Documenting the Naso’s Endangered Language and Knowledge in Panamá

Natalia Bermúdez and the Endangered Language Alliance (NYC), 2011
Naso (or Teribe, the name known to outsiders) is a Chibchan language in Panamá with about 500 speakers out of 3,500 ethnic Nasos.
PART I: Troubles of the Naso

1. Their land, unrecognized
2. Their autonomy, threatened
3. Their traditions, diminished
4. Their language, endangered
1. Their land, unrecognized

Bor klung e za e
1PL.OBL land DEM cut DEM

‘my territory, region, limits’
Of the seven indigenous groups in Panamá, the Naso stand alone without political independence of their land. Their homeland is surrounded by other indigenous populations, infringed by government-owned national parks, and since 2004, invaded by an international hydroelectric energy plant.
Naso activists demanding control over their land after government attack on a Naso community house (top) and after years of an unwanted hydroelectric project (bottom).
2. Their autonomy, threatened

‘our royal advisors’
A monarchy (the king and council) traditionally governs the Naso. In 1998, the Panamanian government created a *corregimiento* (precint) of the Naso area, implementing Latino political structures and affecting the local balance of power and money.

*Election Day for the new king, August 2011:* The Panamanian government mediates voting in the Latino building (right) while the traditional communal center (left) is used for resting.
Their traditions, diminished
After the first contact with colonists and missionaries, Naso traditions have been disappearing. Their rich botanical, artistic, mythological, historical and survival knowledge have been greatly reduced ever since.

Today, the Naso perform dances for tourists but rarely for themselves.
10 JULY 2011. Nasos dance in jubilation after securing an election date for a new king. The former king was in solidarity with the Panamanian government’s interests.
4. Their language, endangered

Uushi

Uushi, dënâshkoga tjawa łon shörbâre kjonë, eshko uushi ara, kjok pjaŋ żöm dług eshko łök bâle kjonë, uushishko le tjâbgagarë.

Kjok sëŋa kuyga uuj jułe ter, eenidoga eeraga ìge, pjlaraga tjâbga tjîega uushi ìge tet shâŋ eshkoga shi to kłun kê lea, kłunyo këy joŋ ee jûnî, uushi łon shâŋ ìywlo lea êŋkoŋ, kjargalôn ba, ke kjër pjîępgowo karajon ėej kësbaŋ ee, uushi shaklo, kjîŋgara tuk beroŋ ba shtoshko, kjok sëŋa kuyaga uuj ju lea tet shâŋ jîoe, jîoe lea koshe teroŋ kłun tjwe shâŋ ìge ba pjîęjon lîshkoga kjîntîŋ erâ, kjîntîŋ, shkë kjok shrönga kłun amë
Of the 12 Naso communities, only the furthest one upriver, Sieykjing, has maintained healthy use of the language due to relative isolation.

Since the 1970s, the Panamanian government implemented primary schools into each community with mandatory education in Spanish. Although the government has promised to enforce a Bilingual Education Program, it will take between 10-15 years for Nasos to become institutionally trained as educators of the language.
PART II: Efforts of the GBS- Sponsored Project

1. Documenting Naso through audiovisual recordings of cultural knowledge
2. Training of youth in technical skills for self-documentation
3. Revitalization of traditions through a *Naso Culture Class* in the school
4. Sub-documentation projects initiated by the Nasos’ interests
1. Documenting Naso through audiovisual recordings of cultural knowledge

The wisdom of 13 elders from different families were recorded.
A storyteller shares how an ancestor survived a tiger’s attack.
A woodworker master teaches how to craft arrows and spears.
A mother of many details where her ancestors came from.
2. Training of youth in technical skills

Young relatives of each recorded elder had the opportunity to learn new technology.
Students practiced language documentation with new equipment:

And three main computer programs:
It was dragging him and suddenly turned him over.
A volunteer teaches students how to build a canoe the way their ancestors did.
Students hear the stories recorded of their great-grandparents and answer questions about what they have learned.
4. Sub-documentation projects initiated by the Nasos’ interests

Each Naso family claims distinct dialect variants and has strong feelings about differences that mark them from other clans.
With the medicine man,

collecting significant species of native plants and animals and
documenting traditional ethnobotany and folklore, in Naso.
With land rights activists:
Elaborating a map of the Naso territory. Marking historical sites, area names, and over 200 tributaries of the Teribe River, in Naso.
Other projects brewing:
- Music CD of Naso folktales accompanied by two brothers on guitar
- Botanical booklet containing medicinal recipes with over 2,000 species
- Alphabet Literacy Seminar co-hosted with J. Quesada (Chibchan linguist)
- *Naso Culture Book* of history, traditions, myths, botany, and poetic language
...And much more to continue!

Many thanks to the GBS for supporting the Naso.