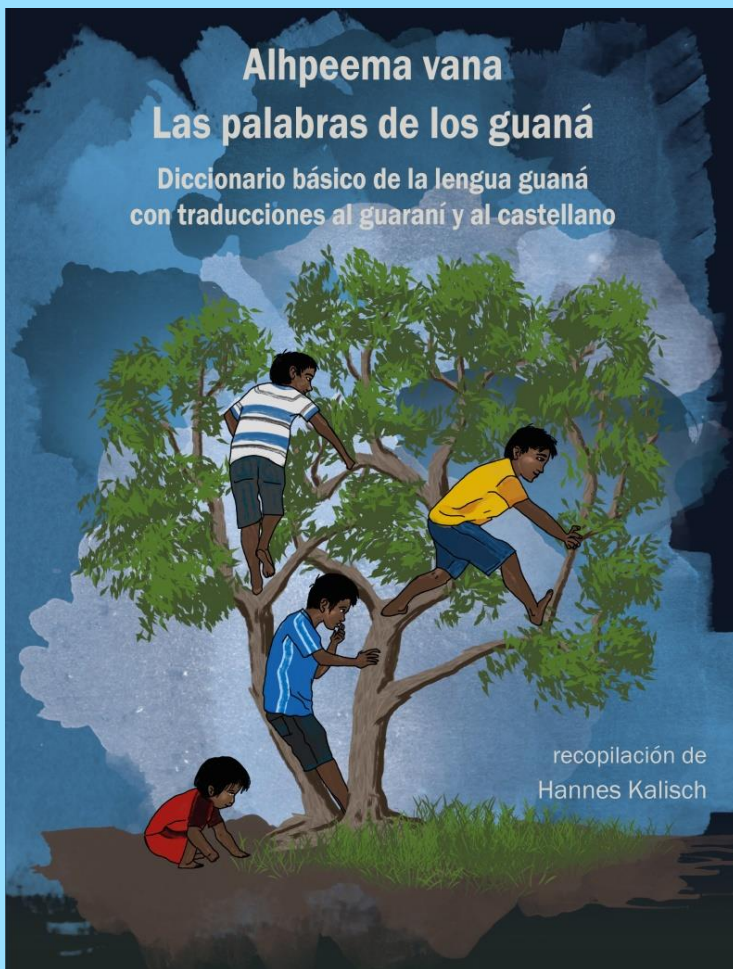


Dear friends of the work of Nengvaanemkeskama Nempayvaam Enlhet,

In mid-April, the Guana dictionary, [*Alhpeema vana. Las palabras de los guaná. Diccionario básico de la lengua guaná con traducciones al guaraní y al castellano*](#), was published. As [previously reported](#), the Guana is one of the six Enlhet-Enenlhet languages. Although some members in the *comunidad* still understand Guaná, only one 65-year-old woman is still alive who actually speaks the language and can narrate in it. This woman still learned Guaná from her mother, but no longer spoke it with her children; they no longer learned it because she spoke Guarani to them. Even though she has taught her grandchildren a few phrases again, I am the only one who can converse with her in her mother tongue, after twenty-five years of studying it. In the consciousness of the Guaná, their language nevertheless lives on, and in 2016, at the request of the Guaná-*comunidad*, I began to work on a dictionary.



One of the last Guaná speakers, Emilio Leiva († 2005), emphasized that the Guaná gave up their language to avoid discrimination by Paraguayans. The decision to abandon their own language was controversial, and many of the elders warned the young people not to do so. However, they could not prevent them from replacing the Guaná with the Guaraní of the Paraguayans. The Guaná became, as Emilio Leiva said, *takha pyempehek*, "skins of the Paraguayans," that is, superficial copies of the Paraguayans.

Although the Guaná gave up their language in order to assimilate with the Paraguayans, they are still exposed to frequent discrimination. This has led to a change of perspective in the community, which the current leader Miguel Cuellar summarizes as follows: "We do not live better after we have stopped being ourselves. Therefore, we must try to live better by accepting what we are, even if this is a difficult path." This change of direction aims at strengthening one's identity instead of denying it. It is expressed, among other things, in the decision to regain access to one's own language: With the desire for a

dictionary in their traditional language, the Guaná express that they want to redefine their relationship to their own past and stand by it instead of repressing it. They have recognized that this is the only way they can live a dignified life as Guaná in today's world.

As a linguist, I have conducted the work on the Guaná at the highest possible professional level, but the motivation for my work was not the desire to document a dying language. Nor is the desire for Guaná

to be spoken again by the Guaná close to my heart; a dictionary is hardly helpful for that. I am concerned with something else: Guaná is no longer spoken, but the Guaná still think in Guaná concepts, so many words and loan-translations live on in the Guaraní that the Guaná speak today. Because they continue to perceive themselves as Guaná and are perceived that way, the absence of their old language is very present and experienced as a loss. Over the years, I have accompanied two of the last three speakers until their deaths. As before with the Enlhet elders and their history, I became an conversation partner for them, but here in their own language, in which they could hardly speak to anyone anymore. In the process, I experienced how they mourned not only their language, but an entire world in which the Guaná had the freedom to shape their lives in a way that, unlike today, was very self-determined. The dictionary - and especially the long process in which it has been created in the *comunidad* since 2016 - can help the Guaná find a place for their language in their society, bringing together consciously that their language is lost but still valuable, and that it continues to have an impact. This can release strength, and they can turn to the future without displacing their people's past.

In October 2022, I was invited to travel to Canada. At the first workshop on [*First Workshop on Lexicography in Indigenous Languages of the Americas*](#) conference in Ottawa, Canada, linguists working on dictionaries of indigenous languages shared their experiences. My presentation was about descriptive difficulties in the semantics of Guaná. During my stay in Ottawa, I had also been asked to teach practical fieldwork with a lecturer in a linguistics seminar at the University of Ottawa. At the end of the four-week trip, I gave a presentation at the University of Winnipeg at the conference *Departing Canada, Encountering Latin America: Reflections on the Centenary of Mennonite Emigration from Canada to Mexico and Paraguay*. Using Mennonite sources and Enlhet accounts, it is possible to show how, at the beginning of Mennonite immigration to Enlhet Land nearly one hundred years ago, patterns in the relationship between the two groups were solidified that are still relevant today. The text of my presentation is to be published in the [*Journal of Mennonite Studies*](#).



As I outlined in the last newsletter, encounters with the Enlhet elders, with their knowledge and wisdom, have become a part of me and my life over the past twenty-five years. Often the conversation with these *ancianos* and *ancianas*, the wise old ones, went on for several years, and the more Ernesto Unruh and I listened, the more we became counterparts for the storytellers, with whom they could talk about things for which they could hardly find any other interlocutors. This also shaped and changed us. In the meantime, no one from the group of these narrators is alive anymore, and Ernesto Unruh is himself an *anciano*; soon he will be seventy. Now we no longer make new recordings. My task now is to process and publish the reports of these narrators in the next few years, so that they do not disappear untraceably in an archive at some point. Therefore, I would also like to tell now a little bit about myself.

A few days before Christmas I went to the nearest hospital with unbearable sciatic pain. A tumor was discovered in my sacrum and in the first days of January I was taken to Asunción to the *Instituto*

Nacional de Cáncer, the National Cancer Center, where I am now undergoing chemotherapy and slowly learning to walk again. The Enlhet reports have to take a back seat at the moment, although I have been able to finish various smaller works such as the article for the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* and the print version for the Guaná dictionary on the laptop in my hospital bed.

I sincerely thank you for your continued interest in our work. With the help of some donors, we have been able to continue this work steadily over the past year. Thank you for that! It is not yet clear how things will continue financially; we would be delighted if you would continue to support us (see below).

With best regards

Yours,



Hannes Kalisch

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Our newsletters are also available on our [website](#).

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.