

# Professor's work in the Peruvian Amazon to document Iskonawa, now spoken by only 14 people

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Doña Nelita Campos Rodríguez—in Iskonawa is her name is Nawa Nika—with her son Elías Rodríguez Campos in Yarinacocha, near the city of Pucallpa, Peru. Credit: Jose Antonio Mazzotti

When a colleague's tip led José Antonio Mazzotti, the King Felipe VI of Spain Professor of Spanish Culture and Civilization at Tufts, to a remote village in central Peru, most scholars believed that the ancient, undocumented language known as Iskonawa was nearly extinct, spoken only by a handful of people living in voluntary isolation on that country's border with Brazil. Then Mazzotti met a village elder named Doña Nelita and heard her story.

Now well over age 70, Nelita grew up in the Amazon, in the Iskonawa community. In 1959, when she was a teenager, missionaries arrived and offered what seemed a better life. She was among a small group of Iskonawa who joined them, learning to speak Spanish. But after two years, the missionaries left, and the Iskonawa were absorbed by another indigenous community, the Shipibo.

Mazzotti asked Nelita in Spanish, "Are you Iskonawa?" She replied forcibly, jabbing at her chest: "I am Iskonawa!"

Mazzotti turned to his guide, who said he did not understand the language Nelita spoke. "So that made me think, okay, we may have something here. I made some recordings." Mazzotti's colleagues later agreed that he had found a new reservoir of the all-but-lost language. Today, just 14 people speak Iskonawa.

Mazzotti recently completed a three-year project to document and revitalize Iskonawa in Peru, working with Tufts undergraduates and colleagues at the Pontifical Catholic University of Lima. Funded by the National Science Foundation's Documenting Endangered Languages Program, the research produced a database on the linguistic and cultural diversity of the Peruvian people; a description of Iskonawa grammar; an Iskonawa vocabulary of about 2,000 words; and a wealth of Iskonawa songs, rituals, hunting prayers, dances and oral narratives. It also provided resources to educate anthropology and linguistic students at

Tufts and Pontifical Catholic University about techniques they might use to document some of the roughly 3,000 other languages that are rapidly disappearing from the face of the earth, out of a total of 6,000. Much of the Iskonawa research material is available to the public here.

## Into the Jungle



Sunset on Lake Yarinacocha, near Pucallpa, where some of the fieldwork for the Iskonawa project took place. Credit: Jose Antonia Mazzotti

Fieldwork for the project took place in a village in the Ucayali region of Peru called Chachi Bai, reached after an eight-hour boat trip from the eastern city of Pucallpa. Conditions in the tiny settlement, comprising

mainly huts and orchards, were humble—no running water, no electricity, no toilets (until the villagers built an outhouse for their visitors).

People in this region survive by living simply, in accordance with nature. Their diet is mostly yucca, sweet potato, pineapple, said Mazzotti. "They fish once in a while, but when they want more protein, they hunt," he said. "There is a hunting ritual that involves singing a poem that is a song and a prayer, which basically asks for forgiveness for killing the animal and expresses gratitude for providing food for the hunter and the community."

Mazzotti welcomed the rigors of the research. He was an impressionable 5-year-old when he accompanied his father, an astronomer, on a trip to map the Amazon forest by reading the stars. One night at their campsite, he recalled, he was horrified—and fascinated—when a tarantula crawled over his bare foot. That visit to the jungle, he said, "was one of the happiest times of my life."



Don Pablo Rodríguez Sangana—in Iskonawa, Wini Kora—husband of Doña Nelita, surrounded by his sons Elías and Germán Campos Rodríguez and his grandson Lleverson Silvano Campos in Chachi Bai in Peru. Credit: Jose Antonio Mazzotti

The young adventurer grew up to pursue the life of the mind. After graduating from Pontifical Catholic University, he earned his master's and Ph.D. from Princeton. He worked in colonial Latin American studies, Latin American poetry and Andean studies. An award-winning poet, he also became editor-in-chief and director of *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana*, a journal published through the Department of Romance Languages at Tufts that focuses on understanding Latin American literature and culture, and the president of the International

Association of Peruvianists. The National Science Foundation's Documenting Endangered Languages Program offered him the opportunity to return to the Amazon, and this time use the skills he had acquired to help preserve its culture.

Mazzotti believes that revitalizing Iskonawa, which is spoken fluently by a few elders like Nelita and somewhat by some of their children and grandchildren, will help preserve the Iskonawa people's sense of identity. That, he said, could "empower them to stand up to the pressures that threaten their land and heritage," among them deforestation, crime, drug trafficking and environmental contamination. Those same forces, he noted, are endangering indigenous societies throughout Latin America, including an estimated 14 other tribes in Peru.

Protecting [indigenous societies](#) and their languages is important for the world community, he said. "Indigenous communities take care of 80 percent of the environment that hasn't been taken over by the West, so it's very important that these people continue their way of life."

Like all languages, Iskonawa embodies "a whole bank of knowledge, of culture, of world views, even scientific information," Mazzotti said. The bank of material collected about Iskonawa "speaks volumes about the possibility of coexistence among humans and between humans and nature." If we lose Iskonawa, he said, "we lose our own human heritage. The consequences will be tragic."

Provided by Tufts University

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