

Globalization and Oral traditions: Some Remarks on Indigenous Orality in the Amazon

Globalización y tradiciones orales: algunos apuntes sobre la oralidad indígena de la Amazonía

Globalização e tradições orais: algumas observações sobre a oralidade indígena na Amazônia

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ARTÍCULO



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RECEIVED: January 13, 2020 / ACCEPTED: January 20, 2020

Abstract

Indigenous orality represents an important part in the everyday life of the Ameriandian communities from the Ecuadorian Amazon region. It is important to see a symptom of serious threats in this phenomenon that can lead to the extinction of these indigenous languages. According to recent research, several languages spoken in the communities of Ecuador are considered to be in danger of extinction. Effective prevention can be promoted by academic projects focused on encouraging indigenous speakers of all generations to use the language regularly in ordinary situations. In this way, indigenous languages can become the lan-

guage of instruction used in official educational institutions.

KEYWORDS

Indigenous orality, Oral traditions, Intangible cultural heritage, Indigenous communities, Amazon region.

Resumen

La oralidad indígena representa una parte importante en la vida cotidiana de las comunidades ameriandinas en la región amazónica ecuatoriana. Es importante ver en este fenómeno un síntoma de amenazas graves, que pueden conducir a la extinción de esas lenguas

indígenas. Según investigaciones recientes, se considera que varios idiomas que se hablan en las comunidades de Ecuador están en peligro de extinción. La prevención efectiva puede ser promovida por proyectos académicos enfocados en alentar a los hablantes indígenas de todas las generaciones a usar el idioma regularmente en situaciones ordinarias y los idiomas indígenas pueden convertirse en el idioma de instrucción utilizado en las instituciones educativas oficiales.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Oralidad indígena, Tradiciones orales, Patrimonio cultural inmaterial, Comunidades indígenas, Región amazónica.

Resumo

A oralidade indígena representa uma parte importante na vida cotidiana das comunidades ameríndias na região da Amazônia equatorial.

na. É importante ver neste fenômeno um sintoma de sérias ameaças, que podem levar à extinção dessas línguas indígenas. Segundo pesquisas recentes, várias línguas faladas em comunidades no Equador são consideradas em risco de extinção. A prevenção efetiva pode ser promovida por projetos acadêmicos focados em incentivar falantes nativos de todas as gerações a usar o idioma regularmente em situações comuns e os idiomas indígenas podem se tornar o idioma de instrução usado nas instituições educacionais oficiais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

Oralidade indígena, Tradições orais, Patrimônio cultural imaterial, Comunidades indígenas, Região amazônica.

1. GLOBALIZATION AND ORAL TRADITIONS: SOME REMARKS ON INDIGENOUS ORALITY IN THE AMAZON

Among the native ethnic groups that live in the Ecuadorian Amazon regions, orality keeps representing an important element that plays an irreplaceable role in the daily life of their members.

Thanks to the efforts of researchers, anthropologists, ethnographers and linguists who publish their works that comprise all genres of authentic indigenous oral traditions, there is a guaranteed and a reliable access to a wide range of plausible examples of living oral expressions and traditions that document the immense cultural diversity in the Amazon. This effort is not only important because of the results motivated by proper research objectives, but

it is also very valuable seen from other, more general, perspectives related to the current situations in indigenous communities from the Amazonian regions.

As numerous recent surveys and researches show, there is a great number of indigenous languages that are in danger of extinction (Stewart, 2019), it is symptomatic that many of them are from Latin America. The alarming situation is quite obvious if we consult the Atlas of Endangered languages (UNESCO, 2017). Languages that are spoken in different parts of the world and find themselves in danger of extinction, are traced on interactive maps with all sort of relevant data. The explicatory notes include a division of those languages into six fundamental categories. The first one is defined as a safe status, while the last one is the category reserved for extinct languages. This division characterizes the safety of a language

based on particular criteria: those languages that are considered endangered are divided according to the extent of the danger, which corresponds to a five-degree scale. Each degree is differentiated with one symbolic color. The first degree of danger is related to a white color and it comprises the category denominated Vulnerable. It is followed by the category of Definitely endangered languages, which is represented by a yellow color. The next degree is called Severely endangered and its color is orange. The following degree includes Critically endangered languages and is marked in red, as can be expected. The last category lists extinct languages, and that is why its color is black (ibid).

While looking at the map that documents the situation in Ecuador, we can assume that the current state is quite worrying. The registered results speak for themselves. One language is categorized as vulnerable. It is the case of Wao-tededo, whose speakers live in the heart of the Amazonian region. There are two cases of critically endangered languages. The first of them is Zaparo and is spoken by communities in the North of the country. The second is Sia Pedee, whose speakers live in the areas located deep in the West of the Ecuadorian Amazon region, close to the Peruvian border.

Five languages are recorded as critically endangered. Some of them are linked to communities that live in the Amazon region, as is the case of Awapit, Siona/Secoya or Shiwiar. These can serve as examples to illustrate the alarming situation related to critically endangered indigenous languages spoken on the territory of the above mentioned South American country (UNESCO, 2017). The majority of languages presented in the map are considered to be severely endangered. To be more specific, there are nine of such cases. As typical examples can be mentio-

ned three of those languages: A'ingae/Cofan, Achuar and Shuar chicham (ibid).

In this context, it is crucial to point out the important role of Universities that try by all means to prevent the extinction of endangered languages. University academics and researchers, mainly from the Humanities fields, often combine specific research goals of projects with the struggle for conservation and preservation of indigenous languages. It is common that a language can be registered in the category with a safe status only if it is spoken by all members in the community which it is linked to, and by the youngest generations. It is not a coincidence that the criteria for considering a language as critically endangered are based on the fact that: "the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently." (UNESCO ATLAS, 2017). As Victoria Tauli-Corpus points out "Safeguarding living heritage is very crucial for indigenous peoples because their heritage is the basis of their identity, the basis of their cultures and, of course, it is the continuous transmission of this heritage that is going to strengthen indigenous peoples' identities and cultures" (UNESCO, ICH, 2019, p. 2).

An inherent part of the indigenous cultural heritage is represented by the diverse oral traditions that constitute one of the basic pillars of the social life in many Amerindian communities in Ecuador. The academia is aware of the dangers that jeopardize the future of the vulnerable indigenous languages, that is why there is an increasing number of projects that aim to prevent the extinction of endangered languages. The University of Azuay can be mentioned as an example worthy of imitation. From among all the university projects related to the indigenous culture, there are some focused precisely on indigenous oral expressions and traditions, where UDA professors and their

students have collected examples of living oral tradition. One of such projects worth mentioning has been carried out under the supervision of Narcisa Ullauri (Torres Jara, G., Ullauri, N., and Llangui, J, 2018), senior professor who is engaged in the issues of indigenous cultural heritage. Among the outputs of this project, we can find collections of Shuar oral tradition that inspire students to pay attention to the Shuar community when preparing their thesis or academic projects.

There is another important fact that needs to be pointed out. If such collections are published, they constitute an important source of authentic material that can be studied from different perspectives and diverse disciplines. Moreover, if they are available in Spanish or English translations, the circle of potential researchers or just readers can grow. Thanks to the meticulous effort of those who take an active part in such projects, there is a plausible source with authentic study material for all those who wish to get familiarized with the particular samples of the cultural legacy of the Amerindian peoples from the Ecuadorian Amazon.

According to Carneiro da Cunha:

There is always a double dimension in culture. One is what could be termed an internal dimension, that is its living practice, the practice of its producers and is related to its creativity. Then there is something like an external but equally fundamental dimension, which has to do with the assertion of identity of a group vis à vis other groups. (2001)

The indigenous oral traditions are important in the life of Amerindian communities not only because of its cultural dimension and identity significance, but also due to its agglutinating role in the life of the community. In this connection it should not be forgotten that the great varie-

ty of particular manifestations of indigenous orality represent an element that plays an important role in the life of the community, since the oral expressions are performed mostly as collective acts. This fact is crucial because the public performance contributes to underlining the important identity components of the community. Moreover, it is frequently repeated in order to strengthen the ties among its members. In this sense, the oral tradition not only represents the core of the indigenous culture, but a key factor with relevant social importance.

The importance attributed to the identity as one of the crucial elements in indigenous communities is also underlined in the definition of the concept of the intangible cultural heritage provided by UNESCO, where it is presented as a kind of 'living heritage' and as such it is considered "important because it offers communities and individuals a sense of identity and continuity. It can promote social cohesion, respect for cultural diversity and human creativity, as well as help communities and individuals to connect with each other." (UNESCO, ICH, 2019).

Amerindian communities from the Amazon keep their ancestral cultural heritage alive by passing it conscientiously from one generation to another. For long centuries, they have tried to conserve their knowledge in oral traditions and performances that, along with their ceremonies, rites and rituals, constitute the base of their intangible cultural heritage.

Thanks to various external factors over the past two decades, awareness and recognition of indigenous cultures in Latin America has grown slightly. This fact has contributed to an increasing appreciation of indigenous languages. Their presence at a national level is being more visible in comparison with the situation 30 years ago, due to their changing role in the society. Though the situation is far from being

ideal, nowadays at schools and colleges of all education levels, from elementary schools to universities, students can get in touch with indigenous languages more frequently. It is due to the fact that in many Latin American countries there is a progressive tendency to enhance the integration processes concerning the use of indigenous languages. Therefore, they cease to be only objects of study and become representations of instructional languages. As Fajardo Salinas (2011) presents it, the notion of interculturality emerges in this context thanks to changes in the way of understanding the cultural diversity. This includes situations when indigenous languages pass from being considered a problem to being looked upon as a resource, which is complemented by the bilingualism of maintenance and development, with the proposal of a dialogic relationship between the two languages and two cultures they represent.

There is one more important aspect that should be mentioned when speaking about the possible concepts of the orality. Some scholars define orality as a pattern that:

describes cultures or populations whose worldviews, rhetorical principles, and mental constructs develop in the absence of widespread, systematic, and habitual literacy and also refers to the coexistent or residual presence of orality in habitually literate cultures. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish between primary orality and secondary orality. Primary orality (and thus primary oral cultures) describes cultures that privilege the spoken word as the only means of social and interpersonal communication, often lacking even a basic orthography. Secondary orality describes the presence of oral and/or pseudo-oral elements in habitually literate cultures. (Jacobsen, 2007)

In relation to the distinction of primary and secondary orality defined by Walter Ong (1996), Daniel Murillo observes an essential paradox which is related to the primary orality. On one hand, it allows memory to be activated and permits consultation of what he calls corpuses; i.e. the set of knowledge, habits, traditions, representations, symbolisms, meanings and language in a given social group (Murillo, 1999). As the author points out, it makes possible the query to an unwritten, but permanent file. On the other hand, once the words leave the mouth and are said, they also cease to exist in their acoustic form as sounds, even if the range of possibilities towards the meaning is opened. Orality is, according to Murillo, transience and permanence (ibid). It is the conjunction between the immediate and the mediate, between ancestral memory and non-memory. This double phenomenon has allowed orality to debate between the world of written culture and transform. Oral cultures exist because they have a common history, common values, a corpus and a culture; but the so-called written cultures would seem to suffer from it. It is believed that by being in books, traditions are not lost, memory is not fleeting and the corpus can be fed in different ways (Murillo, 1999).

As Juan Goytisolo (2001) states, when speaking about the antiquity of the oral heritage of Humankind, it is equally significant to pay attention to several factors that help us understand the interaction between oral traditions, written expressions and the growing imbalance that characterizes it. According to the Spanish author, only seventy-eight languages out of the three thousand languages spoken today in the world, have a living literature founded on one of the one hundred and six alphabets created throughout history. In other words, Goytisolo (2001) points out the fact that there are hundreds of languages currently used on our planet which

lack writing. Consequently, the communication of their speakers is exclusively oral (Goytisolo, 2001).

Due to the impact of different factors in the contemporary globalized world, the indigenous orality is subject to permanent changes that leave a considerable mark. As a consequence, the traditional ways of oral expression pass through a process of smaller or bigger changes. Margarita Zires refers to the observations of Paul Zumthor (1987) about the tradition that is understood as an open series, indefinitely extensive in space and time, of the variable manifestations of a particular archetype. But this archetype is not conceived as a static model, since it designates a set of pre-existing virtualities that precede all textual production (cfr. Zumthor in Zires, 1999).

In this context, Gabriel Poratti (2010, pp. 99-100) points out to another effect of globalization that is reflected in the fluid cultural exchange. This process is greatly enhanced by the advent of new communication technologies, such as telephone, TV or Internet. As Poratti perceives it, the main contributions of the Internet are represented by the facts that different forms of communication have accelerated. One of the most significant consequences of such speed has been reflected in the feeling that the world has become smaller and we have reached the point where information or people are found at a simple "click" away. (Poratti, 2010, p.100)

In the long history of the humankind, there were many historical eras when the society was exposed to various radical changes. Nevertheless, none can be compared with this period in which we live with regard to the extent, depth and impacts of such changes.

"Like other forms of intangible cultural heritage, oral traditions are threatened by rapid urbanization, large-scale migration, industrialization

and environmental change. Books, newspapers, magazines, radio, television and the Internet can have an especially damaging effect on oral traditions and expressions. Modern mass media may significantly alter or replace traditional forms of oral expression." (UCH, 2006)

In relation with various impacts on the oral traditions, there is another aspect worth mentioning. As Juan Goytisolo (2001) states, all cultures are based on the language, that is, on a set of spoken and heard sounds. This oral communication, which also includes numerous kinesthetic or physical elements, has experienced a series of changes over the centuries. These modifications depend on the extent of contacts with other forms of communication, transmitted at the beginning due to the existence of the writing. Knowledge of writing has gradually influenced the mentality of the rhapsody or the narrator. According to the Spanish writer, it is difficult to find depositories of an oral tradition absolutely "uncontaminated" by writing and its technological and visual support in today's world of mass media. (Goytisolo, 2001)

In the struggle for the conservation of indigenous orality as an inherent part of the intangible cultural heritage of the Amerindian people, it is vital to promote indigenous culture and encourage native speakers to use their languages actively in everyday situations. The natural and frequent use of vulnerable indigenous languages spoken by all generations in a particular community is the only effective prevention of the danger of their extinction. In this uneasy process, the academia can contribute with its own means. On one hand by encouraging the native speakers to use their language and on the other hand by making the indigenous cultural heritage accessible to the majority of society. This is the first step that can help to increase the respect and appreciation for indigenous languages and cultures.

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