Dance rituals and songs of the Murui from Northwest Amazonia
by Katarzyna I. Wojtylak (Language and Culture Research Centre, James Cook University, Australia)

The real authors of this introduction to Murui dance rituals and songs are the Murui people, principally Walter Anacleto Agga Arteagga. Since my first encounter with the Murui in 2010, Walter has been a remarkable teacher. Over the years, he has sung all types of songs, many of which he has patiently repeated time after time. As he put it: 'These songs are part of the Murui identity; I hope that by teaching them, the Murui way of life will not be forgotten.' The songs included here have been recorded and edited by Kristian Lupinski.

Walter Anacleto Agga Arteagga, a leader of one of two communal houses
in the Murui community of Tercera India in Colombia (Cara-Paraná River) (by Kasia Wojtylak)
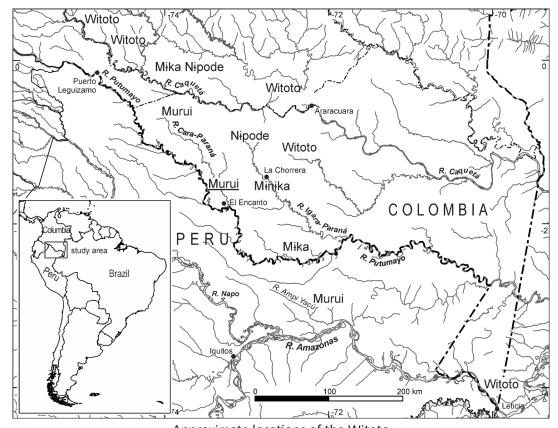
The Murui people – the Witoto people
by Katarzyna I. Wojtylak

Walter is a member of the Tercera India community, a small Murui village located in the remote parts of the Amazon rainforest in southern Colombia. Murui communities, such as that of Tercera India, are mainly located along the Cara-Paraná and Igara-Paraná tributaries of the Putumayo River in Colombia. Some Murui speakers also live in northern parts of Peru, along the Ampiyacú and Napo rivers.

The Murui, like many other indigenous groups in the Amazon, share the tragic history of enslavement and disease that in the early 20th century caused the death of many thousands (Casement 1912). In 1908, Thomas Whiffen, a traveller and an ethnographer, estimated the total population of the Murui, Mɨka, Mɨnɨka and Nɨpode (referred to also as the Witoto) people at 15,000. Today, they collectively number about 6,000 people.

Approximate locations of the Witoto
(Murui, Mɨka, Mɨnɨka, and Nɨpode) people (Wojtylak, forthcoming)

Over the last century, Spanish has become the language of everyday life for the Murui. This is more evident for communities located closer to cities, but nevertheless, even speakers located in remote areas are nowadays bilingual. Among the young people, the use of their native tongue is mainly associated with traditional performances and ritual discourse.

Murui ritual discourse and songs
The Murui ritual discourse has several genres, including *bakakɨ* (mythology), *yoraɨ* (sung narrations of the origin of lineages), *ruakɨ* (songs), and the dominant *rafue,* a discourse which has power to 'evoke' things in the world (Echeverri 1997: 185).

The *ruakɨ* song genre is an inherent part of *rafue*. In fact, *rafue* consists of many genres and styles. One of them is the fascinating hunting avoidance speech style, which is a system of lexical substitution meant to 'deceive' animal spirits by avoiding the utterance of the animals' 'true' names (Wojtylak 2015). In the context of *ruakɨ*, *rafue* has a performative function as a dance ritual that takes place in a communal house.

During the dance ritual, the invited groups bring game and perform songs; the hosts 'repay' the gifts with tobacco, coca, and food.

Dance rituals have their origin in the story of creation. In Murui mythology, at the beginning of time, the cultural hero, Buinaima, distributed a yucca shrub among his sons. The yucca shrub was Buinaima's first-born daughter, and, upon being given to her brothers, she branched out and became four main dance rituals:

-   *yadiko* (ritual of reproduction)

-   *zɨkɨi* (ritual of dance sticks)
-   *menizaɨ* (ritual of 'charapa' turtle)

-   *yuakɨ* (ritual of fruits)

Each of the four rituals has its own meaning and purpose. *Yadiko* and *zɨkɨi* honour the first and the second-born sons, *menizaɨ* and *yuakɨ* celebrate the third and fourth. *Yadiko*, being the ritual of reproduction, is most secret, and has major cosmic, social, and personal implications (Gasché 2009; Urbina Rangel 1997).

Other types of Murui dance rituals include:

-   *muruikɨ* (ritual of cultivated fruits)
-   *eraɨ ruakɨ* (ritual of house inauguration)
-   *marai* (birth ritual)
-   *bai* (ritual of commemoration of eaten enemies)
-   *zɨyɨko* (ritual that takes place before assembling pieces of *manguaré*)
-   *ruakɨ* (ritual of inauguration of a newly made *manguaré*)
-   ɨfonako (ritual to celebrate the end of a duel).

Dance rituals have their own styles and adornments. For instance, *zɨkɨi* (ritual of dance sticks) is performed with long undecorated sticks. During *menizaɨ* (ritual of 'charapa' turtle), a person's body is painted in imitation of 'charapa' turtles; throughout the ritual, those invited approach to touch a turtle shell. All dance rituals also involve a myriad of songs.

Each of the Witoto group (Murui, Mɨka, Mɨnɨka, Nɨpode) have their own dance rituals (and, therefore, inherent repertoire of songs). For instance, the Mɨka 'own' the *jaiokɨ* ritual; *muinakɨ* is of the Mɨnɨka people; the Murui 'possess' *muruikɨ*.

The distribution of 'payments' during the *muinakɨ* dance ritual
in the Mɨnɨka community of La Chorrera, Igara-Paraná, Colombia (picture by Kasia Wojtylak)

Ritual and corresponding songs can also be 'borrowed' from other (non-Witoto) groups. A case in point are the Carijona neighbors to the north, the eternal enemies of all the Witoto. *Rɨaɨ rua* or 'carnivore songs' are celebrated by Murui on occasions of joy and sorrow, such as farewells, and, nowadays, also birthdays. The Carijona dances involve a combination of songs with slow and fast rhythms.

Voices From Around The World (GSSC)
Murui Song 1

5:03

Some characteristics of Murui songs

Murui songs are characterized by frequently occurring patters. For instance, *muruikɨ* and *jaiokɨ* songs have many interjections, among others *yi, hɨɨ, huu,* and *haa*. Another characteristic of Murui songs is a frequent repetition of the structural elements, such as phrase, verse, and chorus. Each song also has a special formulaic ending that involves words from other languages (Witoto and non-Witoto).

Voices From Around The World (GSSC)
Murui Song 2

2:34

Voices From Around The World (GSSC)
Murui Song 3

1:32

The Manguaré Instrument

Murui dance rituals are frequently accompanied by the *manguaré* instrument, consisting of a pair of large hollowed-out wooden drums called *juai*. The 'male' drum is thinner and has a higher pitch; the 'female' drum is thicker and has a lower pitch. Through dance rituals and songs, the *manguaré* is associated with words. It is said that the souls of people, living and dead, are enclosed within the manguaré (Preuss 1921, 1923).

A pair of wooden signal drums in the Murui
community of San José, Cara-Paraná, Colombia (picture by Kasia Wojtylak)

To construct a wooden drum, the interior is burnt out through the two holes and a connecting slit. This is accompanied by the *ziyɨko* and *ruakɨ* dance rituals, with the former taking place before assembling pieces of the *manguaré*, and the latter to 'inaugurate' the newly made instrument.

Traditionally, the drums played an important role in social life. In addition to being the musical accompaniment during dance rituals, the *manguaré* was also used for announcements by means of drummed codes within the community and between distant communities (Wojtylak, 2016). The *manguaré* was used to summon kinsmen or clans, to report danger or a communal activity, and to announce a hunt, war, the arrival of an important person, a death, and suchlike.

Language preservation attempts through songs and documentation projects

The latest initiative to support the community efforts to 'revive' the interest of young Murui in their language was the The Murui Oral Literature Collection Project (funded by the Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research, 2014). The project focussed on documentation of Murui songs, and involved basic training in audio-visual documentation skills. It resulted in a short documentary, *Murui Filmmakers. Murui Filmmakers* features an excerpt from one of the films made independently by the members of the Tercera India community, including the song *Jokozoma urue ɨnɨtaja*.

Murui Filmmakers short documentary film by Kristian Lupinski
and the Murui community of Tercera India

References

Casement, Roger (1912). The Casement Report. In *The Putumayo: The Devil's Paradise,* edited by Walter E. Hardenburg, 264-338. London: T. Fisher Unwin.

Echeverri, Juan Alvaro (1997). *The People of the Center of the World. A Study in Culture, History and Orality in the Colombian Amazon.* (PhD dissertation), New York: New School for Social Research.

Gasché, Jürg. (2009). La Sociedad de la 'Gente del Centro'. In *Multimedia Documentation of the Languages of the People of the Center,* edited by Frank Seifart, Doris Fagua Rincón, Jürg. Gasché, & Juan Alvaro Echeverri. Nijmegen: DOBES-MPI.

Preuss, Konrad Theodor (1921, 1923). *Religion und Mythologie der Uitoto: Textaufnahmen und Beobach-tungen bei einem Indianerstamm in Kolumbien, Südamerika: Einführung und Texte.*Quellen der Religions-Geschichte. Vol. 10-11. Göttingen/Leipzig: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht J. C. Hinrichs.

Urbina Rangel, Fernando (1997). Un Rito Para Hacer la Paz. ¿Por qué los Uitotos Hacen Baile de Karijona? In *Religión y Etnicidad en América Latina,* edited by Germán Ferro Medina, Vol. 2, 79-127. Santafé de Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Antropología.

Wojtylak, Katarzyna I. (2015). *Fruits for Animals: Hunting Avoidance Speech Style in Murui (Witoto, North-west Amazonia).* Paper presented at the Proceedings of the 41st Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistic Society. University of California, Berkeley.

Wojtylak, Katarzyna I. (2016). *Traversing Language Barriers. Murui Signal Drums from Northwest Amazo-nia*. Paper presented at the International Workshop Creativity in language: Secret codes and special styles. Presented on 10 August, Language and Culture Research Centre.

Wojtylak, Katarzyna I. (forthcoming). *A Grammar of Murui (Bue), a Witotoan Language of Northwest Ama-zonia*. (PhD dissertation), Cairns: James Cook University.