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THE HISTORY OF EDUCATION AMONG THE AGUARUNA

Gerardo Wipio Deicat

EDUCATION IN PRECONTACT AGUARUNA CULTURE

The Aguaruna[1] lived for centuries without knowing about schools. They received the wisdom of their ancestors from their fathers by means of a system called *jinta ainbau*, meaning "follow the trail made by our forebears." This consisted of drinking tobacco juice and the hallucinogenic drugs, called *ayahuasca*[2] and *tué*, and sleeping alone near a waterfall beside the tomb of a *mun* (great leader). In this way they practiced the philosophy of the great thinker *Bikut*, who formulated laws for the Aguaruna to obey and predicted all that would come to pass among the Aguaruna.

To obey the laws that Bikut had prescribed and to see the fulfillment of his predictions, the young men had to complete certain tests and obey certain prohibitions. The tests consisted of drinking tobacco juice and hallucinogenic drugs off and on until the age of twenty-five or thirty. If a young man failed to do so, he was considered incapable of being a warrior, he would not have a long life, and he was not to be considered a great person, respected by the society.

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1 Some 22,000 Aguaruna live in the Andean foothills of northern Peru. Aguaruna is a member of the Jivaroan language family.

2 *Ayahuasca* is the ordinary Spanish name for the vine *Banisteriopsis caapi*, a species belonging to the *Malpighiaceae*. For more details see Michael J. Harner, ed., *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

The prohibitions specified not having sexual relations before marriage, not sitting on the seat reserved for the women, not associating with or playing with girls, and not using anything perfumed. The young men were to walk in front rather than behind the girls, who wore perfumed necklaces that could be detected from a distance. All the young men who obeyed these rules were considered to be pure of thought, disciplined, worthy of respect by the Aguaruna society, and destined to be valiant warriors.

Since they were following strict discipline, they were prohibited from making any kind of sign on a tree with a machete or ax. If such a mark were made, their relatives investigated carefully until they discovered who was responsible. The guilty party was taken to the *mun,* who gave him a scolding. The *mun* was the highest authority in the area, he meted out punishment to the young men, and his laws were obeyed by everyone.

Additionally, children had to obey all their parents' advice and learn to do the work that their parents did. They were taught to be useful members of the Aguaruna society because men who were hard workers and good hunters and women who were hard workers and faithful to their husbands were the preferred marriage partners.

The father would spend all night spinning cotton, which he used to weave an *itipak,* the skirt which he wore, or a *buchak,* the sarong worn by his wife. The rest of the family slept until 2:00 a.m., the time which the Aguaruna call the first crowing of the rooster. At that time the father would wake up his wife and children so that they wouldn't have bad dreams and so that he could teach them how to spin cotton.

After he woke everyone up, the father would recount the feuds with neighboring groups, talking very loudly and with great force. He also had his older son practice so that he would learn to talk the same way and thus demonstrate his bravery. After this long conversation about their enemies, he would counsel his sons not to be evil, corrupt, cowardly, or hateful, but rather to be good men and hard workers, worthy of the respect of others.

ECONOMIC SYSTEM

The Aguaruna did not worry about what things cost. They traded what they had for what they needed or wanted from each other. For example, a man who didn't have an *itipak* because he didn't know how to weave would trade a blowgun for one; a man who didn't have a crown traded a shoulder bag for one, etc. The women also traded. This made for an equal society, where everyone had the same things. This equality extended to other areas as well. If a young man was to be married, everyone helped build his house and clear his garden. They even gave him some domesticated animals so he could begin his work. Animals killed in hunting were all divided equally. If a person couldn't help fish because of other responsibilities, he wasn't left without fish, as everyone gave him a few of theirs.

FORM OF GOVERNMENT

Each extended family group was governed by a *mun*. When there were serious problems, the people complained to the *mun*, who first investigated the situation and then gave his decision. No sanction or punishment was given without his approval. If someone acted without the *mun*'s knowledge, he had no backing and could not be defended. An exception occurred when someone who was considered to be in the same class as the *mun* acted without consulting him and then successfully defended his decision. In all likelihood this type of Aguaruna was destined to be the *mun*'s successor.

DESTRUCTION OF THE AGUARUNA CULTURE

While the Aguaruna were living as described above, Spanish-speaking outsiders arrived looking for rubber, gold, hides, and other products, hoping to make their fortunes. These men found that the Aguaruna were gentle people when treated well, but rebellious when not shown respect and when abused.

Exploitation was perhaps an inevitable consequence of contact between two groups with such diverse goals and life-styles. It began when the Spanish-speaking outsiders told the Aguaruna that the land where they lived did not belong to them but to the "State." They used this as their justification for coming to work the land. They brought many things with them—guns, shells, cloth, mirrors, etc.—things which really impressed the Aguaruna. The outsiders showed them the use of these articles and offered to trade with them for raw rubber, hides, and other produce. Some Aguaruna agreed and accepted the trade goods, promising to bring rubber. Now at this time the Aguaruna were illiterate and did not know how to keep accounts. Thus, little by little the whole Aguaruna society fell under the power of the Spanish-speaking *patrones* because the Aguaruna went into debt to them.

People who had debts attemped to pay them off by making rubber. Working in the jungle where they lived, they extracted the latex from the trees and then heated and smoked it until it became rubber. Often they began working at five in the morning and didn't stop until six at night. It took a month to make a ball of rubber weighing fifty kilos. Once they had a ball this size, they took it to the *patrón*'s place. The *patrón* did not weigh the rubber with scales; he just guessed at the weight by lifting it in his hands. (For this reason the Aguaruna call the *patrones* "arms of a scale.") Thus, the Aguaruna were always being cheated out of receiving full value for the rubber they brought in.

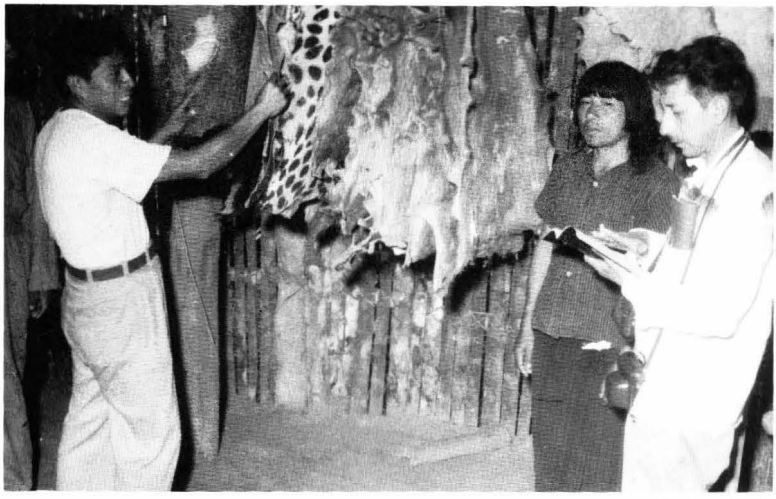
The *patrones* cheated and exploited the Aguaruna laborers in other ways, too. They had books in which they listed all the things which they gave to the Aguaruna. However, when an Aguaruna brought his product, they would fail to mark down his credit. The *patrón* would later look at his book and say, "It's written here that you have a debt of so much, and to pay this you have to bring more rubber." The Aguaruna would answer, *"Tauwa! Parjugka, wi uwejan makichik amua shijigkan itajuamjama!"* ('That can't be, *Patrón*. I have brought you five balls of rubber'). The *patrón* couldn't remember because he hadn't written it in his book. The

Aguaruna lamented, "If I could only read and write I'd know what my accounts really are! The *patrón* is robbing me of my rubber and keeps asking for more."

To keep the Aguaruna in debt, the artifacts that they made, such as hand-woven cloth, carrying baskets, blow guns, clay dishes, large clay pots, etc., were ridiculed by the Spanish-speaking intruders, who considered them valueless because they weren't durable. When they wanted to sell a cup or pot, they grabbed a clay pot and a pot made of aluminum and threw them both down on the ground. Of course, our pottery broke easily because it was made of clay. Then the *patrón* would say, "Okay, do you see? See how the clay bowl and pot broke, while the aluminum plate and pot didn't break. It is much stronger and will last you a lot longer. Take this plate and pot. You must bring me jaguar or otter skins to pay your debt."

Another problem the Aguaruna had was that the outsiders were always trying to make them feel inferior by ridiculing their appearance and life-style. If the outsider met an Aguaruna man with long hair, dressed in his *itipak,* he would insult him by saying, "You dress like a woman. Why do you have long hair, and why do you wear a skirt? You ought to cut your hair and put on pants and be like us. Buy these things that we have brought for you and then bring rubber to pay what you owe." This was a very effective way for the intruders to keep their domination over the Aguaruna and to keep them in debt, because the Aguaruna took the things offered and began working rubber.they stopped making their own and bought the things the *patrón* offered them. More and more their life-style kept changing.

The process of change moved quickly for some Aguaruna who lived close to the *patrón* and learned his culture and abandoned their own, turning into *patrones* themselves. They refused to speak their own language after they had learned the language of their *patrón.* They served his purposes, acted as his interpreter, and were considered traitors by their own people. Sometimes they were sent by their *patrones* to all the houses to collect the rubber.



(Elder, 1957)

Daniel Dánduchu, an enterprising Aguaruna school teacher, assisted by Efraín Morote Best, first Coordinator of Bilingual Education in the Jungle, organizes a cooperative for the benefit of his people (see chapter 5).

(Elder, 1957)

Members of the Aguaruna cooperative bring batches of raw rubber to Daniel Dánduchu (see chapter 5).

THE COMMUNITY SEEKS A SOLUTION

Because of all these problems, some Aguaruna began thinking about studying. They realized that if they learned to read and write and speak Spanish, they could claim their rights and sell their products without anyone deceiving them.

As a result, the first Aguaruna, Nantip and Uwarai, left to go and study on the coast. They planned to return and help their people, but they never finished their studies, because they lost their lives. However, other young men—Daniel Dánduchu, Francisco Kaikat, and Silas Cuñachi—decided to follow Nantip and Uwarai. They went out to the coast and finished their primary education. Daniel Dánduchu returned to his village and shortly thereafter, with the help of one of the SIL linguists, prepared to become a bilingual school teacher. Later, the Peruvian Ministry of Education named him the first Aguaruna teacher. He founded a bilingual school at Nazareth in 1953. In 1954, he founded another school in Chikáis along the Marañón River. As he established these schools he announced to all the Aguaruna that they could now enroll their children.

Many of my countrymen came, anxious to enroll their children rather than sending them to the jungle to follow the *jinta ainbau* of the past. They knew it was only by going to school that the children could learn to read, write, and speak Spanish. Generally they enrolled the young men and boys; I was one of those who attended school at Chikáis. Even before we finished studying, we had promised that we would teach other children and help our parents in the selling of produce, so as to avoid the exploitation and abuses committed by the traders who had come into the area.

Within five years after the first school was established, there were young men prepared in the bilingual schools who were ready to become teachers. With the help of SIL and the government, they were trained at the Ministry of Education facilities at Yarinacocha and went to various communities establishing more bilingual schools where even today the flag waves and the national anthem is sung. "We are free, may we be free forever!" is sung with enthusiasm and pride because,

even more than the freedom and independence of our country from Spain, we feel freedom from exploitation and from illiteracy. Because he was the first teacher and brought freedom, Daniel Dánduchu is considered to be the "Father of Bilingual Schools" by the Aguaruna people.

Since this beginning in 1953, the Peruvian government, with the cooperation of SIL, has continued preparing native teachers for the different ethnolinguistic groups, training teachers in the methodology of bilingual education and also preparing health and community development promoters.

Our government continues to be concerned about helping indigenous communities—oppressed groups of people who for many years had lived without receiving this type of education. The *National Policy of Bilingual Education* was proclaimed,[3] which recognizes the value of the various vernacular languages in the country and their use as a means of communication and cultural expression. Moreover, it continues to promote bilingual education so that everyone may learn to speak Spanish, but respects the cultural characteristics of minority groups. The government has also given us the *Law of the Native Communities and Agricultural Development of the Jungle and the Foothills.*[4] This law makes clear our legal existence and judicial recognition as native communities and guarantees us full ownership of our lands. The government has also given us municipal authorities so that we can register the birth of our children and in this way obtain personal documents. (In the past we had no way to identify ourselves as citizens of the country.)

With all this help from the government and from members of SIL, the indigenous communities are blooming in the midst of the immense green jungle. They are learning to know their brothers—other indigenous people who for centuries have lived in the same region without knowing each other. They are

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3 *Política nacional de educación bilingüe.* Lima, Perú: Ministerio de Educación, 1972.

4 Supreme Decree No. 20653, Lima, June 24, 1974, which was replaced by Supreme Decree No. 22175 on May 9, 1978.

coming to recognize the government's objective of transforming the jungle into something useful for the country. We also feel more capable now of collaborating with the government in its great work of forming new men—men who will be full participants in a society which is free, just, and united—a society involved in creative common work and embued with national values. And we bilingual school teachers are teaching with the goal of forming these new men for this new society. Only in this way will the indigenous people of the jungle make progress which will be for the betterment of our beloved Peru.

BILINGUAL EDUCATION AMONG THE AGUARUNA

To attain these aspirations among the indigenous peoples, it is necessary to educate in the vernacular language, that is, to apply a program of bilingual education.

What is bilingual education? For the Aguaruna, bilingual education means education in two languages: Aguaruna and Spanish. We Aguaruna teachers teach our children in our mother tongue in the lower grades at the same time we are teaching them Spanish as a second language.

Why do we teach in the mother tongue in the lower grades? Because one hundred percent of the children are Aguaruna speakers, and Spanish is a foreign language which they do not understand. Many people think that by teaching in Aguaruna we are wasting time and the children do not learn well. They think that if the children learn to read and write in their own language, they will have serious problems learning Spanish, and therefore they prefer that they be taught in Spanish. For many reasons we consider that teaching in Spanish in the lower grades in a native community is contrary to good pedagogical principles.

In order to clarify this, I will try to explain some of the problems faced by a native child when he goes to school for the first time. Aguaruna children receive the following counsel and prohibitions from their parents:

"Children, don't go out of the house alone because the evil spirits might carry you away and, after beating you up, throw you over the bank of the river."

"Children, don't go near other Aguaruna whom you don't know, because they can hurt you through witchcraft, and don't go near Spanish speakers because it's likely that they will steal from you."

"Children, don't play with older children because they are likely to hit you, and then who will defend you?"

"Daughters, don't play with the boys, because they may harm you."

"Children, don't make friends with other children who are not well behaved."

"Children, be careful not to go into the teacher's house lest he give you an injection of medicine."

"Children, when you go to school, don't play with the other children. You should always stay with your brothers and sisters."

"Children, when you are in school, don't sit with the other children, just sit with your own sister."

Because of all this advice from their parents, the children become fearful, and when they are taken to school by their mother or someone else in the family, they always cry and are afraid. They find the classroom very much different from their home, and the situation is much worse if their teacher doesn't speak their language, as is the case with teachers who speak only Spanish.

Because of these problems, the bilingual teacher gives special attention to the needs of the children during the first weeks of his work. First, he must get to know all of the children, making friends with them, conversing with them in the vernacular in a loving manner, and suggesting things to talk about by such questions as: Where do you live? How did you come to school? Who brought you? Do you like school? Do you know someone else here? However, he must avoid asking about the child's parents if he isn't sure they are living,

because, if the child is an orphan, he will become sad and cry and may no longer want to come to school.

As the teacher gets to know each of the children, he encourages them by explaining everything about the school to them. He tells them that the school will be like their home. The other children will be their friends, and they will play together every day. They will work together learning to read, write, sing, and draw, and in this way learn to be good children. The teacher tells them that he is the older person who will help them if they have difficulties, and that he will take care of them and not let other children hit them.

And so the teacher shows kindness and love to the children without demonstrating any kind of avoidance, contempt, or discrimination, even though there may be some children who are not very clean and some who may have old, dirty clothes. Since the teacher is also Aguaruna and was like them when he was a child, he treats them with love. He is interested in molding lives which, in the years to come, will be useful to the community.

Little by little the children become accustomed to attending school and being with the other children. They learn to share school materials and to pay attention to the teacher. Since the teacher teaches the lesson in their language, the children understand very well; it is their language, and they remember easily what they are taught.

At first Spanish is taught orally. The children learn easy expressions which will be helpful in their daily lives, such as greetings and dialogues useful in conversation with visitors who come to the community. The teacher encourages them to practice these expressions regularly in school and whenever they meet someone who speaks Spanish, but he does not insist that they all talk Spanish.

After the children have learned to read and write well in their own language and know the syllables, he teaches them to read and write in Spanish, but he is always sure to translate the meaning into their mother tongue. In this way, little by little, without too much pressure being put upon them, the children acquire Spanish as a second language.

However, when the teacher is a Spanish speaker working in a native community, he does not have the same patience that the native teacher has. In the first place, because he doesn't know the culture, the real world of the native child, he doesn't give importance to, or take interest in, the tremendous reactions and cultural shocks that the child suffers in school. Without paying attention to these psychological problems, which can damage the child, he tries to teach in Spanish even though the child doesn't understand him. If the children don't learn, he insults them by saying, "You don't know anything. You are stupid and dumb and so you don't learn anything, even though I've been teaching you well. I am teaching you in Spanish, but you don't learn."

Sometimes, when Spanish-speaking teachers converse among themselves, they say that Aguaruna children can't learn Spanish. They say, "I have a problem because they don't understand me, and so I have forbidden them to talk in their language. They may only talk in Spanish; maybe that way they will learn more quickly."

Because of these problems, the native children are frightened in front of the Spanish-speaking teacher, and they are embarrassed by the insults and hang their heads. When they want to ask questions, they lack confidence because they fear that the teacher will again embarrass them for not expressing their ideas well. They feel bored, disoriented, and discouraged with going to school, and so they drop out.

While I was working as a district school supervisor, I had the opportunity to visit various schools in Aguaruna communities. On one visit I found a teacher who was working in a community where no one spoke Spanish. The teacher did not speak Aguaruna, but he was teaching various grade levels in Spanish. He wrote on the blackboard in Spanish, and the children copied exactly what he wrote, even though they were not able to read it. The one child who could read what was written did not know what it meant. Afterwards the teacher said to me, "Look, my friend, I'm teaching all that I can, but they don't understand me, and they don't know how to read."

I said to him, "But you should teach them by explaining to them in Aguaruna so they will understand." He said, "But I don't speak Aguaruna. That is my problem. I can't even talk with the members of the community about education."

There is a great lesson to be learned here. How many times have administrators made the mistake of putting teachers of this kind in native schools and asking them to teach in Spanish! How many frustrations have the native children suffered from this kind of school! This is why we teach in our own language in the bilingual schools and learn Spanish as a second language. Only an Aguaruna can teach an Aguaruna. Because of this, we bilingual teachers, although minimally trained, began to teach as much as we were able and each year prepare ourselves to teach a bit better.

I would like to emphasize the fact that we indigenous people have a language which is the product of our culture and which is valuable as a system of communication among us. There are many who do not consider it worthy to be used as a means of instruction, like other languages. But the alphabet which we have been using, and which is still in use, has received the approval of several administrations of the Peruvian government. The materials we use in our schools have always been authorized by the Ministry of Education. We have functioned this way from 1953 until the present. Many of the young men who have graduated are now serving their country as civil servants. For this reason, we indigenous people consider bilingual education to be the solution to the grave errors which occurred in the teaching of native children when they were obliged to study in Spanish, a language very different from ours and a language which they could scarcely understand.

Therefore, I believe that those who teach in a language other than that of the child in the lower grades are violating principles of good pedagogy and are guilty of cultural imposition. More often than not, this type of education has been the cause of native children dropping out of school and experiencing psychological trauma, resulting in their failure to learn to read and write.

Bilingual education does not signify abandonment or rejection of the teaching of Spanish, which is also a necessary tool for communication with our Peruvian society. Rather we teach in Spanish in the more advanced levels.

(Hesse, 1964)

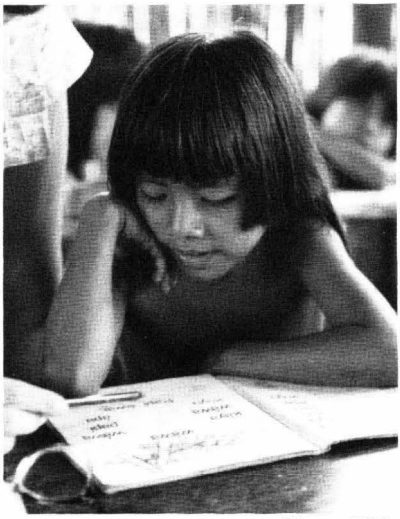
Pupils line up for opening exercises at the Aguaruna bilingual school at Nazareth (see chapter 5).

(Lance, 1969)

In a course specially organized for them, wives of bilingual school teachers learn to use treadle sewing machines (see chapter 6).

(Hesse, 1962)

Pastor Valencia, a Ticuna schoolteacher, checks his pupils' notebooks (see chapter 12).



(Hesse, 1964)

Reading opens up a bright new future for an Aguaruna student (see chapter 5).