On Wao Tededo River Names

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In the northern half of the Ecuadorian Amazon (roughly between the Bobonaza and the Colombian border) river names end in —ano (Pano, Cawandano) —eno (Cuyabeno), -ino (Payamino), or -uno (Arajuno). It is safe to assume that this is a suffix meaning river in which the first vowel is an allophone. It is reasonable to assume that these river names are comprised of a noun or an adjective which is the proper name of the river followed by a suffix meaning river. But what language? The Northern and and southern portions of this region are now occupied by Amazonian Quichua speaking people who no longer recognize the meaning of either the proper name or the suffix.

However, in the middle of the region are the Waorani who do recognize both the proper names and the suffixes in their region. For example:

Gareno = Piraña River gare (piraña) + -eno (river)

Peneno = Plantain River pene (plantain) + -eno (river)

Dayono = Cottan River dayo (cotton) + -ono (river)

Gontiwano = Curassao River gontiwa (curassao) + -ano (river)

Teweno = Peach Palm River tewe (chonta or peach pam) + -eno (river)

Evengeno= Guacamayo River the color

Keneweno kenawe= yellow flowering waranga

Nnoneno ñone= YAKU WAMAK

Bameno = Bone River bame (bone) + -eno (river).

Wamono = wamonka palm fruit

Although the Waorani recognize all these river names as intelligible in their own language they do not understand the -eno river names north or south of their region such as Arajuno, Payamino or Cuyabeno in the north Villano in the South and usually assume these are Quichua.

What conclusions could we draw from these facts? The broad distribution of the -eno river names strongly suggests that speakers of a language related to Waorani once occupied a much broader area and that the current Waorani may be a remnant of these people. This is interesting because the Waorani are now considered to be an isolated group of people who inhabit the internal forest regions away from major rivers and avoided contact with other groups. If they once inhabited a much larger region this suggests that they were previously more settled, agricultural, with larger populations and trade relations with other language groups. It also suggests that the Waorani may have been the main population which underwent language shift to Quichua through assimilation to the Archidona mission in colonial times. The present Waorani may be a remnant that avoided or escaped from contact and became resistant to contact with other groups.

If so why would they not recognize the -eno river names outside their immediate territory? In the cases where we do know the meaning the first part of the names it is usually the name of plant species that grows along the river. It turns out that Wao Tededo plant names are highly local so that Wao living on the Nushino or upper Curaray often do not recognize the Wao plant names used on the Shiripuno or Tiputini and vice versa. This is the case even when people from these areas have little difficulty communicating with each other on other topics. Thus it seems likely that the unrecognized river names ending in -eno/ino are simply the local or archaic names of plant species no longer recognized.

There are a few cases like Yutsupino and and Tiwentza that seem to combine a Wao suffix or species name with a Kichwa or Shuar word indicating that there may once have been a bilingual population.