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14 On the revitalization of a ‘treasure language’: The Rama Language Project of Nicaragua

Colette Grinevald and Bénédicte Pivot

1 Introduction

This is an update on a twenty-five-year-old field project known as the ‘Rama Language Project’ (henceforth RLP) that has been combining description, documentation, and revitalization of a very small and very endangered language of Central America. The RLP has been amply documented over the years, from Craig (1992) – an articulation of its political origins – to Grinevald (2007b), which addresses the nature of fieldwork on endangered languages. More recent publications (in French) review the evolution of the project and account for how the RLP has led to focus on issues of linguistic fieldwork on endangered languages, the story being told from a sociopolitical perspective in Grinevald (2010a), and a methodological and ethical perspective in Grinevald (2010b). Pivot (2010) offers an evaluation of the impact of the revitalization aspect of the project, analysing the nature and the extent of its success through discourses of members of the Rama community.

This new piece of writing revisits the different phases of the revitalization efforts of the RLP in order to develop new perspectives of concerns for the programme ‘Langues en Danger: Terrain Documentation Revitalisation’ (henceforth LED-TDR) of the DDL laboratory at the University of Lyon 2, including the articulation of the T (‘Terrain’, or ‘field’) and R (Revitalization) of the title LED-TDR, with a clear focus on the human factor of fieldwork on endangered languages. Our work includes propositions for a typology of the different types of speaker in situations of endangered languages (Bert and Grinevald 2010, Grinevald and Bert 2011), to be integrated with a typology of the different actors of revitalization (see Costa 2010a, b). We have also been exploring how speakers of endangered languages and linguists relate (or not) to each other in the field (Grinevald and Bert 2010), and we propose to integrate the human dimensions of fieldwork on endangered languages into the exercise of evaluating the level of vitality of endangered languages (Bert, Grinevald, and Amaro 2011). We seek to evaluate what kinds of revitalization programmes could best be launched in any particular case.

Our way of thinking about revitalization is cast within a critical sociolinguistic approach modelled after Costa (2010a, b), in which linguistic revitalization is taken to be the product of social movements to be analysed through the discourses of the various social actors involved. Another LED-TDR trademark is to question our posture as academics in the revitalization movements of which we are participant-observers, and to consider as part of our responsibilities how to try to provide as much ideological clarification as we can muster on the often elusive and confusing, if not conflictive or maybe disappointing, processes of revitalization.

We review phases of the RLP through the lens of the LED-TDR perspectives just mentioned. Section 1 retells the origins of the project in order to retrace how a foreign ‘expert’ linguist established client and advocate relations from the start of the RLP. It evokes the various sociopolitical dynamics that converged to launch the Rama project, sketching out the top-down government dynamics, bottom-up community demands responding to those dynamics, and horizontal contracting of a foreign linguist. The availability of a linguist willing to take up this kind of challenge in that country and at that time will also be accounted for by sketching out the political and ideological academic context of the encounter.

Section 2 is a contribution towards the task of building a typology of all the actors concerned with the fate of an endangered language. It focuses on an emblematic type of actor within revitalization movements, in this case a visionary speaker of Rama who became the soul of the RLP and the saviour of the language, and who has been turned posthumously into a regional and even a national hero. It is also presented as a case study of another line of advocacy, this one consisting, for the linguist, of taking a supportive and empowering stance, and leaving the initiative to an inspired speaker. Section 3 reviews another form of advocacy on the part of academics, in this case various forms of ‘return to the community’ developed by the RLP team. In particular, it retells an intervention cast as an exercise in ideological clarification. The proposal to think of the Rama language as a ‘treasure language’, which was presented simultaneously to members of the Rama community and to regional educational authorities, was meant to address a pervasive confusion about the real nature and status of the Rama language manifest in discussions of a new ‘bilingual education’ programme to be set up. Section 4 reports on the discourse of the Rama people involved in the revitalization process, to take note of their satisfaction in spite of what objectively might be considered small gains in their new Rama-language capacities.

2 The sociopolitical origins of the project in revolutionary Nicaragua

The article in which the sociopolitical origins of the RLP were first discussed (Craig 1992) was one of the papers given at a special session of the Linguistic

Society of America (LSA) that meant to bring the issue of endangered languages to the attention of the linguistic profession.¹ The article recounted how an essential characteristic of the RLP was its inscription in the markedly political context of the Sandinista Revolution of Nicaragua of the 1980s and its dealings with the indigenous communities of its Atlantic Coast, and of the creation of a network of US-based academic linguists working in solidarity with Nicaragua, (Linguists for Nicaragua or LFN).

2.1 *Revolution, counter-revolution, discussions of autonomy, and linguistic rights*

The tormented history of Central America in the 1970s and 1980s included three 'civil' wars (in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua) in which the US administration openly supported right-wing governments or powers against leftist movements. In Nicaragua, the intervention of US forces took the form of the orchestration of a counter-revolutionary war, known as the Contra War, as soon as the Sandinista revolutionary government took power in 1979. The war raged in the north of the country, but mostly on the (eastern) Atlantic Coast, where indigenous and Creole populations speaking indigenous and Creole languages lived. The USA had little problem enrolling indigenous and Creole combatants dubious of the benefits to them of a revolution led by white Hispanic mestizos from the Pacific side.

In the face of a raging conflict with ethnic overtones, the Sandinista government was convinced by specialists of the region to consider granting the territory on the Atlantic Coast autonomy as a major component of a peace-making process (Díaz-Polanco and López y Rivas, 1986, CIDCA 1987). Multi-ethnic assemblies were therefore held to discuss a plan for autonomy that was meant to include linguistic rights for all ethnic groups. Underlying these discussions was a simple ideological equation between ethnic group and ethnic language, and the assumption that all ethnic groups still spoke an ethnic language, although it turned out that two of the ethnic groups of the region, the Garifuna and the Rama, had all but lost their language.² Autonomy for the Atlantic Coast

¹ Colette Grinevald was then Colette Craig. The round table organized by Hale and Craig was specifically timed to match the official celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the so-called discovery of America (1492–1992) and to echo the protests of a continent-wide alliance of indigenous communities. It was conceived as a linguists' tribute to the survival of many native languages of America in the face of the massive destruction of the linguistic diversity of the continent in the process of colonization. A clear act of academic advocacy, picked up by the journal *Language* (Hale et al. 1992), it launched a debate about the role of linguists in situations of endangered languages (Ladefoged 1992 and Dorian 1993).

² A situation typical of all the indigenous ethnic groups of the Pacific side of the country, whose languages were lost through the real hardships they suffered under early Spanish colonization, from which, however, the groups of the Atlantic Coast were historically spared (CIDCA 1987).

was officially inscribed in the National Constitution of 1987 and included full recognition of all the languages of the region.

2.2. *The Rama Language Project, Linguists for Nicaragua, and the CIDCA institute*

In the multi-ethnic assemblies where autonomy was discussed, representatives of the Miskitu, Sumu, and Creole groups would introduce themselves in their respective languages. When the Rama representative had to introduce himself, however, he had to do it in the only language he spoke, the regional, English-based Creole (Misquito Coast Creole or MCC, today spelled Kriol). As he recalled many times, he felt real shame at not being able to speak ‘his own language’ and having to speak in ‘the language of others’. Hence his official request to the Sandinista authorities for help in ‘saving the Rama language’, a request passed on by the local authorities to the Ministry for Culture.

Meanwhile the linguist Colette Craig, then faculty at the University of Oregon and member of a US-based human rights organization working in Latin America.³ was travelling occasionally to Nicaragua as an interpreter on the organization’s behalf. On one of her trips, she had made it known to that same Ministry for Culture that she would be interested in working on an indigenous language of the coast, if there was a chance to do so. The Ministry for Culture then matched the two requests, the one from the Rama community’s representative and the one from the academic looking for a field. The Rama Language Project was launched in 1985, in the midst of the ongoing US-financed Contra war in the Rama region, but with academic support from the US National Science Foundation (for a grammar of Rama). The origins of the RLP are therefore the result of the convergence of several dynamics (the Nicaraguan government, the Rama community, a US academic), each strikingly inscribed with in its own ideological context.

The RLP linguist was soon joined in Nicaragua by similarly minded US-based academics (anthropologists and linguists) who organized themselves as ‘Linguists for Nicaragua’ (LFN).⁴ LFN associated itself with a new Nicaraguan

³ The Council for Human Rights in Latin America, known as CHRLA, one of many citizen-based organizations working at that time against US aid to the Contras in Nicaragua (as well as US support for the military government of El Salvador and Guatemala). (See Grinevald 2010a.)

⁴ Linguists for Nicaragua was started by MIT-based linguists (Craig had been trained in syntax as a graduate student at MIT and been the student of Ken Hale there). Chomsky himself joined them in the capital on several occasions to talk about linguistics but mostly to protest against the US intervention in that country (see Chomsky 1987). At first, LFN offered courses in general linguistics in the capital, but soon most of them were dispatched to work on all the languages of the coast (and on sign language in the capital!). For the oddity of generative linguists working on the revitalization of languages of Nicaragua, see Grinevald (2002). The story is told in more detail in Grinevald (2010b).

research institute, the Centro de Investigación y Documentación de la Costa Atlántica (CIDCA), whose mission was to fill the informational gap on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, until then a little-known region of the country in spite of its constituting half of its surface area. Through CIDCA and in just a few years, all the languages of the coast were covered, from the dominant Miskitu to newly identified variants of Sumu (Ulwa⁵ and Mayangna), and the extremely endangered Rama. In all these projects the fieldwork approach was of that best fitting the political environment, one variously referred to in the literature as a 'collaborative' or 'empowering' framework, or 'action research'. As suggested in Grinevald (2007a, b) inspired by Cameron et al (1992), one could say that the linguists of LFN all worked *on* languages, *with* the speakers, and, as much as possible, aimed at creating conditions for work *by* the speakers.

2.3. *The beginnings of the RLP: a crazy-making situation*

Language revitalization projects, by nature, are challenging, because they happen in marginalized communities caught in complex political and multilingual contexts. This inevitably makes these field situations particularly difficult for academic fieldworkers, who by and large are little prepared for the realities of this kind of field, particularly if they were trained as linguists. In this particular case, it is worth noting that the RLP started long before any coordinated and official mobilization of a sector of the linguistic discipline regarding the issue of language endangerment. This was also long before the establishment of a sub-discipline and actual funding of 'endangered-language documentation', and of course noticeably before the more recent push within linguistic academic circles for concern over issues of 'endangered-language conservation or revitalization'.⁶

Although the RLP was launched with the official support of the regional government and community authorities, and was tied to the supportive network of LFN, the task actually turned out to be a real crazy-making experience, due to an array of complicating factors. First, there was the pressure to 'save the language' from Sandinista and regional authorities, who had no sense of the reality of the Rama situation, including the extremely difficult field conditions and endangered state of the language.⁷ Second, there was the unpreparedness of

⁵ The project was led by Ken Hale (see Hale 2000). Some work was also done on the MCC of Bluefields, the main town of the coast, close to Rama land.

⁶ This was in contrast with the early discussions of the process of revitalization (Hinton and Hale 2001, Bradley and Bradley 2002, Grenoble and Whaley 2006) and the increasing effervescence as attested at the conference at which this chapter was first presented.

⁷ There was a concerted effort to hide from the linguist a first botched attempt at 'saving the language', also hidden from the Rama community for several years (see Craig 1990 for an account of the misadventure of a young German anthropologist years before the RLP).

the linguist officially sent to ‘save the Rama language’: her previous field experience had been the syntactic description of a Mayan language of Guatemala spoken by several thousand speakers (Craig 1977).⁸ Third, and lastly, there was the discovery of strong contradictions in the attitudes and discourse of the Rama people, who were asking for help to rescue the Rama language while despising it profoundly and criticizing work done on it throughout the project. Upon reflection, one could probably have anticipated such contradictions (which are often common in such situations) and could have been better prepared to cope with them.

As discussed partly in Grinevald (2005), the main challenge to the revitalization aspect of the RLP arose from the fact that the Rama people of the main island of Rama Cay⁹ in effect profoundly despised the Rama language that their representative had claimed they wanted back. This distaste was such that, when the first Rama language material produced by the RLP was presented on Rama Cay island, it was denigrated for being ‘tiger language’ (i.e. the growling of animals, not ‘real language’) of ‘tiger people’ (i.e. savages or primitives). We now know about these tensions between non-speakers supposedly asking for revitalization and the despised real speakers of the language to be revitalized – a common trademark of revitalization programmes – but actually living it was very disheartening for the naïve linguist.

3 A decade of revitalization work by one visionary woman (1987–97)¹⁰

The task of ‘saving the Rama language’ seemed daunting, since the Rama people were the smallest, most marginalized, and most isolated ethnic group of the region, at the absolute bottom of a marked ethnic hierarchy. In fact, nobody knew whether there were any speakers left, or, if there were, where they were located.¹¹ Academic networking in the USA provided contact with

⁸ Not to mention the pressure from academia to be doing ‘just linguistics’. The explicit agreement with the director of the linguistic section of the National Science Foundation (NSF) was to produce as ‘scientific’ a description of this dying language as possible as fast as possible, which was done (Craig 1987). Paul Chapin deserves to be saluted again for having been willing to allow funding for a linguistic project that he knew was taking place in a US-backed Contra war zone and that included work with the community. Tensions also ran high at that time between the linguist and her then department head, who was pressuring her to ‘choose between academia and politics’ and not give a ‘bad name’ to the department.

⁹ They were the only Rama known to the outside world. To this day, the Rama are still known in Bluefields as the ‘Rama Cay’, in spite of twenty-five years of RLP efforts to clarify the situation through local newspapers, national Spanish publications, interviews on local radio, courses at the regional university, etc!

¹⁰ Much of this section was originally told in Craig 1992b, and retold in Grinevald (2010a, b).

¹¹ The only information provided by the authorities was hearsay about the existence of three elderly male speakers on Rama Cay who in any case never participated in any of the activities of the RLP.

an American woman who had lived among the Rama in the 1970s; she was the one who led researchers to the Rama speaker from Rama Cay who became the motor and the soul of the RLP. Eleonora Rigby, famous today as 'Miss Nora', was an older, illiterate woman who had long wanted to see the Rama language recorded, conscious that it was in great danger of disappearing without leaving a trace. She is the one who decided to launch by herself a one-person revitalization programme, as soon as she felt assured that the language was being properly described and recorded by the linguists of the RLP.

3.1 *Only two speakers for the description of the Rama language*

Miss Nora worked with two linguists of the RLP for the first time in the summer of 1985. In a matter of a few weeks they established together the basics of the language: an outline of its phonology and a practical writing system, a morphological inventory, and a syntactic sketch. The first publication proving to the outside world that the Rama language was still spoken was a narrative text from Miss Nora, glossed, translated and accompanied by grammatical notes (Craig, Tibbitts, and Rigby 1986).¹² But that first experience was somewhat traumatic for Miss Nora. Although she was a fluent speaker, it turned out that she had learned Rama as a second language at the age of 10, and that she had not used it in a long time, and her occasional linguistic insecurity made her decide that she needed support from a native speaker. For the next fieldwork session, in 1986, she brought with her one such native speaker from the mainland who was one of her daughters-in-law.

The grammar of Rama produced as a final report to the National Science Foundation (NSF) (Craig 1987) is based on data from these two speakers, who ended up being the only ones with whom the linguists managed to work, in spite of meeting and trying to work with a total of eighteen speakers. A census of speakers carried out in 1986 had revealed the existence of more than fifty speakers of Rama, thirty of them native speakers (Craig 1987).¹³ This census, which has been regularly updated over the decades of the project, has been the basis for reflecting on the process of 'counting speakers' of endangered languages: the reality is one of many different kinds of speaker one encounters in situations of endangered languages, the frustrating difference between locating speakers and being able to work with them, and, if working with

¹² Colette Craig was accompanied by a graduate student, Bonny Tibbitts, who was familiar with a form of English Creole and helped communication with Miss Nora. Miss Nora did not speak Spanish: her main language was the local form of English Creole.

¹³ The census was actually organized by Barbara Assadi, the American who had lived among the Rama and who had provided contact with Miss Nora. She knew all the Rama speakers and has been a member of the RLP ever since. Speakers were identified by name and nickname, age, family ties and residence pattern, and language competence. The majority of the native speakers turned out to be childless, single males who lived deep in the jungle.

them, between their being good speakers as opposed to being good linguistic informants.¹⁴

3.2 *Miss Nora as a natural linguist*

Miss Nora turned out to be a rare natural linguist. She had a keen sense of the details of the language and understood the linguist's requests, thoroughly enjoying the elicitation sessions. For years she patiently acted as an intermediary between the linguist and her daughter-in-law, a very fluent speaker and good narrator but a speaker who never acquired the skills of a good informant. They formed an inseparable team, Miss Nora regaining her old fluency and learning more Rama from the traditional native speaker and the linguist.

She genuinely took great pleasure in watching the linguist do morphological analysis, which she described as 'chopping words with a machete'. One day she explained that she felt relieved to see that the language could be written down and analysed, because she had come to believe that there was something wrong with it. She had concluded that from the fact that the missionaries had not written it down the way they had done with the Miskitu language a long time ago before,¹⁵ and from the fact that none of the people with whom she had worked previously had been able to 'give the language back to her' in an intelligible way. As she put it, she had loved the language anyway, the way a mother loves her child even if (s)he is not normal. So she was relieved to hear that the missionaries had decided not to write the Rama language down simply because too few Rama spoke it, and that the reason the other people who had worked with her had not been able to write it down the way she was speaking it was simply because they were not linguists and were not trained for the job.

3.3 *Miss Nora as a language rescuer*

Soon Miss Nora initiated Sunday meetings on the island to demonstrate to her people how she worked with the linguist. She would run these public work sessions, dictating sentences to the linguist and asking her to write them on the school blackboard and analyse them (to chop up the words) by showing

¹⁴ Later on, the data gathered for a dictionary came from a third speaker, a nephew of Miss Nora, a native speaker originally from the mainland and the only Rama speaker with some literacy skills (in Spanish). He had been with the Contras in Costa Rica but was persuaded to return to Nicaragua three years into the project, with a full amnesty from the revolutionary government as a show of support for the RLP.

¹⁵ Miskitu is a dominant indigenous language, spoken by tens of thousands of speakers, and is a lingua franca of the region through the efforts of missionaries who developed literacy in it and used it widely in the region, on the pattern of 'lenguas generales' of other parts of the Spanish colonization. The Rama were dominated by the Miskitu, who took them as slaves on occasion. Today the Miskitu language enjoys a high level of literacy.

possible substitutions of person or tense or negation. It was clear that Miss Nora wanted to show that the linguist worked for her as much as she worked for the linguist. Those were very intense moments for the linguist, at the same time very stressful (reminiscent of the stress of PhD comprehension exams) and very exhilarating in sharing with the speaker the pleasure of demonstrating in public the workings of the language, and witnessing the linguistic intuition and powerful mind of the speaker.

Two years into the project, Miss Nora announced that she had decided to go into the school to teach Rama. She had chosen to teach the kindergarten children, for two reasons: first, she counted on them not to mock her and to like it, and second she liked the teacher of that grade and had already secured her support. For the next ten years, Miss Nora went every morning to teach some Rama to a whole generation of schoolchildren, who are today the young adults of the island, many of them eager participants in the workshops organized by the RLP in recent years (see Subsection 3.2).

For years the RLP team produced teaching material at the specific request of Miss Nora.¹⁶ Her idea was to teach the children first how to name what they saw around them, and the so material consisted of illustrations of single words of basic vocabulary. Then she asked for two- and three-word combinations (two white flowers, three big fish, four small houses . . .), and more material was produced. At some point a volunteer from Norway, a native Saami speaker who had been active in the revitalization movement of her own language, worked with her and taught her the total body response approach to language teaching. Children then learned verbs upon commands from Miss Nora, who acted them out (stand up, sit, close your eyes, open your mouth, clap your hands). They made up songs and little routine games. This is what the young adults of today learned and now know of the Rama language. They say today that this is when they discovered that there was a Rama language, that they learned it was their language, and how they learned to speak it, 'one one word' (see Section 4 below).

Miss Nora also participated in the courses created for Creole professors of the new regional university URACCAN (Universidad Regional Autónoma de la Costa Caribe de Nicaragua), and officials of the region by the linguists of LFN. She would tell them that Rama was a good language, that it had a grammar, that it could be written, and would then teach people a few words of it with her material. She would also accompany the linguist every time journalists, people from the authorities, or university representatives wanted to hear about the Rama language, and talk to them with poise, the role of the linguist being

¹⁶ They were young Rama people, but also volunteer students of the University of Oregon in solidarity with the RLP project, material produced with donations from LFN and various NGOs that had visited the island and met Miss Nora.

limited to that of translating her demonstrations in Creole English to Spanish, as necessary.

3.4 *Portrait of a visionary*

Propelled by deep feelings about her language, expressed in her motto '*If we have no language, we are no people*', and conscious of the state of the extreme endangerment of her language, Miss Nora's mission was to make sure that the language would be recorded, and, if given a chance, to pass some of it to the young ones. Her commitment was such that she remained amazingly immune to the kind of discrimination and harassment she ended up suffering from the authorities on Rama Cay.¹⁷ For example, on the occasion of the public presentation to the community of an 'elementary dictionary' she had requested and helped to produce early in the project, she was accused of being a crazy old lady lying to the linguists and making up words. However, when asked on several occasions by the concerned linguist if she felt it was all worth it, her immediate response was that the Rama people of Rama Cay did not know how important the work was and would probably understand it later, and that she would keep working and teaching.

When she died in 2001 it was not clear how her work would survive her. Her nephew, a native speaker and the main informant for the dictionary project, took over the teaching of Rama in the school. His steady presence for another ten years in the school of Rama Cay has assured continuity to her work, even if he is far from having her charisma. She has become, posthumously, a regional and even national hero, as the naming of the library of the URACCAN University testifies.¹⁸ Evidence of her impact on a whole generation of Rama people was certainly clear in the dynamics of the workshops led by the RLP in recent years.

4 **Rama revitalization in recent times: on RLP and new forms of advocacy in new political and institutional contexts**

For the last decade, the RLP team has been busy archiving the material produced with Miss Nora and has entered on several occasions into new interactions with the Rama community, by and large to respond to institutional and government demands and preoccupations. As powerful forces have brought the Rama language to the forefront in various types of discourse and new forms of ideology,

¹⁷ Including from the same Rama leader who had requested help with saving the language. The ill-treatment included the withholding of food provisions distributed in war time on account of her 'getting rich' by 'selling out' the language, as narrated in Craig (1992b).

¹⁸ Although see Subsection 4.2 for the role of the RLP in keeping her memory alive.

the RLP team has been drawn to new forms of advocacy, much of it done again in total improvisation.

4.1 *Institutional and government interests in the Rama language*

The Rama language has found itself recently at the heart of a number of dynamics at the local, regional, national, and international levels. At the local level was the official recognition of a joint Rama–Kriol territory after years of painstaking 'demarcation' work (Riverstone 2003, 2008).¹⁹ Once established, the 'Gobierno Territorial Rama–Kriol' (known as the GTR-K)²⁰ declared the defence of its territory and the revitalization of the Rama language as the top two priorities of its twenty-year development plan (PADA).²¹ Regionally, a new system of education, the 'Sistema de Educación Autónoma Regional' (known as SEAR), had been established by a 2006 law of 'General education'²² and had turned its attention to the teaching of the Rama language. In the spirit of the UNESCO discourse which promotes education in one's 'mother tongue' as a basic human right and as the appropriate mode of struggle against illiteracy (Lopez 2006), SEAR has opted for the dominant Latin American model of the Bilingual Education programme, known as the model of Educación Intercultural Bilingüe (or EIB), and was considering Rama as the 'mother tongue' of the Rama people.

At the national level, it appeared that the central government had made repeated attempts to have the Rama language added to UNESCO's Urgent Safeguarding list, although no one in the region or from the Rama community had been informed of it. Meanwhile, at the international level, the same UNESCO was establishing itself regionally with a new programme of 'cultural revitalization' for all the different ethnic groups of the coast, including therefore the Rama people.

The period was, hence, marked by a convergence of outside and inside declarations of interest in all things Rama – whether territory, language or culture – which ended up presenting the RLP team with new challenges. And while trying to respond to some of the demands that were clearly expressed

¹⁹ During the years of battle for the demarcation and recognition of a Rama territory, the study of the Rama language toponyms was a key element in establishing land boundaries and legitimizing ancestral positions. See Grinevald & Kauffmann (2006) for a contribution of the RLP to this endeavor.

²⁰ Officially the newly recognized territory includes six Rama Communities, which means that five Rama communities have been officially identified in addition to the island of Rama Cay, which had been the only known one: Wiring Cay, Bangkukuk Taik, Rio Indio, Samuu Kat, and Tiktik Kaanu. In addition there are three mixed Rama–Kriol communities: Monkey Point, Corn River, and Graytown (Riverstone 2003, 2008).

²¹ Law 445, 2003.

²² Law 162, 1996.

to them through the GTR-K, SEAR and UNESCO, the RLP ‘experts’ found themselves on a number of occasions improvising interactive encounters.

Some were meant to provide clarification where confusion seemed to prevail, others new information that was deemed useful to share at some point, and yet others to revive a collective memory that had seemed to fade. That is how, for three years in a row, the RLP team led regular activities focused on the perceived needs of the Rama community, including their need to speak for themselves when various institutions seemed to speak for them without really knowing anything about them.

4.2 *New ‘activities’ for the RLP: Various forms of ‘giving back to the community’*

After the death of Miss Nora in 2001, direct contact with the Rama community had been limited to one field trip during which the RLP had worked at establishing the correct forms and linguistic analysis of the Rama toponyms (Grinevald and Kauffmann 2006).²³ The original data on toponyms had been collected by a geographer (Riverstone 2003) working with Rama people to establish the lines of demarcation of the Rama territory. Otherwise the bulk of the activities of the RLP for several years consisted in archiving the materials produced in the first phase of the project in the 1980s, with the support of the HRELDP Foundation of London.

When field activities started again²⁴ they mostly took the form of workshops organized at the regional university, the Universidad Regional Autónoma de la Costa Atlántica de Nicaragua (URACCAN) and at the GTR-K. The workshops were conceived by the RLP team as free-form experimentation in various activities of ‘return to the community’, with a high degree of improvisation in order to best respond to the felt needs and interests of the Rama people present.

In 2008, the URACCAN workshop marked the passage of the RLP to the age of new technologies through the presentation of the Rama materials newly available online. The RLP team showed how the RLP material of the first phase of the project had been archived at the Archives of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America (AILLA) of the University of Texas at Austin.²⁵ The other

²³ This field trip was financed, at the request of the Rama community, through the Tromsø–URACCAN university collaborative programme (see Gonzales, Jentoft, Koskinen, and Lopez 2006), the Norwegian counterpart being led by some Saami activists interested in supporting the small Rama community.

²⁴ Thanks to funding from the Institut Universitaire de France, gratefully acknowledged here for its five-year unrestricted fund that made possible the diverse activities for the Rama community described below.

²⁵ The other material presented was the new Rama online dictionary (www.turkulka.net), which also contains archives of RLP material, in particular all the material produced specifically

activities that year consisted of an elementary course on the Rama language that served as an introduction to understanding the toponyms of the Rama territory. The RLP team also decided to present the Rama community with a tribute to Miss Nora, to recall her work and show her in action with archived pictures from the project.

For the next workshop, in 2009, the most striking thing was the participation of several dozen Rama who had travelled from various points of the territory, among whom were numerous new actors, such as several native speakers who had never participated before in any of the RLP activities, several semi-speakers (including two children of Miss Nora's) eager to take on new active roles,²⁶ and many new speakers (neo speakers), most of whom were ex-students of Miss Nora (or her nephew who succeeded her at the school). At some point, in a coffee break, there might have been forty people speaking Rama aloud and looking proud of doing it, in striking contrast to the old Rama way of hiding and being ashamed of speaking Rama. Taking advantage of the celebratory atmosphere of so many different kinds of speaker and the impressive manifestation of interest in the language, a council of speakers was officially formed. The act was symbolic and powerful; the council is supposed to become the reference entity for future work on the language.

That year, the RLP improvised two conferences on themes judged to be of crucial interest to the community. One was a lecture introducing the notion that Rama was a member of a large family of languages, the Chibchan family, through which the Rama of Nicaragua were linked to their indigenous neighbours in Costa Rica and other countries south. This presentation had a very strong impact on the Rama people, who declared later their relief at learning that they were not an isolated ethnic group, as they had thought they were, and how they suddenly did not feel orphaned any more.²⁷ Another presentation introduced how UNESCO evaluated the level of endangerment of a language, in order to apply the same method to the Rama language and try to suggest corrections in the application that the national government had made in their name for UNESCO. The RLP team also organized a number of meetings and discussion sessions to try to clarify what it had come to be perceived as widespread confusion, on the part of the Rama community as much as that of the

for the community (www.turkulka.net/hablemos-rama), and the series of Spanish-language articles about the project since its beginning published in the journal *WANI* of the CIDCA institute (www.turkulka.net/memorias).

²⁶ One of them, a school teacher who had taught himself with Rama materials and taught some Rama in highschool, has recently been elected representative of the Rama at the regional assembly. It is most likely that he prepared himself to stand up and introduce himself in Rama.

²⁷ Presentations by linguists of the Mayan family of languages to Mayan speakers of various languages of Guatemala in the 1980s had had a profound impact.

educational system SEAR, about the real status and nature of the highly endangered Rama language. (See Subsection 4.3 below.)²⁸

By 2010, after the UNESCO cultural revitalization programme had established itself on the Caribbean coastal region of Nicaragua, the RLP was asked to help set up Rama participation in the project. After having to defend the place of the Rama language in a ‘cultural revitalization’ programme, the RLP offered to work with speakers on a book of Rama traditional cooking. Later that same year, Pivot (2010) carried out a survey of the attitude of the Rama people towards the Rama language and its revitalization.

4.3 *An attempt at clarification by the RLP: talking of Rama as a ‘treasure language’*

By 2009, it appeared that the public discourse of the various constituencies showing interest in the Rama language revealed ignorance and confusion about the state of the Rama language, a very endangered language no longer spoken by any child or teacher (with one exception, now retired). There was the discourse of the regional educational institution SEAR that simply equated ethnic or indigenous language with mother tongue, according to present-day UNESCO and EIB positions, which echoed the original government posture at the time of the granting of Autonomy to the region.²⁹ And there were other sources of confusion about the true situation of the Rama language, such as the blatant inaccuracies about the Rama people and the Rama language found in the national government application form seeking the nomination of the Rama language to UNESCO’s Urgent Safeguarding list, and the tendentious tone of a major article published in a widely read supplement of the national press entitled ‘the agony of the Rama’ (Nuevo Diario, 2009). In both cases no contact had been made with any of the actors of the twenty-year revitalization project who were actually present at the RLP workshop.

In the face of this widespread confusion, the RLP improvised a series of working sessions for the Rama participants and the representatives of the institutions concerned. There were sessions of analysis and discussion of the UNESCO

²⁸ Back in the GTR-K building, a room was dedicated as the Rama Language Room, with computers and internet to consult Turkulka and to be used as a classroom to teach Rama. A presentation of the Rama revitalization program was organized for Rama high school students and university students attending school in town, best candidates to learn to use the archives and the dictionary on line.

²⁹ The Rama situation is complex, since Rama people are actually speakers of an English-based creole and not the official language, Spanish. And, to complicate matters further, the creole spoken by the Rama people is actually a variety of the dominant creole of the region (MCC), known as Rama Cay Creole (RCC). This variant is fast disappearing, but militants of bilingual education have been attempting to revive it in its specificity. See Grinevald (2005) for a discussion of this conundrum.

application document in the presence of the UNESCO regional representative, and of the press article with journalists of the national and local press, including the author of the article. One major theme of all the discussions was the RLP team's proposal to think about the Rama language as a 'treasure language'.

The expression 'treasure language' was adopted by the Rama community after consideration of alternative terminology already in use in the literature. The expressions discussed included sociologically marked terms like 'ethnic, indigenous, autochthonous or minority' language, as well as terminology with such macabre connotations as 'moribund language' or 'language in extinction', but also valorizing terms like 'heritage' language (Hinton and Hale, 2001), as well as newer terms meant to salute the remaining potential of life of languages thought to be gone, like 'sleeping or silent' languages (Hinton 2001b). None of these terms seemed to fit well the ideological, sociopolitical, historical, and cultural contexts of the Rama language of Nicaragua for the purpose at hand, which was principally that of addressing the question of 'bilingual education' for the Rama handled by the regional educational institution, SEAR.

The metaphor of a 'treasure language' instead seemed to more adequately correspond to various specificities of the relation of the Rama community to the Rama language at that time. It echoed the natural environment of the Rama, mainly a coastal region, and the historical dimension of its long local tradition of pirate attacks, often motivated by the search for gold that characterized much of the colonization of the American continent. The metaphor of gold was actually echoed in the words of some Rama, as when Miss Nora's nephew, the native speaker who taught Rama on Rama Cay, said of the language that 'It's gold.' If considered in a timeline, the notion of treasure also fits the idea of something that had been buried and almost lost, but was now being rediscovered and shown and shared. And the word 'treasure' also evoked the notion of something belonging exclusively to the Rama people, who now attributed real value to it and who had become eager and proud of being able to show it to others.

4.4 *A discourse of Rama satisfaction*

Pivot (2010) was a follow-up study of the discourse with the Rama about the revitalization efforts orchestrated over twenty-five years by the RLP. Most striking in the collection of interviews with older and younger actors on Rama Cay was the widespread qualification of the Rama language as 'our language', taken as which was a mark of a definite evolution in attitude towards an ethnic language that used to be referred to negatively on the island as a 'tiger language'.

Miss Nora's motto from the time of the discussions about autonomy that Rama is '*our language*' and '*is our right*' had become a widespread notion by 2010, and continued making the link between the Rama people and their identity of as a 'nation'. But by the turn of the present century, this association

of the language with an ethnic identity had evolved into a new claim that the language helped legitimize the boundaries of a traditional territory. In the words of the then secretary of the GTR-K (and ex-student of Miss Nora's), the Rama language is 'a way to identify myself, maintain my culture as Rama . . . without language we are nothing . . . we would have to speak the language to identify this is Rama territory'. A similar link between language and territory was made in the words of the newly elected Rama representative at the Autonomous Council of the Region: 'as indigenous group we have the language that is one of the element, and we have the land that's the natural partner so . . . then those two things identify us like indigenous people in the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua'.

Interestingly, the interviewees young enough to have been taught in school by Miss Nora, or by other teachers who have tried themselves at some Rama classes with the materials available, all feel reconnected to the language, and declared themselves happy to talk 'some word' or 'little word' or 'one one word'. As a highschool student put it: 'When I come to visit the primary I hear them talk some one or two words but I see like them learning plenty. Like at first we never had them, we never hear children that talk some words in Rama. We find plenty difference then first until now.'

If on the one hand the Rama seem satisfied with whatever they have learned of the Rama language, they are on the other hand resisting the idea proposed by some from SEAR of providing them with bilingual education in Kriol (English Creole), since it is de facto their vernacular language. The refusal comes first from their considering Kriol as 'other people language' and second from seeing it as 'broken English', i.e. a low variety of language that identifies them again as a low-prestige social group. In the end, the challenge of how to educate the Rama children remains in all its complexity, since they come to school speaking only the regional Kriol (although a local variant of it), say that Rama is 'their language', and in any case will have to learn the official language, Spanish, in school, which is still nobody's first language.

5 Conclusion: A twenty-five-year perspective on Rama revitalization

The twenty-five-year perspective of the RLP provides an interesting case study of the multiple dynamics at work in any such project, and their constant evolution. This recalls how the project developed following three different strands. One was its inscription in local, regional, national, and international spheres of ideology; another is that of the varieties of actors on the ground, focusing here on the personality of a language rescuer of the kind many a linguist working on very endangered languages will recognize; while the third strand was the different postures of the group of academics of the RLP who have not been

afraid of mixing 'academia and politics', assuming the stance of activist in their own way.

At first this posture of 'activist' was a question of accepting a political mandate to 'revitalize' the language, a task for which the linguist was not at all prepared (nor was anyone at that time, before there was any talk of endangered languages, even less of their 'revitalization'). Later the activism took the form of empowering a visionary speaker who took the lead, with the result that, as time passes, the feeling is more that it was a privilege to have been given the opportunity of being part of such an adventure. More recently, the posture of activism by the RLP has been characterized by several improvised interventions to offer clarification, in the midst of current debates, about ignored aspects of the reality of the Rama people and deep confusion about the state and nature of their Rama language. Those RLP-led debates that marked the last workshops with the Rama community have been fuel for reflection on the process of revitalization and have been fed by the recent debates within academia about the nature of such processes.

In the end, it is clear that what seemed unthinkable in 1985 has become some sort of reality, and at the same time that the clear lesson to be drawn is the fact that, in the case of such fragile and highly endangered, small indigenous languages such as Rama, 'revitalization is a rehabilitating, healing and empowering process' to be cast within larger sociopolitical dimensions, and that it is just that – 'a struggle without an end in sight' (Huss 2008).³⁰

³⁰ Epilogue: the revitalization of Rama has always been clearly cast within ideological and sociopolitical contexts. It appeared first within a struggle for ethnic identity and was later an essential part of a process of territorial claims. Today, it seems to have emerged as a priority concern of the Rama, in the double context of a new discourse on 'cultural revitalization' on the part of UNESCO that sidesteps the place of language in culture, and of the priority given today by the GTR-K to the issue of the invasion of the territory and the process now known as 'saneamiento', the search for peaceful negotiation with non-Rama people settled on Rama territory. So, to some extent, the issue of the revitalization of Rama has become temporarily dormant, until it arises again, maybe in a new wave of discussion of ecotourism in the making (Pivot, fieldwork 2012).