

# **A Report on Xokleng Language Maintenance**

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## **Abstract**

A survey was conducted in the Xokleng reserve in the state of Santa Catarina in Brazil, where we observed language use among the Xokleng to determine the likelihood of the maintenance of the Xokleng language. Language development work with the Xokleng was being considered. Our methods included observation and questions.

### **1. Introduction and Purpose**

From December 1-8, 2002, Stan and Sandy Anonby made a trip to the state of Santa Catarina in Brazil. The main purpose for this was to assess the ethnolinguistic vitality of the Xokleng language. We are aware of two people—one with SIL and one with another agency—who are considering initiating a language development project among the Xokleng. The Brazil Branch of SIL thought it would be appropriate to conduct a survey in order to determine whether a language development program among the Xokleng would be viable.

The date was timed to coincide with the visits of Ursula Wiesemann, an SIL colleague formerly involved with language development among the Kaingang people, Nanblá Gakran, who had assisted with previous Xokleng language development, and Johannes Klement, a leader of an agency interested in working in the area.

#### **1.1 Geographic Location**

Paraná, Santa Catarina, and Rio Grande do Sul are the three southernmost states of Brazil. They are a prosperous part of the country and are known as “Brazil’s Europe” because of the many immigrants from Germany, Poland, and Italy. There are only three Indian tribes living in these states—the Kaingang, the Xokleng, and the Guarani.

The Xokleng live around the town of Jose Boiteoux, near Blumenau, Santa Catarina. It is a mountainous area divided by the North Itajai River. At the time of their first contact with white people in 1914, the Xokleng lived spread out in clusters of homes, much as they do today. Many of these family clusters were in the valley along the Hercílio River (the Northern Itajai). When Barragem Norte Dam flooded the river in 1979, the people relocated to six villages, three on each side of the river. On one side of the river, miles of Brazilian settlements separate the villages of Sede, Bugio, and Lages (Toldo). The three villages on the other side of the river are Palmeirinha, Figueira, and Coqueiros. It is a long trip from one side of the river to the other, since the only way across is around and over the dam. Since none of the roads are paved and the climate is rainy, the way is sometimes impassable.

Five of the six villages are near the river. One village, Bugio, is on a mountaintop, where the weather is especially cool and rainy, and the jungle vegetation is dense. Bugio is the village where most of the Xokleng went immediately after their main village was flooded. Eventually many drifted down to the valley and began villages there because they could not get used to the cool weather. Although Bugio is very hard to get to from the other villages, the city of Blumenau is easily accessible from there.

## 1.2 Language

The *Ethnologue* (Grimes 2000) classifies the Xokleng language as “Macro-Ge, Ge-Kaingang, Kaingang, Northern.” Flavio Wiik (1999), in his dissertation for the University of Chicago, writes that Xokleng belongs to the Jê family. Dennis Radunz (1999), writing for the *Anexo*, a local newspaper, wrote an article about Xokleng people at a workshop for teachers of Jê. He states that Xokleng belongs to the Jê family.

## 1.3 Previous Research

Initial research on the Xokleng was done by Jose Maria de Paula from Brazil’s Indian Protection Agency. De Paula presented a paper on the Xokleng to the Twentieth Americanist Congress in 1922. In 1930, Simoens da Silva published a book about the years he spent with the Xokleng. Jules Henry of Columbia University conducted anthropological fieldwork among the Xokleng between 1932 and 1934. He presented the results of his research in *Jungle People*, published in 1940. Darcy Ribeiro wrote about his years among the Xokleng in the 1950s in *Os Indios e a Civilizacao*. In 1978, Gregory Urban wrote an anthropology dissertation for the University of Chicago describing the social organization of the Xokleng. Gioconda Mussolini published *Os Kaingang* in 1980 on Xokleng healing practices, based on Henry’s data. In 1999, Flavio Wiik of the University of Chicago published an article describing Xokleng medicine and religion in the online *Enciclopédia Povos Indígenas no Brasil*.

## 1.4 Other Background Information

### 1.4.1 History of the Xokleng

The Gê peoples are relatively recent arrivals who settled mainly in eastern Brazil. They generally inhabit marginal areas, such as grasslands or mountains that were not heavily populated by the tribes that preceded them. Physically, the Gê people are taller and have bigger builds than other Brazilian Indian groups.

Each Gê ethnic group was divided into two exogamous moieties. There were cultural prohibitions against members of either moiety marrying members of the other moiety. Among the Xokleng, the subdivisions were the Waikomang and the Kanu. Some time before contact with white people in 1914, the Waikomang killed all the male Kanu, which destabilized broader Xokleng society. The revenge killings that followed split the remaining Waikomang into three groups living in three different areas of Santa Catarina state: the Ngrokothi-to-prey, in the west, near the border of Paraná; the Laklano, on the North Itajai River; and the Angying on the southern coast (Wiik 1999).

Originally, the Xokleng were sedentary farmers and likely numbered in the thousands. The late 1800s and the early 1900s saw *bugreiros* (Indian bounty hunters) attempt to eradicate the Xokleng. The first peaceful contact by white people with the Ngrokothi-to-prey came in 1918. Shortly thereafter, most died from respiratory illnesses. There are currently forty-six Ngrokothi-to-prey. They have integrated into Brazilian society. Most Angying were killed by *bugreiros* in 1925. Three Angying were contacted by white Brazilians in 1949, but two of these individuals died of influenza soon after. The Laklano were the only Xokleng to survive as a group. Their survival was probably a result of the area’s settlement patterns. The Itajai Valley was settled by small communities of Germans, Italians, and Poles who, unlike other Brazilians, did not accept the Xokleng into their communities. When the Laklano were contacted in 1914, they numbered 400. In the next two decades, their population dropped to 106 (Wiik 1999). They have currently rebounded to about ten times that number.

## 1.4.2 Social factors relevant to the sociolinguistic environment

### 1.4.2.1 Economics

The economy consists of both cash and cashless segments. The cashless segment takes the form of *rocas* (subsistence agriculture plots), animal husbandry (mostly pigs and chickens), and hunting.

The cash segment of the economy consists of various government service jobs in the community and *projetos*, money-making schemes by some organizations. The Xokleng talked about Bible translation as a *projeto*. The young people wanted to speak more about the cash part of the economy. Several expressed the desire to become doctors or dentists and take over the jobs in the community currently held by the non-Indian people. One lad said, "One can become rich that way." Another area in which cash is exchanged is in the selling of Xokleng handicrafts. Xokleng pastors and presbyters also receive a modest salary from their congregations' tithes and offerings.

### 1.4.2.2 Population distribution

After the dam flooded their original village on the bottomland, the Xokleng scattered to four villages. The two main ones were Bugio and Sede, and the smaller ones Figueira and Coqueiro. Lately, Sede and Bugio have declined in importance. The Xokleng told us Palmeirinha has become the dominant village. As evidence of this, we noticed a large high school that is being built there, modeled after one on Kaingang land. Also, the Xokleng grand chief, Aniel, lives in Palmeirinha. We were not able to visit Toldo village, but a bilingual schoolteacher told us there were more children there from Xokleng-speaking homes than there were in Sede. In Sede village, a higher percentage of Xokleng had African or Italian facial features. We saw many children in all the villages.

The *Ethnologue* lists a 1975 figure of 250 Xokleng speakers out of a population of 634 (Grimes 2000). Instituto Socioambiental (ISA) (2000) lists a population of 757 ethnic Xokleng in 1998. When we asked the Xokleng for a population estimate, most provided an estimate of 2,000. This may be an inflated figure. Many of these individuals may have adopted a Xokleng identity to benefit from the compensation money for the 1979 flood. The number of Xokleng speakers is likely significantly less than 2,000.

### 1.4.2.3 Religion

There is at least one Assembly of God church in every village. There were no Catholic churches. When talking to pastors and chiefs about literature in the Xokleng language, their answer was always affirmative. They said they wanted literature in the language because it would motivate children to speak the language. One person commented that books should have been translated into Xokleng years ago, when there were still old people alive that did not understand Portuguese.

We were told the key person who would influence literature use was the grand pastor, Edi, so we asked him what difference literature in Xokleng would make for the community. He said that 70 percent of the people of one community understood Portuguese. Eli stated the reason for translating literature was it would motivate the young people to speak the language.

One night a choir sang beautifully in Xokleng and in Portuguese. We were told this choir goes on tour to other Brazilian churches. Although we were told the pastor in Bugio preaches in Xokleng, the Xokleng used by this choir was the only Xokleng we heard in church. The rest of the service, including the announcements, was in Portuguese.

Ursula Wiesemann has spearheaded recent efforts to initiate a language development project. In a meeting between Ursula and others (the Grand Chief Aniel, the Grand Pastor Edi, Nanblá, Chief Antonio, and a member of the community) during our visit to the Xokleng area, there was discussion of translating material into Xokleng. Edi noted that it would be difficult to recruit Xokleng volunteers for language development. Ursula recently located an SIL member who is interested in initiating a language development project among the Xokleng in the near future.

#### **1.4.2.4 Politics**

The Xokleng are politically active. After their best land was flooded by the dam break in 1979, they worked for many years to receive compensation. Finally, in 1992 they were awarded 3.5 billion cruzeiros (ISA 2000). There were some distribution problems, such as when a former chief said that white or black people married to Indians would not receive the first installment of the payment (Anon. 1992 PIB/CEDI, cited in ISA 2000). With this money, the Xokleng have renovated their communities, as evidenced by their new houses. They do not pay for electricity because their electric bill is paid as part of the compensation package.

#### **1.4.2.5 Education**

Each village has a one-room school up to grade 4. These elementary schools are run by the municipality of Ibirama, the population of which is mostly Brazilian of German descent. Municipality of Ibirama support for Xokleng bilingual education is not enthusiastic.

In the late 1980's, a local linguist and Nanblá and began to work toward the establishment of bilingual schools. Nanblá frequently referred to his role in developing the Xokleng bilingual education program. He was proud to tell us that today, after a lot of work and lobbying each school in the village has two teachers—the regular teacher and the bilingual Xokleng teacher. The bilingual Xokleng teacher speaks the language but is generally not qualified to teach other subjects. Usually, Xokleng is taught for 1½ hours a day.

Most of the Xokleng language instruction takes the form of teaching children to write words in the language. There is also some drama and songs. The bilingual teachers and some of the regular teachers are Xokleng. The teachers express frustration at the fact that the kids are not learning Xokleng. A complaint expressed by two teachers is that parents are not cooperative. The parents say it is the school's responsibility to teach the children Xokleng. The bilingual teacher in Sede said 75 percent of the parents are against their children learning the Xokleng language and culture in the school. Nanblá noted that these "bilingual teachers are only bilingual on paper." Paul Mullen's impression is that there was very little true teaching in Xokleng.

Nanblá has edited a small Xokleng/Portuguese dictionary and a Xokleng/Portuguese book of legends. These books were produced with the help of Fundação Nacional do Índio (FUNAI), local municipalities, and Blumenau University. Still, according to Nanblá, bilingual teachers have few materials. In his opinion, no child has learned to speak Xokleng through these bilingual school programs, but he believed that would change when the bilingual teachers became better educated.

From grades 5 to 12, the young people study outside of their villages. Their first choice for a high school is an agricultural school in the town of Rio de Sul, where Xokleng students room and board and visit home periodically. If a young person is not accepted into the school in Rio do Sul, he or she

studies in the town of Jose Boiteux. There are busses that drive by every evening taking students in grades 5 to 12 to their school at Jose Boiteux.

We were told an average of one Xokleng per year graduates from high school. We found the students excited about the future. Many had ambitions to study medicine or dentistry in Itajai, a large university in Santa Catarina State. One man has been accepted into a master's program in linguistics at Brazil's foremost university in Campinas.

There is a school under construction in Palmeirinha village. It is a combined elementary school and high school that will accommodate 600 students. It will house a "house of culture" and will attempt to boost the Xokleng language. Nanblá said the school would be "100 percent in Xokleng."

#### **1.4.2.6 Immigration/Emigration**

Only a handful of Xokleng live permanently outside Xokleng villages. Many of these live in Itajai and are married to non-Xokleng. An example of this is Nanblá, who is married to a Kaingang. He lives in Itajai with his immediate family, which includes his niece. Kaingang Indians also stay at Nanblá's home for periods of time. Xokleng is not spoken in his home.

There are also some non-Xokleng Brazilians who have married Xokleng and live in the villages. We did not hear of any non-Xokleng Brazilians married to Xokleng who learned to speak the language.

## **2.0 Goals of the Research**

The survey goal is to ascertain the need for a language development program among the Xokleng based on the fact of language maintenance or the potential for language maintenance. The remainder of this paper will discuss what we observed about the vitality of the Xokleng language.

## **3.0 Methodology**

### **3.1 Procedures**

Participant observation was used to elicit data. We stayed in a Xokleng home, visited five of the six Xokleng villages, and did a lot of listening. We constructed an oral questionnaire to find out how much of the Portuguese literature the Xokleng understand, but were advised not to use it. We were told the Xokleng felt they had been the focus of numerous research projects and they would not react favorably to questionnaires or tests.

### **3.2 Data Sources**

We visited five of the six Xokleng villages: Bugio, Sede, Palmeirinha, Figueriha, and Coqueiros. We did not go to the sixth village, Lages, because the bridge was washed out. We spoke to at least one family group from each of these villages. Our choice of families was based on simple availability. We spoke with the groups who were willing to give us their time.

## **4.0 Results**

### **4.1 Linguistic Issues**

#### **4.1.1 Regional differences in speech**

The Xokleng never mentioned any differences in speech between villages or families. We did not hear of any mixing of Kaingang and Xokleng. Paul Mullen states that the Kaingang who live with the Xokleng speak either Xokleng or Portuguese.

### **4.2 Sociolinguistic Issues**

#### **4.2.1 Interaction with outsiders**

##### **4.2.1.1 Interaction with Portuguese**

There are many mixed marriages. We heard a lot of Xokleng/Portuguese code switching among younger people.

##### **4.2.1.2 Interaction with Indian languages from other locations**

Xokleng appears to be somewhat mutually intelligible with Kaingang. Ursula Wiesemann spoke some Kaingang words and phrases, which the Xokleng seemed to understand.

In the early 1900s, Kaingang families were brought into the Xokleng area to help with the pacification process. At that time, Brazilian government policy was to make the Indians into common Brazilian citizens as quickly as possible. Many of the descendants of these original Kaingang remain in Xokleng villages, particularly Sede Village. There are a few cases of Kaingang/Xokleng intermarriage and bilingualism, but it is much more common for the Xokleng to marry non-Indian Brazilians.

We were told about some Guarani Indian families living in Lages village.

##### **4.2.2 Domains of language use**

Antonio, the chief of Figueira, said his meetings with the community were conducted in Portuguese because there were community members who did not speak Xokleng. Nanblá also said that when he had meetings with the community it was in Portuguese out of deference to people who didn't speak Xokleng.

On the way to Sede, our guide and his friend spoke Xokleng with each other. Our guide's 17-year-old friend said something briefly in Xokleng. We also heard Aniel's children, who looked like they were in their late teens, tell Nanblá in Xokleng that their father was in Florianopolis. In both cases, teens spoke Xokleng with someone older. It was more common to hear Xokleng under 30 speaking to each other in Portuguese. A researcher, a father, a schoolteacher, and Nambla mentioned children who spoke Xokleng, but the youngest person we heard speak Xokleng was around 17 years old. We asked many children between the ages of 6 and 12 whether they spoke or understood Portuguese. These children said they did not speak Xokleng. One of the older ones said he understood a little Xokleng. Sandy heard Edi address his two grandchildren, ages 6 and 8 in Xokleng. The rest of the time we observed adults speaking with children in Portuguese.

Nanblá told us the pastor in Bugio preached in Xokleng. That pastor told us he got angry with his grandchildren because they would not speak Xokleng. He said when he spoke to them in Xokleng, they would only respond in Portuguese. He said that if they had literature in Xokleng his grandchildren would begin to speak Xokleng.

Church is almost exclusively in Portuguese. An exception was in Figuera village where we heard a choir sing beautifully in Xokleng and Portuguese. The rest of the service was in Portuguese.

### **4.2.3 Bilingualism**

By speaking and listening to the Xokleng, we concluded they were adequately bilingual in Portuguese. We heard Portuguese spoken almost exclusively among the under 30 crowd. Even when an elder talked to someone under 30, it was usually in Portuguese. Portuguese was dominant in all the domains we observed—in school, at play, in church, at meetings, etc. We did not run across any domains in which Portuguese was not used. We heard more Xokleng spoken by the older people than the younger people, and we were told that some elders preferred to speak in Xokleng. In the village of Bugio, we saw some proof of this when we talked to an older pastor whose Portuguese did not seem too good. All other Xokleng we talked to seemed very fluent in Portuguese, regardless of their age.

### **4.2.4 Language attitudes**

The Xokleng seemed to have a positive attitude toward their language. Whether or not they speak Xokleng, they seemed to be in favor of speaking the language.

Often in our presence, Xokleng would begin speaking to each other in Xokleng. After a few minutes, they would switch to Portuguese. We would concur with Flavio Wiik (1999), who noted that the Xokleng enjoy speaking Xokleng in public and that that language has become a political symbol tied to the idea of a positive Xokleng identity.

Positive attitudes do not appear to have resulted in much language-related activity. For example, we were told volunteers for a language development program would be very difficult to recruit. Language attitudes of non-Xokleng married to Xokleng did not appear as positive. One older man told us his Italian wife spoke Xokleng, to which she replied, “I do not. I just talk Brazilian!”

We spoke with a Brazilian researcher from Blumenau University, who was working on a handicraft *projeto*. She had a positive attitude toward Xokleng, and she stated that there were children speaking the language.

### **4.2.5 Language vitality**

#### **4.2.5.1 Factors affecting language vitality**

The option of higher education in Portuguese appears to encourage the young people to use Xokleng less. They spoke with excitement about their prospects of employment once they became doctors or dentists.

Every home we visited had a TV, and it was usually on and viewed by a room full of people. Portuguese language TV seems to draw people away from the Xokleng world and language.

The cash economy, namely the *projetos*, is increasingly important in the villages. Since Xokleng are not the source of the money, it seems that proficiency in Portuguese is an important prerequisite for those who administer these *projetos*. The economic benefits of Portuguese are a very strong motivator for language shift.

There is a definite renewal of Xokleng pride and identity. If the language can be successfully tagged onto this cultural revival, this could encourage the maintenance of Xokleng. The young people appeared to be more enthused about being Xokleng than about speaking Xokleng.

#### **4.2.5.2 Current status of language vitality**

To gather language vitality information, we asked people if they spoke Xokleng. Most of our information came from listening to conversations in various villages among groups of various ages and both genders.

Among the people we observed, those over 35 usually spoke to each other in Xokleng and people under 35 usually spoke to each other in Portuguese. In general, young children seem to have limited comprehension of Xokleng and very little fluency. Teens and young adults apparently have good comprehension of Xokleng and some proficiency in speaking it, but little interest in maintaining it as the primary language of communication, except with older folks. Older folks have proficiency in speaking Xokleng, but for many there is greater interest in speaking Portuguese.

### **4.3 Cultural/Anthropological observations**

Nanblá mentioned that in the last decade he and others had moved from being ashamed to be and speak Xokleng to being proud of being Indian. It appears that in a mixed marriage the Brazilian spouse does not learn Xokleng.

## **5. Discussion**

Our observations of language proficiency and use tell us that the possibility of language maintenance among the Xokleng is low. Our observations and people's comments about language use usually concurred. Any apparent conflict was usually resolved by further questioning. It appeared to us that most Xokleng sought to represent their language proficiency in the most positive terms possible and were reluctant to admit that their language was not being maintained. We worked in a language revival project among the Kwakwaka'wakw of Canada for five years. It was uncanny how many times we heard the exact same comments about the Xokleng language that we had heard about the Kwak'wala language. Both our observations and the people's self-perception and comments provide valuable data. But based on what we observed and heard from the Kwakwaka'wakw, we believe our observations reflect the language situation among the Xokleng better than their comments.

## **6. Recommendations**

Based on our observations and informal interviews, it seems to us that a language development program of the type SIL generally provides is not needed among the Xokleng. We were told there were some homes where Xokleng was spoken, even among the children. If there could be a language development program that targeted these homes, it might have a chance of being successful.

The literature translated in Xokleng does not seem to be well known by the Xokleng and is not part of the government's bilingual school program. The current language development program is only

targeting the schools, where the majority of the children do not speak Xokleng. The Xokleng appear to be putting a lot of effort into getting an education. There are Xokleng in universities and some are working on master's degrees. This enthusiasm for education in Portuguese might undermine any language development efforts in Xokleng.

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