Global Linguistics, Mayan Languages and the Cultivation of Autonomy

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Language has been linked to globalization ever since transoceanic empires first forced those whom they colonized to learn imported tongues. Indigenous peoples, in turn, have faced the meteoric (and often violent) physical reduction of their languages. Nowadays, just in the Americas, dozens of the indigenous languages go extinct each decade. Yet globalization's intellectual reduction of languages has been equally dramatic, as colonizers have portrayed indigenous languages as tangled, inferior, and unworthy "tongues" or "dialects," unfit for modernity.

As global trade, law, and science privilege a handful of former imperial tongues and their associated cultures and political systems, Indigenous peoples struggle to maintain not only their languages as a means of communication and as evidence of indigenousness, but also their "linguistic autonomy" — the distinctiveness, independence, expressiveness, and resilience of language that metonymically embodies wider political, cultural, ideological, and economic welfare. How do Indigenous people use language not only to engage, but contest, globalization? How do they change the concept and practices of autonomy in the process? And what potential do indigenous practices and visions of globalization and autonomy have to affect established structures of power and authority?

The case of the Guatemala's "Maya Movement" reveals how contemporary struggles to reshape globalization to secure autonomy can be both promising and perilous. Indigenous people speaking at least twenty-three distinct Native languages constitute 40-70 percent of Guatemala's population of nearly thirteen million people. But since the 1980s, they have transcended those linguistic divisions by organizing as "Mayas" based on the theory that all but two of the Native languages currently spoken in Guatemala (together with another ten languages spoken in the neighbouring countries) descend from "Proto-Mayan" — an extinct language theorized to have been spoken four or five thousand years ago. The common descent of the Mayan languages is now accepted by experts worldwide, along with the idea that the family tree of the Mayan languages should be a basis for Pan-Maya culture and identity.

Mayas have used the phylogenetic model as a framework for mobilizing collectively to revitalize culture, to show linguistic autonomy, and to push for political reforms and rights, battling against a state dominated by Spanish-speaking "ladinos" who descend from, or at least prefer to identify with, Guatemala's European colonizers. Mayas have succeeded in getting their culture, history, and languages taught in schools. In the process, they have come to reimagine comparative linguistics as an ancient science practiced by their ancestors. They have also earned private and government (though perhaps token) support for numerous projects promoting indigenous cultures and languages. Mayan ethnolinguistic subgroups are even the units to which foreign and domestic institutions distribute aid.

Yet Pan-Mayanists' new language ideology has marginalized Mayas who maintain divergent traditions, such as linguistic parochialism, flexible linguistic identities, and multilingualism in Native

languages. Moreover, as activists seek to slow the physical reduction of indigenous languages, they may be complicit in reducing the complex roles, character, and meaning of those languages by fixing the parameters by which they are defined and evaluated and by prescribing non-indigenous models to explain the highly politicized relationship of language to identity. Modern linguistic maps promote the idea of unitary languages occupying land like property in a cadastral land registry, such as that which Guatemala's neo-liberal state has been building, with the help of transnational backers, since the end of the Guatemalan civil war in 1996. Supporters of the cadastre aim to replace customary shared use of land, flexible borders, and periodic negotiation of land rights with foreign "global" notions of property that dictate unitary owners with written titles to fixed resources and parcels. In the process, people are being redefined in terms of property according to global standards, just as they are now defined in terms of fixed languages.

Ultimately, the new cadastral notions that have accompanied Mayas' global linguistic ideology threaten not only traditional Maya culture, but the resources that sustain them. Operation of the central land registry will disadvantage Mayas, most of whom lack the funds and schooling to adequately defend their rights as land is registered. The cadastre is also likely to intensify land scarcity by enabling outsiders to buy land within indigenous communities, while eliminating Mayas' convenient tradition of buying, selling, sharing, or trading land with a socially-binding community oath. The cadastre will be the basis of a future property tax that could impoverish subsistence farmers and force them to sell land. Numerous recent protests against the privatization and sale of rights to water, trails, and underground minerals demonstrate how, by giving the state authority to define property, the cadastre undercuts unwritten indigenous rights. The cadastre also furthers the state's long-time objective of breaking up communal lands. Finally, the cadastre takes away Mayas' ability to settle disputes by means of negotiation, forcing them to submit to laws and legal institutions controlled by ladinos and foreigners. Ultimately, while language ideology of pan-Mayanism has offered an important architecture for Maya political activism and autonomy, it has simultaneously empowered a perilous neo-liberal logic that threatens that very autonomy.

Amidst the new "global" regulation of language and property, some are working to revitalize Maya autonomy through customary linguistic beliefs and practices. Central to this effort is the pan-Mesoamerican agricultural metaphor of the *milpa*, or maize field. Some cultural activists are encouraging Mayas to imagine both language and autonomy as a *milpa* that not only must be cultivated and cared for by humans, but which also depends on a complex conjunction of resources, inputs, and interrelationships. Locally-adapted maize, beans, squash, and chilies are intercropped to not only sustain the basic nutritional needs of the farmer, but to sustain one another. The plants replenish the soil with vital nutrients required by one another; maize stalks are tied together and strengthened by the entwining bean vines, which flourish upwards; broad squash leaves block weeds; chilies discourage animal pests. All the while, farmers work to foster the complex symbioses upon which they themselves depend. Cultigens are strengthened by cross-fertilization by neighbouring fields; gentle collective invigoration by a civilization built around *milpa* agriculture.

The *milpa* represents the cultivation of a resilient autonomy sustained by parochial interrelations, persistent human labour, and the conservation of local diversity. Traditionalists who recognize the strength of traditional maizeways advocate a slow, measured embrace of global practices. A Maya farmer who cultivates *milpa* has the subsistence security to dedicate some land to imported crops; similarly, Mayas who maintain linguistic autonomy by cultivating indigenous languages and maintain wider political-economic autonomy by cultivating customary parochial interrelations have the versatility to dabble with foreign tongues and global influences. Indeed, just as Indigenous people protect diverse heirloom seeds and agricultural ingenuity that help control blights and catastrophe,

they protect diverse languages and alternative relations between people that ultimately might help humankind resist a global crises.

For Mayas in Guatemala, language is key to fostering Native autonomy and contesting globalization, and *milpa* is a model for both. Mayas' complex relational ideology about cultivation of language and autonomy contrast the globally-hegemonic image of spontaneously (and endlessly) "growing" languages, economies, and liberties. Ultimately, Mayas' ideas constitute a powerful alter-globalization that augments Native autonomy. But the cultivation of autonomy through the cultivation of languages is also an important model for the rest of the world.

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