

# La lengua rama sobrevive

Por Colette G. Craig, Bonny Tibbitts y Nora Rigby

Este trabajo representa los primeros resultados de un estudio sobre la lengua rama que actualmente se lleva a cabo con el apoyo del CIDCA y el Ministerio de Cultura.



se publica un texto en rama; presentamos el relato de un miembro de la comunidad rama en su propia lengua, que recoge además un aspecto de la forma de vida de su grupo.

Quedan pocos hablantes de la lengua rama. En julio de 1985, de unos 800 ramas, 23 manejan el idioma; la mayoría vive en Cane Creek, una comunidad del litoral al Sur de la laguna de Bluefields. El número pequeño de hablantes podría llevarnos a creer que la lengua está en vías de extinción, aunque todavía tiene la posibilidad de sobrevivir. Existen hablantes de todas las edades, y representan tres generaciones, pero la mayoría de ellos tienen alrededor de cuarenta años.

Hasta la fecha se sabe poco de la lengua rama. Contamos nada más con listas de palabras recopiladas por Lehmann y Conzemius publicadas en Alemania a principios de este siglo, y algunos apuntes inéditos recopilados por Loveland y Assadi en los años setenta. Es esta la primera vez que

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La primera fase del estudio de la lengua rama se llevó a cabo con la colaboración de la Cra. Nora Rigby, una hablante del rama de sesenta y dos años. Actualmente vive en Rama Cay, pero ha pasado la mayor parte de su vida entre los ramos del litoral, en Wiring Cay, Monkey Point y Cane Creek. En la isla de Rama Cay la lengua rama ha desaparecido, y la gente allí habla una variante del inglés creole que apenas entienden los creoles de Bluefields.

El texto que sigue fue grabado y transcrito, luego se tradujo. Lo presentamos aquí con una traducción palabra por palabra, e interpretación libre, para que los aficionados del lenguaje puedan penetrar un poco en las maravillas de esta lengua. Los números que aparecen sobre la línea indican las construcciones gramaticales que después trataremos en el esbozo gramatical que sigue al texto.

Este texto, además de darnos una idea sobre la gramática de la lengua rama, nos ofrece claras imágenes de la vida del pueblo rama; en pocas líneas se detallan muchos de los elementos esenciales de la cultura de este pueblo. Allí se encuentra Rama Cay, que ellos denominan sencillamente "la isla"; la laguna que les da sus alimentos básicos; el pipante, imprescindible para este pueblo de mar, lagunas, ríos. También trata de presentar aspectos de la vida de la comunidad; de los hombres que cazan y pescan, y las mujeres que cocinan; de cómo se reparte la comida entre todos; de la alegría que todos sienten. Las últimas palabras nos hablan del contacto de los ramos con el mundo externo, de Bluefields, que ellos llaman "el pueblo", y de sus vínculos comerciales, vendiendo sus productos de caza y pesca y comprando la comida de ciudad para complementar su comida básica.

# Notes on the Rama Language



This work is the first result of a study of the Rama language currently underway under the auspices of CIDCA and the Ministry of Culture.

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To date very little is known of the Rama language, mostly just word lists collected by Lehmann and Conzemius, published in Germany in the first quarter of this century, and unpublished notes gathered by Loveland and Assadi in the 1970s. The text presented below is the first Rama text ever to be published and is meant to offer a sample of the language as it is actually spoken, while also telling of an aspect of the Rama way of life in the words of a native speaker.

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There are few speakers of Rama left in the population of some 800. Of the 23 counted in July 1985, the vast majority live in Cane Creek, a settlement on the coast south of Bluefields Bay. The number of speakers is so small as to create concern that the language is in imminent danger of becoming extinct, although the danger may not be so imminent in that the speakers are distributed across three generations, with the biggest group being the middle generation of people in their forties.

The first phase of the study of Rama was carried out with the cooperation of Miss Nora Rigby, a 62-year-old speaker of Rama

who resides presently in Rama Cay but who has spent most of her life among the Ramas of the mainland, in Wiring Cay, Monkey Point and Cane Creek. On the island of Rama Cay the Rama language has completely given way to a distinctive form of Creole English hardly comprehensible to the Creole speakers of Bluefields.

The following text was originally tape-recorded and later transcribed and translated. It is presented with both a word-by-word translation for the benefit of language lovers eager to penetrate the wonders of the language and with a free translation. The superscript numbers mark the constructions discussed under the same numbers in the grammatical sketch which follows the text.

## Manatee (Sea Cow)

*Ipang ika kiikra paalpa baanalpi traali<sup>1</sup> lakun aik Paalpa ansungka, paalpa ankungi*  
 island of men manatee they-look-for go-out lagoon in manatee they-see-when manatee They-strike  
 Men of Rama Cay go to look for manatee in the lagoon. When they see the manatee they strike it (with a harpoon).

*Paalpa anmalngu.<sup>3</sup> Naing paalpa anmlingka, uut tupanungi. Uut tapanungi nainguku paalpa pshutki*  
 manatee they-kill this manatee they-kill-when dory they-sink dory they-sink the reason manatee inside  
 They kill the manatee. When they kill this manatee, they sink the dory. The reason they sink the dory is to put the

*ankaakama.<sup>8</sup> Namanku uut nainguku anplungkingi. Su anaatsi. Pulkat mahka,<sup>7</sup> anapaiki.<sup>2</sup> Pulkat aakitka, anaakangi.<sup>2</sup>*  
 they-put-inorder to then dory so they-bail in they-get in breeze no-if they-paddle breeze thereis-if they-sail  
 manatee inside. So then they ball out the dory. They get in. If there is no breeze, they paddle. If there is a breeze,

*Ipang su<sup>5</sup> ansiiku.<sup>4</sup> Naing ipang su ansiikka, kaulingdut mliika aakar paalpa anmalngu.*  
 island to they-come this island to they-come-when all-the-people happy are manatee they-kill  
 they sail. They come to the island. When they come to the island, all the people are happy that they killed the

*Mliika anaakar paalpa anakuka. Paalpa suuli taara, nainguku*  
 happy they-are manatee they-hear-when manatee animal big that'swhy  
 manatee. They are happy when they hear about the manatee. The manatee is a big animal, that's why

*mliika sjanakar. Ipang su yuantungutka,<sup>7</sup> uut tapanungi amaing paalpa tabiikama uut ki*  
 happy they-feel island to they-carry-when dory they-sink again manatee take-in-order to dory in  
 they feel happy. When they have carried it to the island, they sink the dory again in order to take the manatee out

*karka<sup>6</sup> Namanku ariira ankuusu,<sup>3</sup> naing paalpa paniis anangaius, nainguku naing anasarku. Ngaling uruku<sup>6</sup>*  
 out then string they-take this manatee flippers they-tie so it they-haul rocks on top of  
 of the dory. Then they take a string and they tie the manatee flipper, so that they can haul it. They haul it up on

*anasarku<sup>4</sup> Kiiknadut aatsi anunglaing siiru v<sup>5</sup> anngatikama. Ipang ipang anartki. Nainguku namangku*  
 they-haul men come they-come down knife with they-cut-inorder to piece piece they-cut so then  
 the rocks. The men come down with a knife in order to cut it. They cut it piece by piece. So then they cut it all up

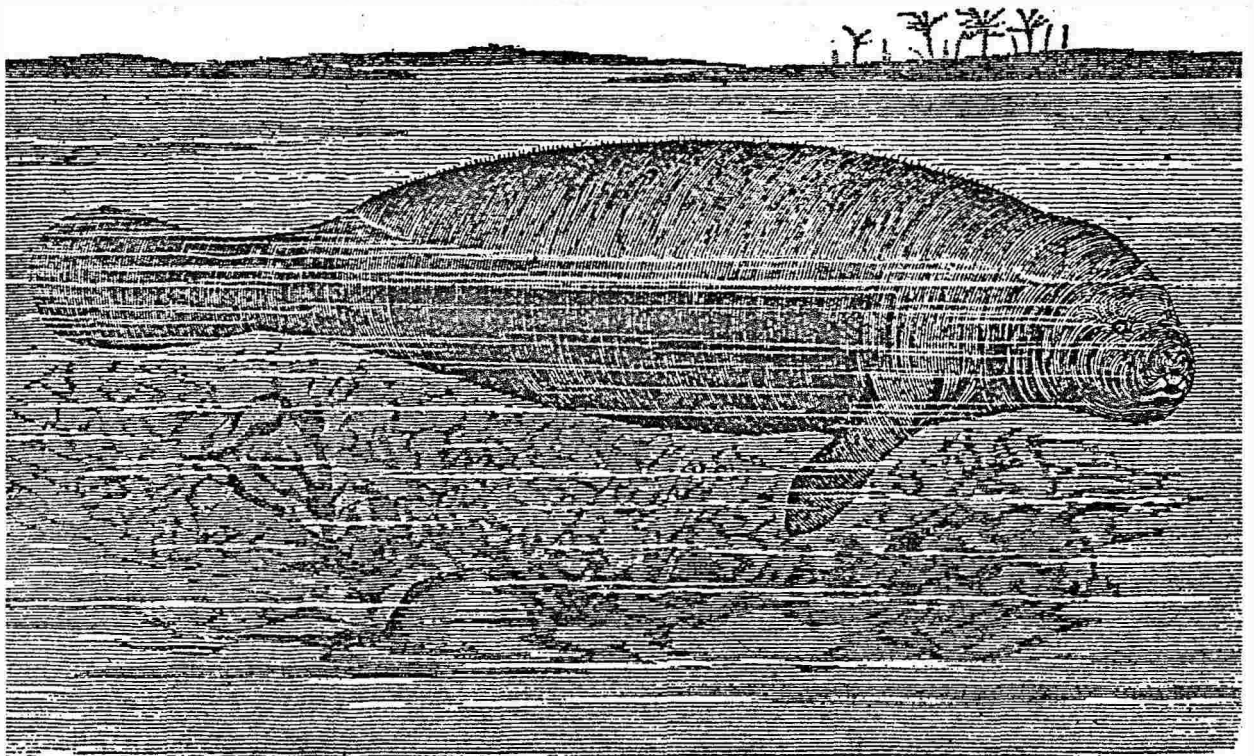
*anngatikakulu alaungkama.<sup>8</sup> Kumaalut bauli kuu.<sup>1</sup> Kaas anskwi,<sup>3</sup> analaungu,<sup>2</sup> Anasiiku.<sup>2</sup> Anasiikka naing*  
 they-cut-all cook-inorder to women bowl take meat they-wash they-cook they-boil they-boil-when this  
 in order to cook it. The women take a bowl. They wash the meat, they cook, it, they boil it. When they boil it,

*yupsi tabii. yupsi tabii ung su karka,<sup>4</sup> ung saina ankwaakar ariisba Ung ariisba yupsi anka.*  
 oil comesout oil comesout in from-when pot another they-get empty pot oil they-put  
 the oil comes out. When the oil comes out of the pot, they get another empty pot. They put the oil in the empty

*Namanku seem wan, naing ankansii. Kaas ankansii ankwiskama. Nainguku kauling mliika yu akar.*  
 then same one this they-fry meat they-fry they-eat-inorder to that'swhy people happy withit are  
 pot. Then that same oil, they fry it. They fry the meat in order to eat it. That's why people are happy with it.

*Yiraa naing nainguku yu ankwiskama. Suuli seem kiikna' naing malngu kaing itriis naing kaas naing*  
 breadkind this so withit they-eat-inorder to animal same men it kill who piece this meat this  
 The boil the breadkind, to eat it with. If any animal meat remains, the same men who killed it take the piece to  
*pairkungka, tawan ki yutaaki. Tawan ki<sup>5</sup> anpayai. Nainguku namangku cabbage anpayai, onion anpayai, macaroni anpayai. Taimka*  
 remain-if town to take town in they-sell so then cabbage they-buy onion they-buy macaroni they-buy time-when  
 Bluefields. In Bluefields they sell it. So then they buy cabbage, they buy onions, they buy macaroni. At that

*uruga anpayai yu ankwiskama.*  
 food they-buy withit they-eat-in order to  
 time they buy food to eat with it.



## Structure and Sound System

Rama has three basic vowels: **i, a, u**. The vowels **e** and **o** occur only in loanwords from other languages. In addition vowels may be short or long. The long vowels are transcribed with double vowels as in:

*kii***kna** man; *kaas* meat; *uut* - dory

The consonants are **b, d, k, l, m, n, ng, p, r, s, sh, t, w, y**. The combination of letters **ng** represents a single sound. It is a nasal sound such as the one found in the final position of the English words *talking*, *song*, (or of the Spanish word *pan*, *también* in certain regional varieties of Central American Spanish). This **ng** sound is more

common in Rama than the **n** or the **m** sounds and appears in all positions in the words:

*ngaling*- rock; *malngu* - kill; *urnga* - food; *alaungu* - cook

The most obvious characteristic of Rama sentence structure is its word order. Unlike European languages such as Spanish or English, which have a subject-verb-object (SVO) word order, Rama exhibits a subject-object-verb (SOV) word order. The SOV word order is much less common than the VSO word order but it is found in a variety of regions of the world. It is the word order of neighboring languages such as Miskito to the north and Bribri of Costa Rica to the south. It is also the word order of Japanese, Tibetan, Turkish, Farsi, (Modern Iranian) and Basque. Clear examples from the text are:

1) *Kii***kna** *paalpa* *baanalpi* *traali*  
man manatee look for go

The men go look for a manatee  
subject-verb- object

*Kumaalut* *bauli* *kuu*  
women bowl take  
subject- object-verb

The women take a bowl  
subject- verb-object

Often the sentence has no independent subject noun and consists minimally of a verb with a subject marker prefixed to it. In the following examples the initial **an-** is the marker for third-person plural subject, in the absence of a full subject noun, as above, or of an emphatic independent pronoun:

2) *an-apaiki* They paddle  
*an-alaungu* They cook it  
*an-akarngi* They sail  
*an-asiiku* They boil it

There exists a different subject marker for each person, so that while *an-malngu* means 'they kill', *na-malngu* means 'I kill'; and *ma-malngu* means 'you kill.'

The three possible third-person constructions would therefore be:

full noun subject:	<i>kiiknadut apaiki</i> The men paddle
subject prefix:	<i>an-apaiki</i> They paddle
independent pronoun:	<i>anaultapaiki</i> The y paddle

Because of the absence of non-emphatic independent personal pronouns it is common to find sentences with an object and no independent subject, as in:

- 3) *paalpa an-malngu*  
manatee they-kill  
object-verb  
-They kill the manatee

*ariira an-kusu*  
string they-take  
verb-object  
-They take a string

*kaas an-skwi*  
meat they-wash  
object-verb  
-They wash the meat

The other complements of the verb may precede or follow the verb:

- 4) *ipang su an-siiku*  
island to they-come  
complement-verb  
-They come to the island

*ngaling uruk-su an-asar.ku*  
rock top-on they-haul  
complement-verb

*yupsi tabii ungsukar.ka*  
oil come out pot in from  
subject-verb complement

-The oil comes out of the pot

Word order has been the subject of much attention in linguistics in recent years. What has come to light in particular is that, in those languages where word order of subject, object, and verb is rigid, the relative word order of the verb and the object (VO/OV) correlates strongly with other word order characteristics. For instance, a typological study of SOV languages shows that they share the characteristic of having postpositions instead of prepositions. Rama, like Miskitu, Japanese or Turkish, among others, has such postpositions:

- 5) *ipang su*  
island on  
on the island

*siiru u*  
knife with  
with a knife

*tawan ki*  
town to  
to town

Besides the simple postpositions of the type illustrated above, Rama has complex ones, much like the combination of simple and complex prepositions in English or Spanish:

- 6) *uut ki karka*  
dory infrom  
from inside the dory

*ngaling uruk-su*  
rock top-on  
on top of the rock

Just as postpositions follow the nouns, conjunctions of subordination follow the embedded verb in Rama. The text has multiple examples of the two most common, *-ka* 'if/when' and *-kama* 'in order to-', as in:

- 7) *pulka mah-ka*  
breeze no-if/when  
when/if there is no breeze

*ipang su yu-an-tungut-ka*  
island on -they-get-when  
When they get on the island

- 8) *uut tup-an-uungi-ka*  
dory -they-sink

*pshutki an-kaa-kama paalpa*  
inside they-put-in order to manatee  
they sink the dory in order to put the manatee inside

*an-ngatik-attulur alaugn-kama*  
they-cut-up cook-in order to  
they cut it in order to cook it

This characteristic final position of the conjunctions in Rama in also found in Miskitu and other SOV languages.

This cursory overview of some interesting features of Rama grammar as they appear in this text leaves much to be said about other aspects of the grammar, such as its rich system of tense and aspect markings and its varied a system of negations.

Besides offering insights on the workings of Rama grammar, the text provides clear images of the life of the Rama people: in a few lines many of the essential elements of the Rama culture are gathered. There is Rama Cay, which they simply call "the island"; the lagoon, which provides basic sustenance; the dory, without which there would be no life for these people of lagoons, rivers and ocean. The text also talks of community life: of men as hunters and fishermen and women as cooks, of the sharing of food, and the feeling of shared happiness. The final words tell us of the contact the Ramas have with the outside world, of going to Bluefields, which they call "the town", and entering a cash economy by selling the product of their hunt and buying creole foods to complement their diet.