

# BRINTON DANIEL GARRISON

The Arawack Language of Guiana in  
its Linguistic and Ethnological  
Relations

**Daniel Brinton**

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# **The Arawack Language of Guiana in its Linguistic and Ethnological Relations**

## **THE ARAWACK LANGUAGE OF GUIANA IN ITS LINGUISTIC AND ETHNOLOGICAL RELATIONS. BY D. G. BRINTON, M. D**

The Arawacks are a tribe of Indians who at present dwell in British and Dutch Guiana, between the Corentyn and Pomeroon rivers. They call themselves simply *lukkunu*, men, and only their neighbors apply to them the contemptuous name *aruac* (corrupted by Europeans into Aroaquis, Arawaaks, Aroacos, Arawacks, etc.), meal-eaters, from their peaceful habit of gaining an important article of diet from the amylaceous pith of the *Mauritia flexuosa* palm, and the edible root of the cassava plant.

They number only about two thousand souls, and may seem to claim no more attention at the hands of the ethnologist than any other obscure Indian tribe. But if it can be shown that in former

centuries they occupied the whole of the West Indian archipelago to within a few miles of the shore of the northern continent, then on the question whether their affiliations are with the tribes of the northern or southern mainland, depends our opinion of the course of migration of the primitive inhabitants of the western world. And if this is the tribe whose charming simplicity Columbus and Peter Martyr described in such poetic language, then the historian will acknowledge a desire to acquaint himself more closely with its past and its present. It is my intention to show that such was their former geographical position.

While in general features there is nothing to distinguish them from the red race elsewhere, they have strong national traits. Physically they are rather undersized, averaging not over five feet four inches in height, but strong-limbed, agile, and symmetrical. Their foreheads are low, their noses more allied to the Aryan types than usual with their race, and their skulls of that form defined by craniologists as orthognathic brachycephalic.

From the earliest times they have borne an excellent character. Hospitable, peace-loving, quick to accept the humbler arts of civilization and the simpler precepts of Christianity, they have ever offered a strong contrast to their neighbors, the cruel and warlike Caribs. They are not at all prone to steal, lie, or drink, and their worst faults are an addiction to blood-revenge, and a superstitious veneration for their priests.

They are divided into a number of families, over fifty in all, the genealogies of which are carefully kept in the female line, and

the members of any one of which are forbidden to intermarry. In this singular institution they resemble many other native tribes.

# LANGUAGE

The earliest specimen of their language under its present name is given by Johannes de Laet in his *Novus Orbis, seu Descriptio Indiæ Occidentalis* (Lugd. Bat. 1633). It was obtained in 1598. In 1738 the Moravian brethren founded several missionary stations in the country, but owing to various misfortunes, the last of their posts was given up in 1808. To them we owe the only valuable monuments of the language in existence.

Their first instructor was a mulatto boy, who assisted them in translating into the Arawack a life of Christ. I cannot learn that this is extant. Between 1748 and 1755 one of the missionaries, Theophilus Schumann, composed a dictionary, *Deutsch-Arawakisches Wærterbuch*, and a grammar, *Deutsch-Arawakische Sprachlehre*, which have remained in manuscript in the library of the Moravian community at Paramaribo. Schumann died in 1760, and as he was the first to compose such works, the manuscript dictionary in the possession of Bishop Wullschlägel, erroneously referred by the late Professor von Martius to the first decade of the last century, is no doubt a copy of Schumann's.

In 1807 another missionary, C. Quandt, published a *Nachricht von Surinam*, the appendix to which contains the best published grammatical notice of the tongue. The author resided in Surinam from 1769 to 1780.

Unquestionably, however, the most complete and accurate information in existence concerning both the verbal wealth and grammatical structure of the language, is contained in the manuscripts of the Rev. Theodore Schultz, now in the library of the American Philosophical Society. Mr. Shultz was a Moravian missionary, who was stationed among the Arawacks from 1790 to 1802, or thereabout. The manuscripts referred to are a dictionary and a grammar. The former is a quarto volume of 622 pages. The first 535 pages comprise an Arawack-German lexicon, the remainder is an appendix containing the names of trees, stars, birds, insects, grasses, minerals, places, and tribes. The grammar, *Grammattikalische Sätze von der Aruwakkischen Sprache*, is a 12mo volume of 173 pages, left in an unfinished condition. Besides these he left at his death a translation of the Acts of the Apostles, which was published in 1850 by the American Bible Society under the title *Act Apostelnu*. It is from these hitherto unused sources that I design to illustrate the character of the language, and study its former extension.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Since reading this article before the Society, Prof. S. S. Haldeman has shown me a copy of a work with the title: "*Die Geschichte von der Marterwoche, Auferstehung und Himmelfahrt unsers Herrn und Heilandes Jesu Christi. Uebersetzt in die Aruwackische Sprache und erklärend umschrieben. Philadelphia: Gedruckt bey Carl List, 1799,*" 8vo. pages 213, then one blank leaf, then 40 pages of "Anmerkungen." There is also a second title, in Arawack, and neither title page is included in the pagination. The Arawack title begins: "*Wadaijahun Wüüssada-goanti, Wappussida-goanti baddia Jesus Christus,*" etc. The remarks at the end are chiefly grammatical and critical, and contain many valuable hints to the student of the language. I have no doubt this book is the Life of Christ mentioned in the text. The name of the translator or editor is nowhere



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mentioned, but I have no doubt Mr. Schultz wrote the “Anmerkungen,” and read the proof, as not only are his grammatical signs and orthography adopted throughout, but also we know from other sources that he was in Philadelphia at that time.

# PHONETICS

The Arawack is described as “the softest of all the Indian tongues.”<sup>2</sup> It is rich in vowels, and free from gutturals. The enunciation is distinct and melodious. As it has been reduced to writing by Germans, the German value must be given to the letters employed, a fact which must always be borne in mind in comparing it with the neighboring tongues, nearly all of which are written with the Spanish orthography.

The Arawack alphabet has twenty letters: a, b, d, e, g, h, i, j, k, l, m, n, o, p, q, r, s, t, u, w.

Besides these, they have a semi-vowel written *lr* the sound of which in words of the masculine gender approaches *l*, in those of the neuter gender *r*. The *o* and *u*, and the *t* and *d*, are also frequently blended. The *w* has not the German but the soft English sound, as in *we*. The German diphthongs æ, œ, eu, ei, ü, are employed. The accents are the long ^, the acute ` , and that indicating the emphasis ´. The latter is usually placed near the commencement of the word, and must be carefully observed.

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<sup>2</sup> Brett, *The Indian Tribes of Guiana*, p. 117 (London, 1868).

# NOUNS

Like most Indians, the Arawack rarely uses a noun in the abstract. An object in his mind is always connected with some person or thing, and this connection is signified by an affix, a suffix, or some change in the original form of the word. To this rule there are some exceptions, as *bahii* a house, *siba* a stone, *hiäru* a woman. *Dáddikân hiäru*, I see a woman. Such nouns are usually roots. Those derived from verbal roots are still more rarely employed independently.

Numbers. The plural has no regular termination. Often the same form serves for both numbers, as is the case in many English words. Thus, *itime* fish and fishes, *siba* stone and stones, *känsiti* a lover and lovers. The most common plural endings are *ati*, *uti*, and *anu*, connected to the root by a euphonic letter; as *uju* mother, *ujunuti* mothers, *itti* father, *ittinati* fathers, *kansissia* a loved one, *kansissiannu* loved ones.

Of a dual there is no trace, nor does there seem to be of what is called the American plural (exclusive or inclusive of those present). But there is a peculiar plural form with a singular signification in the language, which is worthy of note. An example will illustrate it; *itti* is father, plural *ittinati*; *wattinati* is our father, not our fathers, as the form would seem to signify. In other words, singular nouns used with plural pronouns, or construed with several other nouns, take a plural form. *Petrus*

*Johannes mutti ujúnatu*, the mother of Peter and John.

Genders. A peculiarity, which the Arawack shares with the Iroquois<sup>3</sup> and other aboriginal languages of the Western continent, is that it only has two genders, and these not the masculine and feminine, as in French, but the masculine and neuter. Man or nothing was the motto of these barbarians. Regarded as an index of their mental and social condition, this is an ominous fact. It hints how utterly destitute they are of those high, chivalric feelings, which with us centre around woman.

The termination of the masculine is *i*, of the neuter *u*, and, as I have already observed, a permutation of the semi-vowels *l* and *r* takes place, the letter becoming *l* in the masculine, *r* in the neuter. A slight difference in many words is noticeable when pronounced by women or by men. The former would say *keretin*, to marry; the latter *kerejun*. The gender also appears by more than one of these changes: *ipillin*, great, strong, masculine; *ipirrun*, feminine and neuter.

There is no article, either definite or indefinite, and no declension of nouns.

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<sup>3</sup> *Etudes Philologiques sur quelque Langues Sauvages de l'Amerique*, p. 87 (Montreal, 1866).

# PRONOUNS

The demonstrative and possessive personal pronouns are alike in form, and, as in other American languages, are intimately incorporated with the words with which they are construed. A single letter is the root of each: *d* I, mine, *b* thou, thine, *l* he, his, *t* she, her, it, its, *w* we, our, *h* you, your, *n* they, their; to these radical letters the indefinite pronoun *ükküahü*, somebody, is added, and by abbreviation the following forms are obtained, which are those usually current:

dakia, dai, I.

bokkia, bui, thou.

likia, he.

turreha, she, it.

wakia, wai, we.

hukia, hui, you.

nakia, nai, they.

Except the third person, singular, they are of both genders. In speaking, the abbreviated form is used, except where for emphasis the longer is chosen.

In composition they usually retain their first vowel, but this is entirely a question of euphony. The methods of their employment with nouns will be seen in the following examples:

*üssiquahü*, a house.

*dássiqua*, my house.

bússiqua, thy house.  
lüssiqua, his house.  
tüssiqua, her, its house.  
wássiqua, our house.  
hüssiqua, your house.  
nássiqua, their house.  
*uju*, mother.  
daiju, my mother.  
buju, thy mother.  
luju, his mother.  
tuju, her mother.  
waijunattu, our mother.  
hujuattu, your mother.  
naijattu, their mother.  
waijunuti, our mothers.  
hujunuti, your mothers.  
naijunuti, their mothers.

Many of these forms suffer elision in speaking. *Itti* father, *datti* my father, *wattínatti* our father, contracted to *wattínti* (*watti* rarely used).

When thus construed with pronouns, most nouns undergo some change of form, usually by adding an affix; *báru* an axe, *dábarun* my axe, *iulí* tobacco, *dajulite* my tobacco.

# ADJECTIVES

The verb is the primitive part of speech in American tongues. To the aboriginal man every person and object presents itself as either doing or suffering something, every quality and attribute as something which is taking place or existing. His philosophy is that of the extreme idealists or the extreme materialists, who alike maintain that nothing *is*, beyond the cognizance of our senses. Therefore his adjectives are all verbal participles, indicating a state of existence. Thus *üssatu* good, is from *üssân* to be good, and means the condition of being good, a good woman or thing, *üssati* a good man.

Some adjectives, principally those from present participles, have the masculine and neuter terminations *i* and *u* in the singular, and in the plural *i* for both genders. Adjectives from the past participles end in the singular in *issia* or *üssia*, in the plural in *annu*. When the masculine ends in *illi*, the neuter takes *urru*, as *wadikilli*, *wadikurru*, long.

Comparison is expressed by adding *bén* or *kén* or *adin* (a verb meaning to be above) for the comparative, and *apiüdi* for the diminutive. *Uburu*, from the verb *uburau* to be before in time, and *adiki*, from *adikin* to be after in time, are also used for the same purpose. The superlative has to be expressed by a circumlocution; as *tumaqua aditu ipirrun turreha*, what is great beyond all else; *bokkia üssä dáuria*, thou art better than I, where

the last word is a compound of *dai uwúria* of, from, than. The comparative degree of the adjectives corresponds to the intensive and frequentative forms of the verbs; thus *ipirrun* to be strong, *ipirru* strong, *ipirrubîn* and *ipirrubessabun* to be stronger, *ipirrubetu* and *ipirrubessabutu* stronger, that which is stronger.

The numerals are wonderfully simple, and well illustrate how the primitive man began his arithmetic. They are: —

1 *abba*.

2 *biama*, plural *biamannu*.

3 *kabbuhin*, plural *kubbuhinînnu*.

4 *bibiti*, plural *bibitinu*.

5 *abbatekkábe*, plural *abbatekabbunu*.

6 *abbatiman*, plural *abbatimannínu*.

7 *biamattiman*, plural *biamattimannínu*.

8 *kabbuhintiman*, plural *kabbuhintimannínu*.

9 *bibitiman*, plural *bibititumannínu*.

10 *biamantekábbe*, plural *biamantekábunu*.

Now if we analyze these words, we discover that *abbatekkábe* five, is simply *abba* one, and *akkabu*, hand; that the word for six is literally “one [finger] of the other [hand],” for seven “two [fingers] of the other [hand],” and so on to ten, which is compounded of *biama* two, and *akkabu* hands. Would they count eleven, they say *abba kutihibena* one [toe] from the feet, and for twenty the expression is *abba lukku* one man, both hands and feet. Thus, in truth, they have only four numerals, and it is even a question whether these are primitive, for *kabbuhin* seems a



strengthened form of *abba*, and *bibuti* to bear the same relation to *biamā*. Therefore we may look back to a time when this nation knew not how to express any numbers beyond one and two.

Although these numbers do not take peculiar terminations when applied to different objects, as in the languages of Central America and Mexico, they have a great variety of forms to express the relationship in which they are used. The ordinals are:

atenennuati, first.

ibiamattéti, second.

wakábbuhinteti, our third, etc.

To the question, How many at a time? the answer is:

likinnekewai, one alone.

biamanuman, two at a time, etc.

If simply, How many? it is:

abbahu, one.

biamahu, two.

If, For which time? it is:

tibíakuja, for the first time.

tibíamattétu, for the second time.

and so on.

# VERBS

The verbs are sometimes derived from nouns, sometimes from participles, sometimes from other verbs, and have reflexive, passive, frequentative, and other forms. Thus from *lana*, the name of a certain black dye, comes *lannatûin* to color with this dye, *alannatunna* to color oneself with it, *alannattukuttun* to let oneself be colored with it, *alanattukuttunnua* to be colored with it.

The infinitive ends in *in*, *ûin*, *ùn*, *ân*, *unnua*, *ên*, and *ûn*. Those in *in*, *ûin*, *ùn*, and *ân* are transitive, in *unnua* are passive and neuter, the others are transitive, intransitive, or neuter.

The passive voice is formed by the medium of a verb of permission, thus:

amalitin, to make.

amalitikittin, to let make.

amalitikittunnua, to be made.

assimakin, to call.

assimakuttûin, to let call,

assimakuttûnnua, to be called.

The personal pronouns are united to the verbs as they are to the nouns. They precede all verbs except those whose infinitives terminate in *ên*, *in*, and *ân*, to which they are suffixed as a rule, but not always. When they follow the verb, the forms of the pronouns are either *de*, *bu*, *i* he, *n* she, it, *u*, *hu*, *je* or *da*, *ba*, *la*, *ta*,

*wa, ha, na*. The latter are used chiefly where the negative prefix *m, ma* or *maya* is employed. Examples:

### **hallikebben, to rejoice**

hallikebbéde, I rejoice.  
hallikebbébu, thou rejoicest.  
hallikebbéi, he rejoices.  
hallikebbên, she rejoices.  
hallikebbéu, we rejoice.  
hallikebbéhü, you rejoice.  
hallikebbéje, they rejoice.

### **majauquan, to remain**

majáuquada, I remain.  
majáuquaba, thou remainest.  
majáuqala, he remains.  
majáuquata, she remains.  
majáuquawa, we remain.  
majáuquaha, you remain.  
majáuquana, they remain.

Moods and Tenses. Their verbs have four moods, the indicative, optative, imperative, and infinitive, and five tenses, one present, three preterites, and one future. The rules of their formation are simple. By changing the termination of the

infinitive into *a*, we have the indicative present, into *bi* the first preterite, into *buna* the second preterite, into *kuba* the third preterite, and into *pa* the future. The conjugations are six in number, and many of the verbs are irregular. The following verb of the first conjugation illustrates the general rules for conjugation:

*ayahaddin*, to walk.

## Indicative Mood

Present tense:

dayahadda, I walk.  
bujahadda, thou walkest.  
lujahadda, he walks.  
tūjahadda, she walks.  
wayahádda, we walk.  
hujahádda, you walk.  
nayuhádda, they walk.

First preterite – of to-day:

dayaháddibi, I walked to-day.  
bujaháddibi, thou walked to-day.  
lijaháddibi, he walked to-day.  
tujaháddibi, she walked to-day.  
wayaháddibi, we walked to-day.  
hujaháddibi, you walked to-day.

nayaháddibi, they walked to-day.

Second preterite – of yesterday or the day before.

dayaháddibüna, I walked yesterday or the day before.

bujaháddibüna, thou walked yesterday or the day before.

lijaháddibuna, he walked yesterday or the day before.

tujaháddibüna, she walked yesterday or the day before.

wayaháddibüna, we walked yesterday or the day before.

hujaháddibüna, you walked yesterday or the day before.

nayaháddibüna, they walked yesterday or the day before.

Third preterite – at some indefinite past time:

dayaháddakuba, I walked.

bujaháddakuba, thou walked.

lijaháddakuba, he walked.

tujaháddakuba, she walked.

wayaháddakuba, we walked.

hujaháddakuba, you walked.

nayaháddakuba, they walked.

Future:

dayaháddipa, I shall walk.

bujaháddipa, thou wilt walk.

lijaháddipa, he will walk.

tujaháddipa, she will walk.

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