

A NOTE ON THE ORTHOGRAPHY  
OF NASA YUWE



Nasa Yuwe, the language of the Nasa, has over time been written in various alphabets, beginning with the 1755 dictionary, grammar, and catechism of Fr. Eugenio del Castillo y Orozco (1877 [1755]), parish priest of Tálaga, Tierradentro. However, it is only in the last decades of the twentieth century that the Nasa themselves began to employ various orthographic systems in the educational sphere. The first of these alphabets (Slocum 1972), based largely on the Spanish alphabet but also to some degree using borrowings from English, was created by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), an organization of evangelical missionaries whose objective was to translate the Bible into indigenous languages and to convert indigenous peoples to evangelical Protestantism. Until recently, the SIL alphabet was employed not only by Nasa Protestants, but also, in slightly altered form, by Roman Catholic missionaries from the Apostolic Vicariate of Tierradentro and those Nasa intellectuals engaged in educational planning within the Vicariate's schools (García Isaza 1996). As a result of advanced linguistic training at the Universidad de los Andes received in the mid-1980s by several Nasas affiliated with the Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca (CRIC), a more rigorous alphabet was developed (CRIC n.d.c) to account for the complex phonology of Nasa Yuwe; this alphabet has been used in most of the CRIC publications, with the exception of the earliest ones, which employed a variant of the SIL's orthography.

Beginning in the 1990s, attempts were made to create a unified alphabet for Nasa Yuwe (Various n.d.), bringing together proponents of the CRIC alphabet with advocates of the SIL orthography and with representatives of the Apostolic Vicariate in Tierradentro. To some degree, the positions of the three parties owed to distinct appreciations of how Nasa phonology should be written, particularly concerning the necessity of following Spanish ortho-

graphic conventions. However, the differences across the three positions were largely political, given that each of the three groups espouses a distinct vision of the nature and objectives of the indigenous movement. By 2000, a single alphabet was agreed upon (Abelardo Ramos and Collo 2000). For the most part, I have chosen to privilege the new unified orthography by substituting it in quotations in the place of earlier alphabets. Its rules are reproduced below, adapted from Abelardo Ramos (2000, 52–53).

## CONSONANTS

### *Basic*

p t ç k m n b d z g l s j y w r

Ç has a hard sound, like the letter *k* in English. *J* is pronounced as in Spanish. These were concessions to Spanish orthography. Consonants *b*, *d*, *z*, and *g* are prenasalized; in the SIL alphabet, these consonants were preceded by the letters *m* or *n*.

### *Palatalized*

px tx çx kx nx bx dx zx gz lz sx jx fx vx

### *Occlusive silent aspirated*

ph th çh kh

### *Occlusive silent aspirated palatalized*

pxh txh çxh kxh

## VOWELS

### *Oral*

|    |    |    |                  |
|----|----|----|------------------|
| a  | e  | i  | u                |
| a' | e' | i' | u' (glottalized) |
| ah | eh | ih | uh (aspirated)   |
| aa | ee | ii | uu (long)        |

### *Nasal*

|    |    |    |                  |
|----|----|----|------------------|
| â  | ê  | î  | û                |
| â' | ê' | î' | û' (glottalized) |
| âh | êh | îh | ûh (aspirated)   |
| âa | êe | îi | ûu (long)        |

Nasal vowels can be written with the following diacritics: *â*, *ä*, or *ā*.