

Dear friends of the work of Nengvaanemkeskama Nempayvaam Enlhet,

in the following letter I would like to give you another update of our work, in which we - Ernesto Unruh, a native Enlhet, and myself – work with testimonies of Enlhet elders about their lives and history.

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Guaná is one of the six languages that, like Enlhet, belong to the Enlhet-Enenlhet language family. For almost twenty-five years we have been in contact with the only Guaná-*comunidad*, the Comunidad Guaná Río Apa. At their request, we started working on a dictionary in their language in 2016, which at that time was only spoken by two women. This dictionary should help to ensure that the Guaná retain access to their language. [Lucía Cuellar](#) was a key figure in this process. She had a considerably better command of Guaná than the second speaker. At the same time, she was driven by the desire to leave her language to her *comunidad*. We were a tool for her in this process, and especially in the last two years I worked intensively with her on the Guaná dictionary.

In February, Lucía Cuellar died of covid at the age of about seventy. We had known each other for more than two decades. We were united by the awareness that we were both among the last witnesses of a dying language. That was a close bond and I mourn Lucía. Regardless of our relationship, her death has a special weight: with her the living access to a world and the knowledge of its great richness has disappeared. It is now more important than ever, that we finish this dictionary to give it to the *comunidad* as her legacy, and so community members can access a part of their cultural heritage.

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In recent years, almost all of the elders, men and women we worked with have left us. Ten years ago, in July 2012, Metyeeyam' died at the age of over ninety. [Metyeeyam'](#) spent his life collecting oral accounts of the history of his people and he was able to retell them with great precision even into old age. In doing so, it was important for him to name the sources of his accounts. His theme, which he pieced together through countless individual reports like a large jigsaw puzzle, was the Enlhet's loss of land, of freedom, and of creative possibilities. He portrayed how diverse their life options used to be and how competently they knew how to act. Metyeeyam' mourned the loss of his world. "If the Enlhet had known what the foreign settlement of their land amounted to, they would have reacted differently to it than they did." He often said that.



Kenteem, 2011.

For more than ten years, Ernesto Unruh and I made countless visits to Metyeeyam', often staying overnight in his house together with our families, sometimes for a whole week. During these visits, about a hundred hours of recordings were made, forty hours of which have already been transferred to an elaborated manuscript. When Metyeeyam' died, few realized the treasure that had gone with him. One of his grandsons, however, has realized the significance of what he left

behind with the recordings and is now urging us to make these accounts available to all Enlhet. “If the Enlhet don’t know what it was like in the past, they cannot respond adequately to the fact that they are now a marginalized minority in their own country,” he says.

A few days before Metyeeyam’, [Kenteem](#) died in June 2012. I often spent several days with him and his family too. As with Metyeeyam’, I grew close to him. [Kenteem](#) was also a notable storyteller with a clear thread. He emphasized the political aspect of foreign settlement. “Mennonites should always remember that we were here first,” he said, for instance, as can be read in the collection of accounts in [Wie Schön ist Deine Stimme](#) (How Beautiful is Your Voice). His wife [Sa’ko-Yenyeem](#), who died in 2017, gave similarly precise accounts. With her accounts, she has created a vivid picture of life from the first period of foreign settlement in Enlhet land. Ernesto Unruh and I now have the task of making the legacy of these and other thinkers widely accessible among the Enlhet in their language; many of them have explicitly commissioned us to do so. We have already published some of their accounts as video sequences in the [Biblioteca de la memoria hablada](#), in the Library of Spoken Knowledge, which is constantly being expanded. The time-consuming editing of the written accounts is also progressing.

As the storytellers have told us about their lives and thoughts over the years, a great trust has grown between us. Again and again the elders have told me: “I am all alone. All my people have died.” They have referred to the fact that they could no longer share their wealth of experience with anyone, the knowledge of a world that was very different from the current world. The more of them leave us, the lonelier I too become, to whom they entrusted their experiences and knowledge. The mourning for Lucía, Metyeeyam’, Kenteem or Sa’ko-Yenyeem reminds me of my responsibility to ensure that their words are preserved. They are important thoughts they have left behind. They are accounts that give meaning to life today.

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A month after Lucía’s death, I visited the Guaná. They asked me to publish the dictionary as soon as possible. Fortunately, the work is already so far advanced and my notes from the last few years are so extensive that we can finish it even without Lucía. The remaining last speaker, Modesta Sosa, is helping to fill in the last gaps in the manuscript of the dictionary.

For the dictionary, the Guaná words are translated into Spanish and Guaraní, because today, the Guaná speak mainly Guaraní, which is the second official language in Paraguay after Spanish. We plan that this trilingual dictionary will be ready before the end of 2022. At a later date, I plan to present a much more sophisticated work in which every Guaná word



In the picture: Miguel Cuellar, Líder of the Comunidad Guaná Río Apa, Ladislaa Alcaraz, Minister of the Secretaría de Políticas Lingüísticas, a kind of language ministry, and Hannes Kalisch in March 2022 in the Comunidad Guaná Río Apa.

is explained with sentence examples in Guaná that can also be played back as audio files. This is possible because I have recorded all the conversations with Lucía and Modesta about the words in their language acoustically. Over the last few years, I have continuously transcribed these recordings and divided them into audio sequences that can be assigned to the individual dictionary entries. Nevertheless, the completion of such a complex work will still take several years, because working with texts in a language that one hardly speaks requires particular care.

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There have been some highlights in the last six months: In March, we finally published our book *Don't Cry. The Enlhet History of the Chaco War* at McGill-Queen's University Press in Canada. A short introduction to this collection of Enlhet reports can be found [here](#).

In April, [Lanto'oy' Unruh](#), a member of *Nengvaanemkeskama Nempayvaam Enlhet*, presented new photographs and digital images at an Open Studio hosted by the [Santo Domingo Centre of Excellence for Latin American Research \(SDCELAR\)](#) at the British Museum. The [Open Studio](#) forms part of a series in which artists from the Paraguayan Chaco show works created during a residency (virtual because of the pandemic) at the British Museum. The Open Studio with Lanto'oy' Unruh's contribution can be accessed [here](#).

In May, I virtually attended a conference at the University of Waterloo, Canada, on Indigenous-Mennonite Encounters in Time and Place. In my presentation entitled "Salvation? Conversion as part of the process of colonization," I compared Mennonite and Indigenous testimonies about the first years of the mission in the Chaco.

Also in April, the Paraguayan Chamber of Deputies has declared two of our books with Enlhet testimonies to be of "[national and cultural interest](#):" *¡Qué Hermosa es tu voz!, Relatos de los enlhet sobre la historia de su pueblo* (German: *Wie schön ist deine Stimme, Berichte der Enlhet in Paraguay zu ihrer Geschichte*) and *¡No llores! La historia enlhet de la guerra del Chaco* (English: *Don't Cry. The Enlhet History of the Chaco War*). While we are honored by this distinction, unfortunately such declarations are rather symbolic and do not translate into tangible support for our work. However, with the help of some donors, we were able to steadily continue our work in the first half of the year. Thank you for that! It is not yet clear how things will continue in the second half of the year.

I appreciate your interest in our work.

Yours sincerely,



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If you would like to support our work by making a contribution, you can do so through

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We would be happy to keep you informed about the progress of our work. Please contact us via nempayvaam@enlhet.org if you would like to receive our newsletter.