

GETTING TO KNOW THE AWÁ TIKAL NATIONALITY IN ECUADOR, CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC ASPECTS

ACERCAMIENTO A LA NACIONALIDAD AWÁ EN EL ECUADOR, ASPECTOS
CULTURALES Y LINGÜÍSTICOS

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José Miguel Obando Arroyo

Docente titular auxiliar en la Universidad Técnica del Norte
Ibarra - Ecuador

Magíster en Lingüística Aplicada a la Enseñanza Bilingüe Español Ingles
Pontificada Universidad Católica del Ecuador

jmobando@utn.edu.ec
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8338-1237>

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Resumen

La etnia Awá es una de las catorce nacionalidades indígenas reconocidas que actualmente viven en el Ecuador. Sus mitos, leyendas, idioma y demás manifestaciones culturales, así como su estilo de vida, los relacionan estrechamente con la selva, el lugar donde ellos viven, de donde obtienen sus alimentos y sustento y al cual protegen. Este trabajo bibliográfico tuvo como objetivo determinar los temas de investigaciones previas acerca de las características culturales de la nacionalidad Awá en Ecuador. Con este fin, se realizó una revisión sistemática de los trabajos publicados entre los años 2001 y 2023. Los datos evidenciaron que la información presentada describe y analiza la situación de esta nacionalidad en Ecuador en aspectos como sus orígenes, la región en la cual habitan, como están legalmente organizados y su cultura, en la cual incluyen sus leyendas y su idioma el cual se encuentra en peligro de extinción.

Palabras Clave: Awá, Ecuador, Awapit.

Abstract

The Awá is one of the fourteen indigenous nationalities that currently live in Ecuadorian territory. Their myths, legends, language and more cultural manifestations, as well as their lifestyle, strongly connect these people to the jungle, the place where they live, from where they get their food and the place that they protect. This document study attempted to determine the themes and ranges of previous research about the cultural features and language of the Awá Nationality in Ecuador. The reviewed works corresponded to publications between 2001 up to 2023. The accounts evidenced that the information published describe, analyze and discuss the situation of the Awá Nationality in Ecuador in aspects like their origin, the region where they live, how they are organized and their culture, including the myth of their origin legends and the language which is in endangered.

Kew Words: Awá, Ecuador, Awapit.

Introduction

Just above Surinam and Uruguay, with an extension of 256.370 square kilometers is one of the three smallest countries in South America. As far as the population, the estimated number citizens of Ecuador is of eighteen million people from which 64% live in urban areas and 36% in rural areas (INEC, 2022). Ecuador has a contrasting ethnic diversity: 71.9 % of the population self-identifies as mestizo, 7.4 % as montubio¹, 7.2 % as Afro-Ecuadorian, 7 % as indigenous, 6.1 % as white, and 0.4 % as other ethnic groups (UNFPA, 2022). With the aim to overcome centuries of subordination of diverse peoples and nationalities, the 2008 constitution declared Ecuador as a multinational country.

Ecuador recognizes 14 indigenous nationalities,¹³ Indigenous languages and 18 indigenous groups (Haboud, Estudios sociolingüísticos y prácticas comunitarias para la documentación activa y el reencuentro con las lenguas indígenas del Ecuador, 2019). This clearly evidences that in spite of being one of the smallest countries in the region, Ecuador is ethnic and language diverse. However, not all the 14 nationalities are native to Ecuador. That is the case of the Awá, a cross border nationality that constitutes the subject of study of this review.

This literature review attempted to find out what is known about the Awá who live in Ecuador, what their current situation is and what the ranges of published material about the Awá Nationality in Ecuador between 2001 and 2023 are.

Based on the articles and publications from 2001 to 2023 The emergent topics were:

1. The recognition of the link between the Awá nationality and the local environment (Alvarez & L., 2007), relationship with nature (Marroquin & Riveros, 2019)
2. Awapit, the language spoken by Awá, is an endangered language (Haboud & Toapanta, 2014). The displacement of the tongues goes hand in hand with inequity situations and its social and political effects (Haboud, 2019). The awapit is partly learned through the formal education system and is practiced in family and community contexts (Gómez, 2010).
3. The need of more effective interventions from the viewpoint of modern and participative communication (Ávalos & Culqui, 2020).

Historical Ancestors and Current Diaspora in Ecuador

The Awá is a cross border group that currently lives in the south western jungle of Colombia as well as the northwestern jungle of Ecuador. However, there is no coincidence among the data regarding its origin. The website Etnias del mundo mentions that the origin of the Awa is unknown as so far, archeological studies have shown that the Colombian and the Ecuadorian coast region was inhabited by the culture known as “Tumaco” (2008). The same source accounts that, after the arrival of the Spanish conquerors to that region, the chroniclers refer to those groups as some semi nomad people with a lower degree of development in relation to the

1 The Royal Academy of Spanish Language defines the term montubio as: a rude person. In Ecuador the term is used to refer to the mestizos who live in the coast region.

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communities living in the Colombian and Ecuadorian Andes. The source also mentions that due to the form of the houses they lived in, they were called “Barbacoas”. A second source, the official website of Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE) mentions that historic registers suggest that the Awa are descendants of the Mayas from Mexico (2014). The source also includes accounts that mention that three hundred years ago, they began to move south to Central and South America and eventually, they settled in Colombia.

In that country, they occupied the southwestern jungle in the region between Altaquer, Kuaiaquer and Ricaurte belonging to the departments of Nariño and Putumayo. However, just beginning the twentieth century factors like the consolidation of some municipalities and road construction towards that region accelerated the colonization of the Awa territories. Eventually, the so called “la guerra de los mil días entre conservadores y liberales” (The thousand-day war held between conservative and liberal) forced the Awa to move south up to Ecuadorian territories (Pineda, 2010). Later on, the pression of timbers, the deforestation caused by palm farmers in the Colombian western rainforest forced the Awá who lived in Colombia to continue moving south to Ecuador. It was until 1982 when they, sponsored by “Fundación Altrópico of Ecuador”, started to organize (Walsh & Santacruz, 2006). The process ended with the recognition of the so called “Federación de Centros Awa del Ecuador” (FCAE) and the allocation of 101 hectares that later was recognized as Reserva Étnica Forestal Awá Kwaiker”. The land part of this reserve is part of the provinces of Esmeraldas, Carchi and Imbabura.

Since 1986, this nationality celebrates annual assemblies with the participation of representatives of the 24 Awá centers who currently live in Ecuadorian territory, even though there are only 22 legally recognized – The remaining two are settled in Sucumbios are in the process of being legally recognized (Huanga, 2022). The meetings are organized by “Federación de Centros Awá del Ecuador”, that pursues improvements in the quality of life of its members within and outside its territory in Ecuador (Consejo de Participación Ciudadana y Control Social, 2015).

As for their population, there is no data available about the number of members of this nationality that initially came to Ecuador. The results of the 2001 census conducted by Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos (INEC) established that 3.283 Awá lived in the, at that time, 22 provinces of Ecuador (Chisaguano, 2006). Data published by Care Project Ecuador in 2014 stated that there are 3500 Awá living in Ecuador distributed in 22 communities in three provinces namely: 1000 in Esmeraldas, 2000 in Carchi and 500 in Imbabura. From then on, the population of the Awá has increased significantly. By the year 2021, the number of Awá living in Ecuador was of 8000 approximately (La Hora, 2021). There is no data published in the last two years about the number of Awá currently living in Ecuador. However, recent visits to the communities evidenced that there is a rise in the number of inhabitants in the Awa communities. For example, in “El Baboso”, a small Awá community settled in Carchi, the number of inhabitants is of 300. Oral accounts collected by the researchers among habitants of some Awá communities of Carchi suggest that in big communities like San Marcos there are around 3000 people (Huanga, 2022). Even though there is no still data published by INEC about the population of the Indigenous Nationalities in the last year, considering that currently there are 24 Awa communities in Ecuador, it is expected that the number of Awá easily reaches 10000 inhabitants.

Methods

This document study collected data from research for the period between 2001 and 2022 about the situation of the Awá, their culture and language in Ecuador. Data collection was conducted through documental analysis techniques.

Being a literature review, the researcher must ensure that the search methods are comprehensive, systemic and justifiable (Hallinger, 2013). With the purpose of identifying themes, it was used the inductive method of document selection. To write the review, there were taken the following steps suggest (1) Writing the research questions, (2) Identifying key words, (3) Sources selection, (4) Evaluation (5) Findings extraction in a final discussion (Briner & David, 2012). Information search was conducted in Google Scholar. The key words used to conduct the search were: Awá Nationality in Ecuador.

The studies included thirteen articles, one book, two theses and a booklet on the Awá published between 2007 and the year 2000. Two of the articles were published in 2007, one in 2010, three in 2013, one in 2014, one in 2015, one in 2018, two in 2019 and one in 2020. The book was published in 2009, the thesis in 2013 and the booklet in 2017. It was also necessary to look for maps that allowed graphically see where the Awá live. There have been research reports, governmental entities as well as international organization publications from 2001 up to 2022 that describe, analyze and discuss the situation of the Awá Nationality in Ecuador in aspects like the regions where they live, how they are organized and their culture, including the myth of their origin legends and the language which has particular linguistic features.

Findings and discussion

Cultural practices

Culture is a broad concept that includes beliefs systems, social forms of organization as well as particular ways to interact with the material aspect of environments. The Awá Tikal strongly believe in their myths and traditions which make them feel that they are one with the jungle as they live off the jungle and live to protect it. In addition to this, they also try to preserve their celebrations and social meetings like the funeral rites, curse, minga², communitary minga and the Awa assemblies which have constituted the space where the representatives of this nationality discuss the topics of interest for the 24 Awá centers (including the two new ones settled in Sucumbios) that are part of the Federación de Centros Awá del Ecuador. Their music, dances, handcrafts and other cultural manifestations are also subject of preservation by the Awá Tikal. As for the language, even though in the last decades has been included in the list of endangered languages, it constitutes one the major cultural exponents of the culture of this Nationality.

The myth of their origin

“The Awá – Tikal”, their name in Awapit³, translated as “People of the mountains” see themselves as part of the jungle. “We are sons of the mountain; our mission is to protect the jungle. We cannot live one without the other. What happens in the jungle it also happens to us” (Arcos &

2 Minga: free farm labor

3 Awapit: the language spoken by the Awa - Tikal

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Mora, 2012). This concept constitutes one of the major components of the Awá daily life. As previously transcribed by Arcos and Mora, from the words of Awá Tikal inhabitants, it can be stated that this community live off the forest. Furthermore, they have been recognized as strong defenders of its territory in the jungle, their cosmovision, culture and language. For these people, nothing is aside of their myths and legends which have been spread through oral tradition throughout its history. Most of their uses and practices that later become rules are related to the “Myth of Origin of the Awá” (Arcos R. , 2013).

In the beginning, the world was just inhabited by trees. The dense jungle was by everywhere. One day, from a tree (ti), it began to come out a black “barbacha”(titkaya** Tipuj**)⁴, it grew and grew in such a way that soon it reached the ground. When that happened, it acquired the human form. In that way, the first man who was to live in the jungle was born and named “Atim Awá”. He learned to live in the mountain, to eat its fruit, fish and hunt. This was a tall, dark skin and big nose man. However, his main gift was to be able of talking with the trees. At that time trees could talk among them and with the Atim Awá. From this conversation, between the first man and the plants, all the secrets and wisdom of the mountain were transmitted. Every day a tree taught the Atim Awá something different to survive. As time passed, he began to get old, being alone and not being able of sharing with others like him caused a great sadness in him. One day, from the tree from where in the past had come out the Atim Awá, it began to come out a new barbacha, a white one this time (pucha*** Tipuh). In the same way, they grew until they got the ground and once they touched the soil it took the form of a woman, the first Ashampa***.

Cosmovision

In the world of the Awá Tikal, it can be found two ways to conceive the cosmos namely a circular and vertical. From a linguistic perspective, the first one, is an analogy between the tree and the man (Arcos R. , 2013). The former one where everything begins and finishes, where the myth of their origin is created and recreated continuously and the latter, the man, in whom that principle is replicated constantly and eternally. The second one, a vertical vision of four worlds:

Tabla 1.
Cosmovisión

WORLDS	SU	FEATURES
Fouth	<i>Ampara Su</i>	The place where the creator lives
Third	<i>Kutña Su</i>	World of the dead, a big house that puts up all the dead. <i>Irit</i>
Second	<i>Pas Su</i>	The world where the Awá live
First	<i>Masa Su</i>	<i>Ish kun Su the world where the short people who eats smoke live</i>

4 Tipuj: Translation Awapit – Spanish – Barbacha: Translation Spanish - English (epiphytic plants that hang of the trees that look like hair or beard).

Taken from: Myth and Education in the culture of the Inkal Awá. Arcos, 2013

The Language

As far as their language, awapit, even though there are some centers in which it is spoken by most of the members of the community, there are also places where just a few speakers can be found. As for the center where awapit is used for most interactions, the community of San Marcos in the province of Carchi, has the higher percentage of speakers (Gómez, 2010) On the other hand, recent visits of the researchers to the community “El Baboso” in the parish Tobar Donoso, also in the province of Carchi, give account that the center is probably one of the places where just a few speakers of the language can be found, only eight members use awapit to communicate sporadically. Most of them are middle age and have not received formal instruction on awapit. What they know about the language has been learned from their parents or grandparents.

Linguistically, the awapit, the language spoken by the Awá also known as Coaiquer or Kwaiker, since the studies conducted by Beuchat & Rivet in 1910, it is usually classified a part of the family of the Barbacoan languages (Gómez, 2010). As many of the ancestral languages in America, it is of the agglutinating languages which means that it generates its vocabulary and meanings by adding morphemes to a root. It is important to highlight that compared to other languages, the differences that may arise between awapit and languages like the Spanish are not only formal but that also respond to the logical thinking scheme consequence of a different cosmovision and social realities separated by distances in space and time (Contreras, 2009).

The language awapit also presents phonetic and morphological typological features that differentiate from other languages. Phonetically, it is the only language in Ecuador and one of the few in the world that has voiceless vowels with a phonemic value. Morphologically, this language has a system of conjunctive – disjunctive suffixes as for the case of the person, where a conjunctive morpheme uses the first person in statements and the second in questions. The disjunctive is used for second and third person in statements and third in questions (Curnow & Liddicoat, 1998). Findings of studies conducted between 2009 and 2010 showed important differences in lexis and grammar between the Ecuadorian and the Colombian dialect.

Synthesis

Encapsulating, the reviewed literature gives account that the Awá Tikal approximately arrived in Ecuador 80 years ago. Currently, they live in the four northern provinces of the country namely: Esmeraldas, Carchi, Imbabura and Sucumbíos. The data from the census of 2001 accounted that 3286 Ecuadorian citizens self-define as members of the Awá Nationality. Even though there is no current official data about its population, it is undeniable that the number of Ecuadorian citizens that belong to this nationality has increased significantly in the last two decades. Internally, they recognize 24 communities even though, legally recognized there are 22 communities.

As for their culture, the myth of their origin, their cosmovision, current lifestyle, religious practices, beliefs and their language, everything is connected to the jungle, their origin and end. Its language, awapit, presents phonetic and morphologically features that make it different from other languages spoken in Ecuador. The alert about the language is clear as the data confirms

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that this language is considered one of the endangered indigenous languages in Ecuador. Although there are still Awá centers in Ecuador where awapit is the dominant language, there are also Awá settlements where Spanish has become the language used quotidianly.

Conclusions

The search of data for this review established that there were not found works published between 2001 and 2004 related to the culture and language of the Awá Nationality in Ecuador. There were some works published before 2001 which due to the criteria of selection were not considered in this work.

From 2007 on and up to 2020 there have been several studies conducted in Ecuador and Colombia about the Awá community. In Ecuador, the themes and ranges of the studies, books and theses published between 2001 and 2022 related of the Awá present information about their history, their arrival to Ecuador and current legal situation, the agreements between the Awá communities settled in Colombia and those settled in Ecuador, their culture and their language.

The accounts suggested that this community came from Central America and settled in Colombia from where emigrated to Ecuador. There is no current data available about the number of Awá living in the country, but it is suggested that they easily exceed in 10000 distributed in 24 Awá centers in Ecuador settled in four northern provinces in the border with Colombia, there are a few Awá disseminated throughout the country though.

They have a rich mythology that clearly establishes a strong connection with the jungle. However, there is a contrasting situation between the strong recognition of the linkages of this Indigenous Nationality with their surrounding environments and the lack of interest in assessing the state of their language endangerment.

Recommendations

Even though, there have been efforts to study the Awá in their different facets, it becomes necessary that new studies are conducted to determine the current situation of the twenty-four Awá centers settled in Ecuador.

Culturally speaking, the Awá are the owners of invaluable cultural manifestations like the myth of their origin, that may be subject of study and analysis to better understand the cosmovision of this nationality.

As the situation of the awapit in Ecuador is critical, not the same situation in Colombia, it is recommended that new researches are conducted to identify the centers where the language has almost disappeared to generate proposals oriented to re – vitalize it.

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