

**NAMING AND RENAMING IN THE PROCESS OF SAFEGUARDING  
ENDANERED LANGUAGES: THE CASE OF JAKALTEK MAYA LANGUAGE  
(GUATEMALA)**

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**I. INTRODUCTION:**

The impact of the current process of globalization on indigenous languages of Guatemala and Central America is becoming pervasive and some world institutions such as UNESCO, ONU, etc., are alarmed at the pace of absorption and elimination of ways of life that erase cultures, languages and indigenous worldviews all around the world. Now wonder why the General Director of the United Nations, Mr. Ban Ki-moon in his speech during the celebration of the International Day of Indigenous People said that: “As 2008 is the International Year of Languages, this International Day is also an opportunity to recognize the silent crisis confronting many of the world’s languages, the overwhelming majority of which are indigenous peoples’ languages. The loss of these languages would not only weaken the world’s cultural diversity, but also our collective knowledge as a human race.”

This is the case of indigenous languages in Guatemala and Central America, an attack that started against their speakers since the Spanish Conquest of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. Although, prior to the coming of the Spaniards and the imposition of Spanish as an official language of Latin America, a previous globalization occurred with the expansion of the Nahua/Aztec empire with a world economic and political system

that extended throughout Central America, and thus imposing Nahuatl as a lingua franca of the empire (Carmack, Gosen and Gasco 2000). Nevertheless, indigenous people of Guatemala adopted Nahuatl as a second language, but were not forced to abandon their own Mayan languages. It was, then, with the Spanish conquest that Nahuatl was imposed as the lingua franca of conquest and the cities, territories and people were renamed with Nahuatl names that have persisted until now. For example: The entire country of Guatemala was known in Maya as Chigag or Xe-q'a' (Root of Fire) because of the many active volcanoes, but the Tlaxcaltec warriors who accompanied the Spaniards renamed the country as Quauthemallan, (Place of abundant trees), the region of western Guatemala Zac-uleu (White Earth) to Huehuetenango (Place of the Elders or the Ancient Ones). Or my hometown Xajla' (Place of Water and Limestone) changed to Jacaltenango (Place of huts surrounded by stone a fence).

My argument here focuses on recapturing the knowledge of the past and rewriting oppressed people's histories. If a colonial process of renaming places and erasing previous identities of people truncated a process of creating knowledge in their own languages, a process of renaming is necessary to maintain the languages and make them useful as instruments for self-determination. To rename places and people is to recognize previous histories and identities displaced by the forces of colonialism and domination. The renaming can occur in literature, geography, science and history. The imposed colonial terms of foreign indigenous cultures such as Nahuatl imposed on Mayas can be changed by renaming people, animals, plants and everything of the

environment to make language alive. The safeguarding of Mayan languages can be done by using them to create knowledge and sustain or nourish indigenous worldviews. Young speakers do not see any productive use of indigenous languages so they try to get rid of them and learn English, Spanish which are the world globalizing languages in Latin America. As Leanne Hinton has said: “A language that is not a language of government, nor a language of education, nor a language of commerce or of wider communication is a language whose very existence is threatened in the modern world” (Hinton 2000:3).

Responding to the efforts of the organizers of this international conference on safeguarding endangered languages, we must make sure that safeguarding indigenous languages is not only a concern of foreign institutions or governments, but of the speakers themselves. We must make sure that younger speakers of indigenous languages can see the creative power of their languages and present them with successful stories in the revitalization of native languages. They must understand that their languages are unique human creations and cultural treasures of humanity. At the present time and with the current discrimination and oppression in which they live, most illiterate peasants don't realize the importance, or the value of maintaining their indigenous languages. It is not enough to emphasize that communities encode in their languages a particular way of seeing the universe, or their particular worldviews, but to develop specific projects for safeguarding indigenous languages. To safeguard a language is to protect the knowledge encoded and expressed in it, such as indigenous people's respect and reverence for nature

and the environment. Safeguarding a language is to successfully use the language in scientific research, literary creations and its wider use in education and commerce.

Ultimately, linguistic diversity and cultural autonomy is a human right issue that we must take seriously complying with the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People which has established that “Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and to retain their own names for communities, places and persons”.

## **II. THE PROBLEM OF NAMING AND COLONIAL LANGUAGES**

Prior to the Spanish conquest of Guatemala, indigenous languages enjoyed a high status and were praised as the gift of gods and the ancestors. In the sacred Book of the Mayas, the *Popol Vuh*, language was given by the first fathers and mothers created as an instrument to praise God and to give thanks for everything that was created. The Creators asked the first men created: “What is the nature of your existence? Do you know? Is not your speech and walk good?” And they answered with joy. “Truly we thank you doubly, triply that we were created, that we were given our mouths and our faces. We are able to speak and to listen...We thank you, therefore that we were created” (Christenson 2007:199). According to the ancient Mayas, the word had a power for changes and miracles so the languages were considered a sacred gift of God. With these languages Mayans created the most sophisticated culture of the American continent, creating a

hieroglyphic writing system that has not been totally or truly deciphered until now. Unfortunately, the languages of indigenous people of the Americas were inferiorized and neglected since the Spanish conquest. Some Spaniards, particularly the missionaries like Bartolome de las Casas tried to defend and support indigenous cultures and diversity of beliefs, learning the language of the natives and writing grammars to show that the indigenous languages were comparable to the languages of Old World. But unfortunately, the power of the conquistadores and the colonial system prevailed, imposing their will over the indigenous people and their languages. In this context of subjugation, some Spanish missionaries wrote to the King of Spain, Charles V declaring that: “Indians should not study because no benefit may be expected from their education, first because they will not be able to preach for a long time inasmuch as this requires an authority over the people which they do not have; moreover, those who do study are worse than those who do not. In the second place, Indians are not stable persons to whom we should entrust the preaching of the Gospel. Finally, they do not have the ability to understand correctly and fully the Christian faith, nor is their language sufficient or copious enough as to be able to express our faith without great improprieties, which could lead easily to serious errors” (Hanke 1974:26).

Because of the misunderstanding of other peoples cultures and languages, Bishop Diego de Landa collected the books (codices) of the Mayas and burned them at noon, close to the sacred well of Chichen Itza. According to Landa, “they contained nothing but superstitions and falsehood of the devil we burned them all, which they took most grievously, and which gave them great pain (Landa in Gates 1978:82). The destruction of

the Maya writing system and with it the destruction of the ancient Maya knowledge was, indeed remembered with great pain by the Mayans as stated in the Maya book *Chilam Balam*. “Should we not lament in our suffering, grieving for the loss of our maize and the destruction of our teachings concerning the universe of the earth and the universe of the heavens?” (In Montejo 2005:143). Later, bishop Diego de Landa wanted to document the Maya writing, but knowing his bad disposition toward indigenous knowledge and writing, the natives did not provide Landa with the information needed to write and read the Maya hieroglyphic writing system.. Only Antonio Chi and Nachi Cocom, sons of the Maya lords subjugated by the Spaniards gave him some glimpses about the glyphs and this is how Landa wrote his known ‘Landa’s Alphabet’. With this destruction, the knowledge of the ancient Maya hieroglyphic writing system died at noon when the books were burned close to the sacred well of Chichen Itza during the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, as part of the Spanish conquest of the Maya land.

Since then, the naming and renaming of places, people and communities began affecting indigenous identities and the expression of their worldviews.. Thus, the land of Xeq’a, Chiqaq, (Roots of Fire) name of Guatemala because of its geography of active volcanoes, was renamed as Quauthemallan by the Tlaxcalteca warriors that accompanied Pedro de Alvarado in the conquest of Central America. Thus, Nahuatl became the *lingua franca* of the region and the names of people and places have remained until now. But perhaps, the most damaging identity given to indigenous people of the Americas was the naming of them as “*Indios*”, a denigrating term used to discriminate against indigenous people for centuries. It was until recently (1990s) that indigenous people of Guatemala renamed

themselves Mayas, claiming their inheritance of the ancient Maya culture and civilization. The use of traditional names for plants, animals and places is important for the maintenance of indigenous worldviews. Ancient knowledge is being lost because younger generations do not use the traditional names of plants and animals. First, because most species of animals have been extinct in their communities and regions, so they are not in direct contact with nature anymore. It is unfortunate that indigenous knowledge is not included in the educational system in Guatemala. Maya children go to school and learn Spanish while rejecting little by little their indigenous languages until they graduate from school (primary and secondary education). Only a few recognize the importance of maintaining their indigenous languages and use them parallel to Spanish as bilingual speakers.

The rights and identities of indigenous people have been affected by centuries because of the colonial act of naming and renaming people, and places. As Seamus Dean as argued: “The naming or renaming of a place, the naming or renaming of a race, a region, a person, is, like all acts of primordial nomination, and act of possession” (Seamus 1990:18). A process of decolonization is necessary so that indigenous people and their languages are dignified and discard pejorative terms used to discriminate against indigenous people. The Guatemalan Constitution recognizes those rights, as well as the Accord on the Rights and Identity of Indigenous People of Guatemala. But it has been so difficult to get rid of the names of places and people given by the empire, since naming is an act of power (Hinton 1194). It is then important that indigenous people retake their

own names and take control over their own identities in order to represent themselves in their own terms.

### **III. LITERACY: A KEY FOR SAFEGUARDING ENDANGERED LANGUAGES**

Definitively, literacy is fundamental in the process of self-determination and self-possession against the appropriation done by naming and renaming by colonial forces that controlled indigenous populations. For the past five centuries, the indigenous languages of Guatemala have been neglected and abhorred as symbols of backwardness. And to paraphrase Leanne Hinton, they have not been the languages of government, education, commerce or of wider communication. For this very reason some Mayan languages are in great danger of becoming extinct during this 21<sup>st</sup> century.

After the Spanish invasion of the Mayas some young man were taken by missionaries to be educated into the new invading culture and they learned how to read and write in Spanish. Despite the dangers of the time, when indigenous people were persecuted and accused of being devil worshippers some of these few Maya men who learned the colonial language tried to safeguard their languages and cultures. When they realized that their worldviews were under attack and in danger of being destroyed, they decided to write down their ancient traditions by using the Latin characters to write Maya texts. As a result of this effort to document the past, we have important ethnohistorical documents such as the *Popol Vuh*, the *Chilam Balam*, the *Annals of the Kaqchikels* among many other native texts. Literacy then, was important and these indigenous writers understood



the impact of a foreign language on their lives so they dedicated themselves to write down part of their histories in these worldwide recognize Maya texts such as the *Popol Vuh*. For this reason we recognize that literacy, which is the result of formal education is a basic human right issue to deal with. On the other hand, we know that a written language has more prestige than a non-written one, so it is important to write and use indigenous language to produce and document indigenous knowledge. In other words, “having a written form of a language can elevate perceptions of its prestige. Alternatively, lack of written form is often interpreted by local communities as signaling that their language is not a “real” language and does not merit writing. If reading and writing are valued at regional or national level, not having them in a local language can, unfortunately, lead to the idea that the language is inherently deficient’ (Grenoble and Whaley 2006:116-117).

This is how Mayan languages have survived until now, considered as “dialects” (meaning deficient ways of communication) and not as real languages that merit writing. Only anthropologists who compiled stories in Mayan languages wrote some texts, until more recently that linguists have compiled vocabularies and worked with indigenous people to write dictionaries. Now, Maya scholars and linguists are writing ethnographies where they collected Maya stories and compiled short vocabularies demonstrating that they Mayan languages are, indeed, languages that could be written and have grammars as other world languages. Despite these efforts, Mayan languages are still considered “dialects” by the Ladino population and not good enough to produce and express abstract ideas. This was the same argument used by early missionaries who argued against the

teaching and learning of indigenous languages, so that Spanish remains until now as the national language.

In 2003 the Guatemalan Congress approved the Law for Indigenous Languages, recognizing the linguistic diversity of the nation and promoting their development as an integral part of the national unity of Guatemala. The Law was written and soon forgotten, since because of the lack of funding and the political will to enforce the law in order to rise the standards of indigenous languages as national languages. There are some minor efforts to promote bilingual education (Maya and Spanish) in remote rural areas, carried out by small programs called “escuelas mayas, (Maya schools).”

In terms of literacy, it is then fundamental that indigenous people learn how to write and read in their own languages. And this practice is not easy, since even school teachers who supposedly read texts, find it hard to read and write in Mayan languages. There are several reasons why this practice has become difficult. First, the Mayan languages did not have a standardized alphabet, so each linguist or anthropologist wrote the language using different characters to represent linguistic sounds. It was until 1985 that the Academy of Maya Languages of Guatemala standardized the alphabet to write Mayan languages. Second, Mayan languages have difficult sounds such as the guttural, palatal glottal sounds that are difficult to write and pronounce. Without practice, the reading of Mayan languages became difficult and tedious. Third, there is a lack of interest in reading even among school teachers, not to say among students. For this reasons, very few are really fluent in reading Maya languages. A good example of this lack of interest of reading in

Mayan languages is mentioned by Dr. Fernando Penalosa, who published a Maya novel in Q'anjobal Maya written by the Maya writer Gaspar Pedro Gonzalez. "Only one copy of the book was sold and the buyer was a US linguist" (personal communication). This example illustrates the lack of interest in reading and writing in indigenous languages in Guatemala. School teachers and students are more familiar with Spanish so, even if there is a parallel text in Maya, they would prefer to read the Spanish version and not the Maya text.

## **V. DOCUMENTING NATIVE KNOWLEDGE**

I argue that safeguarding endangered languages in the case of Mayan languages must start with a process of recapturing the knowledge of the past and rewriting oppressed people's histories. The colonial process and postmodern process of globalizing and erasing indigenous identities has truncated indigenous people's dynamic process of creating knowledge in their own languages. A process of renaming (people, places, animals, plants, etc.) in their own languages is fundamental and a useful project in the struggle for indigenous rights and self-determination. The safeguarding of Mayan languages must involve the dynamic use of these languages to create knowledge for the maintenance and promotion of indigenous worldviews. At the present younger speakers do not see any productive use of indigenous languages, so they try to get rid of them and learn English or Spanish which are the languages of globalization in Latin America. We must make sure that the younger speakers of the language can see successful stories in language revitalization and that the creative power of their

languages can be expressed in scientific research, literary creations and their wider used in education and commerce. In other words, safeguarding the languages is to protect the knowledge encoded in them, such as indigenous people's respect and reverence for nature and the environment. I propose a research project that focuses on native knowledge and epistemology in Maya linguistic communities where languages are in greater danger of extinction.

The project proposed must be carried out by native scholars and the elders who are specialists in different areas or domains of native knowledge. This process of research, documentation, analysis and interpretation of the ways indigenous people produce knowledge (*ohtajb'al*) and their ways to organize and explain their existence within their particular worldviews should be a good way to safeguard Mayan languages in danger of extinction. The project should also focus on Maya ways of knowing, and the uses of indigenous methodologies and native classificatory systems. This philosophy of life or native science and knowledge is also implicit in the sacred Maya calendar. On this respect, the Jakalteq calendar is a good example since it has the days dedicated to animals, plants, the ancestors, heroes and supernatural beings for the purpose of paying homage and respect to them throughout the year cycle, and signaling the relationships that exists between all beings of the universe.

The Jakalteq Maya calendar is important here as a source of knowledge about time, space, cyclical history, myths of creation, cosmology, religion and the ecology using indigenous Mayan languages. The project should be multidisciplinary, focusing on major

native forms or fields of knowledge such as Native philosophy, religion and spirituality, ethnoarchaeology (indigenous interpretation of monuments and sacred sites), epigraphy, ecology, ethnobotany, ethnolinguistics, ethnohistory, oral histories and traditions. We must remind ourselves that for indigenous people the various fields mentioned above are not compartmentalized. All these areas of knowledge form a unity in the production of knowledge, and the performance of rituals to form a complex whole, or what I call a living cosmology. As a result of the project, a series of text on each of these segments of knowledge should be produced, using the indigenous languages in which knowledge is encoded. This will become an important contribution to indigenous Maya knowledge at the closing of the *oxlah b'aktun*, or the end of the fifth millennium in the Maya calendrical system, and the best way to safeguard indigenous languages with the participation of native speakers in the process.

This challenging project will be developed within and from the current Maya intellectual renaissance project (Montejo 2003). In fact, it will be the basis for the development of this systematic documentation and re-interpretation of native knowledge, methods and epistemology. The significance of this research project is multiple. First, the researcher will provide concrete examples of the quality and philosophical depth of indigenous belief systems and world views stemming from within. This project will show the persistent struggle of indigenous people (in this case the Maya) to demonstrate to the scientific world that their knowledge is Maya-logical or has its acceptable truths.

It will also show that indigenous people are capable of producing and creating knowledge as any other culture around the world. In this way, we will dispel the myth that consider modern Mayas as members of a decaying culture (Asturias 1977). Instead, we will show that Maya culture is still very creative and persistent and that has survived by using its own knowledge system despite centuries of economic and educational neglect. This knowledge may not be evident to outsiders of the culture, but for indigenous people it is part of their daily life. The problem is that indigenous people are not yet allowed to create and produce (write) knowledge within the accepted “official” cultural and scientific canons. Indigenous people have been seen by researchers as informants and not as producers of knowledge. In most cases, indigenous people cannot spend time in academic or intellectual endeavors since they are concerned with their basic human rights and their survival.

A research study of this kind among the Mayas will be important for projects and programs dealing with ecological or environmental studies, religion and philosophy (Montejo 2001). Native knowledge will also provide contribution to the field of linguistics, ethnography, ethnohistory, epigraphy, Native American studies and the humanities in general. This project will generate the theoretical and methodological tools needed to express the complexity of indigenous knowledge systems.

The creation and interpretation of this knowledge will play an important role in the documentation and understanding of the cultural and intellectual diversity among indigenous people. It will develop and provide native methods in the field in an effort to

decolonize methodologies in the traditional practice of science and research. This is very important since Maya people, scholars, intellectuals, artists, spiritual leaders are currently promoting the revitalization of Maya culture. It is appropriate to develop a project of this kind since the current globalization of the economy, and mass media communication will force indigenous cultures to assimilate or to adopt new ways for their survival.

## **VI. JAKALTEK MAYA LANGUAGE, A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

When I was a boy (4-5 years-old), I only spoke Jakaltek Maya language which was the language in which my mother and father communicated to each other. It was the language that I heard in the community when I learned to talk, so I started to use it as my mother tongue. My parents told me of an incident that took place when they travelled to a ladino community. As I was taken by my parents to this Mexican community across the border, they say that I started to play with the child of the family where we were staying. We played, each one communicated to the other with his mother tongue. I talked to the boy in my Jakaltek Maya language, while he spoke to me in Spanish. Obviously, I did not understand what he said nor he understood what I said, but we enjoyed playing and communicating with the language that our parents spoke. This incident demonstrated how Mayan language was learned in the communities as a natural language used by all members of the community when I grew up. But this same incident, also motivated my father to communicate with me in Spanish since he thought I should learn Spanish too. Thus, at this early age I learned Mayan language from my mother and Spanish from my father, receiving a bilingual

instruction during my childhood. This is how I became bilingual at an early age and it was not hard for me to enter into primary school to achieve a formal education with the Maryknoll missionaries.

To me it was natural to speak two languages as a boy and I shifted from each language when needed, although, formal education was carried out in Spanish, but I always returned to my mother and community to live and speak Maya languages by learning stories and legends from the Jakaltek Maya oral tradition. Everyone felt comfortable speaking the Maya language in the community since only a very few families spoke Spanish and we did not communicate with them. These Spanish speaking families were there in town because they worked as school teachers, as secretaries of the municipality, or as post office attendants. But, after a few of us finished primary school in town, then we needed to leave our community to a larger city in order to achieve middle school, high school or higher education. Here, some of my companions suffered discrimination and started to reject Mayan language as they were embarrassed to be called “Indians”. As a result of the continuous discrimination suffered in schools as we identified ourselves as indigenous people, some returned home and avoided speaking in Maya language, even to their mothers who only spoke Maya. In my case, it was easy to adapt myself to the cities with ladino speakers since at an early age I too spoke Spanish as well as Mayan language. My parents used the strategy of bilingual education to prepare me to confront this racist world that discriminate against indigenous people and their cultures. Those who did not speak



Spanish well enough, also started to think of their Mayan language as an obstacle to become a sophisticated person, so they began to dislike their own native languages.

Another major problem that I faced during the early 1980s was the rejection of native school teachers who were assigned to teach in their own linguistic communities. During the early 1980s there was a movement of rejection of Indians and the parents wanted their children to learn Spanish. In order to achieve this goal, they wanted ladino school teachers in their communities and rejected native speakers, arguing that ladino school teachers were better because they were from the city and were monolingual in Spanish. In this way, some communities rejected indigenous school teachers and forced their children to stop speaking Mayan languages. With the creation of the Academy of Mayan Languages (ALMG) in 1985, little by little the indigenous people started to value their native languages and now some communities show preference and appreciation for bilingual education, preferring teachers who are native of their own communities.

Like Jakaltek Maya, most indigenous languages in Guatemala remain unattended by governmental institutions. Not even the Academy of Maya Languages has a strong program for promoting and safeguarding indigenous languages. Another major problem in promoting Mayan languages is the persistent racist view of indigenous people in Guatemala which is reflected in the treatment of the languages. The government censuses and other institutional studies on the vitality of Mayan languages have tended to reduce the number of speakers, invisibilizing the indigenous

people in an effort to present a more assimilated or ladinoized Guatemalan population.

With a country whose minority ladino population dominates and control the national institutions, indigenous languages are in constant danger of extinction. A recent report funded by USAID presented six indigenous languages in danger of extinction. Xinca with 18 speakers, Garifuna with 203 speakers, Itza with 123 speakers, Mopan with 468 speakers, Tektiteko with 1200 speakers and Uspanteko with 1230 speakers. The Jakalteko-Maya language with 38,350 speakers is also in danger of extinction since the children and youth are not learning to speak and write in their Mayan language. Also, the research on the Mayan languages by foreign linguists is very limited and the dictionaries produced on these languages, such as Jakalteko Maya are very incomplete, so there is a need to compile greater dictionaries by Maya speakers in collaboration with linguists and anthropologists.

To safeguard the indigenous languages in Guatemala it is important to respond and implement what is stated in the Law on National (Indigenous) Languages. That “the State is obliged to facilitate the access to health services, education, justice and security...so that the population should be informed and attended in the language of each linguistic community”. Unfortunately, the law exists only on paper but there is no appropriate budget for the implementation of it, or the political will of the government authorities to truly implement a national program of bilingual education.

I have argued that in order to promote the uses of indigenous languages, there must be successful stories to be followed or imitated by younger speakers. For this reason, I have started three small projects for the revitalization of Jakaltek Maya language and culture. First, the production of written literature in Mayan languages by poets and writers (including myself) has motivated younger speakers to write and produce literature in their own language. In this way the Jakaltek speaking population recognizes that their language can be use as instrument for the production of poetry and stories that have been published by their authors, thus showing a constant creativity in Mayan languages. Examples, Victor Montejo's *Q'anil: Man of Lightning*, published in a tri-lingual edition by a prestigious University Press. See also Humberto Akabal's poetry in Mayan language Gaspar Pedro Gonzalez novels in Q'anjobal Maya language. (Example).

The second strategy for promoting Jakaltek Maya language is through the production of songs and their lyrics in Mayan language. There have been famous Jakaltek Maya singers who have produced CD's and whose songs have become well known in their communities. The success of some singers and composers have motivated or inspired other to produce songs in Mayan languages. The taped songs are sent to migrant communities in Mexico, Canada and the United States. In 1998 I organized the First Festival for Maya singers and composers inviting all the composers and groups to participate in this event. The response was overwhelming since almost a dozen of Maya groups participated in the competition for the best song created in Jakaltek Maya language. This event took place in the major plaza in front of the Church in Jacaltenango and thousands of people (young, adults, children, etc) were congregated to listed and

enjoy the songs performed by the groups and their composers. Since then, Maya singers and composers have proliferated, entertaining their audience with songs that deal with many issues such as poverty, migration, love and politics, etc. In this festival of the Jakalteq song monetary prizes and awards were given to the best composers and groups, so in this way they were stimulated to continue writing and composing songs in Jakalteq Maya language. (Example).

The third project that I initiated was the compilation of a Jakalteq Maya dictionary since the existing one is very incomplete and written a long time ago by foreign linguists. I compiled thousands of words in Jakalteq Maya, but unfortunately, my luggage was stolen at a bus station as I arrived in Guatemala in 1998. Having lost the work done by months, the project was truncated, although this is an important project that must be carried out soon, since there are few older speakers left who could help in documenting the language with words that no one else uses and know. But funding is needed for this project.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

The impact of globalization on indigenous languages of Guatemala and Central America is alarming as we notice the pace of absorption and elimination of indigenous ways of life and worldviews. Because of the continues subjugation and discrimination of indigenous people as a continuation of the colonial process, the languages of indigenous people are in constant danger of extinction. Of course, Mayan languages have survived a process of globalization before with the Spanish

conquest of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. Since then, Spanish have become the national language and Nahuatl of Central Mexico became the *lingua franca* of indigenous people of Central America during the colonial period. People and places were renamed in Nahuatl and with Spanish, the 22 Mayan languages were considered less important and thus started the process of decline that persists until now as mentioned above.

The Maya people and civilization has already suffered a great loss. The language of the hieroglyphs (reading and writing) was lost and the few who knew this ancient writing system such as Nachi Cocom and Antonio Chi did not passed on the torch of knowledge to future generations. With this failure, the loss of an ancient language of the glyphs was lost and with it, the great knowledge of a whole civilization was lost. Fortunately, Mayan culture and languages diversified and maintained Mayan culture throughout the centuries, but once again, these languages are in danger of extinction as a result of globalization and homogenization of the world. And as mentioned above, colonialism and globalization is causing the alarming rate of language extinction. Language loss is not voluntary but the result of forced changes and violations of the human rights of minorities and indigenous people. For this reason, addressing endangered languages should be “acknowledged as one of the highest priorities facing humanity, posing moral, practical and scientific issues of enormous proportions” (Campbell 2007:1).

It is then important to emphasize success stories like those mentioned above. The younger speakers must recognize that their indigenous language has a creative power in

literature and in the production of knowledge. More success stories are needed and the native language should be continuously used in radio programs, newspapers, songs, videos and teaching material for children and adults. In other words, the danger faced by indigenous languages as a result of globalization needs a prompt and effective response or actions governments, institutions and the communities of speakers.

On the other hand, the rejection of indigenous cultures and languages, as well as the discrimination and neglect in which the majority of indigenous people have lived for centuries is the continuation of this exclusion that began since the Spanish conquest. The first priority then is to focus on the system that exploits indigenous people, just as theology of liberation placed blame on the states as sinners for not allowing the immense majority oppressed to achieve a dignified human life and existence.

Due to the ignorance about indigenous cultures during the early contacts and conquest in this continent, indigenous knowledge systems were dismissed as unimportant to the western world. Sometimes, indigenous beliefs systems were considered too simple and absurd, or simply as expressions of the lack of intellectual capacities of the natives. During the Spanish conquest the written record of indigenous people were burned and destroyed by early missionaries. This was the case in Yucatan, when Bishop Diego de Landa (1560, 1983) burned the books of the Mayas calling its content: “teachings of the devil.” In central Mexico the same occurred, but there was also a documentation of the Aztecs stories told by the elders to Bernardino de Sahagún (1550-82) and compiled in a series of volumes called the Florentine Codex. Unfortunately, in the Maya area there

were no Sahagún who interviewed the elders and documented their belief systems and knowledge from pre-Hispanic times. This was a great loss, since Maya people had a writing system and a literary tradition, but this knowledge was not considered important until recently, when epigraphers began to decipher Maya hieroglyphic writing as shown in the updated works by Michael Coe (1992), and Martha Macri (2002). The surviving codices are examples of how Mayas wrote about their histories, science, politics, literature and religion. Much of this knowledge has been forgotten, and much has remained unused, since not everything disappeared. Native Maya knowledge is out there fragmented in the oral tradition and awaiting the time to be used again in this century of globalization.

For this reason, we must increase our interest in native knowledge, especially those focusing on medicinal plants and traditional forms of healing. For decades, the wisdom of indigenous people expressed in their oral traditions and their experiential knowledge of plants, animals and the natural environment was a source of “folk information” for the West, but never considered as scientific knowledge. Protecting endangered languages and safeguarding indigenous knowledge encoded in their languages is a human right issue that must be respected and promoted for the future.

Unfortunately, and despite the changes in attitude towards the language, some children still prefer being monolingual in Spanish, while Mayan languages are still stigmatized as inferior languages spoken only by Indians. The problem in retaining indigenous languages is also due to the fact that adults are mostly illiterate and don't

see the benefit for their children in retaining their native language. Even worst, with the current wave of globalization the people realize that more and more the language of education and business is the dominant foreign language, either Spanish or English. Despite the forces of assimilation, we must insist in the value of native languages, since a language is a key to our culture, with the power to connect us through time and open the world of the past. For this reason we must not allow indigenous languages to become extinct and continue with our efforts to promote their value, so that they maintain their vitality for the future.



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**LITERACY: A KEY FOR SAFEGUARDING ENDANGERED LANGUAGES** Definitively, literacy is fundamental in the process of self-determination and selfpossession against the appropriation done by naming and renaming by colonial forces that controlled indigenous populations. For the past five centuries, the indigenous languages of Guatemala have been neglected and abhorred as symbols of backwardness. And to paraphrase Leanne Hinton, they have not been the languages of government, education, commerce or of wider communication. For this very reason some Mayan languages are in great danger of becoming extinct d One example is the project "Safeguarding endangered languages of indigenous peoples of Siberia" coordinated by the UNESCO Moscow Office. One element of the project is this round table on endangered languages of the indigenous peoples of Siberia. The aims of the roundtable are to analyze the current status and problems of the endangered languages of indigenous peoples of Siberia and discuss appropriate safeguarding measures.Â The 2003 meeting resulted in the acceptance of recommendations to UNESCO and of a document called "Language Vitality and Endangerment"™. This document is designed to indicate ways how to enhance the vitality of threatened languages.