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# Why F Ua U and not Rama Cay Creole?

Colette Grinevald

## 1. Introduction

The goal of this paper is to illustrate the kind of very complex sociolinguistic field situations we sometimes naïve and unprepared linguists can be confronted with, complex in their variety of multilingualism and language contact patterns, and complex in their being cast in specific language ideologies. The paper considers the origins, the accomplishments and the limitations of a language revitalization and salvage linguistics project in Nicaragua for what was considered a practically moribund ancestral language: Rama, known locally as “the Tiger language”. It situates the project in its Sandinista revolutionary time and its multilingual context, and it raises the question of why no attention was paid at the time to the local variety of creole known as “Rama Cay Creole”, the language actually used by the Rama people, who asked for the revitalization of their ancestor language. It muses about how the ideology of the time prevented working with the variety of language that could have served much more efficiently as a marker of identity than the ancestral language and how ideologies can evolve, since the same Rama Cay Creole is now becoming a legitimate object of study, although most likely too late for that community because it, in turn, has become a moribund language.

The story is told from the standpoint of a linguist specialist of morpho-syntactic descriptions of indigenous languages of Latin America, who found herself drawn into a very politicized situation in a more multiethnic and multilingual situation than she had ever experienced before. This is not an uncommon situation for linguists embarking on fieldwork on endangered languages, who must face the fact that endangered languages are very generally embedded into socio-political contexts of much greater complexities than standard training in linguistics departments prepare them for. The paper reflects therefore on the kinds of difficulties and contradictions that make such fieldwork projects usually extremely challenging and thought-provoking, by trying to sort through the powerful mix of unexpected successes and disheartening set-backs that have characterized this project over the years.

It is worth making note of two aspects of this Rama Language Project. The first is that it developed in the 1980s, i.e. before the decade of the 1990s that resounded with the wake-up call from a sector of the linguistic profession about the alarming rate of language diversity loss around the world, hence before the development of public discourse about

“language endangerment”.<sup>1</sup> The second aspect is that the project is very fortunately soon to benefit from a second round of life through support from the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme, which offers, somewhat unexpectedly, a unique opportunity to revisit the site and to gain a rare twenty year perspective on the possible impact of such language rescue and revitalization projects.<sup>2</sup> Particularly pertinent to this presentation is how it is allowing for the observation of how language ideologies have been changing in the region so that the then ignored and despised community language of the main Rama community, the Rama Cay Creole of the island of Rama Cay, may finally, twenty years later, begin to be viewed with some interest and be finally included in the linguistic studies of the languages of the region, and perhaps find its place in the building of Rama identity. On the other hand, the rescue of the ancestor Rama language has become more urgent and necessary than ever in the face of increasing threats to the integrity of Rama territory and in the new legal battle for land demarcation and land preservation.

I will first describe the socio-political circumstances of the Rama Language Project and then compare the official demands for the revitalization of the Rama language with the actual situation encountered in the field at the time. I will then focus on how some of the major difficulties encountered in the project stemmed from ideological postures behind the official government discourse, that indigenous community leaders espoused, resulting in baffling contradictions and occasional distressing craziness on the ground in the efforts to revitalize the Rama language. I will then turn to Rama Cay Creole and place it in the context of the controversy raging in the region at the time about the role of creole languages in identity building and language policies, in order to explain why Rama Cay Creole, the actual language of the Ramas who asked for the revitalization of their ancestor Rama language, had no chance of being paid attention to at that time. I will close on a postscript of twenty years later, to underline how ideologies have been evolving so that Rama Cay Creole may now become a legitimate subject of study. One might be tempted to think that it is unfortunately probably too late now for it to help strengthen the Rama ethnic identity the way it could have done then, but one cannot be sure of that either, if one considers how no one could have predicted the kind of unexpected success the Rama Language Project encountered in the end.

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<sup>1</sup> It started in fact several years before the original public discussions of the topic of endangered languages and was one of the case studies presented in the first LSA panel on endangered languages, organized by the late Ken Hale to coincide with the 500th anniversary of the so-called ‘discovery of America’ that indigenous populations all through the Americas were protesting about (Craig 1992, Hale et al 1992).

<sup>2</sup> This new round of support will allow for the completion of unfinished business such as the actual production of an extensive computerized dictionary and new materials for the community, and the archiving of all materials for safe keeping and wide access.

## **2. The Rama Language Project of Nicaragua<sup>3</sup>**

The origins of the Rama Language project are to be found in the political history of the country, and are the product of intricate interactions between a government setting language policies and granting linguistic rights, and indigenous communities formulating demands for the revitalization of their ancestor language, in an interesting interaction of top-down and bottom-up pressures.

### **2.1 Nicaragua and its indigenous languages**

Nicaragua is one of five countries in Central America. Until the Sandinista Revolution of the 1980s, little was known of its native and creole populations. Its indigenous populations and languages have only survived on the Caribbean side, those on the Pacific side having been largely decimated. Rama is the ancestral language of the Rama people, located on the south part of the Caribbean coast, between the main town of Bluefields and the Costa Rican border. It belongs to the Chibchan family of languages and is distantly related to the Paya language of Honduras to the North and other Chibchan languages to the south, in Costa Rica, Panama and Colombia. Maps 1 and 2 below locate the country and the Rama language with respect to the other indigenous languages of the region:

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<sup>3</sup> The original Rama Language Project received support from the National Science Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research for the description of the Rama language. Production of materials for the community was financed by donations from the Council For Human Rights in Latin America, Linguists for Nicaragua, and Corso of New Zealand. It is supported today by the HRELP.

Maps 1 and 2



The Ramas are the smallest indigenous group of the region and have the lowest status in the multiethnic social hierarchy characteristic of the region, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: *the Atlantic Coast « costeños »*

« white »	mestizos
-----	
« non white »	
<i>colored</i>	Creole
-----	
<i>Indian</i>	Miskitu
	Sumu
	Garifuna
	<u>Rama</u>

To the multiethnic nature of the region corresponds a multilingual situation with varied patterns of multilingualism. Table 2 is an assessment of the populations of the various groups made in the early years of the Revolution, in 1982, when the country was discovering the existence of the ethnic populations of its Caribbean coast. It gives a list of the languages then said to be associated with the different ethnic groups, with their language family affiliations.

Table 2: *Ethnic groups and associated languages with language families of the “Atlantic Coast” of Nicaragua (CIDCA 1982)*

Ethnic groups	population	language	linguistic affiliation
<b>Mestizos</b>	182,377	Spanish	<i>Indo-European</i>
<b>Creoles</b>	25,723	English /MCC	<i>Caribbean English Creole</i>
<b>Miskitu</b>	66,994	Miskitu	<i>Misumalpan</i>
<b>Sumu</b>	4,851	Sumu	<i>Misumalpan</i>
<b>Garifuna</b>	8,487	Garifuna	<i>Arawakan</i>
<b>Rama</b>	649	Rama	<i>Chibchan</i>

The table is meant to show the low position of the Rama population and language. It interestingly does not mention the existence of a Rama Cay Creole (or RCC), a variant of the Miskitu Coast Creole (or MCC) spoken by the Black Creoles and the language that the

majority of the Ramas had shifted to when they abandoned Rama. The table does not show also that the Garifuna language had practically no speakers left in Nicaragua, nor does it show what future linguistic studies showed, namely that Sumu was a group of languages and not a single language.

## **2.2 Autonomy for the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua and linguistic rights**

The Sandinista Revolution that took place in the 1980s, after the fall of the Zomoza dictatorship in 1979, faced a conflict situation in its eastern half known then as the “Atlantic Coast”. This “Contra war” was largely financed and planned by the United States, to prevent the establishment of a revolutionary regime in their “backyard” region, as they consider it. It did include legitimate demands from the indigenous communities of the region, among them demands for the recognition of their cultural and linguistic specificities. The political response from the Sandinista government to such demands was to launch an Autonomy Project for the Atlantic Coast region that was amply discussed by all the population concerned in the mid-1980s.

In the Autonomy Statute legislated in 1987, Law 28, VIII recognizes the multiethnic nature of the Nicaraguan people and grants to the communities the rights to preserve their language, religion and culture. Article 11, Chapter III affirms the absolute equality of rights and duties for all members of the communities of the Atlantic Coast, independently of their population and level of development. This commitment to equal treatment for all identified ethnic groups of the coast, independent of the size of their population, its social status or the state of its language, clearly granted the Ramas as many rights as any other group.

The Rama Language Project was therefore a direct product of the intense discussions of the Autonomy Project phase that took place during numerous multiethnic assemblies that gathered representatives of all ethnic groups of the Coast for the first time in history. The new laws granting linguistic rights to all populations were the legal context within which it was implemented.

## **2.3 Which language for which ethnic group?**

The discussion and granting of those linguistic rights had several consequences for the identification of the languages spoken by individuals and communities, and for the number of demands for the study and development of the “authentic autochthonous languages” of the coast by communities (as they were called then). On the one hand, the dominant Western ideology of the time and place that equated one ethnic group with one culture and one language (see Foley, this volume) created a certain realignment of speaker populations. For instance, black Miskitu people who had previously preferred to pass for Creoles (colored) opted to declare themselves Miskitu (Indian), raising dramatically the number of

Miskitu speakers identified; on the other hand, some Miskitu-dominated Sumu communities declared themselves not Miskitu but rather Sumu. Further, new linguistic work on Sumu led to the recognition that it was not a language but rather a language group, with two distinct languages, Mayangna (Northern Sumu) and Ulwa (Southern Sumu) (Benedicto and Hale 2004)

In the spirit of the new linguistic rights, the two ethnic groups with very endangered or moribund languages embarked on language revitalization projects. In the case of the Garifunas to the north, a community mostly composed of relatively recent immigrants from Honduras and Belize who had all but lost their ancestral language, a project developed with support from Garifuna speakers from over the Honduran border where the language is still spoken. In the case of the Ramas, popular belief was that there were only a few speakers left, all old men on the island of Rama Cay. When the Creole-speaking Rama representatives found themselves in multiethnic assemblies, they grew distraught at not being able to speak Rama in public. They reported feeling “ashamed” because, as the main chief repeated on many occasions, they felt they could not claim to be “real Ramas” if they stood up to address the assemblies in English Creole, another group’s language, in front of representatives of the other groups that spoke in their own language first when they stood up. From that apparently excruciating and disturbing experience, and from discussions that ensued on the island, Rama leaders decided to come and ask for help in reclaiming their ancestral Rama language.<sup>4</sup>

Linguistic work on the languages of the coast was carried out over the years by a group of international linguists that organized themselves as “Linguists for Nicaragua” under the stewardship of Ken Hale (Rivas 2004). The group taught linguistic courses at the Universidad Centro Americana (UCA) and coordinated language description and language revitalization projects through the Centro de Investigación y Documentación de la Costa Atlántica (CIDCA). The linguists involved with indigenous linguistic communities of the coast, and the kind of work being carried out on the language in those years are given in table 3<sup>5</sup>:

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly it was upon seeing the attention given to the Ramas that the people of the community of Karawala to the north, considered to be speakers of Miskitu until then, came to ask for a linguist too to study their unidentified home language. When Ken Hale started working with them, he soon identified that their home language was distinct from the cluster of other Sumu dialects to the north, that are regrouped today under the name of Mayangna (Northern Sumu). It became known as Ulwa (Southern Sumu).

<sup>5</sup> There were other projects of Linguists for Nicaragua on non-indigenous languages: Wayne O’Neill and Tim Shopen did some work on Creole English or MCC (but see section 3.1. below on how MCC was not taken into account in the bilingual education program) and Judy Kegl worked on Nicaraguan Sign Language.



Table 3 Linguists for Nicaragua and indigenous languages of the Coast

1. <b>Miskitu</b>	<i>Salamanca</i>
The language already had a written tradition. It was the vehicular language of the coast. One of the main goals was the promotion of literary production.	
2. “ <b>Sumu</b> ”	
<b>Mayangna</b> (Northern Sumu)	<i>Norwood, Benedicto</i>
<b>Ulwa</b> (Southern Sumu)	<i>Hale, Green</i>
The languages needed basic linguistic descriptions. The projects emphasized the development of literacy and the training of community linguists.	
3. <b>Rama</b>	<i>(Grinevald) Craig, Tibbitts, Assadi</i>
The project was a combination of salvage linguistics and language revitalization	

The projects in which international linguists participated successfully were all focused on the indigenous languages of the region. As it turned out very limited work was done then on the language(s) of the Creole population due to the polemics and conflicting ideological postures that characterized the discussions of what to promote and teach: whether the “English language” or the local English-based creole variety known as “Miskitu Coast Creole”. It is in such a context that the Rama Cay Creole of the Ramas was never considered worthy of study.

### 3. The Rama Language Project as a language revitalization project: success and limitations

The Rama Language Project (hence RLP) was therefore presented to the volunteer linguist as a mandate “to revive the Rama language”. It was initiated at a time when the Ramas were caught geographically and ideologically in the middle of the Contra War, and it was meant in part as a gesture of peace from Sandinista authorities, who were in fact totally ignorant of the sociolinguistic situation of the Ramas. The project was conceived by the linguist from the start and out of necessity as a two-pronged project: 1) salvage language description and documentation, considering the scant linguistic information available on the language, and 2) language revitalization, as per the request of the governmental authorities and the community leaders.

### **3.1 The Ramas and their languages**

The initial field study revealed that there were two communities of Ramas. Only the one living on the island of Rama Cay in the lagoon, the closest to the town of Bluefields was known to the Sandinistas at that time; it was the community from where the demands for the revitalization of the ancestral Rama language had emerged but where the language had practically disappeared. The other community was further south, in dispersed settlements along the coast and creeks, where the Rama language was still spoken by some.

Those two communities had undergone different patterns of language loss. At Rama Cay for a long while had been few speakers left. The demise of the language Rama was already announced early in the 20th century by Walter Lehmann, who did the first study ever of Rama, mostly a large vocabulary gathered from speakers on Rama Cay in 1907 (Lehmann 1920). When RLP began, no Rama had been heard spoken on the island for decades, as the handful of last speakers did not socialize together. The shift away from Rama had been relatively swift, enforced by zealous Scandinavian and German missionaries who happened to speak English only as a second language, and with noticeable accents at that. The characteristics of the variety of Creole that developed on the island, known as Rama Cay Creole, are said to be due to a combination of the dominant variety of Creole of the Coast, known as Miskitu Coast Creole, a Rama substratum, and the influence of the English spoken by these missionaries. In more recent times, Rama Cay Creole has been giving way to the wider ranging Miskitu Coast Creole of Bluefields. Meanwhile, on the mainland, the shift happened much later and Rama is still spoken in everyday conversations to this day, although by fewer and fewer speakers as time passes. Very few Ramas of the island or the mainland speak Spanish; until recently it was used only by those in contact with the outside, such as school teachers and some representatives, but this situation has been changing with the development of formal education on the island, which now reaches junior high school.

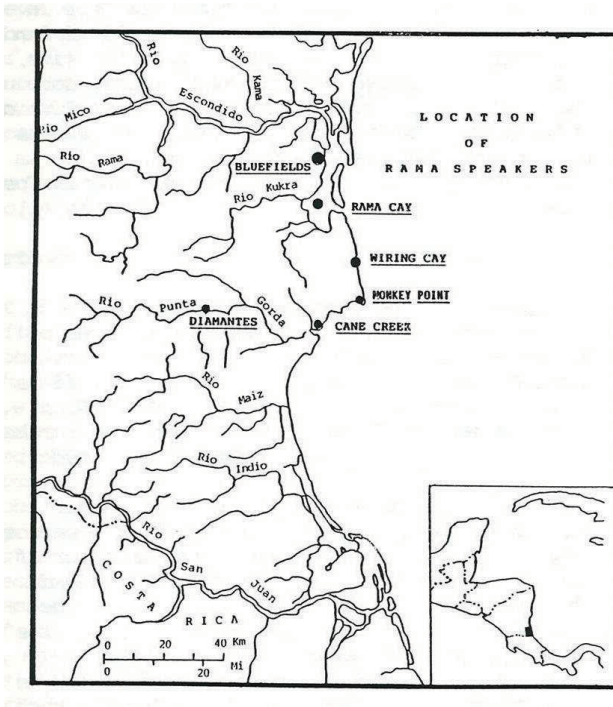
The challenge was therefore that the request for revitalization of the ancestral Rama language came from the Rama Cay community, but the language was practically not spoken in that community anymore. As was slowly revealed in multiple incidents through the first years of the project, this community held very negative attitudes toward the mainland Rama community in general, and even more so toward the last speakers of the language they said they wanted revitalized. They called the last speakers of Rama the “tiger people” and the language they were speaking “the tiger language”; they therefore supposedly wanted back a language that they actually considered “ugly”, that they said sounded like the howling of the tigers, and which was spoken by people they considered primitive. The expressions of ‘tiger people’ and ‘tiger language’ came from the mythology of the Rama about jungle people that were said to be able to speak with the tigers, from whom they received predictions and demands; this was the power of Rama shamans or *turmali*; there were also traditional Rama stories of beings that were half people and half

tigers, much in the same vein as many traditional tales of the Americas of beings half human and half animals (Loveland 1975).

### 3.2 Language description (1): Looking for speakers of Rama

The linguist had been told the popular belief, that there were only three speakers of Rama left, three old men on the island of Rama Cay. However, through an early encounter with another speaker, a woman in her sixties, a rather different picture of the population of Rama speakers emerged. There were indeed a few dozen speakers of Rama left, including clusters of speakers who still used it as their sole language. Those people were living on the mainland, mostly along Wiring Cay, Cane Creek, Punta Gorda, Indian River, or Corn River.

Map 3: location of Rama Speakers



It took several field trips, interviews with about 18 speakers and visits to another dozen to arrive at a realistic census of the last speakers of Rama. This part of the field research was carried out largely with the help of Barbara Assadi, an American anthropologist who had lived among the Ramas of the mainland for several years in the 1970s and who had introduced me to the Rama speaker who became the main leader of the RLP, Miss Nora (Elenora Rigby, 1923-2001, as consultation of church records has recently revealed). The census included some self and other assessment of language skills and language use, kinship relations, and settlement patterns. The total of all Ramas with some knowledge of the language finally reached a figure of 58, and with native speakers totalling 31. The age of the speakers spanned from over 70 to a few teenagers, with a solid group of speakers in their high thirties to fifties. Most striking was the high proportion of male speakers in the native speaker group, who in addition were single men with no descendance and who lived isolated in the jungle.

*Table 4: the last speakers of the Rama language as in 1987*

	Native Speakers	Fluent Speakers	Limited	Understand	
	<i>Total</i>				
Men	<b>22</b>	4	6	2	34
Women	9	1	9	5	24
Total	<b>31</b>	5	15	7	<b>58</b>

It is worth noting that the local publication of these statistics, as well as numerous public interventions to varied audiences – locally, regionally and nationally – about the real situation of the Rama language have had no real impact to this day on the popular belief or myth of the Rama language being “spoken by only three old men on Rama Cay”. The added twist is that those three old men of Rama Cay never participated in any of the RLP activities over the years and their language skills could never be assessed.

### **3.3 Language description (2): Working with three speakers**

In the end, the description of the Rama language had to rely on the speech of just three speakers, in spite of attempts at working with about a dozen who for varied reasons could not provide reliable or comprehensible data or help with linguistic analysis (Grinevald 2003b, Grinevald to appear). Some were too scared, others mumbled too much, and the speech of yet others could not be transcribed with the help of the main speakers of the project (for reasons that remain obscure to this day).

The three speakers had different skills and provided different kinds of data. Miss Nora Rigby, resident of Rama Cay but speaker from Cane Creek, had learned Rama at the age of ten when she had gone to live with her father in the jungle. Her father was the last shaman, and one of the last to “talk to the tigers”. She was in her sixties at the beginning of the study, spoke fluent Rama and was a sharp linguistic consultant with a good acumen for linguistic analysis. In the second year of the project she brought her daughter-in-law, Cristina Benjamins, a native speaker from the same community of Cane Creek who used Rama daily with several speakers, including her two siblings, an aunt and cousins. She was in her late thirties then and the mother of 8 children. The youngest speakers of Rama are some of her children and nephews. The two women provided the data on which the grammar study is based, Cristina providing the bulk of the narratives and Miss Nora being a good linguistic consultant for direct elicitation. A third speaker joined the project a few years later upon his return from Costa Rica where he spent most of the Contra War. Miss Nora had eagerly awaited his return because she considered his participation essential, particularly on the ground that he was the only Rama speaker with some literacy skills. Walter Ortiz is a native speaker of Rama from Wiring Cay, and a nephew of Miss Nora. He was the main consultant for the Rama dictionary work that followed the grammar work. Since Miss Nora’s death he has taken over teaching some Rama in the school of Rama Cay and has taken on the role of being the scholar of the Rama speakers.

### **3.4 Language revitalization (1): confronted with basic contradictory attitudes**

It is not an uncommon situation for field linguists in such projects to find themselves caught between contradictory attitudes of the linguistic community. While they are asked to help work on an ancestral language that the community says it wants revitalized, they often have to cope with the lack of response to activities proposed. It is a well known fact of sociolinguistic field studies that assertions of interest in language revitalization need to be complemented with observations or studies of actual engagement in action, as there is often a gap between the two. It is common for linguists, and community members with whom they work to prepare materials, organize events, plan classes, to be disappointed or even feel betrayed by the actual low level of participation and seemingly low interest in the use of the materials and activities proposed, on the part of those who may have asked for it in the first place.

There are many reasons for this hiatus between claimed interest and lack of real engagement later. For one thing, it is simply not easy to learn an ancestral language, particularly late in life, and when one has learned to live without it. In the case of indigenous people of America who are now speakers of some European colonial language, having to learn their ethnic language means being confronted with a language that is usually typologically rather different from the dominant language of daily use. Sound systems, morphology and syntax can simply be baffling or forbidding, although those

differences are part of what makes the work attractive to linguists. Teaching methods are rarely appropriate either, as they are generally imported from the colonial language tradition, with heavy emphasis on literacy.

Early in the Rama project, it was not just a question of low level interest in the work done by the linguist and the speakers of Rama, but actually one of outright rejection that reached a point of public outburst by a community leader. The occasion was the public presentation on Rama Cay of an elementary dictionary, a word list of a few hundred items of basic vocabulary with illustrations. It had been asked for by Miss Nora, to show the kind of work that was being done and she was participating in, and it was meant to demonstrate that Rama could be written, studied, and learned. It had been produced with great effort and dedication by the team of linguists and volunteer linguistic students back in the United States, and had been financed by solidarity funds.<sup>6</sup> Sufficient copies were distributed for all the households of the island to receive one and for the school to have a set. But that day ended, after the presentation and distribution of the dictionaries, with an angry outburst from the chief of the Ramas, the same person who had come to beg for help to revitalize the Rama language. Shaking his copy of the dictionary in my face, he would repeated agitatedly that the dictionary was “no korek!”.

This outburst was a wake up call and a telling lesson on several accounts. Firstly, I had arranged the dictionary in alphabetical order but there was nobody on the island, teachers included, who could find words in their dictionary because they did not have the functional literacy required to manage alphabetical sorting. On looking at the page illustrating uut ‘canoe’ the chief exasperatedly asked: “where are the words for paddles? Where are the words for sails?” clearly expecting a thematically organised presentation.

But there was more to the rejection of the dictionary by the chief. The data in the dictionary came from an old woman (Miss Nora), who he did not believe could possibly know that many words of Rama and that he thought must have invented them. It became clear later that there was another layer yet to this resistance at accepting the work of the RLP team, a mixture of social and political rejection. Socially, the Ramas of Rama Cay could not imagine learning anything from mainland speakers, from “tiger people” they thought they were superior to. So the dictionary could not be “korek” because it was tiger language from an old woman from the tiger people. The Rama Cay people wanted the revitalization to come from Ramas of Rama Cay, from the three old men who were said to be the last speakers of the language. In a sort of reversed sense of purism they wanted Rama from their own “civilized” Rama speakers of Rama Cay. Finally the rejection and

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<sup>6</sup> The funds came partly from Linguists for Nicaragua and partly from the Council for Human Rights in Latin America of Eugene, Oregon, the multidimensionality of such projects and the complexity of attending to all aspects that involve both strictly linguistic research and a community revitalization component. Due to the shortage of manpower academic linguists simply have to attend to community expectations in contexts like this (cf. Matras, this volume).

resistance was also the consequence of a political problem that no one had briefed me about, neither the Sandinistas nor the Ramas, nor Miss Nora herself. Just a few years before an attempt at dictionary making had involved the Rama Cay community, a young German male internationalist and the older male speakers of Rama of Rama Cay. This was curtailed for political reasons, and the expulsion of the German student had left the Ramas feeling betrayed and diffident. There was much to learn from this experience, about the dynamics of the Ramas, the potential political significance of salvage linguistic work, the need for minimal academic training to properly carry out such linguistic work as a dictionary project, and the fact that the linguist walked blind into a loaded situation with no warning from anyone.<sup>7</sup>

There were therefore multiple layers of complicating factors making the language revitalization part of the Rama language project even more difficult than could have been anticipated just considering the moribund state of the language on the island. Language revitalization projects are always embedded in internal community dynamics as well as local, regional and national politics that tend to make them challenging; they tend, in particular, to be caught in language ideologies that linguists are not particularly trained to interpret for what they are, and even less to deal with (see also Dobrin, this volume).

### **3.5 Language revitalization (2): Miss Nora, rescuer of the Rama language**

The other side of the Rama language revitalization project was the dynamics set in motion by Miss Nora, the true rescuer of the Rama language. This tenacious woman had a powerful vision of the role she wanted to take to fulfil her dream of seeing the language recorded so it would not fade into oblivion, and of bringing it back on the island of Rama Cay. Craig (1992a), Grinevald (2003), Grinevald and Kauffmann (2004) are attempts at paying proper tribute to her, and to her steadfastness in the face of all the aggravations she had to endure over the years for her work on the Rama language. It is interesting to note that it had long been her fear that the Rama language would disappear, and she had determined a long time ago that she would find someone to record it. The Rama Language Project discussed here was in fact her third serious attempt at such basic linguistic salvage effort with a foreigner.

As Miss Nora grew confident that this time the analysis was proceeding satisfactorily, she enjoyed watching me decompose and recompose Rama words and sentences in a way that made sense to her; she would, for instance, describe the work of

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<sup>7</sup> The young German Master's student volunteer had no training in linguistics and had acceded to their request to make a dictionary, but eventually was asked to leave the region because of his perceived association with counterrevolutionary forces. Craig (1989) discusses the flaws in his transcriptions and translations (which were not surprising considering the lack of appropriate training), and some of the unnecessary additional confusion the publication of such an academically limited piece of work created.

morphological analysis to others as “the linguist chopping up the word with a machete”. She began early to take what turned into a long series of initiatives. She requested the productions of proofs of the work, such as the publication of calendars and booklets, and the production of songs; she organized public work sessions in the island school for all to see how elicitation sessions went, putting the linguist to test in public by dictating sentences to her, asking her to write them on the blackboard and to read them back aloud as demonstration of the accuracy of the transcription system. She finally announced that she had decided to teach Rama in the school, taking advantage of on-going discussions about the development of a bilingual education program throughout the region. The school of Rama Cay had started a Spanish/English program to which she received official permission to add some teaching of Rama.

She chose kindergarten children because she felt at ease with the teacher of that grade and that she could count on the young children not to make fun of her. Materials were produced by the linguistic team as she requested, with pictures of what she asked for; with new batches of materials for every new school year. She even learned after a few years the principles of the total physical response method from a Sami volunteer from Norway who spent time on the island working to support the English/Spanish official bilingual education program of the school but who dedicated much time and effort to supporting Miss Nora’s teaching of Rama. Years later, Miss Nora had become such a respected elder on the island and such a regional personality that her death was even lamented in the national press. What is certain is that a whole generation of young Ramas learned from her that they had an ethnic, ancestral language called Rama that they had never heard about before, that it was a real language that they could learn, that it had many words, like the dozens of words of daily use that she taught them. There is no doubt that revitalization projects of this sort need visionaries like Miss Nora to make a breakthrough and counteract community apathy or resistance.

### **3.6 Success and limitations of the RLP as a revitalization project**

The Rama language project accomplished more than envisioned from the start in terms of a community based language revitalization project. As argued this is largely due to the tenacity of a language rescuer with a vision, who was an excellent language consultant, who brought in other speakers for the linguistic study and who masterminded language activities on the island of Rama Cay. Over the years, the Rama language began to be considered as another language worthy of study outside as well as inside the community. There were the written proofs of the language; there were the children going home and naming things around the house and around the island and older people around nodding as they recognized the words. Rama Cay children calling out Rama words to foreign



delegations coming to visit the island could convince some visitors that they spoke Rama.<sup>8</sup> More and more semi-speakers and rememberers were slowly identified although they never actively took part in the work. Some teachers got involved and started using materials in their classrooms, teenagers at high school in Bluefields asked to be taught sentences to speak Rama in the streets of town. The Rama language was much talked about, on the island, in Bluefields, everywhere. The project was deemed a success.

One could certainly ask what is meant by success? Maybe it was the satisfaction of the people concerned, the peace of mind of Miss Nora when she died that she had accomplished her life mission, to see it recorded so it would not be lost for ever, the conviction of most Ramas now that it is a legitimate language, the assurance that it is a language that can be written, studied and learned; a whole generation that grew up enjoying learning some of it; the acknowledgment today that more people speak it than admitted before. Ultimately who has the authority to decide what is success? It should not necessarily be outsiders, particularly speakers of dominant colonial languages with the simple notion that revitalization means recreating speakers that use it in their daily life. Revitalization has many facets, one of the most essential being the recreation of a link with an ancestor language, to develop a relationship and a certain familiarity with the language, for self image and identity purposes. This was the case for the Ramas.

But if the issue was principally a question of identity and self image, then a question could certainly be asked about whether the Rama language, moribund on the island as it were, was the best choice of language to revitalize. What if some effort had been put into the very special creole that was spoken on Rama Cay, a basilect so specific to the place that no other people besides natives of Rama Cay could understand it, a creole so distinct that it could have served the purpose of a marker of Rama identity? What if the same kind of effort that was given to Rama had been paid instead or also to Rama Cay Creole, a language that was known in all the households, so that the whole population could have participated? But there were multi-layered reasons why the omnipresent Rama Cay Creole was never considered then and why it was totally overshadowed by the Rama language, as forgotten, despised and very little known as it was.

#### **4. Rama Cay Creole: the missed opportunity for the revitalization of an ethnic language**

To grasp the absolutely marginalized status of Rama Cay Creole that accounted for its being ignored as a potential resource for a marker of Rama identity, one has to consider its

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<sup>8</sup> The solidarity delegations would often pass through the CIDCA institute and would meet with me, generally after having visited the island and having become interested in the Rama Language Project. On several occasions it turned out to be impossible for me to convince people – one Italian delegation in particular – that the children did not speak the language, that they only knew words by and large. So it was reported in Italy that the Rama language had been rescued and revitalized!

double minoritization; by virtue of being a creole language, and by virtue of being a variety of creole actually spoken by indigenous people.

#### **4.1 The wider issue of the status of Miskitu Coast Creole**

The status of Rama Cay Creole has to be considered in the context of the complexity of the situation of the dominant creole of the region, Miskitu Coast Creole, of which it is a variant. In the political and social history of the region, this English-based creole went from being a dominant to a dominated language, associated first with the European world and later with the regional black Caribbean world. Its high status until the forced “Re-Incorporation” of the Caribbean region into the official boundaries of Nicaragua in 1894 was due to the *de facto* autonomy that the region had enjoyed from the Spanish speaking government of the Pacific side of the country. Until then the dominant social group of the Coast had been a Creole elite under a Northern European sphere of influence, made up of older established and lighter skinned free people of colour, descendants of black slave women and white men, who used standard English as their only language of education and were Moravian protestant English bible readers. They considered themselves superior to all other groups, the black “negroes” that spoke an English Creole basilect as well as the various indigenous ethnic groups. A diglossic pattern held therefore between the high English Creole acrolect of this Creole elite and the Creole basilect of the blacks. One of the major effects of the Re-Incorporation was a change in this established diglossic pattern in that the switch in the educational system that established Spanish as the language of education led to the progressive loss of the English Creole acrolect, and the emergence of a new pattern of diglossia, in which Spanish held the high language status and Creole English became the lower status one.

A century after the Re-Incorporation, the Autonomy Statute of the Atlantic Coast of 1987 did grant the status of “official language of the Autonomous region” to Creole English, as well as to all the indigenous languages of the Coast. It therefore claimed a distinction between Spanish, the official national language and the language of the “Mestizos” originating from the Pacific side of the country, and all the languages of the “costeños”, Creole English included. The law recognizing the languages of the coast was cast within the European ideology that identified languages as uniquely linked to a culture and a nation, associating each ethnic group with a distinct language, as discussed earlier. Thus Creole English was for the Creole population, and for them only, while the ethnic indigenous languages (Miskitu, Sumu, Rama and Garifuna) were for the “authentic autochthonous” people, as the indigenous ethnic groups were then labelled. As already mentioned, programs to attend to the linguistic description, language development or language revitalization of these indigenous languages received the support of professional foreign linguists, as help was requested by the communities. The work of the linguists was locally meant to feed into developing bilingual education programs.

But, interestingly, no extensive linguistic work was done with Creole English, because of the conflicting situation that arose about which language to use in the educational system. Tensions ran high between different postures: there were those who demanded that education be again in standard English, considering Creole English as a spoken dialect of a “broken English” sort and therefore not fit to become part of formal education; and those who considered it a language of its own, the language of the Creole population, for which literacy had to be developed. Those feeling the pull of their earlier European connections, who wanted to see education restored in Standard English, had better advocates among the more educated of the Creole speaking people so that their position prevailed in the bilingual education programs. Materials were therefore produced with standard English orthography, and bilingual education for Creole people was developed to be a bridge to acquiring Standard English.

On the other hand, those who identified most as ethnic *costeños* made common cause with the indigenous groups in their fight against oppression. They wanted to identify with a language of their own, and considered Creole English as an independent language, known by then under the name of Miskitu Coast Creole. Theirs was a “black” identity, an identity of a culture of resistance, associated with the black “Atlantic” diaspora (Gordon 1998). They placed themselves within the African (black) rather than the European (white) sphere, with links to Africa, the United States and the Caribbean. Their claim to legitimacy for a Miskitu Coast Creole language echoed the earlier battles for the recognition of Black English Vernacular (BEV) in the United States, and the recognition of various Caribbean creoles such as Haitian and Belizean Creoles; hence the new spelling of Miskitu Coast Creole for what had been written earlier as Mosquito Coast Creole.

The bilingual education programs that developed in the new autonomous region were therefore in “English” and in the two indigenous languages with child speaker populations, Miskitu and Sumu (later identified as Mayangna in the North and Ulwa in the south). At that point Creole, or Miskitu Coast Creole (MCC), was therefore considered inferior to those indigenous languages as a medium of education. And in contrast to the general acceptance of the benefits of developing literacy materials in the indigenous languages of the coast, there was definite resistance to developing studies of MCC, and making it into a written language to be taught in school.

In the case of the Ramas, and against the logic of the ideology assigning one language to each ethnic group, it was recognized that they were indeed Creole speakers. They were therefore incorporated into the bilingual education plan, with programs in “English” and Spanish, although in fact they happened to speak neither of the two languages. Meanwhile, according to the past-oriented, essentialist and purist language ideology espoused by the Sandinistas and reflected in the spirit of the Autonomy Law, Rama was recognized as the legitimate ancestral language of the Ramas that had to be rescued and revitalized. The task of the Rama Language Project was therefore to begin to create visible, recorded traces of the Rama language, of an authentic Rama language, a

window onto a Rama culture to be revived and rescued too. The special program for teaching some Rama actually designed at the request of Miss Nora, who steadily taught in kindergarten for almost a decade, was never officially integrated by the Ministry of Education into the Bilingual and Multicultural Education program. In spite of much public talk about this program and of the claimed success of the Rama Language Project in general, the bureaucratic rigidity and resistance to recognizing indigenous initiatives was never overcome to provide Miss Nora with some official status and concomitant salary. However, her successor Walter Ortiz, who had completed third grade education as a child, was later given the official status of teacher of Rama. To this day he teaches Rama daily in several grades of the elementary school of Rama Cay.

In the end, outside interventions during the Sandinista Revolution brought three languages to the island of Rama Cay, through elementary school education in new schools and through the Rama language project. They were the languages of the bilingual education program, English and Spanish, and the ancestral language Rama to be revitalized (a situation analyzed in Grinevald 2003b). All this took place, while the Ramas of Rama Cay spoke among themselves in their homes a variant of the regional Miskitu Coast creole, Rama Cay Creole, with its very distinctive features that rendered it difficult if not impossible for outsiders to understand.

## 4.2 The language of the Ramas: Rama Cay Creole

The Ramas of the island of Rama Cay did not speak “English” any more than the Creoles of Bluefields. Their own form of Creole English ranged from a basilect sufficiently distinctive to have had the potential to serve as identity marker, to some form of higher Creole register used by those in contact with outsiders, in particular the leaders and representatives that dealt with the government authorities. But that form of language was of the lowest status possible; to the extent that Miskitu Coast Creole was itself considered “broken English” and did not manage to be identified as worthy of being taught in school and formally studied on its own merit, the situation of Rama Cay Creole was even more extreme. The Ramas themselves certainly had no sense of it being of any value, and even spoke of it as a “broken creole”, indicating by the expression the double marginalization of their form of speech:

Standard English

vs

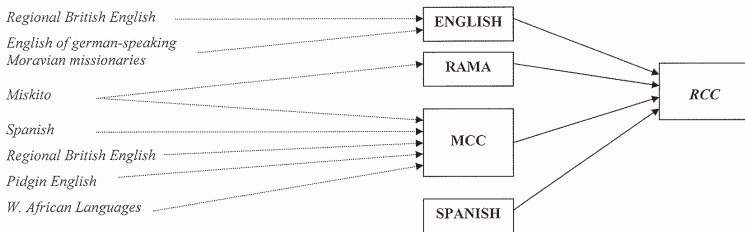
“broken English”      Creole English      =      Miskitu Coast Creole (MCC) vs

“broken Creole” = Rama Cay Creole (RCC)

Some work had actually been done on this speech variety. The first mention of the existence of a special variety of Creole spoken by the Ramas and of the name Rama Cay Creole is due to Barbara Assadi (1983) who outlined some of its distinctive characteristics. Holm (1978, 1988, 1994) referred to Assadi’s work in his original dissertation on Miskitu Coast Creole and in his later survey of the varieties of Western Caribbean Creole English. Young-Davy (1992) pursued further the study of the specificities of Rama Cay Creole as one of the activities of the Rama Language Project.

In the context of an ideology that considered as legitimate only languages and cultures with clear ethnic boundaries, uniform origins and homogeneous identity, even if those are attributed *a posteriori*, the nature of Rama Cay Creole constituted of course a maximal challenge. This form of Creole stood as an admirable testimony of happenstance and multiple language contact situations, revealing through borrowings of various origins the long history of contacts that the Ramas of Rama Cay had had over time with others. There were traces of the first contact with the domineering Miskitu Indians, and the later contact with the English speaking Europeans and first Creoles. Later the language was marked by the influence of the very influential first Moravian missionaries, and more recently by increasing contact with Spanish speakers. Figure 1 below is an attempt at capturing this extraordinary multiplicity of linguistic influences, in the midst of some pervasive Rama resistance surfacing as Rama substratum traits.

Figure 1. Multilingual background of Rama Cay Creole. (Young-Davy 1992:113).



As illustrated by Figure 1, it is estimated that Rama Cay Creole bears witness to the indigenous origin of its speakers and to their multiple contacts over the centuries, such that there are traces in it of two colonial languages, English and Spanish; two indigenous languages, Rama and Miskitu, and some West African languages too, as all Caribbean

Creoles do. Some of it came through direct contact and direct borrowing but a substantial amount of it actually came indirectly through Miskitu Coast Creole (MCC).

The most obvious characteristic of Rama Cay Creole is that it is lexically English based, but that its English component has itself multiple sources. One is the regional British English of the original acrolect speaking Creole population of Bluefields, still present in some vocabulary archaisms. Some of that English influence also came into RCC from direct contact in earlier times with English speakers, such as with merchants with whom the Ramas traded in Bluefields, and some indirectly later through Miskitu Coast Creole. Some forms falling into the realm of English are also attributable to Pidgin English of the kind that flourished around the Caribbean, also transmitted through MCC.

There is no doubt that Rama Cay Creole is also marked by a substantial Rama substratum, as evidenced in its vocabulary and to some extent in some of its grammatical constructions, although a systematic study remains to be done. A quick vocabulary survey did indicate that the Ramas were completely unaware of the Rama origin of some of their most common vocabulary.

Maybe most striking is the fact that the fast and massive shift from Rama to Creole English was orchestrated by the first Moravian missionaries that settled on the island in the mid-nineteenth century and who happened to be German and Scandinavian native speakers who spoke English as their second language, with a heavy accent according to witnesses of the time, as already mentioned. Therefore it is claimed that the distinctive pronunciation and intonation of the creole heard on Rama Cay carries a likeness to the foreign (German) accent of the missionaries. It is not unlikely that such an influence could have happened, considering the small size of the population – no more than three hundred then – and the total social control that the missionaries kept on the population. It is documented for instance that only Ramas could stay and sleep on the island, and that relations and marriage outside of the Rama community were forbidden. It is from that period when the Rama language was clearly associated with primitive ways and forcibly eradicated, along with cultural practices deemed unworthy of educated Christians, that the strong prejudice against the Rama language and their speakers came about, and the labels of “tiger language” spoken by heathen “tiger people”.

While working on the Rama language some preliminary study of the Rama Cay variant of the English Creole spoken by the Ramas on the island revealed some interesting traces of Rama in everyday speech, including vocabulary for animals and plants. This Rama substratum which is not identified by the Ramas, could have been then, and could probably still be today, a theme of study that many Ramas could participate in, to show them remnants of the ancestral language they already know.

The Miskitu borrowings in Rama on the other hand are testimony to the long history of dominance of the Ramas by the Miskitu. The reason the Ramas welcomed the Moravian

missionaries and granted them so much power probably had to do with their liberating the Ramas from the long standing dominance and harassment they endured for centuries on the part of the Miskitus. The warring Miskitus extorted tributes from the Ramas, they took them as slaves, and they enrolled them forcibly in their wars as fighters. It is actually said that they are the ones who gave the island of Rama Cay to the Ramas in the late eighteenth century in recognition of their help in fighting a war against some Costa Rican indigenous people to the South. Rama Cay is distinctly north and east of the traditional territory of the Ramas, in the lagoon near the town of Bluefields, while the more traditional Ramas, the mainland population among whom small clusters of Rama speakers are still found, still live several hours south along the coast toward Costa Rica. The influence of Miskitu on Rama is lexical, and it is striking how many common words of Rama are of clear Miskitu origin, such as animal names, or the adjective for big for instance. To this first layer of Miskitu borrowings that came into RCC through its Rama substratum was added later a second layer, this one indirectly through MCC, which is itself replete with Miskitu borrowings.

West African elements that could be traced into RCC came through MCC. Finally, the influence of Spanish on RCC has come, as was the case for English influence, through both direct and indirect contact. RCC has absorbed not only the Spanish borrowings that MCC had already adopted, but in recent times it has been directly in contact with the Spanish of the poor mestizo peasants coming from the Pacific inland in search of land, with whom they trade in Bluefields.

Sorting through this myriad of influences on the formation of Rama Cay Creole is certainly a challenge, but it is also a unique testimony to the history of the Ramas of Rama Cay, and would certainly deserve a place in the documentation of the linguistic heritage of the Ramas.

### **4.3 Studying Rama Cay Creole now, twenty years later**

Almost twenty years into developing programs of bilingual education using English as the language of instruction, at least as the written language of instruction for Creole speakers, the evaluation of the program is that Creole children do not fare well enough in school, and not much better than they did with instruction only in Spanish. And the analysis of this situation by the education specialists is that what is needed is education in the real language of the children, Creole English or Miskitu Coast Creole. In recent years, researchers and educators associated with the Institute for Promotion and Research of Languages and Cultures (IPILC) of the new regional University URACCAN (Universidad Regional Autónoma de la Costa Caribe de Nicaragua) have therefore been re-addressing the issue of which language to use in the education of the Creole population whose native language is Miskitu Coast Creole (Freeland 2004). For the first time, Miskitu Coast Creole is being integrated into a university program of research, in all its variant forms, with a view to preparing materials for its eventual use and promotion in the bilingual school system.

The evolution of attitudes toward the Creole English of the Coast can be followed in the evolution of its naming, from the original Spanish orthography of Misquito Coast Creole, to the phonemic of Miskitu Coast Creole, with a K orthography claiming independence from Spanish spelling along the lines of the changes in the spelling of the indigenous languages of most of Latin America (from Quechua to Kechua, from Quiche to K'iche' and Cakchiquel to Kaq'chikel). Today the Creole study group of the IPILC-URACAAN program promotes the renaming of the language to simply "Kriol", in alignment with the work being developed for Belizean Kriol. The university research team for Kriol includes university students who are native speakers from different Creole speaking communities, and, interestingly, one teacher from Rama Cay. Rama Cay Creole is therefore now integrated into a developing plan of study of the variant forms of Miskitu Coast Creole (or Kriol) within a university setting.

It is worth noting that this Rama student, one of the teachers of the island of Rama Cay, is not himself a native speaker of RCC. That form of Creole basilect has actually been vanishing rapidly from the island in the last two decades, and must be considered itself now a form of speech variation in danger of extinction, as it is probably only spoken by older people. Rama Cay children have been schooled now for almost twenty years in a system that promotes Spanish literacy and offers some transitional bilingual programs with textbook materials in Standard English, and the education available on the island has now reached junior high school. Therefore, as work on Rama Cay Creole is finally considered desirable and is being promoted, only a decreolized variant of it can be heard today, while the more striking basilect variant with the most marks of Rama substratum and English archaisms will need to be documented in turn as an extremely endangered language variety.<sup>9</sup>

#### **4.4 Which language for the Ramas: Rama, Rama Cay Creole or both?**

At the time of the promulgation of the Autonomy statute in the 1980s, the dominant ideology required that the language for the Ramas had to be the ancestral Rama language. That is what the Ramas were convinced of when they requested help for a Rama language revitalization project. At that time the language spoken by the majority of the Ramas, Rama

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<sup>9</sup> At the same time, an assistant of the Rama Documentation project, Aude Soubrier, has started working on the variety of Creole spoken by the Ramas of the mainland, specifically the community of Punta de Aguila, where a number of the last speakers of Rama have gathered. The community was created about a dozen years ago, on the site of one of the traditional Rama settlements, by Pedro MacCrea, the oldest son of Miss Nora and the husband of Cristina Benjamins, the main language consultant for the study of Rama grammar. Very conscious of the demise of the Rama language, he fulfilled his vision of gathering families of the "real Ramas" to create a community with enough children to justify the construction of a school where hopefully Rama could be taught and to gather in one place enough speakers of Rama to help the language survive, with the hope that it may be passed on to some of the children, like some of his own grandchildren.



Cay Creole, was totally ignored. It was doubly marginalized as the status of Creole of indigenous people, and was caught in the ongoing controversy about the legitimacy of Creole English as a language of education. One can wonder if it could have been otherwise, and if it would not have been more productive then to attend to Rama Cay Creole, the speech of the majority of the households of Rama Cay, if one of the major concerns was one of identity in the context of the plurilingualism and multiculturalism of the new autonomous region. It certainly would have allowed for the full participation of the community of Rama Cay, the one the authorities were mainly concerned with because it represented and still represents the majority of the Rama population. What would have been necessary was to raise the status of the language by giving it attention and demonstrating its uniqueness and its worth. But the political and ideological context did not give it space or time.

Meanwhile the Rama language revitalization project came up against not only the moribund status of the ancestral Rama language on Rama Cay, but against a profound rejection of it that hid not far underneath the public discourse of wanting the language back. This negative attitude was inherited from an intense campaign led by missionaries to eradicate Rama on the grounds that it was a primitive “tiger language” that only primitive Ramas, the wild “tiger people” would speak. It was even said not to be a language but closer to the howling of wild animals. So to the inherent difficulty of introducing an indigenous language with a grammatical structure typologically rather different from the European colonial languages dominant in the region, there was added the weight of some inner resistance to learning the language, particularly from those that still spoke it fluently and daily, the Rama speakers of the mainland who were associated in the minds of the Ramas of Rama Cay with the “tiger people”. I had of course no inkling of all of this when I embarked on the project at the request of the Sandinista authorities, in response to specific demands expressed by representatives of the Ramas.

Meanwhile the opportunity for a second round for the Rama Language Project today, with my return asked for by a new generation of Rama leaders, provides a unique perspective on the evolution of language ideologies and identity building in the region. There is no doubt that the battle for the acceptance of the Rama language by the population of Rama Cay has been won and that the consciousness of the existence and worth of the Rama language as their own marker of identity has been established in that community. It is not clear, however, how much Rama is being learned or how effective the teaching in the school is, but there is an insistent demand for more Rama language instruction and a definite pride and interest in the language. It would certainly be instructive to test the children of the school program and to interview the ex-pupils of Miss Nora, young adults now, many of them new parents.

In the meantime, the most basilectal form of Rama Cay Creole has been disappearing as the children are being systematically schooled. This de-creolization process means that the variant most unique to the Ramas is being lost today as a form of speech and

has become itself a moribund variant that would deserve at least documentation if not revitalization. The newly developing interest for the variants of the regional Creole English on the part of the new regional university would therefore seem to arrive almost too late to fully exploit this linguistic resource the way it could have been twenty years ago, although de-creolization does not mean the elimination of all the specificities of the English Creole spoken by the Ramas, and much of the work remains to be done on the less basilectal form of the speech of the present day Ramas.

## **5. Conclusion**

The case of the Rama Language Project described here is fairly typical of many language documentation projects in its having developed and still being evolving in a situation of intense language contact and rich language variation. It arose in the midst of the establishment of new language policies at the heart of a new autonomy statute granted by the Revolutionary Sandinista government of Nicaragua which acknowledged the plurilingual and multiethnic character of its Caribbean Coast region. However, in casting languages according to a fairly rigid equation of a particular culture and its corresponding language with each ethnic group, the language attributed to the Ramas as identity marker could only be their ancestral Rama language.

The case of the Ramas was special in that their ancestral ethnic language was at a very advanced stage of endangerment and necessitated basic language rescue work before any form of language revitalization could be envisioned. But the language revitalization project was characterized at first by a strident contradiction between the proclaimed desire to see the language revived on the island of Rama Cay and the strong rejection of it stemming from earlier pressure to abandon it and shift to English Creole. This rejection was captured in the labelling of it as “tiger language” barely recognized as a real language. This contradiction extended even to the attitude of the main Rama speaker of the project, Miss Nora, the actual rescuer of the language who was passionate about it but who admitted serious doubts about its worth, years into the project. She revealed how she had thought that there was indeed probably something very wrong with the language since it had not been studied before, had not been written down by the missionaries the way Miskitu had been, and since several foreigners who had tried to work with her had failed to capture it in a way that made sense to her.

All the attention was focused therefore on first studying Rama, in a combination of straightforward linguistic study of its grammar and later of its lexicon, to be able in a second step to return part of this newly uncovered knowledge to the community. Meanwhile, the actual speech of the Ramas of Rama Cay, the variant form of Miskitu Coast Creole known as Rama Cay Creole, was totally ignored, although it would have been well worth studying and exploiting for establishing an identity marker available to all members of the Rama Cay community. But the Rama Language Project was a product of

the language ideology of twenty years ago, a time when Creole languages were not yet legitimized in the region. It took place before any talk of documentation projects for endangered languages, and certainly long before the current discussions on the need to document not only the ancestral languages with limited vitality, but also the complex of speech varieties to which the linguistic community has shifted, in which much of the culture can still be embedded (see Woodbury's contribution in this volume). The very specific basilect form of Rama Cay Creole that was used on Rama Cay twenty years ago probably had all the trademarks of an unfocused speech variety that would have needed some codification to make the unavoidable passage to literacy. This most specific Rama Cay variety of Creole has now itself become very endangered and moribund, through an advanced process of de-creolization, so that today it would not be as easy to capture it, document it, and codify it to give it any status as a marker of identity for the Ramas, although now is the time when ideologies have evolved enough that it is finally getting some attention on the part of the regional university.

A last shift in the dynamics between the two Rama communities is worth mentioning in closing. While twenty years ago the Ramas of Rama Cay could not conceive of learning back the Rama language from the tiger people of the mainland, the situation has totally turned around today. In spite of their numerical and geographic salience, the Ramas of Rama Cay are now turning to the Ramas of the mainland, deferring to them as the "real Ramas", in the new battle they are waging for the defence of Rama identity and their survival as a distinct culture. It takes today the form of a legal battle for the demarcation and protection of their traditional territory (Mueller Riverstone 2003, Riverstone 2004). In a turn of events unforeseeable twenty years ago, the essence of Rama-hood and the source of Rama identity seem to have shifted even for the Ramas of Rama Cay, the only ones known to the Sandinista authorities at the time of the discussion of Autonomy in the 1980s, to the Ramas of the mainland, the then despised and ignored "tiger people". Much is expected today for the defence of the territory from the settlements where the tiger language is still spoken. So once again, it is the ethnic language that has become the essential element of the arguments for the legitimacy of the Rama community and its claims to its traditional land, and this time all attention is turned to the "real Ramas" of the mainland, recognized today as the last guardians of the ancestral Rama language.

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