

# Creating a Language Center in the Upper Rio Negro (Amazon): Considerations for Ongoing Collaborations

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes the process involved in establishing a center dedicated to the investigation, documentation and conservation of indigenous languages and cultures in the town of São Gabriel da Cachoeira in the north-west Brazilian Amazon. Our analysis will focus on how the sociolinguistic situation in the area of São Gabriel da Cachoeira, the complexity of local demands from community members and indigenous organizations, and the institutional context in the region are related to the center's strategic plan and initial activities. The goals of this paper are to identify and discuss potential directions for this pioneering initiative in Brazil, and to call attention to the complex practical and theoretical questions that it raises about collaboration, institutional and community involvement, and academic and traditional knowledge. We will contextualize our discussion of the center within the field of Language Documentation and Conservation (LD&C) and suggest practical directions for its future activities. Ultimately, this paper is intended to go beyond the analysis of a case study and function as a lens for current issues in LD&C theory, such as community involvement, collaboration, and empowerment.

## Résumé

Cet article examine le processus suivi dans l'établissement d'un centre pour l'investigation, la documentation et la conservation des langues et des cultures autochtones dans la ville de São Gabriel da Cachoeira, située dans le nord-ouest de l'Amazonie brésilienne. Notre analyse se concentrera sur la question de comment la situation sociolinguistique dans la région de São Gabriel da Cachoeira, la complexité des demandes locales de la part des membres de la communauté et des organismes autochtones, et le contexte institutionnel dans la région sont liés au plan stratégique du centre et à ses activités initiales. Les objectifs de ce papier sont d'identifier et de discuter des directions potentielles pour cette initiative pionnière au Brésil, et d'attirer l'attention sur les questions complexes, théoriques ainsi que pratiques, qui sont soulevées par rapport à la collaboration, l'implication institutionnelle et communautaire, et le savoir académique et traditionnel. Nous contextualiserons notre discussion du centre dans le domaine de la documentation et la conservation de langues (LD&C) et suggérerons des directions pratiques pour ses activités futures. En fin de compte, ce papier est conçu pour aller plus loin que l'analyse d'une étude des cas, et de fonctionner comme une lentille pour considérer les enjeux actuels dans la théorie de LD&C tels que l'implication communautaire, la collaboration et l'autonomisation.

## Introduction

This paper analyzes the process involved in implementing a center dedicated to the investigation, documentation and conservation of indigenous languages and cultures in the town of São Gabriel da Cachoeira, in the Northwest Brazilian Amazon. The center is called *Nuglan* (from the Portuguese acronym *Núcleo Gestor de Estudos Linguísticos e Antropológicos*, which means *Managing Center for Linguistic and Anthropological Studies*); it was launched in September 2012 and is hosted at the *Instituto Federal do Amazonas* (IFAM), a federally funded school that offers both high school and college-level programs to local residents.

The authors of this paper have been directly and indirectly involved in the creation of the center. Thiago Chacon and Carol Genetti, from the University of California, Santa Barbara, have been engaged in

reviewing the experience of language centers around the world. Their research has motivated much of the discussion behind the creation of *Nuglan*, as Chacon – a linguist with more than 8 years of experience with languages in the Upper Rio Negro (Amazon) – was a member in the commission that created the center. Sarah Shulist, a linguistic anthropologist, has been involved in developing and supporting language revitalization projects in São Gabriel that specifically address the differing needs and sociolinguistic situation facing the urban population.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Although only Chacon, Shulist and Genetti can be held responsible for the content of this paper, it is important to acknowledge the support of our colleagues that worked with Chacon in the elaboration of *Nuglan*'s strategic plan and today occupy leadership position in the center's activities. These include, but are not limited to, Elias Brasilino, Roberta Enir,

Our analysis of Nuglan will focus on how the sociolinguistic situation in the area of São Gabriel da Cachoeira, the complexity of local demands from community members and indigenous organizations, and the institutional context in the region are related to the center's strategic plan and initial activities. The goals of this paper are to identify and discuss potential directions for this pioneering initiative in Brazil, and to call attention to the complex practical and theoretical questions that it raises about collaboration, institutional and community involvement, and academic and traditional knowledge.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 provides general background about the social and cultural setting in the town of São Gabriel da Cachoeira, including both its indigenous and non-indigenous inhabitants, as well as about the role that IFAM plays in this community. Section 3 discusses how language centers around the world and collaborative models of community-based research are serving as methodological and conceptual frameworks for Nuglan. Section 4 presents key points in the strategic plan of the center and analyzes the current initiatives and prospects for the center. Section 5 critically assesses what has been discussed in sections 2, 3 and 4, and gives some concluding remarks.

### **Sociolinguistic and Institutional Context**

São Gabriel is located on the Upper Rio Negro, in the far north-west corner of the Brazilian state of Amazonas. The municipality includes a very large geographic area (approx. 109,000 km<sup>2</sup>) that extends to the borders of both Colombia and Venezuela. It is sparsely populated, with approximately 40,000 people in the municipality as a whole. 13,000 of these live in the urban area of São Gabriel itself. The vast majority of this population (95% in the municipality as a whole, 85% in the city) consists of indigenous peoples from several ethnolinguistic groups. The introduction of governmental institutions, developmentalist projects, and a heavy military infrastructure during the 1970s has led to a massive increase in the number of both non-indigenous and indigenous residents in the town. This migration has only increased during the last decade following the introduction of federal policies that give a small monthly stipend for low-income families. This policy context, along with increasing environmental and economic pressures in the rural territories, has ultimately led to an increase in migration to the urban area, where large numbers of migrant indigenous residents face a daunting situation. Indigenous political concerns play a major role in the social life in this region, and a grassroots indigenous movement advocating for territorial protection, improved access to health care, and high-quality culturally appropriate educational opportunities has been very active since the 1980s. The most important organization emerging from

this movement is a local NGO called the Federação das Organizações Indígenas do Rio Negro (the Federation of Indigenous Organizations of the Rio Negro, or FOIRN), which acts as an umbrella for several dozen smaller organizations representing the interests of the peoples of the region. Since its founding in 1987, FOIRN has gained a powerful presence and voice within municipal politics, and has served as one of the major organizations calling for increased government accountability to the indigenous population, including through the recognition of cultural rights and the importance of language preservation.

The degree of linguistic diversity among this small population—in addition to Spanish and Portuguese, twenty-one indigenous languages from five different families are spoken in the region—has helped to make language preservation a central focal point in discussions about indigenous peoples' cultural rights and political goals. One of the results of this focus on language was the establishment of a municipal-level language policy in 2001 that declared three of the most widely-spoken indigenous languages of the region – Nheengatú (Tupi-Guarani), Tukano (Eastern Tukanoan), and Baniwa (Arawakan) to be “co-official” alongside Portuguese. In addition, linguists and anthropologists have been actively involved in the creation of a system of “differentiated indigenous education” focused primarily on setting up schools in the small rural communities in which students can be educated using the local indigenous language and based in indigenous beliefs and cultural practices. Despite these actions, language shift, especially in the urban area, has been continuing at an extremely rapid rate, and scholars and indigenous advocates are discussing new strategies to address this; Nuglan represents a significant effort in this direction.

The São Gabriel campus of IFAM was originally established as the Agrotechnical Institute as a result of pressure from local indigenous political leaders who saw a need for improved technical education (primarily directed at finding strategies for improving the sustainability of traditional horticultural practices and protecting the environments in the homelands of the peoples of the Upper Rio Negro region), and later reconstituted as a federal educational center. IFAM offers both a standard secondary school education and college-level technical training courses (for example, in educational administration or public service), which usually run in the evenings. Most of the students are indigenous individuals, including some who live with their families in the urban area as well as some who live in residences that support rural students with no family in São Gabriel. Unlike most of the other schools in São Gabriel, however, almost all of the teachers and administrators are non-indigenous. The social dynamics of the campus are fraught; there are many problems in the daily interactions of indigenous and non-indigenous students and teachers. This remains a significant challenge for Nuglan, given its situation the campus.

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Joscival Vasconcelos Reis, Francileudo Gabriel, Leonam Matos, Leticia Alves, Vinicius Retamoso Mayer, and Cleoni Virgilio, among others.

Another fundamental problem faced by IFAM is how to effectively reinforce its educational role in the region. The curricular model for federal schools, such as IFAM, focuses on technological and professional skills aimed at supporting local socio-economic development. However, the economic context of São Gabriel, with its large indigenous population and incipient development (currently, the economy is based mainly on traditional farming, public sector service positions, and a small amount of local commerce), means that most graduates are unable to find appropriate professional positions. Throughout its history, IFAM, along with other organizations in São Gabriel, has tried to improve the local, indigenous-based economy by proposing the use of different techniques and new technologies in the production of farming and fishing. Despite the fact that the indigenous population generally welcomes projects designed to improve their income and the sustainability of their food sources, these attempts have not succeeded beyond the pilot stages, mainly as a result of clashes between indigenous and non-indigenous worldviews and practices.

These experiences have made it clear to everyone involved that there is a strong need for improved institutional understanding of the local socio-cultural situation. The current board of directors at IFAM is thus strongly motivated to increase its collaboration with indigenous peoples and to develop curricula, research, and pedagogical approaches that are more appropriate for the regional context. The board of directors sees Nuglan as an ideal place for bridging this cultural gap. Ideally it will be a place for culture and language advocacy within the IFAM campus, offering information and guidance for non-indigenous personnel, while simultaneously acting as a gathering and supporting place for indigenous students.

In São Gabriel there is currently no locally established organization tasked with safeguarding the vast linguistic and cultural indigenous heritage of the region. The local government incorporates indigenous cultural practices and languages into formal education and public events at a very minimal level, and in ways that have been seen as primarily ‘folklorized’ and performative (Fleming, 2010; Shulist, 2013a). FOIRN has supported researchers and initiatives for linguistic and cultural conservation; due to its lack of consistent funding, however, it tends to prioritize advocating for the political, educational and economic demands of the population, rather than supporting language and culture more directly. There are a few other NGOs in the area, most notably the *Instituto Socioambiental* (Socio-environmental Institute, ISA), which has taken a leading role for more than 20 years in promoting indigenous concerns, including territorial protection, education, and sustainable development. ISA’s headquarters, however, are in São Paulo, far from São Gabriel, and as with many other NGOs, it faces a lack of consistent funding that has often limited the continuity of its projects.

Nuglan therefore aims to fill a gap in the institutional needs of the region. Several factors support its aims,

notably: (i) being a locally established institution; (ii) having secure federal funding; and (iii) focusing its core activities specifically on the research and promotion of indigenous languages and cultures.

### **Drawing on the Experiences of Others**

As a pioneering enterprise, Nuglan faces great challenges and dilemmas, which, while requiring unique responses, can be dealt with in the light of other experiences and models that have been successful in other parts of the world. Specifically, the experiences of *Language and Cultural Centers* and the *collaborative* and/or the *empowerment* model of community-based research (cf. Cameron et. al., 1992; Dobrin, 2008; Czaykowska-Higgins, 2009) can serve as guides for how Nuglan can fulfill its mission. Because we see that the former model creates the most appropriate conditions on which the latter model can be further developed, we will begin by discussing Language and Cultural Centers and then issues regarding collaboration and empowerment.

### **Language and Cultural Center Model**

The idea for Nuglan has been around IFAM for some time. This meant that there was fertile ground for the idea of a center, when it was proposed in 2012 by Chacon, a linguist who had done research in the area and so was aware of the context outlined above. At the time, he was working with Genetti to promote the Consortium for Training in Language Documentation and Conservation (CTLDC), a network of individuals and organizations that want to extend the scope and range of training programs so that others can improve their abilities to document, revitalize, and continue speaking endangered languages. One of the activities of the CTLDC is to bring together people with shared practices around training to exchange ideas, educate each other, and improve training efforts. Among the various models for providing training for indigenous groups, the Language and Cultural Center model struck Chacon as being particularly well suited to the São Gabriel region.

Language and Cultural Centers (LCCs) have arisen in many parts of the world, most prevalently in Australia and in the Northwest area of North America, but also in the Pacific islands, Thailand, Pakistan, Europe, and Central and South America. They thus exist within a wide variety of language ecological contexts, and these shape their structures, goals, and activities. In a nutshell, LCCs can be defined as *organizations promoting language and cultural documentation and conservation for speech communities of minority languages*. These organizations create products and activities that promote the documentation of languages and cultures as well as language use, language attitudes and awareness, and the valorization of other aspects of cultural, educational and sociopolitical life within a speech community. These products and activities come in a wide variety of forms, including the documentation of oral traditions and cultural practices, digital archives, language materials

(dictionaries, pedagogical materials, etc.), academic research, education and literacy programs, language policies, planning and advocacy, media (e.g., radio, internet, television), smart-phone and tablet applications, and even (indirectly) services that enhance the socio-economic prospects of the local speech communities.

There are several aspects of this model that make it particularly appropriate for the Upper Rio Negro context. First, as locally established institutions, LCCs are in a much better position for conducting research and conservation activities than non-local organizations; they become highly specialized and directly involved with the situation of local communities, incorporating the local indigenous conceptions of language and culture, and conducting activities that can be more effective over the long term, as they are based on specific local needs and demands. Also, LCCs can create a feeling of familiarity that helps build trust with local communities, are more open to indigenous control and participation, and are potentially always at service for communicating, providing resources, and conducting work that tends to be dialogic and collaborative.

Second, since Nuglan is ultimately an organization hosted at an educational and research institution, LCCs of the same type (i.e. *academic-hosted LCCs*, e.g., the Alaska Native Language Center and the First Nations Language Program in British Columbia) provide important models for how a center can form a productive link between academic and community-focused activities. Language classes, teacher training, production of pedagogical materials, curriculum development, discussion about orthographies, technical support and guidance to community projects, libraries and other resource centers, and appropriate archive and documentation equipment are services and activities provided by academic-hosted LCCs. These features are also ideal for the São Gabriel context.

Third, a particular lesson that we learn from LCCs around the world is that there is a need for a clear definition of the scope and the focus of the activities. This is especially important given the multitude of tasks and demands that one faces in language and cultural conservation (see Walsh, 2010, and related papers in Hobson et. al., 2010). Decisions on goals and priorities are dependent on several issues related to the organizational profile and funding opportunities of LCCs, but are ultimately based on the particular understanding that a LCC has about its target languages and communities and the relationship that it builds with them.

All three of these features of LCCs will be particularly important for Nuglan if it is to overcome the considerable challenges of establishing a LCC in the region. An issue that arises immediately is the large number of indigenous languages spoken in São Gabriel. These have different patterns of use and transmission, vary in the availability of documentation and resources for language support, and have different statuses within

the surrounding sociocultural and political environment (e.g., only some are official languages and only some have support for mother tongue education; there are also differences in how languages are perceived within local language ideologies). All of these issues vary widely for each of the 21 indigenous languages spoken in the region and it is hard to coordinate strategies that are compatible with discrepant situations.

For example, consider the case of the three Arawakan languages in the region: Baniwa has several thousand speakers in Brazil, Colombia, and Venezuela, in addition to being a co-official language in São Gabriel, while Tariana and Werekena, have less than 100 speakers and are considered moribund. Likewise, the availability of documentary materials and the degree to which these materials are useful to community members, vary widely among the languages. There are also many difficulties involved in coordinating and sharing materials and no forum exists that facilitates different language communities benefitting from the experience of others. Further, with the exception of Baniwa, none of the co-official languages in São Gabriel have developed an agreed-upon written standard, and this lack has proved a major barrier for the development of written texts for education and governmental information and services. Finally, there is the challenge of how to address the different needs of urban versus rural language communities; the urban area is considered “different” from the demarcated indigenous territories, imposing questions for how to support the linguistic and cultural practices of migrant populations in the urban context.

An academically hosted LCC that is locally based, has clear goals shaped by members of local communities, and serves as a central community resource that allows the development and sharing of expertise across groups seems the most promising model to address such challenges.

### **Collaborative Models of Community-based Research**

In the context of the “cosmopolitan” indigenous societies of the Upper Rio Negro (cf. Goldman, 2004), where local groups have always established numerous relations among themselves and with different organizations and foreigners, the idea of how collaborative projects can be “empowering” for local communities needs to be carefully addressed. The complex sociolinguistic situation makes it all the more necessary to approach this work from a community-driven collaborative framework, as conflicting goals and expectations will almost certainly emerge from the different indigenous residents of the region. As a whole, however, the indigenous population’s long involvement with researchers has led to the relatively unanimous position that indigenous control over the research process and the need for locally beneficial results are absolutely necessary.

While it is beyond question that research and conservation projects in the Upper Rio Negro must be “empowering” for local communities, what “empowerment” means in the local context, and how to ensure that local actors are effectively empowered, needs more careful consideration. Just as Dobrin (2008) points out for the Papua New Guinea context, in the Upper Rio Negro societies “interdependence” and “alliance” have a higher cultural value than “independence” and “self-determination”—the core concepts behind the western ideology of empowerment. Numerous examples of cultural norms in the Upper Rio Negro region demonstrate that local groups have lived for centuries in very complex social networks of languages, rituals, goods, kins and affines, etc. (Wright, 1992). At the same time, each local group has a very clear, publically acknowledged special role in these networks, with ritual and economic specializations, and ethnic and linguistic markers that are more or less well defined.

Thus, the outcome of empowering initiatives in the Upper Rio Negro region must capitalize on the strong inter-relational ethos of the local peoples, respecting and interacting according to local networking principles and practices, as well as working to support and strengthen those networks. In addition, such initiatives must acknowledge that, in this local context, all individuals, social groups and organizations have a particular role to fulfill, which means that sharing responsibility for projects is something that can be assumed. Empowering initiatives must therefore create conditions for different actors to best perform their roles in specific projects and in society as a whole.

How Nuglan can make the most of its privileged situation as a locally grounded and academic-hosted LCC involves making good decisions about what kinds of goals the center will prioritize and how it will accomplish them, including more complex “methodological” issues regarding collaboration and empowerment. A fully collaborative research process, in which control over the goals, process, and products that emerge from the center remain primarily in the hands of the local population, will certainly be difficult to apply, but is likely to be extremely fruitful. Some important questions about how this collaboration will emerge remain to be seen, and cannot be adequately addressed in the time allotted for this paper (many of these questions are addressed in Shulist [2013b]). Hypothetically, the center could be well suited to address many of these diverse needs concurrently rather than choosing one side over the other. In section 4, we will discuss the center’s strategic plan and the activities that it has already started to put forward.

### **The Center’s Strategic Plan, Initial Activities and Prospects**

Nuglan’s strategic plan was developed in August and September 2012 by a group of teachers at IFAM and two outside researchers. The strategic plan covers organizational and ideological aspects of the center’s

activities. In this section, we will present a summary of the center’s strategic plan, followed by a discussion of the current state of the center, and consideration about what the next steps in the center’s development and activities should be.

#### **Strategic Plan: A Summary**

The center’s “mission” statement is “to promote the indigenous cultures and languages of the Rio Negro”. The center’s “vision” is to “to be an instrument of conservation, dissemination and enrichment of the intangible heritage of indigenous people from the Rio Negro”. One can see that language and culture are two interrelated dimensions for the center’s activities. Another important conception is the idea that the center is an instrument for social action in the region. The core goals of the center are summarized as follows:

1. research, documentation and conservation of languages, cultures, educational practices and knowledge systems of indigenous peoples, including disseminating language use and cultural practices, especially in different and new social domains;
2. create and maintain an archive and library of information about the languages and cultures of the Rio Negro;
3. create strategies for improving socialization and dialogue among indigenous and non-indigenous students and teachers at IFAM;
4. training of local human resources.

Indeed, Nuglan’s goals are similar to those of many other LCCs. Research and documentation go hand in hand with conservation; formal education is aligned with the promotion of cultural practices and knowledge of local communities; traditional and modern concerns are intertwined; advocacy for intercultural understanding is aimed both at the larger society and within the IFAM campus. Finally, training is regarded as a central goal of the center, whether understood in a broad educational sense or as a more specific set of skills for Nuglan and community members to carry out the center’s activities. This orientation is further supported by the philosophical framework for the center’s operations that is established in the strategic plan which is based on the following points:

1. respecting the unique cultural practices and the interests of the indigenous people of the Rio Negro;
2. recognizing and promoting the individual and collective potential of the social groups in which it is set;
3. discretion with respect to the cultural knowledge of each people, especially that which is held as sacred and restricted.

Nuglan is organized in the following way: a board of directors (“deliberative and advisory council”); an

executive secretary; and coordinators of three executive subareas. The board of directors is formed by a president, who is also the executive secretary of the center, eight representatives of IFAM and Nuglan teachers, three representatives of indigenous organizations and two representatives of the Brazilian national government (one from the local branch of the Indian Affairs ministry, FUNAI, and another from the national cultural heritage institute [“Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional” – IPHAN]). The roles of the board of directors are: to make decisions about the directions and activities of the center; to provide the necessary support for the interaction of the center and local indigenous communities; and to reinforce the center’s mission and goals. The three executive subareas and their specific goals are the following:

1. *Cultures, Languages and Knowledge*. Goals: to research and document indigenous cultures, languages and knowledge systems; to carry out investigation in order to consolidate indigenous cultures and languages in local schools; to produce academic, educational and community-oriented publications and language and cultural resources.
2. *Safeguarding*. Goals: to keep an archive and library; to support archiving techniques in local communities; to support the dissemination of indigenous language, cultures and knowledge through the operations of a media center, publications, public exhibits, etc.
3. *Support and Training*. Goals: to support training of Nuglan staff as well as indigenous peoples, especially those involved in projects carried out by the center; to support language and cultural advocacy among indigenous and non-indigenous teachers and students within the IFAM campus.

This way of organizing the center was designed to take into account the complex social and political context in São Gabriel as well as IFAM’s general educational goals. Creating a place for indigenous representatives in the board of directors is an attempt to bring to Nuglan a degree of indigenous input, despite the fact that it is not an indigenous organization per se. Ideally, qualified indigenous representatives can also occupy the places reserved for the subareas coordinators. Unfortunately, however, there is a shortage of qualified indigenous teachers at IFAM and in São Gabriel in general. This is in fact a structural problem in all indigenous areas of Brazil: while there is a strong demand for indigenous people to assume more significant professional positions, there is also a general lack of qualified indigenous professionals with a college degree.

The three subareas address the core areas of the Language Documentation and Conservation movement, which are documentation, conservation and training (cf. Genetti and Siemens, in press), in addition to a special focus on formal education and the intercultural relations within the IFAM campus. The subareas are the most appropriate niche for collaboration between Nuglan, São

Gabriel society and specific indigenous communities in the Upper Rio Negro, as well as researchers and organizations from abroad. We will return to this point in the next section.

A special place in the board of directors for a person from Brazil’s cultural heritage institute reflects Nuglan’s interest in the safeguarding of indigenous cultural heritage, as well as the goal of contextualizing its activities within a national and international framework of language and culture conservation.

Nuglan’s strategic plan will be revisited in five years, with the hopes that the goals of implementation of the structure and initial activities in each subarea will have been accomplished. A few steps have been taken towards these goals in the months since Nuglan officially opened. We will discuss them in the next section.

### **Initial Activities and Prospects**

Since its inception, Nuglan has been conceptualized as directly addressing practical concerns. Ongoing projects and goals of the people that created the center as well as their work in education and research framed the discussion about Nuglan’s strategic plan. Quite naturally, after Nuglan’s official creation, it was those projects, goals and experiences that have motivated the initial activities and current prospects of the center.

Within the subarea *Cultures, Languages and Knowledge*, two research projects have taken place in the center so far, both framed by intercultural and interdisciplinary ideas, as well as collaboration between eminent Brazilian researchers, IFAM researchers and indigenous people. The first project is about *ethno-astronomy*, which is being developed in collaboration with the renowned astronomer Germano Afonso. The project will initially be focused on the Baniwa and Curipaco students and teachers at the Pamaali indigenous school, located in the Içana river. Its goals are the following:

1. Support indigenous students and teachers to carry out research and documentation of the traditional indigenous knowledge about the sky, calendars and cosmology;
2. Produce bilingual cultural materials in order to support the teaching of ethno-astronomy in local schools;
3. Create a discipline of ethno-astronomical sciences at IFAM, and train indigenous school teachers;
4. Set up an astronomical observatory in the IFAM campus in São Gabriel and a smaller one in the Pamaali school.

The project is still under analysis by Brazil’s national research council (CNPq), but a pilot experiment has already taken place in May 2013 in the Pamaali school.

The other research project is related to *ethno-botany and pharmaceuticals*. Cleoni Virginio, a Chemistry PhD

student at IFAM, has a project to extract pharmaceutical components of plants known by Upper Rio Negro cultures as medicines. Along with this primary goal, the project intends to document the indigenous traditional knowledge about medicines and diseases, and build a greenhouse with medicinal plants in the hospital in São Gabriel where indigenous people coming from rural villages receive medical services. The project has the potential to create financial revenues, but it is not yet clear how those will be divided among IFAM, the researchers, the indigenous participants of the project and the indigenous society in general. Despite the fact that the project received funds for its implementation before Nuglan's creation, it has been delayed due to a lack of agreement between IFAM and local indigenous people. Thus, there is a strong hope that Nuglan will facilitate communication between researchers, shamans and indigenous leaders by setting up very clear and transparent mutual goals, responsibilities and benefits.

Within the subarea *Support and Training*, several initiatives have taken place. Regarding languages specifically, IFAM intends to occupy a very important, but neglected niche for the implementation of the law of co-officialization of the three indigenous languages Baniwa, Tukano and Nheengatu. The local government has done almost nothing to adapt public services, bureaucracy and public signage to these languages; worse, recently there have been signs of regression, as schools in the urban areas have stopped offering classes on these languages. IFAM is establishing partnership with linguists, such as Eduardo Navarro, Thiago Chacon and others, to support the process to unify the orthographies of Nheengatu and Tukano. The idea is that Nuglan will follow up on this issue and contribute with other activities to support the implementation of the co-officialization law, for example, by advocating for public signage, organizing a collection of print and electronic resources on these languages and producing language pedagogical materials.

Training and education is a primary focus of Nuglan's activities. IFAM is working to offer a tertiary degree for indigenous language teaching in order to address the lack of qualified teachers for indigenous schools, especially professionals capable of teaching local languages and cultures (a constitutional right of all indigenous people in Brazil). The curriculum will focus on teaching methodology, as well as research, documentation and basic linguistic skills, and will not be focused on one language specifically; models for such programs can be found in LCCs in various states in Australia.

Another activity that has great potential to be further developed by Nuglan is the practice started by IFAM teacher Roberta Enir to support indigenous students from rural villages to conduct language and cultural documentation and produce practical materials in their local community. We regard this initiative as the most direct and beneficial way of collaboration between Nuglan and local communities through training, education, language and cultural documentation and

conservation. It should also be mentioned that the *Support and Training* subarea is building a student center on the IFAM campus for facilitating indigenous student gathering and support. The center will be built in the form of a traditional indigenous long-house. The *Safeguarding* subarea has primarily focused on constructing an archive and providing digitization services for cultural materials that were recorded or handwritten by indigenous individuals.

Finally, in October 2013, IFAM will hold its Science and Technology Week, where Nuglan will have a prominent role in the organization by defining the agenda of the week regarding indigenous languages and cultures. Workshops and lectures on theoretical and practical issues will be offered; language documentation and orthography standardization for the co-official languages are prominent topics for the workshops.

### **Final Remarks and Prospects**

In this paper, we have described Nuglan as an initiative that could be very fruitful for collaborative language and cultural conservation in the Upper Rio Negro region. Because the project is at a very early stage of implementation, it is difficult to comment on the outcomes of these efforts, but we are hopeful that the work will continue to build from the principles that have been set forth in the strategic plan and the center's preliminary activities. As we have discussed throughout this paper, the support of a broad research community with an understanding of the overall context of language documentation and conservation is an extremely important part of the center's future, as are the involvement of those with a deep understanding of the complexities of the socio-cultural context. Nuglan has been successful so far in finding prominent researchers in Brazil with a commitment to research and conservation: both Chacon and Shulist plan to continue to their involvement in this work. (Genetti, although outside Brazil, can serve as an ongoing link to the CTLDC, so can provide information for improving the center's training mission.) At this point, we see reason to be hopeful about Nuglan's potential impact on language and cultural conservation in the region, while recognizing the significant challenges and concerns that will have to be addressed as the center grows.

On the positive side, Nuglan brings several important strengths into a context in which language revitalization efforts have been difficult to implement. It offers the potential for a continuous, sustainable site for training indigenous people to work with and teach their languages, well-organized archival and library resources, media and computer centers, and a strong focus on language and cultural documentation, all of which are points that have been identified by local people and researchers in the area as major needs for language and culture conservation. For example, one of the challenges that has emerged in implementing the articles of the law that declared three indigenous languages official in São Gabriel has been the lack of well-trained language teachers; because IFAM

prioritizes degree programs including teacher training, Nuglan may be ideally situated to help address this concern. At the same time, broadening and deepening the availability of scientific research about indigenous issues through collaborative research is also a priority at IFAM, and the overlap between Nuglan's mission and the interests of other researchers (for example, in local knowledge about the healing properties of plants) should enhance the types of information being gathered and support the continued growth of the knowledge base about the indigenous cultures of the region.

At the same time, certain features of the local social context, some of which we have touched upon throughout this paper, present potential challenges for Nuglan's leadership. A fundamental issue is how Nuglan can address the different voices in the local indigenous population, given the multitude of indigenous peoples in the region and certain persistent dichotomies that put Nuglan in a cross-road situation, such as urban versus rural indigenous peoples, or local versus regional cultural and political demands. These issues go hand in hand with the current lack of well-qualified indigenous professionals and the shortage of representation of indigenous peoples on the center's board. It is almost certain that the three representatives of indigenous organizations on the board of directors will come from FOIRN or its direct affiliates, and some subgroups of indigenous people (including, for example, many residents of the urban area) feel excluded from the political aims of this organization and express concern that it does not serve their interests. While it is virtually impossible to address all of these issues at once, this means that Nuglan will have to learn how to prioritize, and in doing so it will put more emphasis into certain kinds of projects, work more closely with certain indigenous and non-indigenous groups and organizations, and ultimately define by concrete actions its commitment to local indigenous groups, including training and empowering in areas that Nuglan find as the most strategic ones for the region and for its mission.

Another important challenge for Nuglan is how it will implement truly collaborative and empowering projects, as well as how these projects will be able to combine research and documentation with conservation practices. The example mentioned above, of academic interest in local botanical knowledge and the traditional medical knowledge of shamans, is a controversial one given the introduction of the possibility for profit without clarification about who will benefit from this profit (the researchers or the local indigenous people, and if the latter, which ones?). At this point in the development of these collaborative relationships, IFAM has not taken substantial steps towards considering the implications of these conflicts.

In addition, while Nuglan has begun initiating training programs that in the long run can be crucial for language and culture conservation practices, there is a risk that these can end up focusing on formal education only, and thereby ignore training that supports local community grass-roots initiatives that ultimately are as important to

conservation practices as formal education. The same holds for Nuglan's research projects and their outcomes. Even if they are ultimately carried out within a collaborative framework (e.g. research done *with* community members), this in itself does not entail that the outcome of such projects will create specific resources and activities in local communities for language and cultural conservation. Local actors need to be involved in establishing the goals and outcomes; the Nuglan leadership will be critical in determining whether and how this occurs and for setting precedents and best practice for the future. Only through a conscious, concerted effort in this direction will they be able to realize the strategic plan's practical commitment to language and conservation goals, and create outcomes that will directly affect language and culture conservation in local communities.

Despite these challenges, we believe that Nuglan is one of the more promising ideas for language and culture conservation endeavors that has been attempted in the Upper Rio Negro so far. We hope that it will be able to provide sustainable support for a variety of initiatives addressing the diverse linguistic needs of the multilingual population. We welcome the opportunity for feedback from the FEL community on these ideas, our concerns, and the future prospects of this center.

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