

## BLUEFIELDS OR BLUUFILZ?

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**M**iss Laydy, *yu need wa taxi?*" My head jerked around, seeking the voice from which those words came. I couldn't believe it! The words, the intonation, the phrasing - it sounded just like the way I talked!

*"Oava ya, Miss - da mee aksin if yu need wa taxi."* I peered through the mesh border, which separated arriving passengers from the waiting park area at the Bluefields airport. And there he was. A young, outspoken Nicaraguan taxi driver was energetically waving at me. He saw me as a potential fare - I just gaped and gaped at him. To me, he could have been my brother, uncle, boyfriend (okay, okay, except for the age difference) or fellow citizen of my home country of Belize. Not only did he look like me - he sounded like me.

Well, almost. The Nikaragwan Kriol (Nicaraguan Creole) he was speaking had slight grammatical and phraseology differences from the Bileez Kriol (Belize Creole) I speak. For example, his *"da mee aksin if yu need wa taxi"* would be said in Bileez Kriol as *"da mee di aks if yu need wahn taxi."* Belize is a multicultural country of some 250,000 people located north of Nicaragua, just above Honduras. Its eastern border faces the Caribbean Sea.

I was in Bluefields to assist with a Kriol language appreciation and training workshop for some 35 language teachers who taught in schools situated in Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast (sorry, Caribbean Coast). The week-long sessions were held at URACCAN's southern campus (Universidad de las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa Caribe Nicaragüense). From April 1<sup>st</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup>, 2002, I had

the privilege to share what was being done with the English-based Creole language in Belize with the teacher-experts of Nicaragua who were faced with the daily challenge of teaching English and Spanish to Nicaraguan schoolchildren who spoke Nicaraguan Creole as their first language.

The workshop took place in the context of the on-going PEBI work (Programa de Educación Bilingüe Intercultural) of the Nicaraguan Ministry of Education, being conducted with native languages of the Nicaraguan Atlantic Coast (sorry, I mean Caribbean Coast). Funding and technical assistance towards this endeavor is provided by FOREIBCA (Fortalecimiento de la Educación Intercultural Bilingüe en la Costa Atlántica), a Finish Government sponsored project, and the University of the Autonomous Regions of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast-URACCAN.

Along with me was a colleague from Belize, Jessie Castillo, an expert in the teaching of oral and written Garifuna. She stayed an additional week, going on to Orinoco to share methods of teaching how to read and write Garifuna, another native language which Nicaragua and Belize have in common.

The minute I stepped off the airplane in Bluefields, I felt like I had come home. Belize and Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast (sorry, its Caribbean Coast) share so much history and culture. Apart from the language connection of our almost identical Kriol languages, we have so much lifestyle practices in common. On a walk through the Bluefields market (that's *maakit* in Kriol!), I saw the coal pots and flybrush and so many other household items many Belizeans use or have used. Sure, there are some differences, not so much of content but of use. For example, eating a typical Bluefields breakfast at the *maakit* meant eating rice and

beans with cheese. Now, rice and beans is the national dish of Belize Kriol people, but whoever heard of eating it for breakfast! And with cheese? And why do Bluefields people call that fried flour cake "fry cake" when it's obviously the same "fry jack" that we eat in Belize? Oh, well...a rose by any other name...

And of course, the history of Belize and the history of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast (sorry, I mean its Caribbean Coast), clearly drive home exactly why I felt so much at home. Both countries' history of slavery involved transshipment of common ancestors from Africa's western coast via Jamaica to work for English-speaking colonizers. While British interests have continued in Belize virtually up to the present day, with Belizean Independence gained from Britain in 1981, British interests in Nicaragua's Mosquito (or Miskitu) Coast were strong up to the Treaty of Versailles in 1783, when Britain gave up claim to sovereignty there. As recorded by Dr. Colville Young in his book Language and Education in Belize, 2002 (p. 17):

«...the British had the chiefs of the Miskito crowned with what must have been impressive pomp and ceremony in St. John's Cathedral, Belize...Before Britain abandoned her claims to the "Mosquito" coast, there was frequent movement of people, especially of timber workers, between Belize and the southern settlement. A Spanish raid on one often meant seeking temporary shelter in another; after the British finally abandoned the "Mosquito" coast, much of its population found permanent homes in Belize.»

It is no wonder, then, that I felt so much at home in Bluefields, the heart of that "Mosquito" coast. I felt like I was the modern embodiment of that 300-year old intimacy between our shared ancestors. Note that the workshop participants and

I have begun using the term “Nikaragwan Kriol” to refer to all the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast varieties of Kriol (Bluefields, Rama Cay, Corn Island, Pearl Lagoon, Puerto Cabezas - Bilwi). Another term found in previous literature has been MCC (Miskito Coast Creole) - a nomenclature that reflects the initial stage of the development of Nikaragwan Kriol which began with contact between Miskito (also called “Miskitu”) Amerindians and African slaves who were shipwrecked on the coast around 1640.

It is also quite natural, too, that both countries’ Kriol languages thus developed “in situ” as a mixture of primarily English vocabulary with African grammatical patterns. Additionally, borrowings of Miskito, Spanish and other lexical items are found. African word origins and grammatical patterns have been traced by Dr. Joseph Iyo (2001, National Tour Guide Training Program Manual, Belize) currently working in Belize, to such African groups as the Eboes and Nagos (Nigeria), Ashantees (Ghana), Congoes (Democratic Republic of Congo), Mandingoes (SeneGambia) and Mongolas (Angola). Dr. John Holm’s sociolinguistic work done in 1978 on the Creole English spoken in Nicaragua also reveals the source of some of the common Miskito words in, not just Bileez Kriol, but in Belizean English in general (words like *soopa*, the Central American peach palm, *kuhune*, a large palm with edible nuts; *doary*, a small dug out canoe).

Additionally, the shared history also has meant shared folktales (like *Bra Anansi* stories) and shared folksongs (like *Wait Gaalin Soop*: meaning a soup/*soop* made from the white/*wait* egret bird/*gaalin*). Above all, though, what I can only call a shared “personality” - a manner of being, a warmth - is what I best retain about my visit to Bluefields. I instinctively interacted with every elderly woman as though she were my

granny; every workshop participant quickly became a dear colleague with a level of camaraderie marking the workshop sessions unlike any I have ever experienced before. And evening interactions with some participants quickly made them my *bombaliz* (a Bileez Kriol word meaning "wonderful friends and companions"). And their names! It was just like a roster of Belizean surnames - Parham, Hansack, Simmons, Cox.

Perhaps it was the instinctive familiarity I felt with the teacher-experts in the workshop that made us have such mutually beneficial sessions. My substantive mission was to share and present on the following topics:

- ♦ Creole (Kriol) language history
- ♦ Creole (Kriol) grammar, semantics and lexicon
- ♦ Investigations on popular attitudes towards the Creole language
- ♦ Case studies of Belize and Jamaica Creole language attitudes
- ♦ Principles of Orthography Standardization
- ♦ Bileez Kriol (Belize Creole) Orthography developments
- ♦ Kriol and English in the education of Creole children
- ♦ Kriol as the first language in the teaching of English
- ♦ Second Language Teaching Methodologies

Supporting my input was input from Nicaraguan linguist and URACCAN affiliate Guillermo McLean, and Finnish linguist Arja Koskinen. The tangible result of the workshop was the development of a draft phonetic orthography for Nikaragwan Kriol (Nicaraguan Creole) which was generated and

validated by the participants and which, of course, needs to be tested and reviewed and used and re-tested and revised over the coming years, if Nikaragwan Kriol-speakers so desire to pursue the development of a written version of the warm and wonderful Kriol language spoken along Nicaragua's Caribbean Coast.

I have in this article given just a taste of some of the orthography symbols considered at the workshop. During the workshop, too, participants were appraised of the on-going steps in the process of standardization of an orthography for Bileez Kriol, a process which began in earnest in 1993 by local Kriol enthusiasts and educators, with voluntary linguistic expertise solicited from the Summer Institute of Linguistics. Their experts, Ken and Sandy Decker, joined the local team and the Belize Kriol Orthography Project was started. The Project is now approaching a major ten-year revision to make the system more internally consistent - that is, phonetic with only one symbol for each sound.

Many of the symbols that may eventually be chosen for standard use in Nicaragua will, no doubt, share a lot in common with the orthographies being developed in Jamaica and Belize - but some may well be closer to the orthography being developed in nearby San Andres. Let's just look at a few examples: Bluefields workshop participants appeared to prefer the symbol *l*ii*/* for the representation of the *long e* sound, which is what the current San Andres Kriol orthography uses. The Bileez Kriol orthography, on the other hand, uses */ee/* for the *long e* sound. Another difference is with the *long u* sound. In the draft *Nikaragwan Kriol* spelling system, this is represented as */uu/* while the *Bileez Kriol* revised orthography uses */oo/*. Both *Bileez Kriol* and the burgeoning *Nikaragwan Kriol* spelling systems, however,

favor the use of /k/ for the hard c sound; both also favor /j/ for the soft g sound and both favor the use of /ai/ for the long i sound.

How far will the *Nikaragwan Kriol* writing system be developed? How well will it be accepted? How widely will it be used? Clearly, the answers to these questions lie with the speakers of the language in much the same way as it is up to Belizeans to advance the case for *Bileez Kriol*. What is critical to bear in mind is that while a country's education system is an obvious vehicle for the development of an orthography system, ultimately, it is the users of the written system that will make it viable and productive - a cultural enrichment to its people in addition to an educational tool. So, it is critical to get writers involved in the standardization process - poets, novelists, lyricists, advertisement copy writers, court stenographers, police statement writers - in short, anyone who has a real need to use a written version of the Kriol, should be involved in the process at some point.

So...maybe the next time I arrive in Bluefields Nicaragua, and I see the warm welcome sign that is currently in English and Spanish, maybe it will then proudly be in three languages with the addition of *Welkom tu Bluufiilz*☐