

Schooling among the Guarani Indigenous People of Paraguay

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Is missionary work, including schooling, a threat when one must preserve valuable culture and history? PYM's (The Pentecostal Foreign Mission of Norway) schooling among the Guarani indigenous people of Paraguay shows that there is no such contradiction.

In many respects, we are part of a very long missionary tradition. Missionary to India, William Carey (1761-1834), called the "father of modern world missions," worked in a similar way. He translated the Bible into many languages, collected local stories, wrote textbooks and established schools and universities.



In 1958, Bergliot Normo (Nordheim), Gunvor Johansen (Iversen) and Ruth Kjellås became the first Norwegian missionaries to work with the Guarani Indians. They tell, "We had been in Paso Cadena for just one week when we got the first children together to teach them."

After a short time, the school was moved to a small Indian hut; then in 1965, a brick school building was opened. Since then, some 30 school buildings have been built around the indigenous colonies. Two of them are secondary schools. About half of the buildings were fundings through PYM / BN (Digni) / NORAD.

Since then, schooling has been an important part of this work.

However, school materials were not consistent with the situation and language of the indigenous people. It is true that we soon had parts of the New Testament in the people's language, but schooling addresses various topics. Regular formal educational materials were adapted to the local language and culture but often orally. Furthermore, instruction in Spanish made learning even more difficult.

In 1979, the school received a qualified teacher, Rosa Bogado Garcete. It was then that the school was accredited by the education authorities. In 1986, modern school buildings were opened.



Paso-Cadena School in 1986

In the 90s, some young indigenous students completed their secondary schooling and studied teacher education. In 1999, Crispin Caballero Vera became one of the first indigenous people to receive such training.

Land and People

Paraguay has a population of about 6.5 million people. Of these, there are 17 indigenous people groups with a total population of about 120,000. In the 50s, there were roughly 50,000 indigenous people; the number has more than doubled. PYM are working among 4 groups (guarani) living in the east of Paraguay: Ava-Guaraní, Mbyá, Aché and Pai-Tavytera. Their languages belongs to the language family Guaraní. Ava-Guaani and the Pai-Tavytera language is related linguistically to the guarani of the mestizos (the no-indians in Paraguay, where 90% speaks Guaraní as their first language).

The Ava-Guaraní are closer culturally (but not religiously) to the rural population. They live in the territorial departments of Caaguazu, Alto Parana and Canindeyu. They may have come the longest way in education. Most teachers are Ava-Guaraní. The number of Ava-Guaraní in higher education is growing. Some of the evangelical churches are also among this people group.



Most **Mbyá** live south of the Ava-Guaraní, but there are Mbyá colonies in areas inhabited by both Mbyá and Ava-Guaraní. The Mbyá have been more culturally closed. Only in recent years have some Mbyá received higher education. Their Guaraní is very different from the mainstream dialect. They are also somewhat different culturally and religiously from the other groups.

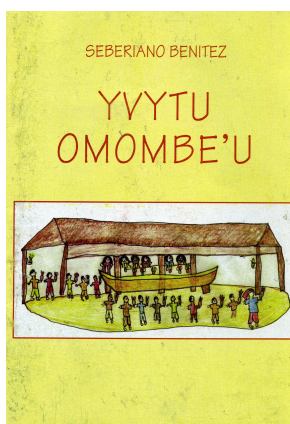


The Aché are linguistically and culturally very different from other Guaraní groups. The population is estimated at around 1,500-2,000 individuals. They were nomadic until the 80s and now live in several villages south of Ciudad del Este and in the north of the territorial department of Canindeyú. They seem to work best as a group, and they work together a lot. Some villages practice modern agriculture. Most are Christians.

The **Pai-Tavytera** live in the territorial departments of Amambay and Concepción. They also speak Guaraní. They are the largest group among the Guaraní. PYM also worked extensively among them in the 70s and 80s. A hospital is now serving the indigenous people in Yby Yau.

The indigenous population is growing at a rate of 4% a year. The mestizo population is growing at 2 to 3%.

Pilot Project



Under the "Paso-Cadena" project (schooling, agriculture, and medical care) in the late 90s, Inge Bjørnevoll developed a booklet called "Yvytu omombe'u" ("The Wind Speaks"). It was a kind of pilot project. It took time to gain the trust of the indigenous people, and the computers lacked some of the Guaraní characters. It also took time to find a printer that could print it. The booklet was published by the PYM foundation of Paraguay, "La Mision Norma." In the brochure, our neighbor in Paso-Cadena, Seberiano Benitez, tells about his life. There are photos of Seberiano and children made drawings showing different aspects of their lives. This was the beginning. The indigenous people, themselves, started the textbook.

This was their first book, and among other things, we wanted it to strengthen the indigenous peoples' identity in relation to the society that surrounds them.



Seberiano Benitez

Partners

Inger Johanne and Inge Bjørnevoll again took up the challenge in the late 90s. They realized that there was a need for a much broader linguistic environment. So, they contacted the Evangelical University, and the Kuatiañe'ẽ Project was established.

Cooperation with these institutions has been excellent, and the guidance has contributed to a professional job.

Our other partners in Paraguay are the indigenous church, indigenous schools, indigenous individuals and the "Prof. Dr. Reinaldo Julián Decoud Larrosa" Foundation. The Foundation, named after a former researcher of the Guaraní language, was created in 1997, with the goal of preserving the Guaraní language and runs the Kuatiañe'ẽ Project. In the 60s, Dr Decoud Larrosa translated the New Testament from Greek to Guaraní, and in 2006, Dr. Aquino revised this translation to produce an Ava-Guaraní language edition.



Dr. in Theology, missiologist and linguist Almidio Aquino has led the work the whole time. Inge Bjørnevoll was PYM's representative in the work until 2007.

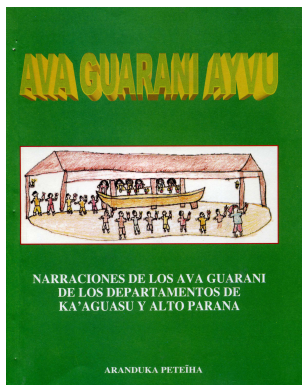
Cultural material is collected by recording on cassettes, which is preferably done by the indigenous people, themselves. This includes the singing of old songs. Key people, chiefs and healers, tells what they want for the future generations to know about their culture. The recordings, together with photographs and drawings by schoolchildren from different villages, form the basis of the books.

PYM has always been the main contact in Norway. From there, it has monitored the project, especially with regard to organization, finance, and reporting. This has been very important and decisive in obtaining results. Solveig Irene Seland and Rudolf Leif Larsen have been PYM's

representatives for several years, and the project visits have been very helpful.

Cooperation with individual and Pentecostal churches to get the contributions of 10 %, ultimately made the project possible. Without this contributions, the project would have been impossible.

The 2000-2004 Kuatiañe'ẽ Project, extended into 2005 and 2006



“The Institute of Guaraní Linguistics” and “School of Modern Languages” have participated in this project. During the project period, books 1 (see image) to 14 were produced for the Ava-Guaraní people; books 1 and 2 and a dictionary were written for the Mbyá; and a grammar book was developed for the Aché.

The books contain texts of great ethnological, sociological and anthropological value. The indigenous people, themselves, tell their stories. The seniors remember words that were commonly used in their generation. They discuss different types of crafts, hunting methods, food production, meals, clothing and decorations for all kinds of celebrations.

They sing their old songs, both religious ones and their own popular songs. The Guaraní know a lot about medicinal plants, and this is also a subject of the books.

The Kuatiañe'ẽ Project from 2006 to 2009

In this period, the project produced 17 Mbyá books, 4 Aché books and 4 Ava-Guaraní books. Since 2008 six indigenous students received scholarships. Furthermore, 45 training courses for indigenous teachers and university lectures were conducted. The project-produced texts were the course topics.

The start of collecting texts among the Aché indigenous people was interesting. They live in six different villages. Previously, the Aché lived freely in the forests. Many children were separated from their parents, and many of them lost their parents to murder. These children, now adults, are in search of their roots. It was important to build a bridge among those who were separated from their families. The project's goal involves addressing this aspect of history, as well.

In the project period, products have been revised in cooperation with indigenous teachers from different local communities. Changes and corrections made periodically at workshops have helped to improve the books.



The same period saw the creation of a Project Committee, with representation from the project's target areas. The Committee held 15 meetings in this period, during which it studied and analyzed mechanisms for increasing ownership of the books they helped to produce.

18,550 books have been distributed to local Mbyá, Aché and Ava-Guaraní communities.

Basic materials will be stored at the “Institute for Guaraní Linguistics Research of Paraguay” until the community has safer facilities for taking care of them.

Nine workshops have been conducted under ILO grant agreement number 169 to encourage the

indigenous people to know their rights to health and education and to preserve documents on their great cultural, historical and linguistic heritage.

Kuatiañe'ë Project from 2010 to 2014

The purpose of the work has been the following:

1. Developing comprehensible reading books that emphasize ethnocultural values, native language, the development of self-awareness, self-esteem, confidence in the future and the possibility of socio-economic change at home
2. Providing teachers with training and strengthening their rights
3. Electronically storing tales and songs to preserve this cultural material just as it was told and sung. Much will disappear when the current generation of grandparents passes away.
4. Since 2008, scholarships have been awarded to students from universities and other centers of higher learning. These students are closely monitored and receive necessary support. It is not easy to go from an indigenous village to a very harsh, secularized environment to study. They have received higher education in Nursing and Education.

In May of 2014, books 11 to 14 were produced for the Mbyá, books 27 to 33 for the Ava-Guaraní and books 4 to 10 for the Aché.

Is this important? Of course! To our knowledge, nobody has collected material as the project has done. Just as helping to prevent and cure diseases through health care, this is a natural part of the work, so is promoting schooling, preaching the gospel, forming congregations and helping the Guaraní indigenous people of Paraguay in other ways. This has much to do with the Guaraní soul: what they have been, are and will be. It is about documenting and preserving their local language. Each of the three groups has its language or dialect, and we see there is a great risk that they could lose their native language. We preserve it in books and on CDs.

The project has been evaluated several times. Conclusions from evaluations were as follows:

2011 Evaluation with Tenondere Consultants, Asunción, Paraguay, says:

The report from this external evaluation states:

- That the evaluation reveals a high degree of acceptance and appreciation of Kuatiañe'ë Project work
- That different Ava-Guaraní, Mbyá and Aché communities and settlements see the collection of their culture in books as something very positive, since they understand that it will help to protect their culture and will attract children and youth to their own people group, which has been besieged by acculturation and whose culture has been largely forgotten, at risk of being abandoned by its members
- That Ava-Guaraní, Mbyá and Aché survey respondents have expectations concerning the Kuatiañe'ë Project's future work. They hope the project will continue to work closely with them to increase knowledge about and appreciation of their culture, and they want to work to reach other communities and individuals, as well.

Conclusion

The means and time invested in the books project have yielded great results. At the project's conclusion, about 70 books will have been produced. All texts, images and drawings that come from these three indigenous groups, were collected by the groups themselves. Project staff have adapted their stories for the book. The same stories and songs are recorded on cassettes or CDs and videos.

Some 20 people have received higher education in teaching. Many are back in their home villages, teaching in schools. Those who are completing their studies are returning home to work there. One of these is Aché Estella, who will be the first Aché woman to complete a higher education.

A good environment of linguistic research has been created at the "Prof. Dr. Reinaldo Julián Decoud Larrosa" Foundation, where much knowledge has been generated about the languages of Ava Guaraní, Mbyá and Aché.

All indigenous people who have served on the project committee, collected cultural material, edited or studied language are an important resource for their future development.

There is a great desire to extend the project to other indigenous groups.