Language, Literacy and Maintenance of Oral Tradition in a Kaqchikel Maya Community
Preliminary Report

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Hana Muzika Kahn is an assistant professor of Spanish at Temple University. Her research focuses on Guatemalan Mayan literature with an emphasis on (self) translation and re-writing in the sociolinguistic context of indigenous language revitalization. Muzika Kahn uses a comparative approach in analyzing the cultural content, literary style, and linguistic characteristics of works by Spanish/Mayan language bilingual authors. Her current research, “Language contact, maintenance and revitalization in the Guatemalan highlands: expressive aspects of the use of Kaqchikel Maya and Spanish in oral histories and narratives”, is a collaborative project with Dr. Jonathan Holmquist (also in Temple University Spanish Department). Holmquist and Muzika Kahn are combining their backgrounds in sociolinguistics and comparative literature to evaluate language use in Parramos, a bilingual community in the Guatemalan highlands, where Spanish and Kaqchikel Maya are spoken, and to collect and analyze oral histories and narratives. Muzika Kahn received a Ph.D. and M.Ed. from Rutgers University, a B.Phil. from Liverpool University, and a B.A. from Manchester University. She has taught French, Spanish and English literatures and languages in the U.S.A., Peru, France, and England.
Abstract

Background
Kaqchikel is one of the 22 Mayan languages of Guatemala, spoken in areas in close contact with the capital and other Spanish-speaking cities. Following the Peace Accords of 1996 and demands for Mayan language revitalization and revalidation, the 2003 Language Law and other official policy statements established new standards for the use and recognition of the Mayan languages, Garifuna and Xinka in Guatemala, while maintaining Spanish as the only official language; DIGEBI, (Dirección General de Educación Bilingüe Intercultural) has promoted bilingual language instruction, but lacking enforcement, pedagogical support and materials, progress has been slow and Mayan language literacy is uncommon.

Previous studies
According to earlier studies by Edward Fisher, McKenna Brown, Susan Garzon and others, there has been considerable Kaqchikel language loss and shift to Spanish among children attending school and adults who are working in more urban communities, but there are some indications that the trend may be changing.

Current research
My paper will present current research to determine proficiency levels in Kaqchikel and Spanish among speakers of different generations of families, and the frequency of their use of each language in the home and in other spheres of community life. Taking into account the materials published on the Maya Movement by Cojti Cuxil and on Kaqchikel Literature by Salazar Tetzagüic, I will also discuss current attitudes toward the maintenance and loss of Maya language and culture, the adoption of Hispanic alternatives, and the survival of Kaqchikel oral tradition.
Introduction

In summer 2011 Dr. Jonathan Holmquist, a colleague at Temple University, and I began a research project in Parramos, Chimaltenango to develop a sociolinguistic study of Kaqchikel and Spanish language and collect oral narratives in the community. Kaqchikel is one of 30 Maya languages, of which 21 are used in Guatemala. It is one of the most widely used, and is spoken in 52 towns in 7 counties by about 500,000 speakers, according to the 2002 census. Spanish is the official language of Guatemala. This preliminary report presents the background of the community, discusses the significance of oral tradition in the maintenance of community language and culture, and describes the current sociolinguistic status in relation to Kaqchikel instruction in the schools.

Parramos is a town in the Guatemalan highlands between Antigua and Chimaltenango, with a mixed Maya Kaqchikel-Ladino population of 14,000. It is organized into four “cantones” (neighborhoods in the town itself), three rural villages, and two “caseríos” (or rural hamlets). The neighborhoods in the town all have Spanish names: La Libertad, La Unión, La Paz, and La Democracia; the rural villages and hamlets all have Maya names: Parojas, Chirijuyu, Pampay, Chitaburuy, and Paraxaj and are located on the hillsides surrounding Parramos. As mentioned, the population of the town is mixed Ladino and Maya Kaqchikel, with Kaqchikel residents concentrated in parts of two cantones a few blocks from the center, while the rural areas are predominantly Kaqchikel. There is a corresponding difference in language use, with Spanish predominating in the town, while Kaqchikel is spoken more in the rural villages.

As in other Guatemalan communities, cultural shift is evident in clothing choices: men wear western-style clothes, while a large proportion of Kaqchikel women continue to wear the corte and huipil (skirt and blouse), although few women now weave their own clothes. The regional geometric design and red color of the traditional huipil is rarely seen, and the most common huipil to be seen today has a multi-colored design of birds and flowers—whereas the original color was the kaq = red of the Kaqchikel and had a woven design which represented geographic features of the area. It is noticeable that many women now wear huipiles from other communities, which they are able to buy in the markets in Chimaltenango or Antigua, both of

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which are easily accessible by bus. The cultural change represented by the choice of clothing is also noticeable in the choice of language and stories in the community.

My long-term goal is to collect, analyze and publish written transcriptions of oral narratives from the Parramos area (including legends, traditions, anecdotes, and personal histories) in Kaqchikel and Spanish. In view of the trend in past years to shift from Kaqchikel to Spanish, and the more recent initiative to teach Kaqchikel in schools, with a corresponding revival of interest in the language and culture, there is a renewed need to preserve narratives in oral recordings and in written form for an audience of children and adults who do not want to forget their culture, but who are forgetting the tradition of oral story-telling and are turning more to the written word. A number of factors have affected Kaqchikel oral tradition in this area: socio-economic pressure to assimilate to Spanish language and ladino culture; more children are spending more years in school immersed in a Spanish environment; reading is replacing oral tradition as a form of learning culture; fewer multi-generation families live together; television is replacing time spent talking with the elders. As writing replaces orality as a mode of cultural transmission, it is critical that written materials reflect the different genres which were traditionally transmitted orally. Manuel de Jesús Salazar Tetzagüic, discussing contemporary Guatemalan narratives in 1998, points out that “Aparte de estar escritas completamente en lengua castellana, no existe en ellos una traducción de cuentos, leyendas o relatos de la literatura maya, y sus temas de lectura son ajenos al medio en que viven.” (38) The available literature, in his opinion, was neither culturally nor linguistically appropriate. Today, nearly twenty years later, there is still a growing need for Kaqchikel literature for both children and adults, primarily for use in the Kaqchikel language and culture school curriculum, which I will discuss shortly in the context of my study of Kaqchikel use and attitudes towards Kaqchikel instruction in the community.

Gaspar Pedro González, Maya Q’anjob’al author, has repeatedly pointed out that written literature is based on oral literature, and the oral tradition in Guatemala is rich in complexity and variety. While many organizations and universities have participated in collecting narratives, these have largely been for specialists, and few have been made available to general readers, particularly school children, in either Spanish or Mayan languages. The traditional genres include fables with morals, legends, historical accounts, ceremonial speeches, “pedida” (formal asking for the bride’s hand), and marriage speeches and ceremonies, stories about nature, animal
transformation, and traditional rites relating to agriculture, and of course, personal testimonies of individual and community experiences. Adult community members have many memories of the 1976 earthquake which destroyed the town as it was then, and also of the 36-year-long civil war, particularly during the 1980’s, when the town and surrounding villages were caught in the fighting between the military and the guerillas. My objective is to continue recording, transcribing and translating local narratives, so as to make them available to the schools and public library. Members of the community are aware of the gradual erosion of the collective memory stored in the oral tradition, and are interested in their preservation.

Among the stories I heard in Parramos in summer 2011, one, to which he gave the title “The Ant King” was narrated by a student in 3o Básico in a rural school in Cajahualten, and stood out as the rare narrative told in Kaqchikel by a young person. The plot, summarized, is as follows: A man goes in search of his wife who has disappeared. When he sits down to rest and eat, some ants gather and he gives them some crumbs. One large ant climbs to his ear, asks him where he is going and then tells him he will find his wife in a certain cave. If he needs help, since he has shared his food with the ants, they will help him to find his wife. When the man arrives at the cave, he calls on the ants, who help him to overcome the three-headed man who has abducted his wife, and recover both his wife and other women who are held captive there.

The student narrated his story with a traditional introduction, in this case “My father told me…” and it was narrated with typical parallelism, repeating words, phrases and structures throughout the story. Among the repeated words are two Spanish borrowings, “entons” for “entonces” and “cuand” for “cuando,” discourse markers which are used respectively 12 and 7 times. Other Spanish borrowings include the “pan” which the man takes to eat on his journey. It is later referred to as “kaxlanway”, which combines the Kaqchikel words for “foreigner” (kaxlan is a corruption of castellano, the foreign invader) and for “tortilla” “way”—bread being what outsiders eat rather than the local tortillas. Most striking, in the narrative is the use of the Spanish title for the Ant King “El Rey de las Hormigas” even though the individual ants are referred to by their Kaqchikel name, sanik. The use of Spanish borrowings, and the intermittent code-switching is evident in all the narratives I have collected in Kaqchikel.

The plot of this story resembles some of the traditional stories from other Mayan communities, with the interaction of man and animals or insects (although the ant is rare) and the theme of the abduction and rescue of a woman; the narrative style is also in keeping with
traditional oral narrative, especially in the use of direct speech when the man and the ant king speak to each other; and the final moral, that the man’s generosity towards the ants is rewarded. However, it must be emphasized that this story was the exception among narratives I heard in Parramos and the surrounding villages, both because it was narrated in Kaqchikel by a teenager, and also in its form and content.

The most common kinds of narratives which I was able to record were personal and community testimonies and histories. These included accounts of marriage customs, many memories of close family relationships, the death of a close family relative, some accounts of abusive relationships and of acts of violence, family memories of the 1976 earthquake, and a large number of accounts of family experiences during the period of armed conflict. The latter reflected the different experiences of urban families in the military-occupied town and rural families in the guerilla-occupied mountain villages. There was some hesitancy in narrating these accounts, because of the close proximity and frequent interaction today of people from urban and rural communities. Some narrators had faced attacks from guerillas, others from the military, others had had to run to safety and live in other communities until it was safe to return to homes which had been occupied by one side or the other. Many accounts included the violent death or disappearance of a family member, and many showed confusion about what the fighting was about, or were caught between the military and the guerilla. These are not topics which people talk about with other community members, but rather pass on within the family. It was clear that many people in the town and even more in the villages still feel deep sorrow and fear from their experiences of those years. I am still in the process of transcribing and translating these narratives, and plan to collect more continue with further analysis in 2012.

My initial experience of collecting oral tradition in Parramos and its villages suggests that there is considerable Kaqchikel language shift and loss and a substantial loss of Kaqchikel traditional culture. However, there is some indication that this may be changing, and this impacts the motivation to preserve the culture in writing. One major difference in the current socio-linguistic situation is the fact that for the last two years, Kaqchikel has been taught in the Parramos schools. Although Mayan languages have been taught in some schools in Guatemala at the elementary level in some of the Mayan-language dominant areas, the teaching of the Mayan languages has not been a common practice. The current Basic National Curriculum (CNB) developed in 2007, however, mandates Mayan language instruction for a specific number of
hours per week, and also the inclusion of specific aspects of Mayan culture in the curriculum. In the schools I was surveying, this was implemented at the beginning of the 2010 school year.

This shift in curriculum from “castellanización” (Spanish language immersion) for non-Spanish-speaking students in the schools, to the teaching of a Mayan language to all students, both indigenous and non-indigenous, is a radical shift which calls for a close look at the implementation of the curriculum, and the impact it has had on students and families. It represents official recognition of the equality of Mayan languages and Spanish, and of their respective speakers. Consequently, my research includes a survey of Spanish and Kaqchikel language usage, and a survey of the school administrators and teachers to evaluate the implementation and effects of the Kaqchikel instructional curriculum, now in use for 2 school years. The collection of oral narratives responds to the needs articulated by many of those interviewed, who expressed the need to preserve the local culture and history.

As emphasized earlier, this is a preliminary report, bearing in mind that more data will be collected in summer 2012, prior to carrying out statistical analysis of the interview responses. However, before examining the current situation in Kaqchikel language instruction in the schools surveyed, it is appropriate even at this point to present some historical background on the Basic National Curriculum background and requirements, and then present innovations in how the Basic National Curriculum is now being implemented in the schools. I will also discuss some reactions to this recent change on the part of administrators, teachers, students and parents.

**Historical Background of the CNB**

The Guatemalan educational system, for those Maya children who had access schools, was, until recently, known as “castellanización”: Spanish immersion to train non-Spanish-speaking children to speak Spanish. Gaspar Pedro González gives a vivid account of this experience from a Q’anjob’al child’s perspective in his testimonial novel “A Mayan Life.” With the establishment, beginning in the 1980’s, of the Academia de Lenguas Mayas, (ALMG), the Programa Nacional de Educación Bilingüe, (PRONEBI), and the Dirección General de Educación Bilingüe Intercultural, (DIGEBI), a series of acts and statutes were passed, promoting and defining, but not implementing or enforcing bilingual intercultural education. Indeed, in 1999, when Demetrio Cojti Coxil was Minister of Education, DIGEBI formally requested the implementation of previous Bilingual Education statutes which had been approved but not
enforced. In 2001 Congress passed an act determining the requirements for teachers of bilingual education, as well as curricular requirements for subjects taught in bilingual programs, with a percentage of time for languages and subjects (including Mayan history, philosophy, and culture.) Again, this was not enforced.

In 2003, following the passing of the Language Law, which to the chagrin of Maya activists continued to state that Spanish was the only official language of Guatemala, there was a survey of a 1974 pilot project of bilingual education in 40 Guatemalan schools, which came up with the following conclusions:

1. Graduates of bilingual programs show increased competency in reading and writing Mayan languages.
2. Teaching methodology was very traditional—use of notebooks and blackboard.
3. Bilingual programs show little access to or use of DIGEBI materials prepared for bilingual programs—this needs assessment to determine why, before expanding programs.
4. Community members do not understanding the meaning of “bilingual intercultural education” [Link](http://www.ieq.org/pdf/Study_Bilingual_grad_Guatemala.pdf)

The government response to the study, in November of 2003, was that it was necessary to redesign the educational curriculum, and in 2004, new educational goals were established for 2004–2007. These stated that all students in Guatemala should learn a national language (Spanish) and one other Guatemalan language, plus a foreign language, that educational policy should be bilingual intercultural, and that teachers should be trained and assigned to relevant language communities.

Following up on this, the 2005 National Curriculum Orientation included Mayan language instruction and Mayan culture integrated into the curriculum – for example Mayan language vocabulary and grammar, narratives from the Popol Vuh, recommendations for the use of materials from the Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala, and the inclusion of narratives and songs from pupils’ own cultures.

The 2007 Basic National Curriculum, which is now in effect, has established what appears to be a significant change. The general cultural and educational goals are similar in terms of instruction in Mayan language, narratives and songs, but the significant difference is that the curriculum specifies the number of hours per week dedicated to native language, second and
third language instruction (for example, 4, 2, 2 for 3rd grade) (CNB p. 43), and defines the language competencies to be taught with suggestions for related categories of instructional activities. This instructional time requirement is the single major change which seems to have led to the wide-spread teaching of Kaqchikel in schools.

**Specific Basic National Curriculum Requirements—Example of 3rd Grade**

The curriculum for 3rd grade specifies listening, speaking, reading and writing for the purpose of communicating in L1 (First Language) and includes detailed criteria for different expressive and receptive language skills, and lists of activities including, for example, dictionary use, writing stories, prose and poetry writing, and the promotion self-esteem for speakers of different languages and respect for others. Included here are also suggestions for the production and preservation of oral tradition, a multitude of pedagogical methods and definitions of competencies. The curriculum gives similar information for L2, second language, taking into account that the 1st and 2nd language will be Mayan or Spanish depending on the individual students in each community, but lays considerable emphasis on the importance of literacy in each language. In addition to language instruction, teachers are encouraged, as in previous DIGEBI and PRONEBI documents, to promote self-esteem and mutual respect among children of different cultural and ethnic groups.

**Current Language Use**

As I mentioned earlier, this curriculum was implemented two years ago, at the beginning of the 2010 school year. Consequently, all the school children interviewed for the sociolinguistic study which Dr. Holmquist and I began in summer 2011 have had Kaqchikel instruction since then. This survey was designed to assess both Spanish and Kaqchikel usage and attitudes towards the two languages among school children and their families in the town of Parramos and the rural villages surrounding it.

Although the research on language use in the community is still in progress, I can make some general comments: all the children interviewed in Elementary grades 3 & 6 and Básico/Middle School grade 3 in both urban and rural schools were fluent in Spanish. The same is true for the adults interviewed, and those who were Kaqchikel-speaking were bilingual, with different levels of Kaqchikel fluency. Few of the children in urban schools showed proficiency in
Kaqchikel, although many self-identified as Kaqchikel (more in the public than in the private school). A greater percentage in the rural schools showed some proficiency in Kaqchikel and also identified as Kaqchikel. Regardless of ethnicity, many of the children showed some recognition of a few words in Kaqchikel. It was striking that many of the elementary school children stated that one or both of their parents spoke Kaqchikel, but that they did not speak Kaqchikel to their children. Some of these children recognized and understood words and phrases, but could not respond. Since the Kaqchikel instruction has only been in effect for two years, it is difficult to evaluate the fluency of children in the program, but it would not appear that they learn much beyond some vocabulary words, and an apparent appreciation of the importance of the language, which is significant in itself.

In general, the older students were more proficient in both receptive and expressive language. When they were asked to tell a story, it was only in the rural Básico class (students aged approximately 14-16) that we found students able to narrate a story in Kaqchikel, one of which I have discussed. On the other hand, many students of all ages in the urban schools, when talking in Spanish, recounted some of the local legends, for example, variations of La Llorona, and one about a woman in white who haunted one of the public washing centers in town, and disappeared when someone followed her. However, it seems that the urban children, even when living in Kaqchikel homes, are rarely exposed to traditional oral narratives, in part because families are divided by generation, and in part because they have television. Many of the children, when asked which was their favorite story, said it was Cinderella or Snow White, which they had seen on television. It was rare to hear a traditional animal fable, a creation myth, or a legend. On the other hand, there were some accounts of family memories of the 1976 earthquake, which leveled Parramos, and many testimonial accounts of the impact of the armed conflict on the family.

Further evaluation is needed to assess the direct and indirect impact of Kaqchikel instruction on the language skills and attitudes of the students and their parents. Since all the children are now taking Kaqchikel classes, interviews to inquire about the implementation of the CNB curriculum were conducted with the local school district Technical-Administrative Coordinator (equivalent to an American school superintendent); the principals of the schools; and the classroom teachers of urban and rural schools at elementary and “básico” level in Parramos and surrounding villages. Questions covered Kaqchikel language instructional
requirements; compliance with these requirements; reactions of students and parents to Kaqchikel instruction; teaching materials; teaching methods; and finally interviewees had the opportunity to express personal experiences, reactions and concerns.

Officially, all the schools comply with the requirement to teach Kaqchikel 3 times a week for 30-35 minutes at all grade levels. Officially, the teachers comply with the requirement to take a written and oral exam to demonstrate competency in the language. Officially, the government supplies teaching materials.

According to my survey, the private urban elementary and middle school had 2 bilingual teachers assigned to teach Kaqchikel to all elementary and middle school grades. In the state urban elementary school, the Kaqchikel teachers knew no Kaqchikel, although the vice-principal was a native speaker and helped them plan classes. One rural state elementary school had one bilingual teacher and 3 monolingual (Spanish only) teachers; the other had three bilingual teachers and 2 monolingual teachers. Both the rural and the urban state middle schools had a bilingual teacher who was responsible for teaching Kaqchikel to all levels in the urban school, and one level in the rural school. The teachers who taught, but did not speak, Kaqchikel, had no training in the teaching of the language, but were teaching the classes, 1 word at a time, some with the help of a colleague who gave them word lists and help with pronunciation.

As far as materials were concerned: the urban state school had no materials; the private urban school teachers had obtained materials for themselves from some non-profit organizations and through some donations, because private schools are not entitled to government educational supplies. The rural elementary schools had been equipped with dictionaries of Kaqchikel neologisms, a copy of a Teach-Yourself Kaqchikel published by the DIGEBI, and a song/poem book by Luis Alfredo Arango. The methodology used in all cases was to write words on the board, have the children repeat them, then copy and illustrate them, so as to prepare an illustrated dictionary. These observations were similar to those noted in the 2003 survey I have discussed: the lack of access to pedagogical materials produced by DIGEBI, and the use of traditional teaching methodology.

A difficulty that all teachers mentioned was that of teaching Kaqchikel vocabulary. Even for the teachers who are Kaqchikel-speakers, one problem is that dialects vary considerably from community to community, with the result that in one community, parents complained to the teacher that their children were not learning the same Kaqchikel that the parents spoke.
Textbooks and dictionaries invariably reflect local language of the community where they were produced. Even if the standardized alphabet established by the Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala (ALMG) is used, vocabulary and grammar vary, pronunciation is different from town to town, and some words may be unrecognizable for people who are unfamiliar with language variants and unused to mixing with others from different areas.

The actual frequency of classes varied from school to school, from twice weekly for 1 hour to once a week for 35 minutes, and informally, I was told that some of the teachers simply gave up trying to teach Kaqchikel, because it was too difficult, given their lack of knowledge and materials.

Teachers in all the state schools recommended that instead of all elementary teachers being required to teach a language most did not know, the schools should assign one trained native speaker to teach all Kaqchikel classes. Administrative and financial obstacles have stood in the way of this. In the private elementary and middle school, Kaqchikel is taught to all grades by the 2 specialized bilingual teachers.

In addition to evaluating the implementation of Kaqchikel instruction in the schools, I also wanted to learn about attitudes towards the use and study of Kaqchikel on the part of students, their families, and also teachers and administrators people directly involved in the teaching and administration of the new curriculum. It is reasonable to ask whether the implementation of the indigenous language curriculum leads, first, to a shift in attitudes, particularly in places and situations where there has been discrimination, second, to an appreciation and validation of the Kaqchikel language and culture, and third, to a revitalization of the use of the language, and to the expansion of bilingualism among native speakers of both Kaqchikel and Spanish?

School children invariably responded that teaching Kaqchikel was worthwhile, because it was part of the local culture, and those who were from Kaqchikel families frequently responded with an affirmation that it was part of their heritage, and that they were proud to speak the language. While elementary school children did not seem to be aware of discrimination, Básico students did—they were aware of prejudice and offensive language both among their peers and in the community. Kaqchikel-speaking adults, while largely in favor of Kaqchikel instruction, sometimes felt it was not necessary to teach the language in school, since their children were surrounded by the language at home. Others felt that that adding Kaqchikel meant cutting back
on English and Spanish classes, which would be more useful in the future. Administrators pointed out that when Kaqchikel was first introduced, many parents objected, but that now, in the second year, they seemed to accept it as part of the official curriculum. Literacy did not seem to be an issue, since none of the parents were literate in the language. Some of them, however, did mention that Kaqchikel instruction in the schools would help their children to find work later, since it is required in more work places now. This is also something that the teachers and principals emphasized, and my impression was that the parents who referred to this were repeating what they had heard at school assemblies.

Preliminary conclusions from this research are that the lack of DIGEBI support for the Kaqchikel language program, in terms of materials, and qualified, trained teachers, has resulted in minimal changes in language acquisition skills. However, there is a significant impact in two areas: all students, both Ladino and Kaqchikel, are exposed to Kaqchikel instruction and literacy skills. Attitudes are altogether positive towards learning and using Kaqchikel—although there is a disconnect between these attitudes and the practice of encouraging children to speak Kaqchikel in the home. There is limited use of Kaqchikel in the town, but an increased awareness of the need to know the language and of its usefulness. The primary need is for the efficient use of trained Kaqchikel educators, and for the distribution and effective use of appropriate instructional materials.

At this transitional stage in the sociolinguistic climate of Parramos and its surrounding communities further research is necessary. It is to be hoped that a growing collection of local oral narratives will contribute to the resurgence of interest in Kaqchikel language and culture and provide reading material to stimulate Kaqchikel literacy. Sociolinguistic research and the collection of narratives is continuing in 2012.
Bibliography


The 2011 Symposium for Teaching and Learning Indigenous Languages of Latin America (STLILLA) was the second in a biennial series of symposia organized by the Association for Teaching and Learning Indigenous Languages of Latin America (ATLILLA). The Kellogg Institute for International Studies at the University of Notre Dame hosted STLILLA-2011 in collaboration with partner institutions.

For more information: kellogg.nd.edu/STLILLA