

# Language Documentation and Description

ISSN 2756-1224

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This article appears in: *Language Documentation and Description*,  
vol 20. Editor: Peter K. Austin

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MAKSYMILIAN DĄBKOWSKI

Cite this article: Dąbkowski, Maksymilian. 2021. A'ingae (Ecuador and Colombia) - Language Snapshot. *Language Documentation and Description* 20, 1-12.

Link to this article: <http://www.elpublishing.org/PID/223>

This electronic version first published: June 2021



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# A'ingae (Ecuador and Colombia) – Language Snapshot

Maksymilian Dąbkowski  
*University of California, Berkeley*

<b>Language Name:</b>	A'ingae, Cofán, Kofan, Kofane
<b>Language Family:</b>	isolate
<b>ISO 639-3 Code:</b>	con
<b>Glottolog Code:</b>	cofa1242
<b>Population:</b>	ca. 1,500
<b>Location:</b>	0.054639, -77.409417
<b>Vitality rating:</b>	endangered

## Summary

A'ingae (or Cofán) is a severely under-documented language isolate spoken by about 1,500 Cofán people in the Ecuadorian and Colombian Amazon. The origin of the Cofán can be traced to the Eastern Andean Cordilleras, where they ranged over a large territory. A'ingae reflects the history of the Cofán migration, showing a mixture of typical Andean and Amazonian features (AnderBois et al. 2019). The language is relatively vital in Ecuador and severely endangered in Colombia. Illegal mining operations and poaching have exerted ecological and economic pressures on the Cofán, putting their way of life in danger. There is little support for the language outside of traditional communities. Despite the challenges, language attitudes surrounding A'ingae are uniformly positive. The A'ingae language is the cornerstone of the Cofán ethnic identity (Cepek 2012).

Previous descriptive work on the language includes a dictionary (Borman 1976), a grammar sketch (Fischer & Hengeveld in press), and collections of myths (Blaser & Chica Umenda 2008; Borman & Criollo 1990). The combined archival collections of AnderBois & Silva (2018) and Dąbkowski et al. (2020) contain about 31 hours of audiovisual narratives, both traditional and contemporary. Theoretical work on the language includes phonology (Dąbkowski 2019b submitted; Repetti-Ludlow et al. 2019) and semantics (AnderBois & Dąbkowski in press; Morvillo & AnderBois in press).

## **Resumen**

El a'ingae (o cofán) es una lengua aislada con muy poca documentación. El a'ingae se habla por unos 1.500 cofanes en la Amazonía ecuatoriana y colombiana. El origen de los cofanes se remonta a las Cordilleras Orientales de los Andes, donde se extendían por un amplio territorio. El a'ingae refleja la historia de la migración de los cofanes, mostrando una mezcla de características típicas andinas y amazónicas (AnderBois et al. 2019). La lengua es relativamente vital en Ecuador y está en grave peligro de extinción en Colombia. Las operaciones mineras ilegales y la caza furtiva han ejercido presiones ecológicas y económicas sobre los cofanes, poniendo en peligro su forma de vida. Hay poco apoyo para la lengua fuera de las comunidades tradicionales. A pesar de los desafíos, las actitudes lingüísticas en torno al a'ingae son uniformemente positivas. El idioma a'ingae es un pilar de la identidad étnica de los cofanes (Cepek 2012).

El trabajo descriptivo previo sobre el idioma incluye un diccionario (Borman 1976), un esbozo gramatical (Fischer & Hengeveld en prensa), y colecciones de mitos (Blaser & Chica Umenda 2008; Borman & Criollo 1990). Las colecciones de archivo combinadas de AnderBois & Silva (2018) y Dąbkowski et al. (2020) contienen cerca de 31 horas de narraciones audiovisuales, tanto tradicionales como contemporáneas. El trabajo teórico sobre el idioma incluye análisis fonológicos (Dąbkowski 2019b enviado; Repetti-Ludlow et al. 2019) y semánticos (AnderBois & Dąbkowski en prensa; Morvillo & AnderBois en prensa).

## **1. Language identification**

A'ingae is a severely under-documented Amazonian isolate. The language has about 1,500 native speakers inhabiting the northeast Ecuadorian province of Sucumbíos and the southern Colombian department of Putumayo (Repetti-Ludlow et al. 2019). The national borders coincide with a dialectal divide (Cepek, 2012). My research and all citations in this paper relate to the Ecuadorian variety.

A map showing the Cofán territories is given in Figure 1. Ecuadorian communities include Sinangoé, Río Cofanes, Dovuno, and the recently founded Dureno and Zábalo, shown in Figure 2.



Figure 1: Indigenous languages of southern Colombia and northern Ecuador (based on Curnow & Liddicoat 1998).

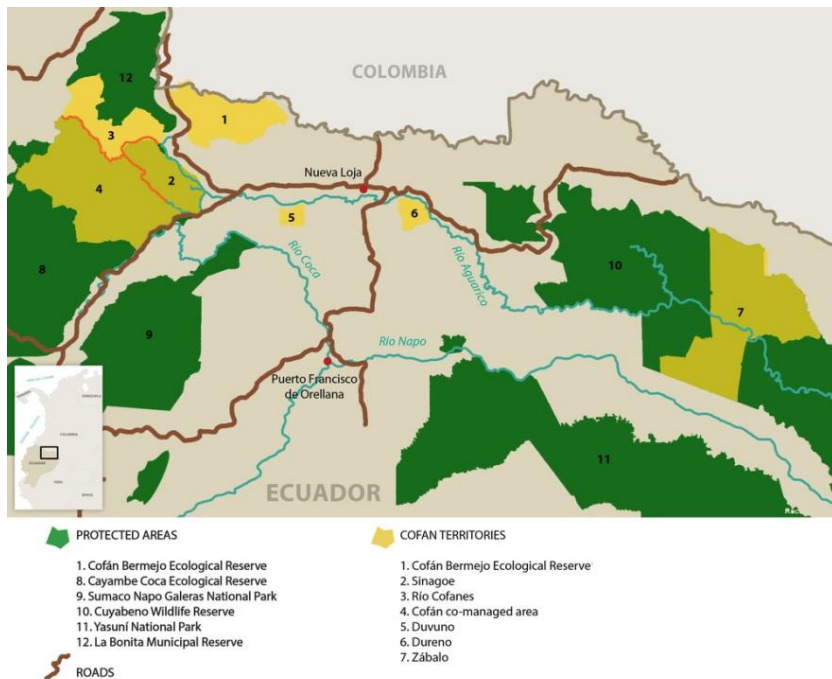


Figure 2: An overview of Cofán territory and communities (Cofan Survival Fund 2016). A larger version of this map is on page 12.

The endonym *A'ingae* can be morphologically decomposed into *a'i* '(civilized, Indigenous) person' and the manner case clitic *=ngae* 'MANN'. Thus, to speak *a'ingae* is to speak like a civilized person. Language exonyms include *Cofán*, *Kofan*, and *Kofane*. Both *A'i* and *Cofán* can refer to the ethnic group of *A'ingae* speakers. The exonym *Cofán* might be a derivative of the river name *Río Cofanes*, where Europeans first came in contact with the Cofán people (Cepek 2012).

## 2. History

In the course of their recorded history, the Cofán have resisted the Inca conquest, Spanish colonial forces, anti-Indigenous policies of the Ecuadorian state, and exploitation at the hands of rubber tappers and miners.

The origin of the Cofán can be traced to the Eastern Andean Cordilleras, where they used to range over a large territory (AnderBois et al. 2019). Danver (2015) estimates that the pre-Colombian population of the Cofán was around 60,000 to 70,000. In 1501, their lands were invaded by the Inca ruler Huayna Capac. The Cofán resisted the Inca encroachment, but were

eventually pushed down to the eastern lowlands, which territory they presently inhabit (Lucitante 2019).

The Spanish colonial expeditions into the Amazonian territory of the began in 1536 (Friede 1952). As the Cofán challenged the Spaniards militarily along the rivers Guame and San Miguel, they became recognized as a ‘warlike group’. In the period of 1603-1769, Jesuit missionaries converted many chieftains to Christianity, which resulted in a decline in ‘warlike activities’ among the Cofán (Lucitante 2019).

Under the Spanish rule, the population of the Ecuadorian region was divided by ethnicity. Despite the emancipatory spirit of Ecuador’s struggle for independence, the segregation de facto persisted (codified, for example, as stringent requirements on citizenship in Ecuador’s 1830 constitution). Thus, Ecuador’s marginalized groups were excluded from Ecuador’s nation-building phase and the state’s protection from exploitation by private interests (Lucitante 2019).

In the 1880s, Cofán settlements along the Upper San Miguel and Upper Aguarico Rivers saw an influx of Christian missionaries, who took a paternalistic interest in protecting the Cofán, as well as *caucheros* (or rubber tappers), who forced the Cofán to work for them through inhumane methods. In 1923, a measles pandemic brought by outsiders decimated the population, bringing it down to only a few hundred. This event entrenched itself in the collective memory of the Cofán people (Lucitante 2019).

Since the 1960s, the Cofán communities have been plagued by illegal oil extraction, which has reduced their territory and caused environmental damage, putting the Cofán way of life in jeopardy (Cepek 2018).

Despite all these challenges, the Cofán have played a prominent role in the political Indigenous movement in Ecuador. In 2018, the Cofán achieved an unprecedented judicial victory for Indigenous rights, with the court of Sucumbíos recognizing their right to decide over environment-related activities in their territory and requiring the cessation of all mining activities which took place within it (teleSUR 2018). The Cofán are a member of *Alianza Ceibo*, a non-profit organization of four allied Ecuadorian nations (Cofán, Siekopai, Siona, and Waorani). *Alianza Ceibo* works towards the defense of Indigenous territory, cultural preservation, and environmental protection.

The traditional religion of the Cofán is shamanistic, with a central role for *yaje* or *ayahuasca*, an *N,N*-DMT-containing entheogen, consumed by shamans for purposes of healing, divination, and ‘good living’. A key cultural value of the Cofán is being *upatshi*, which conveys a sense of being easy-going and partaking in harmonious conviviality (Cepek 2012).

### 3. Linguistic neighborhood

A'ingae is spoken in the eastern foothills of the Andes, which is one of the most linguistically diverse parts of South America. Despite spurious, mostly geography-driven, claims about genetic affiliations with other languages (e.g. with Barbacoan in Rivet 1924, 1952; and Chicham in Ruhlen 1987), A'ingae remains classified as a language isolate (AnderBois et al. 2019). The lexicon of A'ingae has been influenced primarily by Kichwa (at least since the late 19th century), Spanish (over the past 80 years), and Siona-Secoya. It remains unclear whether Cariban cognates are direct borrowings or *Wanderwörter* (AnderBois et al. 2019).

Around the 16th century, the Cofán still lived in the Eastern Andean Cordilleras. The history of the Cofán descent to the Amazon Basin finds reflection in their language which retains Andean features, while showing Amazonian innovations. Andean features include switch-reference, lack of tone, contrastive aspiration, palatal sonorants, and an extensive case system. Amazonian features include a frustrative marker, suprasegmental glottalization, a system of noun classifiers, contrastive vowel nasality, and nasal spreading (AnderBois et al. 2019).

### 4. Language vitality

There are approximately 1,500 speakers of A'ingae across Ecuador and Colombia (Repetti-Ludlow et al. 2019). In Ecuador, the language is robustly spoken in all domains of life and learned by children. Most Cofán also speak Spanish and almost all of them understand it. Among the youngest generation in some communities, Spanish is gaining ground as the language of everyday communication due to the interactions with youth speaking Kichwa and Spanish. The Cofán are predominantly endogamous; currently, there is some intermarriage with speakers of Kichwa, especially in the community of Dureno, and little intermarriage with the Siona-Secoya. In Colombia, A'ingae is severely endangered. In both Ecuador and Colombia, A'ingae is under severe ecological and economic pressures. In recent decades, abuse and exploitation at the hands of national governments, poachers, and oil companies have caused environmental degradation of the Cofán land, which disrupted many former lifeways, including subsistence practices and language transmission.

A'ingae has little institutional support outside the traditional way of life. A'ingae-speaking education is limited to elementary schools, which often lack materials, teachers, or appropriate training. For this reason, many parents send their children to Spanish-speaking or Kichwa-speaking schools, which considerably lessens children's immersion in A'ingae. Media published in A'ingae are limited to mythological accounts, descriptions of traditional

activities, and programs on one local radio station. An estimated two thirds of A'ingae speakers are literate in A'ingae as well as Spanish. The first orthography for the language was developed by Marlytte 'Bub' Borman and Roberta 'Bobbie' Borman, SIL-affiliated missionary linguists active in the Cofán communities since the 1950s. It conveyed contrastive aspiration though grapheme doubling, e.g. *pp* /p<sup>h</sup>/, and followed Spanish conventions with both *c* and *qu* representing /k/. Most communities have now adopted a revised orthography, which uses *h*-digraphs for aspirated consonants, e.g. *ph* /p<sup>h</sup>/, and *k* for /k/. The apostrophe represents the glottal stop. For a more thorough comparison of the two orthographies, see Fischer & Hengeveld (in press) and Repetti-Ludlow et al. (2019).

Despite the aforementioned challenges, language attitudes surrounding A'ingae are uniformly positive. Speaking A'ingae is believed to be an important aspect of Cofán identity. One's status as an *a'i* is dependent on one's command of A'ingae, participation in cultural practices such drinking *yaje*, and mastery of traditional skills such as hunting and housebuilding, rather than descent or ethnicity (Cepek 2012). The Cofán credit the feat of withstanding colonial oppression and preserving their traditional way of life to their linguistic identity, which unites their communities. They take pride in A'ingae and welcome projects aimed at bolstering the language's status.

## 5. Research and media

There is little previous scholarship on the language. Apart from a few brief word lists, the first contributions to the systematic study of A'ingae were made by the Bormans. Borman (1976) is the only substantial dictionary to date. Fischer & Hengeveld (in press) present a grammatical sketch; Borman & Criollo (1990) is a corpus of morphologically annotated cosmological narratives; Blaser & Chica Umenda (2008) is a collection of traditional stories in A'ingae with translations in Spanish. The Bormans completed the A'ingae translation of *The Bible* (1980).

AnderBois & Silva (2018) is an archive deposit of approximately 17 hours of naturalistic narratives recorded in the community of Zábalo, Sucumbíos, Ecuador. Dąbkowski et al. (2020) comprises over 14 hours of audio and video recordings, representing the variety spoken in Sinangoé, Sucumbíos, Ecuador. Both collections include traditional and contemporary narratives, such as mythological accounts, procedural texts, autobiographies, jokes, social commentaries, and descriptions of traditional festivities. Morphologically annotated transcriptions and translations time-aligned with audio and/or video are available as the *A'ingae Language Documentation Project* (2021). Repetti-Ludlow et al. (2019) provide the first detailed phonetic description. Dąbkowski (2019a, b, submitted, in press) describes and analyzes complex interactions of stress, glottalization, and morphosyntactic constituency. Sanker



et al. (2018) identify the discourse functions of A'ingae falsestos. AnderBois & Sanker (2019) reconstruct prenasalized stops, and AnderBois et al. (2019) investigate the history of the language.

Hengeveld & Fischer (2018b) discuss A'ingae TAME (tense, aspect, mood, evidentiality) operators. Fischer (2007) and Fischer & van Lier (2011) study clause linkage and subordination strategies. Morvillo & AnderBois (in press) analyze the semantics of the frustrative operator. AnderBois & Dąbkowski (in press) and Dąbkowski & AnderBois (in press) describe and analyze the language's apprehensional domain.

My current research investigates A'ingae suprasegmental glottalization, the language's phonology-syntax interface, semantics of rationale and precautioning clauses, wh-movement, and the structure of the left periphery. Scott AnderBois and Wilson Silva have been awarded NSF DEL Grant #BCS-1911348/1911428 for research focused on perspective taking and reported speech. Information about A'ingae is also available in Hammarström et al. 2020, Wikipedia contributors (2020), the Endangered Languages Project (*Cofán* 2021), and Eberhard et al. (2020).

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the Cofán who have graciously welcomed me to their communities. Thanks especially to Hugo Lucitante, who introduced me to the language of his people, as well as my research collaborators Shen Aguinda and Leidy Quenamá. The research presented here was supported in part by my Royce Fellowship grant for *A'ingae Language Preservation*.

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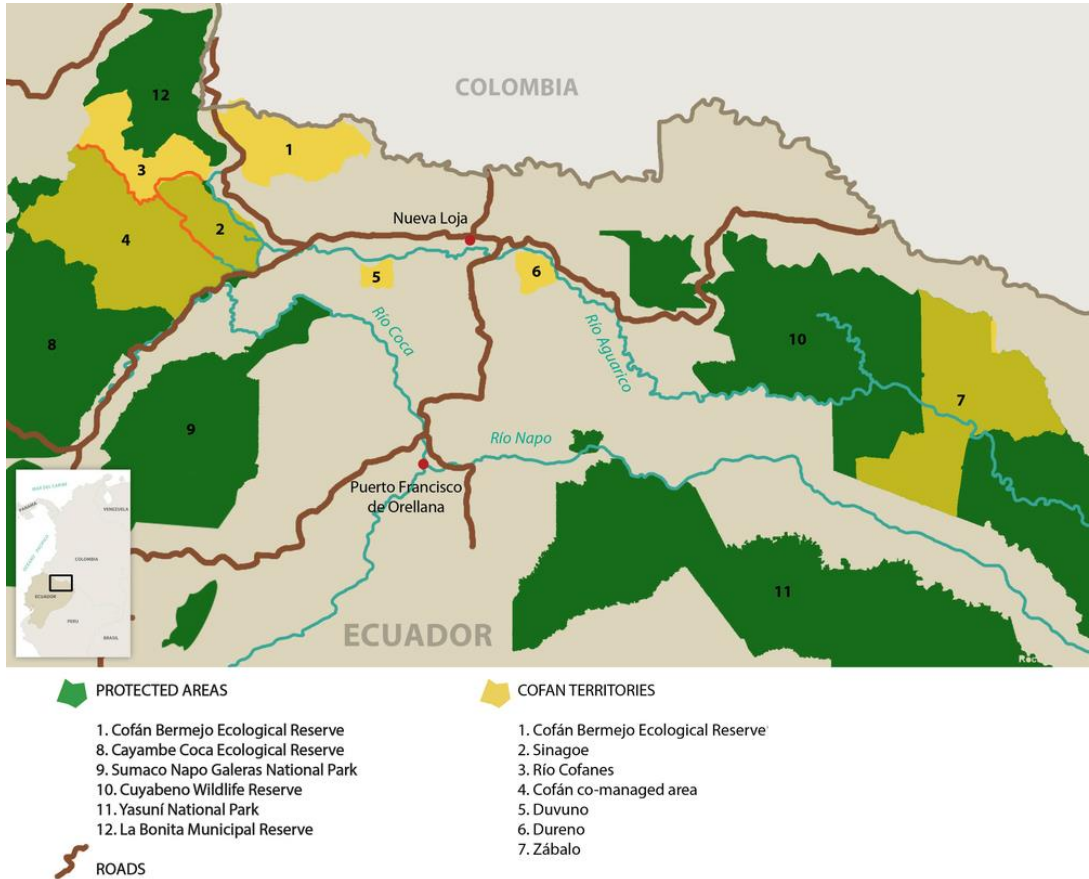


Figure 2: An overview of Cofán territory and communities (Cofan Survival Fund 2016).

This is a larger version of the map on page 4.