dadurch werden die Geschlechtskrankheiten verbreitet und die Frauen mit Kinder sehr selten. Die Sterblichkeit bei zarten Kindern ist sehr groß. Es wird immer schwerer neue Arbeiter anzuwerben. Die einzige Möglichkeit ist solche zu kaufen, zu kaufen die Schuldklaven von anderen; und ein arbeitstüchtiger Mensch ist hier mindestens tausend Bolivianos wert. Ein Knabe wird auf vierhundert Bolivianos geschätzt. Ein Mädchen wird meist nach dem Aussehen bezahlt.

[...] Jede Spur indianischer Kunstfertigkeit und Kultur ist hier verschwunden. Das Leben bietet diesen Menschen nichts anderes als Arbeit für den Herrn an

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<sup>22</sup> ‘recruiters’ (= persons who had to hook rubber workers)



Wochentagen, Saufen an Feiertagen und Vielsaufen an den großen christlichen Festen. In den Dörfern feiert man diese mit Messen und Branntwein. Hier gibt es keine Messen, hier gibt es nur einen Gott, und dieser Gott ist der Branntwein.”<sup>23</sup>

Not only the Indians from the former Jesuit settlements fell victim to the rubber activities. The search for new zones with resinous trees during the rubber boom also had its genocidal and ethnocidal effects on the Indians who had not been catechized in the Jesuit missions, such as the Araona, Chácobo, Pacahuara, and Ese Ejja, who at their turn also had to undergo the effects of epidemic disease, alcohol, debt peonage, forced labor, etc.

Year	Canichana	Movima	Cayubaba	Baure	Itonama
1687				4,000-6,000	
1693	4,000-5,000		10,000-12,000		
1704					6,000
1712				40,000	
1749		2,930	3,000		
1767		4,400			4,000
1780	1,860				
1797	2,544				
1831	1,939	1,238	2,073	5,178	4,815
1909			100		300
1962		2,000			
1967			30-50	3,000-4,000	300
1974	500				
1994	583	6,528	794	631	5,090

Table 2. Demographic data of some ethnic groups in the Department of Beni<sup>24</sup>

Table 2 gives an overview of some demographic data that have been roughly established or estimated by Jesuit priests, explorers, or local censuses between the

<sup>23</sup> ‘Here one can no longer speak of Indians of different tribes, but only of rubber workers. Chiquitano, Baure, Itonama, mestizos, all are brought together under the same roof. They live in barracks. All family ties have been cut. They do not have independent fields, they do not run an independent home. Only a few are married. Most have unattached women, who wander from one arm into another. This causes venereal diseases to spread and women with children to be very scarce. Mortality among newborn infants is very high. It is steadily becoming more and more difficult to recruit new workers. The only possibility is to buy them, to buy the debt slaves of others; and here a hard-working person costs at least one thousand bolivianos. An adolescent boy is estimated at four hundred bolivianos. A girl is usually paid for according to her looks.

[...] Every trace of Indian craftsmanship and culture has disappeared here. Life offers these people nothing but work for the master on weekdays, drinking on rest days and getting extremely drunk on the big Christian holidays. In the villages these are celebrated with masses and brandy. Here there are no masses, here there is only one God, and this God is the brandy.’ [Translation MC].

<sup>24</sup> Data adapted from Métraux (1942), Plaza Martínez & Carvajal Carvajal (1985), and Crevels & Adelaar (2000-2002).

late 17<sup>th</sup> century and the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although the data may not be very reliable, being sometimes based on estimations, Table 2 –with the exception of Movima– does show a sharp decline after 1831 as far as the numbers for the different ethnic groups are concerned. The relatively high demographic numbers for 1994 will be discussed in Section 3. All in all the numbers underline the devastating effects of –among other things– the rubber boom on the inhabitants of the Department of Beni.

Around 1912, when the rubber boom was coming to an end, many people who worked on the rubber plantations in the north came back to the center and the south of the department. This implied a new impulse for the farming and cattle raising establishments and a reinforcement of the coercion practices to recruit Indian workforce. Once again the Indian population was subjected to debt peonage. This time *la matricula*<sup>25</sup> –a term that refers symbolically to the registration of Indians for the payment of territorial contributions– was applied via the state authorities to provide the proprietors with labor force (cf. Lehm Ardaya 1999: 70).

### 2.3. *The Chaco War and its consequences*

In 1932, the Chaco War broke out between Bolivia and Paraguay. The origin of the conflict went back to the outcome of the War of the Pacific (1879-84), in which Chile defeated Bolivia and annexed its entire coastal region. Bolivia attempted to break out of its landlocked situation by seeking access to the Paraguay River to ship oil to the sea. On that route lay part of the Gran Chaco, the Chaco Boreal, a rough and deserted region of about 259,000 square kilometres north of the Pilcomayo river and west of the Paraguay river. The Chaco Boreal was thought to have large oil preserves. Pushed by English oil companies and the United States, the two countries started a war to decide for once and for all on the political status of the region. More than 100,000 lives were lost, and the war ended in 1935 only when both sides were exhausted. After three years of mediated negotiation following the end of hostilities, Bolivia and Paraguay signed a treaty in 1938 at the Chaco Peace Conference in Buenos Aires, which included Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru, Uruguay, and the United States. Three quarters of the disputed Chaco Boreal went to Paraguay; at the same time Bolivia was granted a corridor to the Paraguay River, the privilege of using Puerto Casado, and the right to construct a Bolivian port. Argentina was given the main credit for the settlement, and Argentinean investors profited greatly from Paraguay's territorial gain. Years later, oil companies explored the Chaco region but they were unable to find significant oil fields.

After the Chaco War, Bolivia's economy was so seriously disrupted that the impoverished masses demanded reforms. The defeat marked a turning point: the enormous loss of life and territory discredited the traditional ruling classes and service in the army had started to awaken some political awareness among the indigenous groups. The agricultural sector lacked capital, and by 1950 food imports had increased to 19% of total imports. Land was unequally distributed –92% of the

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<sup>25</sup> 'the registration'

arable land was in hands of owners of estates of 1,000 hectares or more. The expansion of mining from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had attracted foreign investors and led to the establishment of three large foreign mining corporations that became dominant in Bolivia's economic and political life. At that point these mining corporations controlled the country, together with the big landowners and the military. On April 8, 1952 a popular revolt took place in La Paz and elsewhere. The *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario* (MNR), with the support of armed workers, civilians, and *campesinos*<sup>26</sup> overthrew the ruling military junta and seized control of the government. Subsequently the MNR introduced universal adult suffrage, nationalized all the tin mines of the three big mining corporations, implemented an agrarian reform, by which the large estates were divided among former tenants and peasants, and promoted rural education, by implementing the *Reforma Educativa*<sup>27</sup>. By the time that the MNR was deposed by the army in 1964, it had introduced far-reaching economic and social changes. It also committed many serious violations of human rights. Over the next 28 years (1964-2002) Bolivia has 20 presidents, of whom 13 were generals; only two completed a full term in office.

The *Revolución Nacional*<sup>28</sup> of 1952 disregarded the indigenous lowland –and highland– groups by lumping them together under the label of *campesinos*. According to the 1953 *Reforma Agraria*<sup>29</sup>, the land that was occupied by Indians was to be considered fallow, and, therefore, its ownership could be granted to all sorts of entrepreneurs. The idea was to turn the rural Indian into a *campesino* who could make a contribution to economic and consumptive needs. The new agricultural law only permitted him to work on a single plot of land. This disintegrated the unitary and integral conception that the indigenous inhabitant had of his territory, and in the long run it would turn out to have disastrous consequences for the indigenous cultures and day-to-day life in the communities. From the perspective of the indigenous groups in the Department of Beni, not only the agrarian reform but also the educational reform had devastating effects on the rural communities, in which – up till that point– important features of the authentic indigenous cultures and traditions had been conserved to a certain degree. Even though the rural schools that were established during this period were the first ones to which most of the indigenous communities had access, the extremely hispanicizing education had genocidal effects on all the indigenous groups implied, insofar that it provoked the progressive loss of indigenous languages and other forms of cultural heritage. The rural teacher and his guava whip, which was used to punish the children that spoke in their native language, soon became decisive factors of a progressive acculturation process (cf. Lijerón Casanovas 1998: 119).

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<sup>26</sup> 'peasants'

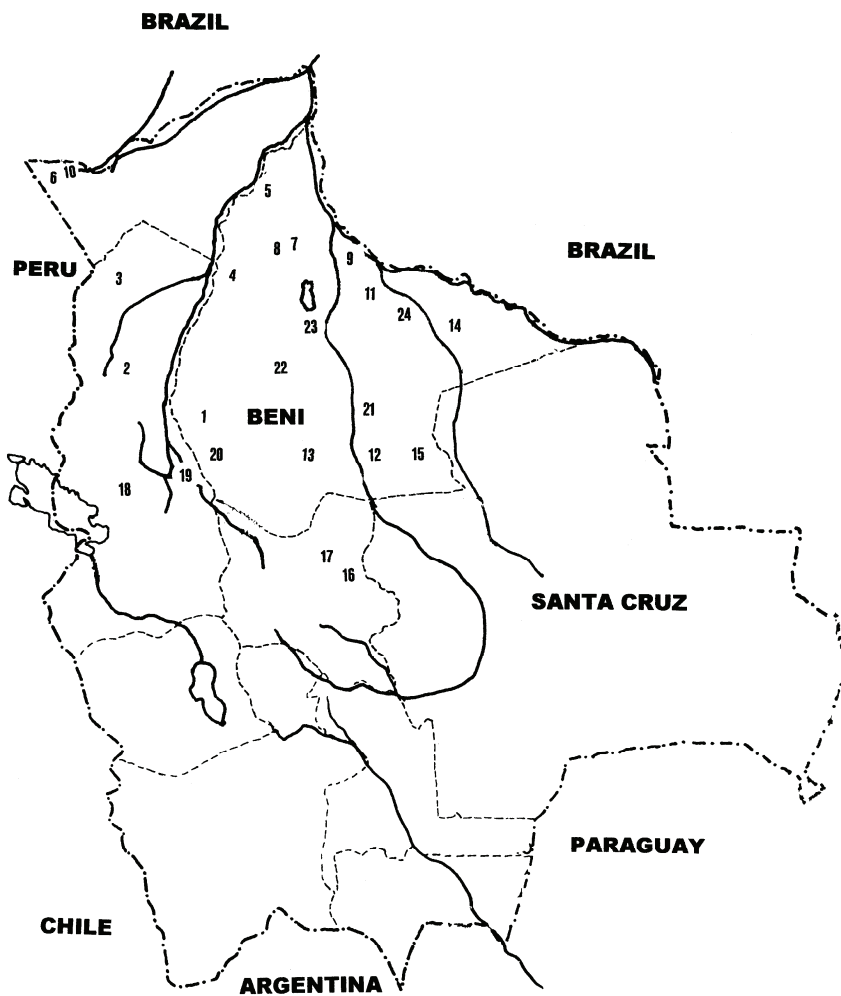
<sup>27</sup> 'Educational Reform'

<sup>28</sup> 'National Revolution'

<sup>29</sup> 'Agrarian Reform'

### 3. Current status of the languages

To this day some 20 indigenous languages are still spoken in Amazonian Bolivia. They represent five language families and a total of seven language isolates or unclassified languages. Of these languages 15 are spoken in the Department of Beni: Reyesano, Cavineña, Ese Eja, Chácobo, Pacahuara, Moré, Baure, Trinitario/Ignaciano (Mojo), Sirionó, Yuracaré, Chimane, Canichana, Movima, Cayubaba, and Itonama.



Map 2. Location of the indigenous languages of Amazonian Bolivia.

Table 3 gives an overview of the indigenous languages of Amazonian Bolivia, their affiliation, speakers' and demographic numbers, and state of endangerment. The general location of the languages is indicated on Map 2 as numbered in Table 3.

Language	Language family	Number of speakers	Number of ethnic group	Degree of endangerment
1 Reyesano	Tacanan	<10	4,118	Moribund
2 Tacana	Tacanan	1,821	5,058	Endangered
3 Araona	Tacanan	81	90	Seriously endangered
4 Cavineña	Tacanan	1,180	1,736	Potentially endangered
5 Ese Ejja	Tacanan	502	584	Endangered
6 Yaminahua	Panoan	137	171	Seriously endangered
7 Chácobo	Panoan	550	767	Endangered
8 Pacahuara	Panoan	18	19	Moribund
9 Moré	Chapacuran	76	200	Seriously endangered
10 Machineri	Arawakan	140	155	Seriously endangered
11 Baure	Arawakan	± 40	631	Seriously endangered
12 Trinitario	Arawakan	<10,000 <sup>30</sup>	20,805 <sup>31</sup>	Endangered
13 Ignaciano	Arawakan			Endangered
14 Jorá	Tupian	0-5 <sup>32</sup>		Possibly extinct
15 Sirionó	Tupian	399	419	Endangered
16 Yuki	Tupian	125	156	Seriously endangered
17 Yuracaré	Unclassified	2,675	3,333	Endangered
18 Leko	Unclassified	20	80	Moribund
19 Mosetén <sup>33</sup>	Unclassified	585	1,200	Endangered
20 Chimane	Unclassified	5,316	5,907	Potentially endangered
21 Canichana	Unclassified	3 <sup>34</sup>	583	Possibly extinct
22 Movima	Unclassified	1,452	6,528	Seriously endangered
23 Cayubaba	Unclassified	<10	794	Moribund
24 Itonama	Unclassified	<10	5,090	Moribund

Table 3. Indigenous languages of Amazonian Bolivia<sup>35</sup>

When establishing the estimated number of speakers of each language, the biggest problem usually is the continuous mix-up of the number of the ethnic group with the actual number of speakers. Yet another problem involves establishing the proper number for the ethnic groups. A striking example is provided by Itonama, for which the 1994 *Censo Indígena Rural de las Tierras Bajas* (CIRTB)<sup>36</sup> gives a total of 5,090 for the ethnic group. This high number is due to the fact that anyone who is born in Magdalena

<sup>30</sup> Number applies to both subgroups of the Mojo language.

<sup>31</sup> Number applies to the whole Mojo group.

<sup>32</sup> Although Grimes (1996) reports that Jorá has become extinct since 1963, data collected by the German anthropologist Jürgen Riester in 1974 mention the existence of 5 speakers. In the literature Jorá is often stated to be a subgroup of Sirionó.

<sup>33</sup> Although Mosestén and Chimane are often mentioned as separate languages, they form, together with Mosestén de Santa Ana, the small linguistic family Mosestenan (cf. Sakel this volume).

<sup>34</sup> These speakers only remember a few words and one or two phrases.

<sup>35</sup> Data adapted from Crevels & Adelaar (2000-2002).

<sup>36</sup> 'Rural Indigenous Census of the Lowlands'

–or anywhere in the Province of Iténez for that matter– is considered to be, or considers himself to be Itonama. Since the majority of the population consists of whites, mestizos and criollos it is practically impossible to decide on the exact number of ethnic Itonama. The same problem occurs with the other ethnic groups mentioned in Table 2. The degree of endangerment depends on many factors, such as the percentage of speakers, the mean age of the speakers, whether the language is still spoken by children, etc. Thus, Yuracaré, with 2,675 speakers, is classified in Table 3 as ‘endangered’, while Cavineña, with 1,180 speakers is classified as ‘potentially endangered’. The difference lies in the fact that in the Yuracaré communities children no longer speak the language, while they still do in the Cavineña communities. The viability of Ese Ejja is quite good, but the language is classified as ‘endangered’ because the ethnic group is relatively small. On the other hand, Movima, with 1,452 speakers, has been classified as ‘seriously endangered’ due to the fact that all speakers are over 50 years old. Likewise, Araona, a language that is spoken by practically the whole community, is classified as ‘seriously endangered’, because the ethnic group is very small.<sup>37</sup>

A closer look at the languages that are spoken in the Department of Beni shows the possibility of making a subdivision in three sociolinguistic scenarios: a) predominant Spanish monolingualism, b) co-occurrence of bilingualism and Spanish mono-lingualism, and c) predominant native monolingualism.

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- a) PREDOMINANT SPANISH MONOLINGUALISM  
Itonama, Cayubaba, Baure, Reyesano
  
  - b) CO-OCCURRENCE OF BILINGUALISM AND SPANISH MONOLINGUALISM  
*More Spanish monolingualism than bilingualism:*  
Movima, Mojo (Ignaciano & Trinitario), Moré  
*More bilingualism than Spanish monolingualism:*  
Yuracaré, Cavineña, Chácobo, Ese Ejja, Sirionó, Pacahuara
  
  - c) PREDOMINANT NATIVE MONOLINGUALISM  
Chimane
- 

Table 4. Current sociolinguistic situation in the Department of Beni<sup>38</sup>

Recent research<sup>39</sup> has led to the belief that the Canichana language is no longer spoken and that within the next few years the same might apply to Itonama, Cayubaba, Reyesano, and even Baure. This would mean that three language isolates,

<sup>37</sup> According to the demographic data, there exists a small tendency towards population growth: 39 (1963), 43 (1969), 50 (1975), 90 (1994), and finally 94 (1996).

<sup>38</sup> Data adapted from the 1994 CIRTB.

<sup>39</sup> In the period 1999-2001 I visited the Canichana of San Pedro on several occasions. The community would very much like to revive its language, but unfortunately all my attempts to track down speakers of Canichana have proved in vain. It now looks as though the language might be extinct.

one of the in total four Tacanan languages, and one of the three Arawakan languages that are still spoken in Bolivia would disappear.

The scenario in which there is a combination of bilingualism and Spanish monolingualism shows that Mojo, Movima, and Moré are on the way to be replaced completely by Spanish. Even though Mojo still has a considerable number of speakers, an alarmingly rapid loss of language is reported among the youth. Yuracaré, Cavineña, Chácobo, Ese Ejja, Sirionó, and Pacahuara show a higher percentage of bilingualism than Spanish monolingualism, but even in the case of these languages there is a growing percentage of children who no longer acquire the language.

Finally, Chimane, one of the dialects of the Mosestenan family, is by far the most viable language spoken in the Department of Beni. Generally the Chimane, especially the women and elders, speak very little Spanish. Children do not acquire Spanish until they are 15, unless they attend a school in one of the so-called *colla*<sup>40</sup> communities.

For many years economic development on the one hand, and preservation of the indigenous ethnic, cultural and social identity on the other hand, were considered to be two conflicting issues: working on the first would inevitably mean sacrificing the second. Moreover, it was often argued that the very culture of indigenous peoples stands in the way of their development. Consequently, programs to help indigenous peoples aimed at substituting their language, culture, and productive and agricultural practices. However, in the early 1990s the relationship between the indigenous groups and the Bolivian government changed. Whereas up to this point the relationship was based on exclusion, and even extermination, the State started to take the demands of the native groups into account. This change of attitude towards the Indians was not only triggered by the impulse of the newly arisen indigenous movement, but also by the growing awareness that the needs of the native population of Bolivia should be attended as well. Thus, in 1993, a state institution for the management of indigenous affairs was created, the *Subsecretaría de Asuntos Étnicos* (SAE)<sup>41</sup>. In 1997, this institution was converted into the *Vice Ministerio de Asuntos Indígenas y Pueblos Originarios* (VAIPO)<sup>42</sup>. Currently the *Programa Amazónico de Educación*<sup>43</sup> –a program that is aiming at the implementation of intercultural bilingual education in the Bolivian lowlands– is being financed with the help of the Danish government. The 1990 and 1996 Indian marches held in support of territorial claims have led to the recognition of the fact that the struggle for territory lies at the base of all of the indigenous demands and should, therefore, be treated with priority. A consequence of this recognition has been the ratification in 1996 of the so-called *Ley INRA*<sup>44</sup> (*Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria*<sup>45</sup>). This new agrarian reform law permits community land ownership and legalizes the creation of *TCO*'s (*Tierra*

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<sup>40</sup> Word used for referring to highland Indians.

<sup>41</sup> 'Bureau of the Assistant Secretary of Native Affairs'

<sup>42</sup> 'Vice-Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and Native Peoples'

<sup>43</sup> 'Amazonian Program of Education'

<sup>44</sup> 'INRA Law'

<sup>45</sup> 'National Institute for Agrarian Reform'

*Comunitaria de Origin*<sup>46</sup>). Furthermore it allots land that is not fulfilling its economic and social function.

As Lema Garrett (1998: 27) points out, by 1997, Amazonian Bolivia had not only captured the attention of the State but also that of the civilian society. Within the context of the decentralization of the administration on the one hand, and the growing interest of NGO's on the other hand, the attention for regional and local indigenous problems has grown considerably. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen what will be the real impact of these development in the long run.

#### 4. Discussion

It is not possible to attribute the sometimes more than alarming state of some of the indigenous languages spoken in the Department of Beni –or in the whole of Amazonian Bolivia for that matter– to a single factor, or even to a few factors. In the previous sections I have tried to sketch some possible causes for language loss and language death in this region. It all started in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when the first Spanish expeditions with explorers and conquistadors entered Mojos in search of El Dorado's gold. They were immediately followed by the slavery expeditions from the Santa Cruz area that came in search of human workforce. Although these expeditions usually did not stay on for a prolonged period in the Mojos area, they lasted long enough to contaminate the native populations with epidemic diseases and unbalance them by taking away young and strong men. By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Jesuits, in search of souls, formed the third group to enter Mojos.

The Jesuit missionaries were strongly opposed against slavery, an institution long condemned by Rome. Even though the missions in Mojos bloomed and brought important economic advantages to the area, it should be stressed that since the early days of the conquest of America Christian mission activity has been a salient component of the European aim to transform and assimilate the native inhabitants of America. The missions were run in a remarkably democratic way. Land, tools and workshops were the property of the community and work was obligatory for all able-bodied members. Nevertheless, the Jesuits' prime concern was to "save the Indians' souls", and, therefore, the indigenous customs and beliefs were discouraged. Christian values and moral were imposed on the people in such an effective way that today very little is known about the pre-Columbian indigenous cultures of this region. Furthermore, Block (1994: 58-59) points out that there is evidence that the demands of mission culture strained Mojos' natural resources. Settling thousands of people into single communities led to changed cultivation patterns, which gradually diminished the fertility of the soil. Historical records show that the activities developed during the Jesuit era reduced the available food resources for gathering.

The often more than inhumane ways, in which the local clergy and administrators who ruled the missions after the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767 treated the indigenous inhabitants of the missions, has been sufficiently illustrated in,

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<sup>46</sup> 'Indigenous Community Territory'



among others, d'Orbigny's descriptions of his travels in Bolivia. Mission culture came to an end when the rubber boom of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century brought white, criollo and mestizo settlers in sufficient numbers to overwhelm the indigenous culture –in so far as it still existed. Although the natives remained, they became marginalized to the Westernized society that had developed in the core regions, in which fluency in Spanish, affluence, and light skin were highly valued.

As discussed in Section 2.2, the rubber boom formed one of the most disruptive factors in the progressive destruction of indigenous cultures and languages. After visiting the rubber barracks on the Iténez River, Nordenskiöld (1922: 124) could not but conclude the following:

“Eines aber steht fest, eine kunstfertige, freie indianische Bevölkerung ist ausgerottet oder in ein elendes branntweindurstiges Proletariat verwandelt worden. Um den Bedarf der Industrie in Europa und Nordamerika zu befriedigen, werden diese Gegenden vernichtet. Mit welchem Recht?

Der Zivilisation wegen müssen die Schwachen untergehen. Nicht so sehr die Grausamkeit einzelner Personen gegen die Indianer regt mich auf, sondern die Versklavung einer ganzen Rasse.”<sup>47</sup>

When the Chaco War broke out, most Bolivians had very little if any interest in the remote Chaco region. Nevertheless, the authorities drafted all young men into the Bolivian army to fight against the Paraguayans in this terrible war, in which Bolivia lost 50,000 lives. The Department of Beni sent many young natives who were noted for their courage and endurance under the most difficult circumstances. After the war those that had survived returned home bitterly disappointed because of all the sacrifices that had been made more or less in vain for a cause that was physically and conceptionally so remote from their own world.

The educational reform that was carried through after the 1952 revolution may have been the decisive factor in the endangerment –and sometimes even extinction– of the languages of the Beni. The majority of the teachers of the newly established rural schools came from outside the region, did not know the local indigenous languages and were trained to severely punish the use of these languages within school settings. It did not take most of the pupils very long to shift to Spanish, thus causing their own native mother tongue to lose even more prestige. This process started almost half a century ago and by now the few speakers that are left in the case of some of the languages have to overcome a deep-rooted feeling of shame in order to be able to speak their native tongue.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> ‘But there is no doubt about one thing, a skillful, free Indian population has been extirpated, or changed into a miserable alcoholic proletariat. In order to satisfy the need of the industry in Europe and North America these areas are being destroyed. With which right?’

For the sake of civilization, the weak have to go down. It is not so much the cruelty of individuals against Indians that makes me angry, but the enslavement of an entire race.’ [Translation MC].

<sup>48</sup> Enrique Jordá (p.c. 2000) reports that in San Ignacio de Moxos the elderly women, who used to greet him and speak to him in Ignaciano, lately have stopped doing so. When asked why, the answer was that

In 1954, the Bolivian government invited the *Summer Institute of Linguistics* (SIL) to Bolivia with the objective to establish the integration of the indigenous peoples in national society. SIL stayed on until 1980 and worked on 18 indigenous, mostly Amazonian, languages. The institute played a pioneering role as far as bilingual education in the Amazonian lowlands is concerned, but once again missionaries imposed their Western norms and moral on the indigenous inhabitants of the Department of Beni by using bilingual education as a tool to launch their cultural and religious philosophy (cf. Castro Mantilla 1997: 80). Other missionary groups that are closely related to the SIL and that are still active in Bolivia today are the New Tribes Mission and the Swiss Mission.

In 1951, the anthropologist François-Xavier Beghin stayed for two months with the last group of 14 surviving Jorá (Tupian) at the Bolsón de Oro Lagoon, to the east of Magdalena and the San Joaquín River. During his stay he found traces of a massacre in an abandoned Jorá village<sup>49</sup>. According to the surviving Jorá, the major part of the village's inhabitants had been exterminated a year and a half before during one of the "punitive" expeditions undertaken by whites, criollos and mestizos in order to "reduce" and "domesticate" one of the last tribes that had the audacity to defend its hunting grounds and crops (cf. Beghin 1976: 130). In 1955 only five Jorá were left, and today the group, and therefore the language, is most probably extinct.

On November 9, 2001, 10 landless *campesinos*<sup>50</sup> were massacred and more than 20 injured, about 40 km from Yacuiba, the capital of the Province of Gran Chaco, Department of Tarija, in the south of Bolivia near the Argentinean border. Today in Bolivia 4,5% of the landowners still possess 70% of the total disposable land. Confronted with the unjust land distribution and having lost hope that the *Ley INRA* will allot them land, *campesino* families decided in May 2000 to organize *Núcleos de Campesinos Sin Tierra*<sup>51</sup> and started to occupy land of big estates that did not fulfil any economic or social function<sup>52</sup> in the Province of Gran Chaco. On June 23, 2000, 180 families occupied the first big estate, the Pananti estate of 3,000 hectares near Yacuiba. Today more than 18 *Núcleos de Campesinos Sin Tierra* exist. The 180 families of the *Núcleo de Campesinos Sin Tierra de Pananti* were attacked by landowners and paramilitary groups with the help of police and army. These attacks have been systematically repeated since the families first occupied the Pananti estate in June 2000, and the persecution of the landless *campesinos* has not stopped after the massacre at the Pananti estate. The Bolivian authorities have not taken any measures to curb the violence against the *campesinos*. The 1996 *INRA* Law was meant to put a stop to the illegitimate assignment and unequal distribution of land, but up till now the land distribution problems still have not been solved. The *Instituto Nacional de*

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they had gotten used to Spanish, that their grandchildren always spoke to them in Spanish and did not understand Ignaciano.

<sup>49</sup> Whenever one of the Jorá died, the other members of the group abandoned the village.

<sup>50</sup> See Section 2.3, 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph.

<sup>51</sup> 'Centers of Landless Peasants'

<sup>52</sup> See Section 3, penultimate paragraph.

*Reforma Agraria* has not succeeded in reverting to the State the abandoned, idle or illegal estates, which preferably should be allotted to indigenous peoples and communities without land. This is partly due to the ambiguity of the *INRA Law*, but more than anything to the fact that the State keeps giving in to the pressure of the influential class of large landowners that is opposed to the planned changes in the structure of agrarian landownership.<sup>53</sup>

Exactly 50 years have gone by since Beghin's visit to the Jorá in 1951 and the massacre at the Pananti estate –which in view of the tension built up around the land allotment question could just as easily have taken place in the Department of Beni–. Unfortunately very little seems to have changed in this time span. As long as the indigenous inhabitants of the Department of Beni get exterminated over conflicts about land or other economic matters, as long as they keep on living in a form of debt servitude in which they get paid less than what the landowners charge them for food, clothing and other goods, as long as they are completely dependent on the landowners for cash money<sup>54</sup>, and as long as they are treated as some kind of third-rate population group, there will be very little chance that the dissolution of the ethnic groups and the disappearance of their languages will come to an end.

### 5. Conclusion

The pending loss of languages, such as Itonama, Cayubaba, and Reyesano<sup>55</sup>, will have serious consequences for the transfer of knowledge to a younger generation concerning the surroundings and cultural traditions of the ethnic groups in question. After all, language reflects the unique world-view and culture complex of its speech community. Wurm (1999: 33-34) points out that with the disappearance of each language, an irreplaceable unit in our knowledge and understanding of human thought and world-view gets lost for ever. This results in a reduction of the human knowledge base as it may be expressed through language. Every language is a symbol of the ethnic identity of its speakers, and its documentation tends to keep it alive. However, the mere documentation of (seriously) endangered or moribund languages is not enough. As stressed by Grinevald Craig (1997: 270), linguists should combine salvage linguistics<sup>56</sup> and archiving efforts with efforts of revitalizing or maintaining endangered languages. In the case of the indigenous languages of the Beni, this is not an easy task, since generally numbers of speakers are very low and, moreover, speakers are not convinced of the need to maintain the indigenous language. However, there is hope that the growing ethnic self-consciousness and pride of many groups in the Department of Beni in the past decade may lead to a resurgent interest of the speakers in their own native languages.

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<sup>53</sup> Full report at [www.movimientos.org/cloc/show\\_text.php3?key=836/](http://www.movimientos.org/cloc/show_text.php3?key=836/)

<sup>54</sup> Especially for health issues cash is needed to pay a doctor or to buy medicine.

<sup>55</sup> See Section 3.

<sup>56</sup> Label that is sometimes used for the linguistic documentation of dying languages.

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