

Oj Kojtz'iban, Oj Kojk'asi'k / We Write, We Survive: The Rebirth of Maya Literacy

<p>“Naj” Pa wa jun ch'uti 'n tinimit juntira naj kakanaj wi: ri wa, ri tz'ib', ri atzyaq...</p>	<p>“Far” In this little country everything is far away: food, writing, clothing...</p>
<p>Humberto Ak'abal, K'iche' poet (2004:252, below)</p>	

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The books in my “Maya literature” collection are written by authors and scholars who identify themselves as Maya, as members of the indigenous civilizations that have occupied the highlands, coasts, and cloud forests of Central America for more than three millennia before the arrival of European colonists or the birth of the creole / *mestizo* nations of the Americas. Some Maya authors write in Spanish or English in order to reach a broader audience. Others write in any of the twenty-one distinct Mayan languages spoken today in Guatemala. Although I consider it my most valued collection, in fact it remains relatively small, constrained by the difficulties of transporting each new addition across the mountainous terrain of Guatemala and back home each summer. My policy for packing each May is to take clothing that I won't mind leaving abroad, in order to make room for more books in my luggage on the flight home.

However, the size of my collection is also limited by the relative scarcity of books that fit the criteria of belonging. Books written by Mayas or in Mayan languages are a newly emerging phenomenon, following a long history of Mayas' exclusion from education and the means of scholarship. Thus, Mayan languages and perspectives are being captured in written form for the first time since the Maya inscribed their languages in glyphs on the surfaces of their temples and palaces in what archaeologists call the “Classic Period,” over a millennium ago.

My original motivation for collecting these books was professional: as an anthropologist, I see works of Maya literature as important sources of data about contemporary indigenous perspectives on Guatemala. My goals as a researcher are to meet the writers and publishers

who produce these texts, to participate in their work, and to understand why the restoration of literacy is considered one of the most pressing social issues in Maya communities. However, as I have gathered these books and explored the stories, histories, and memories within their pages, I have discovered a stronger, more personal motivation for expanding my collection: *These books give me hope*. Each volume is a testament to the human potential for regeneration and creativity. As the collection expands, I am reminded that communities of people can maintain and revitalize their knowledge and practices in the face of incredible adversity.

The survival and revitalization of Mayan languages and identities into the present day is a remarkable case of the preservation of human heritage. These elements of Maya culture have persisted despite five hundred years of systematic attempts at assimilation, from the violence of “the Conquest”, through the rigid racial hierarchies of Spanish colonialism, to the recent attempts by the Guatemalan state to commit genocide of Maya peoples in the name of national security.¹ Mayan languages have survived despite the destruction of all but a handful of the codices of classical Maya literature (and the removal of these to museums in Europe and the United States), despite the exclusion of indigenous peoples from public schools until the modern era, and despite the subsequent policies of forced “Spanish-ization” that encouraged teachers to corporally punish Maya schoolchildren who spoke in their mother languages during class. An elderly Maya woman recounted to me that as a child she was repeatedly told by her teachers that her K’iche’ Mayan language was unfit for public discourse, a source of shame and backwardness for the Guatemalan nation. This woman was thankful that the members of her household taught her to speak K’iche’ anyway, and now as a schoolteacher herself, she is

¹ I enthusiastically refer the reader to the following Maya-produced and/or Maya-published texts for further information about the history of Guatemala and the peoples who have lived there for millennia: Akkeren 2007; Del Valle Escalante 2008; Cojtí et al. 2007; Montejo 1999, 2005; Museo Comunitario Rabinal Achi 2003. One of the greatest consequences of the Maya literacy movement is the addition, at last, of Maya perspectives on this history.

enthusiastic about using the school's resources to help pass on her language to the next generation of children.

Although Mayan languages have survived in oral form, widespread *literacy* in Mayan languages is an altogether new possibility. The Guatemalan state's shift toward bilingual, intercultural education began only in the late 1980s, following efforts by Maya leaders to gain formal legal protections for indigenous culture. Many of the books in my collection are products of this movement for linguistic and educational rights – including the first grammars and dictionaries produced by Maya linguists, guidebooks on “Maya pedagogy” to assist teachers in planning culturally-appropriate lessons, and textbooks designed to teach young children the languages and histories of their Maya communities. These and other works in my collection span and often defy different genres, incorporating knowledge that we might label “folklore” alongside descriptions of agricultural science, or combining the *testimonio* genre of memory narrative with graphic details from forensic anthropologists' exhumations of mass graves dating to the period of violence in the 1980s. I find this narrative innovativeness appealing as a scholar and as a reader – and I have felt the influence of Maya literature on my practices as a writer.

The books I include with this essay demonstrate some of the breadth of Maya literature. Two are textbooks for primary school children: *Kik'ulmatajem Winaqib'* (Tzicap Tzunún and Can Pixabaj 2007), is a K'iche'-language primer that teaches children who speak K'iche' how to read and write in their mother tongue. This book represents the momentous shift in government policies toward bilingual education, the preservation of Mayan languages, and support for Mayan-language literacy and publications. The second textbook, *Kaqchikela*, presents a condensed version of a rare colonial-era Mayan text that recounts the history of the Kaqchikel people. *Kaqchikela* embodies the openness of the preeminent Maya-run publishing house,

Editorial Cholsamaj, to working collaboratively with foreign and non-Maya scholars and to making Maya scholarship accessible to wider national and international audiences. The book was co-authored by Guillermo Paz Cárcamo, a *Ladino* (mestizo) Guatemalan historian, and the Maya scholar Saqilk'u'x Ajpwaq. *Kaqchikela* was published in Spanish in order to encourage its adoption by schoolteachers in Spanish-speaking schools in the capital city, which is nestled in Kaqchikel-language territory. Publishers at Editorial Cholsamaj are excited about the prospect of *all* Guatemalan students learning about and taking pride in Maya history, and they hope to produce more textbooks along the lines of *Kaqchikela*, pertaining to each of the twenty-one Mayan language groups in Guatemala.

Creative writing has also provided an important platform for the publication and revalorization of Mayan languages. Humberto Ak'abal, a K'iche' poet from Momostenango, Guatemala, has gained worldwide recognition for his work, which is published originally in bilingual K'iche' – Spanish volumes, but has been translated into over a dozen foreign languages. The volumes of Don Ak'abal's poetry in my collection were my own first “textbooks” when I began studying K'iche', and as such they carry a great deal of sentimental value.

Finally, the small volume titled *Jupaj Kapaj Uq'alajisaxik uk'u'xal uxe'al Mayab' Kojob'äl* (Gómez and Guarchaj 2002) makes up in ambition and purpose what it might lack in length. This book on “Steps toward understanding the heart of Maya beliefs” is written completely in K'iche', making it an early example of what a future with Mayan literacy could bring. At present, few people have developed the level of fluency needed to read this volume; however the promise that it represents for a true rebirth of Mayan literacy – and the consequent potential for a truly multicultural Guatemalan nation – make this little book the most cherished one that I own.

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