

Yucatec Mayan

Language Family: Protomayan

Language Variant: Yucatec Mayan

Geographical Location: Southern Mexico, Campeche, Yucatan and Quintana Roo

Estimated Population: 774,755 according to INEGI

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I was born in the northern Mexican state of Coahuila, home of the Coahuiltecan tribe, whose people were absorbed into the population of what was known as the state of Coahuila y Tejas (“Coahuila and Texas”) after fighting Spanish and Apaches. Northeast of the town of Melchor Múzquiz, Coahuila, along the Sabinas River, there is a reservation known as “El nacimiento de la tribu Kikapú.” (The Birthplace of the Kickapoo Tribe).

I carry within me different lineages of land and history. Ancestors on my mother’s side migrated from the edges of the Sabinas river. My mother’s father belongs to the lineage of the Spanish colonizers, as missionaries settled in Coahuila to expand the Catholic church. My paternal grandmother migrated to my home city from what is known as La Huasteca Potosina, located in Mexico’s center state, San Luis Potosi. Huasteco people are part of the Mayan family, they speak Tenek, more commonly known as Huasteco. Tenek is a variant of the Mayan language, and today, the Huasteco people are dispersed between the states of San Luis Potosi, Veracruz, and Hidalgo. They were a dominant culture, although they did not build large architectural structures as did the Southern Yucatec Maya. My paternal grandfather was native to my hometown, Monclova, Coahuila, Mexico; he had grown acculturated and accustomed to Mexican ways of living.

I don’t have any memories of my paternal grandmother, but I remember how my maternal grandmother would share stories to instruct me about everything – when certain fruits or vegetables needed to be planted, the prayer we would offer for the Earth to bless our food, and how each item needed to be harvested. I miss her problem-solving skills and ways of seeing the

world.

Growing up, I listened to the sounds of Indigenous languages, including Maya and Nahuatl, and was exposed to two sides of Mexico – one that takes pride in the Indigenous heritage and the other side that disadvantages Indigenous communities. On the latter side, most Mexicans don't see Indigenous languages as national languages; they consider them dialects, suggesting an inferior status and ignoring the deep relationship that Indigenous languages have with the land and natural world (Hoobler 441-460; Muñoz 414-433).

I was brought up in a Spanish-speaking home. My home state, Coahuila, borders the state of Texas in the United States. Therefore, my home city is located in an area that has been Americanized, and where an English-Spanish binary is encouraged at a young age. In my community, parents encourage embracing Western cultures and discourage learning about Mexican traditions. As a side effect of colonialism, this means that if a person speaks English and Spanish, they are worth more than if they were to speak Spanish and any Indigenous language, upholding a version of language supremacy (Sledd 1969). My grandparents lived away from their Indigenous community even before I was born, and I did not embrace their traditional culture and ways of living until later in my life. Consequently, I grew closer to the Americanized life widely promoted in Northern Mexico.

My interest in reclaiming my Indigenous language developed while I was very little, still in elementary school. I was fortunate to have a teacher who spoke Mayan, and who was not afraid of going against the rules of the Department of Education (SEP per its acronym in Spanish) to teach students the basics of the Mayan language. Really, though, it wasn't just an interest – it was an obligation. Most Indigenous peoples are given an obligation; I was given mine during my teen years. At the time it didn't mean much to me, but with time I have come to

recognize my role in revitalizing, reclaiming, and recovering not only the words, but the wisdom embedded in the language of my ancestors. My obligation was worded along these lines: “The voices of your ancestors will live through you” and it continues to resonate as I embrace my work to revitalize Indigenous languages.

INTRODUCTION

Region and Speakers

Today, Mayan languages are spoken by more than six million people in Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and (due to violence, diaspora, and land disposition) it is possible to locate Mayan speakers in communities in the USA and Canada. Six million people sound like a substantial number of speakers, but if we consider that the Mayan linguistic family has at least thirty-two different variants (Bennett et al 2015), the number decreases. For example, in Mexico the Mayan variants Huasteco (Teenek) in central Mexico, Lakantun (Lacandon) and Ch'ol spoken in Chiapas have relatively few speakers compared to the Yucatec variant.

Furthermore, if we compare the number of Mayan speakers against speakers of what is considered the national language, whether Spanish or English, the number decreases even more, and then we begin to see the need to revitalize or refunctionalize in order to bring the language back to its functioning state. The term refunctionalize is described by Mayan anthropologist and linguist, Dr. Briceño Chel. For him, revitalizing entails the acceptance that the language is in a decadent state, and Mayan peoples prefer not to see their language as unprotected. Therefore, Dr. Briceño Chel proposes the term refunctionalize, since it is the State's obligation to ensure that all national languages are spoken in all social areas, from home, school and, of course, in interaction with government institutions and to protect speakers of equally deserving communities (Briceño Chel 1012).

The highest concentration of Maya speakers is found in Guatemala, where between fifty and sixty percent of the total population are considered native Mayan speakers. K'iche',

Uspantek, Ixil, and Q'eqchi' are the most popular languages spoken in Guatemala (England 2003). Outside of Guatemala, Mexico has the highest concentration of Maya speakers in Central America. Based on the 2020 census reported by INEGI (National Institute of Statistics, Geography, and Informatics per its acronym in Spanish) 774,755 peoples speak Mayan Yucatec, of this number 398,124 are men, and 376,631 are women (INEGI), although there is a possibility that the female population is larger than what INEGI registers, due to the fact that Indigenous women in Mexico still endure higher levels of discrimination for being women, for being Indigenous, and for speaking an Indigenous language; therefore the number might not be reflecting all of the speakers. There has been, however, a decrease in the number of Mayan speakers in recent years. In the 2010 national census, INEGI registered a total of 795,499 Mayan speakers in Mexico. This means that in ten years the Mayan speaking population has lost 20,744 peoples (INEGI).

The Yucatec variant of the Mayan language is spoken mainly in the three Mexican states that make up the peninsula of Yucatan - Campeche, Yucatan and Quintana Roo. There is, however, intelligibility with Mayan languages in other countries; for example, Maya Itz'aj in Belize, a highly endangered language that today registers less than 100 survivors, and that will most likely disappear in the next generations (Briceño Chel 2021, Palosaari 2011). There are other Mayan languages such as the Mocho variant that registers a low index of speakers (Hofling 2000, Palosaari 2011), while, sadly, Ch'olti' and Chicomuceltec are now considered extinct variants (Law 2014).

[Why is this considered a minority/ized language or culture?](#)

Although Yucatec Mayan is the second most spoken Indigenous language in the Mexican republic, standing only behind Nahuatl with 1,651,958 speakers (INEGI), it has also experienced

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and continues to experience the loss of speakers. Honoring other languages included in this project, I will briefly mention a couple of historical movements that contributed to the loss of not only Mayan speakers, but also culture and identity.

There are a few reasons to account for the decrease of Mayan speakers in Mexico. Historically, colonization took its toll on all Indigenous Peoples, their cultures, and their languages in the Americas. The conquest of Yucatan was not an easy task; in this area, the conquest took longer than it did in Central Mexico, where the Spanish were only able to defeat the Aztec empire after establishing alliances with the Tlaxcaltecas and other Indigenous nations (Bravo 41). In comparison, the colonization of Mayan people was much more contended; in fact, some may say that Mayan people have continuously lived in resistance up until this very day. Mayan people are active in the reclamation of their right to language, identity, and territory (Velasquez Nimatuj 2016, Casañas 2021).

Francisco de Montejo arrived in Yucatan in 1527 and it took him nearly twenty years to conquer this area. During the conquest process, Mayan peoples responded with resistance and attacked the Spanish incursions on different occasions (Molina Solis 380-1). Mayan people were not scared to battle and defeated Spanish invasions multiple times until (after a number of battles) finally in 1547 the peninsula was completely under Spanish rule and under the influence of the Catholic Church (Molina Solis 837). While Mayan warriors were prepared to face the Spanish, they were not ready for the different sicknesses and epidemics brought to the Americas by the foreigners. After the conquest, there were smallpox, measles, intense labor, and sunstrokes. Many Indigenous people died due to these diseases (Molina Solis 219-22). Scholars estimate that, during this time, one in eight people died due to epidemic diseases in the Peninsula

of Yucatan, adding up to approximately 65,000 deaths (Canto 52, Farraez 115-41, Malvido 111-70).

During the processes of conquest and colonization, Mayan people found themselves as production workers in a colonial system. Another bloody episode, much less well known, was *la Guerra de Castas*, the Castle War (approximately between 1847-1901), where Mayan people again resisted colonization and land removal. During this time (although the Mayan population suffered important human losses and hunger), they were also in control of the jungle areas in eastern Yucatan, and they kept it until the end of the century. Mayan people were strong fighters and knew the jungle area quite well, which gave them an advantage over the Spanish people who had settled in towns. According to Nelson Reed, during *la Guerra de Castas*, white men and women fell prisoner and died as slaves, thus suffering the same fate that the Mayan people had before when their empires were reduced to working camps (Reed 9, Gonzalez 2006). Studies that analyze this movement tend to suggest that one of the main influences moving Mayan people to fight was the opportunity to have control over their natural resources, as well as their leaders' negotiation skills to establish business with people (Gonzalez 2006). The constant battles between the army and the rebels, along with the spread of epidemics, weakened this movement that officially ended in 1901 under the presidency of Porfirio Díaz. Although, in reality many Indigenous rebels who took refuge in the mountains, *la montaña*, maintain their autonomy and are able to exercise their traditional jurisdiction. They have also been able to retain political and economic power in several municipalities of Quintana Roo; for example, Felipe Carrillo Puerto, Tulum, and Solidaridad. In many ways, it is a war that was never concluded and that continues to this day. Many Mayans continue to live in resistance and prefer to work their own lands, to grow their traditional *milpas* rather than to give their work and time to a boss, a *Dzul*.

Pedro Bracamonte y Sosa, Mexican anthropologist and ethnohistorian, supports the principle that many Mayan people fled to *la montaña* to avoid suppression by the colonial system. According to Bracamonte, more than 30,000 people populated the mountain area (15) creating regions of emancipation where the colonial state could not enter. According to him the conquest was left unfinished considering that the Mayan population in the area was never fully converted under the colonial period. The establishment of emancipation regions gave Indigenous peoples the opportunity to reclaim their culture and ways of living and to implement their jurisdiction, and several Mayan peoples such as Itzaes, Mopanes, and Lacandonos kept their position of autonomy, which does not represent the subjugation of an entire culture, but the fall of their capital region (Bracamonte y Sosa 2001).

Therefore, during the conquest and colonial time, Mayan culture, once considered one of the most influential civilizations in pre-Columbian history, experienced a decline in the number of speakers due to epidemics and battles. There are, however, side effects of colonization that continue to contribute to reduction of Indigenous speakers. In more recent times, the peninsula has experienced complex colonization processes aiming towards modernization and pushing for industrialization, renewable energy, and truisms. Many such projects involve the removal of Indigenous communities to exploit their land and natural resources. One of said projects is, indeed, the Mayan Train, a multimillion project designed, supposedly, to help Indigenous communities, but that Mayan people didn't ask for or approve.

National Languages and Language Ideologies

Although it is true that numerous Indigenous peoples perished during the conquest and colonial rule due to wars and epidemics, their suffering has continued until today in the form of

racism and discrimination in the form of language ideologies that limit the rights of Indigenous communities to language and culture. In Mexico, as in many other countries, Indigenous peoples have been socially disadvantaged and forced into silent zones. They have lived in these zones for centuries and have grown so accustomed to them that stepping outside of them results in discomfort because it makes evident the vulnerable place Indigenous speakers occupy in relation to Mexico's Spanish speaking population (Morales-Good 2020). Since colonization, Indigenous peoples have resisted different ways of assimilation into a Western form of society that was imposed on them and that moves them away from their traditional knowledge and languages – wrongly classifying them as underdeveloped (Lopez-Hernandez 47-74).

Opposing the State's anti-Indigenous racism, anthropologists Rodolfo Stavenhagen and Guillermo Bonfil, avid defenders of Indigeneity, argued that the underdevelopment of the Indigenous communities (measured by Western perspectives) comes indirectly, or directly, from the mestizos' economic subordination and because of the State's greediness and racism, which is used to justify the extraction of natural resources and any wealth that's left within Indigenous territories (Mattiace 65). This is especially visible at this time when Mayan communities continue to fight against the implementation of the Mayan Train. The Mexican government defends this project by saying that it will bring economic resources to Indigenous communities in the peninsula, but Mayan communities argue that the result will be the opposite. According to Poet Pedro Uc Be, the Train will bring with it the death of animal species, the contamination of natural resources, and the clear cutting of vegetation (Gomez 2022).

In Mexico, the rights to language, autonomy, and culture are protected by the national constitution, which states, "All persons shall enjoy the human rights recognized in this constitution and in the international treaties to which the Mexican State is a party, as well as the

guarantees for their protection...” (Mexican Constitution, Article 1). Article 2 of the Constitution talks about the multicultural composition of the nation, articulating, “Originally based on Indigenous peoples, which are descendants of populations that lived in the current territory of the country at the beginning of colonization, and that preserve their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions, or *part of them*” (my emphasis). Section B of Article 2 recognizes the State’s responsibility to establish the necessary policies to guarantee Indigenous rights. It states that in order to promote equal opportunities for Indigenous people and decrease discriminatory practices, the State will “determine the necessary policies to guarantee the validity of the rights of Indigenous people and the integral development of their peoples and communities, which should be designed and *operated jointly with them*” (Article 2, my emphasis). It is worth mentioning that the cultural component of Article 2 of the Constitution was just added in 2001 after a constitutional reformation was passed. As a result, it is safe to say that Mexico has recognized its multicultural composition and the presence of Indigenous communities in the national scenario, at least on paper.

This reform, however, has not deterred discrimination in the social scenario. In Mexico, there is a noticeable friction between what are considered Mexican and Indigenous communities. This situation negatively affects the Indigenous’ daily lives, including their interactions in markets, doctor visits, educational institutions, and, of course, public spaces. The very notion that there are many identifiable factors that distinguish one community from another (skin color and the wearing of traditional clothing, for example) immediately ties the usage of an Indigenous language to those less privileged, but equally deserving, communities. Sadly, to avoid negative treatment, Indigenous language speakers end up admitting proficiency in Spanish, even if said proficiency produces linguistic distress, and harms their situation in social cases (Morales Good

2020). Therefore, perspectives and ideologies about language affect social life in many different aspects because they influence perceptions of people, groups, events, and activities (Haviland 764). Such perceptions falsely categorize all Indigenous peoples and set them in a place of disadvantage in comparison to the Spanish-speaking community.

Scholars have explained the relationship between language ideologies and their use within culture and society (Silverstein 1979, Irvine 255). For example, Paul V. Kroskrity (2004) refers to language ideologies as a set of beliefs used by all types of speakers as a model to create language evaluations and engage in communicative activity. For Kroskrity, language ideologies are “beliefs about the superiority/inferiority of specific languages” (Kroskrity 497). Therefore, language ideologies are beliefs, feelings, or perceptions about languages as used in a social context. Kroskrity refers to them as plural because they include ideas about gender, class, ethnicity, and race, among others (Kroskrity 503).

Much of the disdain suffered by the Mayans comes from the Yucatecan-Mexicans. They devalue the Mayan culture and language, and encourage the use of Spanish as the official language in social scenarios. Indeed, language ideologies also play an important role in matters of inequality, discrimination (Lippi-Green 2012), the imputation of nationality (Irvine and Gal 2000), and group identity (Collins 1992). Therefore, language ideologies play an important role in the decline of Indigenous language speakers as they present Spanish as the de facto language in a multicultural society. The strongest obstacle to Indigenous people accepting their identities is a society that privileges foreign worldviews and belittles native ways of knowing (Figueroa 122-43). It causes Indigenous people to develop a sense of exclusion and consciousness of racism that reinforces the false notion of their inferiority. It is nothing more than racism that

denies people their language and cultural integrity while validating language ideologies that support national or “superior” languages (Bender 333; Kearney 226-243; Naranjo 1-24).

If we somehow manage to defeat negative language ideologies that continue to persuade people to believe that speaking an Indigenous language denotes social inferiority, Indigenous people will be a step closer to decolonization and self-determination. This feat is not impossible, but it requires political will, and it should be a collective effort between the State and Indigenous communities. It can no longer be one-directional; Indigenous people must control their knowledge and the way it is presented and disseminated. They should also have control over research done in their communities to oversee and safeguard their customs, rules, and ancestral practices, and it should be they who dictate the way that knowledge is shared and disseminated for the benefit of the communities (Battiste 499-503).

According to Dr. Fidencio Briceño Chel, who refers specifically to the decrease of the Mayan population in the Peninsula, in 1990 38.5% of the Mexican population spoke the Yucatec variant of the Mayan language or *Maayat'aan*, while by 2015 the percentage had reduced to 35.2% (Chel 136). This decline, sadly, supports the principle that if the language stops being transmitted, due to the longstanding side effects of colonization along with language ideologies, the percentage of Indigenous language speakers will inevitably decrease. To improve the situation Briceño Chel, along with other Mayan speakers, linguists, and activists, has been working to refunctionalize the language. He proposes working with small children to strengthen their cultural values as well as the love and admiration for their languages and their territories (Briceño Chel 2021).

Mayan works worth including in curriculum development

From a Colonial Perspective

It must be said that, although colonization and evangelization took a toll in Mesoamerican Indigenous communities, there are also important documents written by colonizers and priests that serve as an approximation to understand ancient cultures. One of the most well-known documents detailing the Mayan world from an entirely Western perspective is *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* written by Diego de Landa, Bishop of Yucatan. He is mostly known for the violent campaign he led against idolatry and was involved in the needless deaths of hundreds of Mayans (Bracamonte y Sosa 58). Diego de Landa invested time to learn about Mayan culture, specifically trying to find similarities between their religion and Christianity. In this *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, he documents important information about Mayan history, culture, beliefs, and ways of living. The pre-Columbian calendar and the brief commentary on the mysterious Mayan hieroglyphic writing stands out among the information collected in this work. The text was written as a record of Mayan Yucatec society at the time of the conquest, with the main purpose being to help new evangelizers carry out their task in a more efficient and didactic way. The publication of this document represents a source of the study of Mayan archaeology and history, and it could be considered an important contribution to the literature in this field. It should be noted that De Landa had the help of informants who were native to the peninsula, such as Gaspar Antonio Chí. As an informant, Chi helped De Landa fight idolatry. During this time, the Church delivered many sentences related to the destruction of ancestral

spaces, as well as hangings, lashings, and torture involving Chi's own people, the Xiu, and their enemy, the Cocomos of Yucatan (Bracamonte y Sosa 58, Yannakakis 7-8).

De Landa knew the knowledge of the old ways and religion was still engraved in the minds of his informants, and he used these informed sources to learn about their religion and then destroy it. De Landa is also known as the person responsible for the destruction of most of the Yucatec Mayan codices and culture (De Landa 3). His *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán* was written in the same fashion as *Historia General de las Cosas de la Nueva España* by Bernardino de Sahagún (2008). Both of them based their work upon information provided by Indigenous informants who had reached adulthood living their Indigenous ways of knowing before the Spanish conquest. Both of these works remain a canon, so to speak, each in its particular field; they also set the path for new research to be done in Indigenous communities, creating a sense of connection and solidarity in a reciprocal way, and emphasizing the need to decolonize traditional research, where Indigenous communities were/are seen as passive subjects and not as protagonists fighting back colonial practices put in place to erode their traditional knowledge, languages, and territories.

Works Written from an Indigenous Lens

Popol Vuh

The Popol Vuh is considered the most important piece of Mayan literature to have survived the conquest, as it offers important details about Mayan culture, their cosmogony, and religion. Scholars have addressed the influence of the Christian Bible in this canon, especially what refers to the description of the creation (Tedlock 2013, Recinos et al 1950). The story of the creation of lands, rivers and skies is often compared to the book of Genesis (Recinos et al 8,

Tedlock 62). The book, however, is full of Indigenous flavors, details, and bears outstanding knowledge relevant to Mayan culture; for example, the different attempts made by the gods in order to create animals and human beings who would worship them and, the humiliation and punishment given to beings who were unable to recognize and adore their creators (Recinos 84-94). The Popol Vuh describes the gods' experimentation process with human work (Tedlock 68) and admits that the creator gods are also able to make mistakes as modelers.

Mayan sense of resistance is evident from the very moment of the creation. The world was in darkness after a flood and the story goes on to explain how the twins, Hunahpú and Xbalanqué's (different spellings are used), battle with the Lord of Xibalbá (Tedlock 43) for the light of the moon and the sun. After defeating the Lords of the underworld, the twins rise as the moon and the sun (Tedlock 287). Maya K'iche' people see the moon as the nocturnal equivalent of the sun, and together they make a full day cycle. Finally, when there is sun and light, the gods are able to mold the perfect human out of maize which explains the important relationship Mayan people profess for this seed and their traditional territories (Recinos 167). Once the world had been created and silence and darkness had been undone, words, *la palabra*, were created to narrate the Book of Council, Popol Vuh.

Chilam Balam

Another outstanding piece of Indigenous literature for Mayan peoples is, indeed, the Chilam Balam of Chumayel (Roys 1950). This document describes the creation of the twenty-day calendar, even before the creation of the world (Leon Portilla 233), then the creation of everything around us is detailed day by day, the Chilam Balam states:

the uninal,

twenty-day cycle,
was created,
the day, as it was called,
was created,
heaven and earth were created,
the stairway of water,
the earth, rocks, and trees;
the things of the sea
and the things of the land
were created (Leon Portilla 234).

In the Chilam Balam, in comparison with the Popol Vuh, humans were molded out of mud. On day thirteen “On 13-Akbal he [the creator] took water and watered the ground, then he shaped it and it became man” (Leon Portilla 235). The idea of circularity in the Mayan world is constant, it symbolizes the union of the beginning with the end, translated as cyclicity of time. This belief explains that, according to the Mayans, things happen because they are destined that way. As stated in the Chilam Balam “Every day is set in order according to the count, beginning in the east, as it is arranged...” (Leon Portilla 236).

The last piece of literature I would like to include in this chapter is *Los Cantares de Dzitbalche* translated and annotated by the anthologist, linguist, and Mayanist, Alfredo Barrera Vasquez, a Yucatan native scholar known for his extensive work in Mayan culture and his contributions to promote literacy among Mayan peoples (Marin 2013).

Los Cantares de Dzitbalché constitutes the publication of an important first-hand Mayan source that registers both its pre-colonial roots and the modification Mayan thought underwent as a result of the Spanish conquest. The songs included in this work are not easy to interpret due to the cryptic language in which they are written. They require a broad knowledge of the culture and religion of the pre-colonial Mayans, since the songs do not explicitly address the sacred world, although it is embedded within the language. The introduction and cultural comments offered by Barrera Vasquez are essential to achieve a more approximate understanding of the Indigenous knowledge included in the songs (Vasquez 1965).

The translation of the songs involved knowing the ancient religious corpus exercised by pre-Hispanic cultures, the changes it suffered as a result of the contact between original groups and Europeans colonizers. This process involved the juxtaposition of elements of Christianity and native traditions, resulting in a new syncretized religion, which shows the way in which the Mayans, from the colonization period, modified their way of perceiving and explaining the world. Thus, the knowledge and analysis of *Los Cantares de Dzitbalché* unravels the complexity of the symbolism that makes up the songs to make them accessible to the reader, even if they are not a specialist in Mayan culture.

In the pursuit of language and cultural reclamation, Briceño Chel and other Mayan linguists and activists such as Pedro Uc Be, Feliciano Sanchez Chan, and Briceida Cuevas Cob, among others, utilize some of the most influential Mayan documents and oral traditions in their works. I have tried to follow their example in my personal teaching practice; for example, while seeking to introduce students to different forms of Indigenous literatures, including poetry and oral traditions, I created a class in 2020 entitled “Indigenous Voices in Mexican Literature.” This class was inspired by Indigenous literary traditions often ignored by Western ideologies. I

included, for example, *The Popol Vuh* –The Sacred book of the Maya, parts of the *Chilam Balan* of Chumayel, and *Los Cantares of Dzitbalché*. Additionally, to prove that Mayan people were not all exterminated during colonial times and that their languages were never fully erased due to colonization and christianization, I turn to important Mayan activists and human rights defenders. For example, to talk about the sufferings endured by the Maya K'iche' and Maya Ixil communities, I quote the voices of Nobel Peace Prize winner, Rigoberta Menchú Tum, journalist and anthropologist Irma Alicia Velasquez Nimatuj, and human rights activist Andrea Ixchú. To talk about language reclamation, I cite the efforts of my good friend and colleague Fidencio Briceño Chel whose work has had outstanding results for Mayan communities in the Peninsula of Yucatan, especially for young children who learn to appreciate the importance of their territory and language through Fidencio's workshops. Many Mayan people have taken advantage from Fidencio's workshops, including Mayan rapper Pat Boy who raps entirely in Maya, and who is featured this year in the Marvel film *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (Morse 2022). Equally important, to talk about land dispossession and the relationship between Indigenous peoples and their ancestral territories, I turn to the words of my teacher and colleague Pedro Uc Be.

In Terms of Language Reclamation

It must be noted that, as a result of government policies implemented since colonial times, the language of minority, or rather, the language of minoritized groups, has been undermined because since then Spanish, Europeans, and other Mexicans have sought linguistic homogenization.

In terms of learning the language, the Writing Standards for the Mayan Language (*Un'ukbesajil i ts'ibta'al maayat'aan*) seeks to strengthen the initiatives and decisions of Indigenous peoples to enrich their languages, knowledge, and all the elements that constitute their culture and identity. The writing standards of the national Indigenous languages facilitate the generation of knowledge, recognition, and appreciation of the linguistic diversity in Mexico, as well as the dissemination and revitalization of national Indigenous languages. This important manual to Mayan writing standards was published in 2014 by INALI (National Institute of Indigenous Languages) and was coordinated by Fidencio Briceño Chel and Geronimo Ricardo Can Tec (Briceño Chel, Can Tec 2014)

The book offers information about the use of vowels and consonants, one of the most important aspects to Mayan language. The use of vowels and their variations are shown in the table below:

Short vowels	a	e	i	o	u
Long vowels	aa	ee	ii	oo	uu
High pitch vowels	áa	ée	íi	óo	úu
Glottalized vowel	a'	e'	i'	o'	u'
Rearticulated vowels	a'a	e'e	i'i	o'o	u'u

The Writing Standards go deep into explaining the composition of morphemes, words, nouns, verbs, adjectives, pluralization, questions, and locatives among the most important

grammar rules to Mayan language (Briceño Chel, Can Tec 2014). This is an introduction to grammar structures and offers a better understanding of the structure of the required elements in a Mayan sentence as well as the elements needed to differentiate time, noun, and the type of verbs (transitive or intransitive) in each sentence.

Many scholars such as Lyle Campbell, Yuri Knorosov, Terrance Kaufman, and Nora C. England have done outstanding work to document Mayan linguistics. While briefly recognizing their significance in Mayan language, my intention is not to diminish their importance within Mesoamerican languages but to shed light onto what every day native Mayan people, linguists, poets, and activists do to strengthen their languages, cultures, communities, and territories in spite of the limited resources provided by their local governments and the never-ending cultural and linguistic discrimination encouraged by language ideologies. It is also worth noting that foreign researchers tend to prefer Western methodologies that do not always reflect the Indigenous reality. Talking about Mayan languages, many other topics must be studied alongside language, for example, numerology, mystery, transcendence, and the metaphysical plane.

In terms of learning Indigenous languages, it becomes essential to recognize their descriptive nature and their close ties with the natural world, including local animals and plants (Battiste 499). I recognize that Indigenous culture is, indeed, a way of communicating (Hall 93-8). Scholars document that Indigenous language would not exist without culture (Jian 328-34, Nida 29-33). Languages reflect communities' cultural components; they carry important information about a speaker's background, both historical and cultural. For Indigenous peoples worldwide, language is a place of resistance, as it speaks to their struggles in a monolingual dominant society.

Regarding a deeper understanding of Mayan worldview, it is worth mentioning the Madrid, Paris, Grolier, and Dresen codices. This collection of essays contains outstanding information related to Mayans' relationship with the natural world as well as the celestial sphere (Aveni 1992). The civilization's deep knowledge of mathematics, architecture, numbers, and astrology becomes evident in the pages of such codices.

Finally, because we cannot separate culture from language, I believe it is important to mention the efforts made jointly between academia, the not-for-profit sector, and community members to offer language instruction and create cultural sensitivity. When visiting Indigenous communities, it is crucial to orientate outsiders regarding the importance of following protocols put in place by Indigenous communities as a way to create a relationship of respect to their ways of knowing and reciprocity. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, for example, has a longstanding relationship with Dr. Fidencio Briceño Chel. Together, every summer, they run the Yucatec Maya Institute sponsored by the UNC-Duke consortium. The program runs annually for six weeks and combines language immersion activities, lectures, demonstrations, and guest speakers (ISA 2022). Fidencio takes the words of his grandfather as his driving force to continue his works as cultural promoter *Ma' su'utsil a t'anik maayai', su'utsil ma' a t'anik* (it is not embarrassing to speak Mayan, it's embarrassing not to speak it) (Briceño Chel 1012). As a lifetime defender of the Mayan language, he has developed books documenting tongue twisters, songs, stories and, in addition, has offered over 1,000 workshops in many Mayan communities across the Peninsula of Yucatan.

In the case of Guatemala, the Mayan Institute "Padre Guillermo Woods" is another example of a center that seeks to strengthen Mayan culture and spirituality from a community perspective. Given the descriptive nature of Indigenous languages, printed texts alone fall short

in covering all cultural aspects embedded in the language. Therefore, learning from Mayan speakers in a community context becomes the best way to learn language, culture, and all the knowledge living in Mayan territories.

Questions for Further Study

While I have tried to resolve some questions about important works related to Mayan cultures, this essay probably opens as many questions as it might have resolved. Plentiful work is still needed to strengthen Mayan communities because limited work has been done regarding the need for intercultural and bilingual (Indigenous-Spanish) education for Indigenous communities in Mexico (Hamel 2008). Bilingual and intercultural education will strengthen children's ties with their communities and territories. Additionally, language rights still need to be recognized as part of human rights. Especially when involving historically disadvantaged communities such as Indigenous peoples (Morales-Good 2020, Hamel et al 2018). The deep relationship between language, land, nature, and Indigenous peoples is yet to be understood by non-Indigenous researchers (Armstrong 146-159). The Land gives us language, and we understand the world according to the knowledge the land shares with us. When Indigenous peoples are forcibly removed from their territories, a connection is lost and we are left with a need to find a sense of belonging.

This is a crucial time for undergraduate students to learn Mayan language and to show appreciation for Mayan culture, ways of living, and territory. A few years from now, due to Mexico's mega project the Mayan train, the Peninsula of Yucatan will be offering a very different scenery. The voices of those fighting to protect their territory and sacred spaces could

become an outstanding responsibility to graduate students seeking to document Indigenous forms of resistance. Furthermore, qualitative work will be needed to demonstrate whether or not Mayan communities would benefit from the Mayan train. It will also be our responsibility as scholars to document how such a project benefits or deters language reclamation. What is in the future for Mayan languages in the Peninsula of Yucatan? Would those already at risk survive? Would we see a positive shift on Mayan speakers? It is our responsibility as students, graduate students, and scholars to continue to strengthen Indigenous languages, as we challenge social norms and seek equity and inclusion.

Conclusion

Throughout this document, my intention has been to shed some light on the current state of Yucatec Maya. I have documented the geographical region in which this language is spoken and offer evidence of language decrease, as well as naming some of the causes encouraging a decrease in speakers' numbers. Historically, Yucatec Maya was made a minoritized language due to racism and language ideologies. Fortunately, Mayan people have resisted the loss of their language and consequently their culture. Today it is possible to raise the voices of Mayan speakers to slowly erase a little of the scorn and ignorance that our people have endured. As an Indigenous scholar seeking to reclaim my culture and language, and obeying the responsibility bestowed on me by my elders, I offer this essay hoping that it will awaken within the readers the desire to learn more about the Yucatec Mayan language and that it will bring positive attention to our people and our language.

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