Running head: MAYAN CULTURE

Modernization or Cultural Maintenance? – A Look into the Mayan Struggle

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Abstract

For centuries before the arrival of the Spaniards, the Maya Indians of Central America lived as one of the most advanced civilizations of the New World. In spite of the conflict the Maya have faced because of the Conquest and civil war, they continue to represent the majority of the Guatemalan population and have maintained much of their heritage.

As the ladino world continues to progress around them, however, the Maya are faced with the struggle between cultural maintenance and the need for progress and modernization. The decisions they make on key issues such as language, dress, and lifestyle will shape the way their descendants will reflect their Mayan heritage. In the best of situations, the Maya could find a balance between their cultural ties and the progressing world by maintaining their unique ancestral links while also benefiting from modern society. If they do not, the Maya could continue as a marginalized society, or they could lose their unique heritage altogether.
Modernization or Cultural Maintenance? – A Look into the Mayan Struggle

“Chan Xawol!” (pronounced chahn sha’-kweel) is what the children in the Mayan village of Chicacadenas taught our group of students when we arrived at their village in the summer of 2006. The phrase means “hello”, and it is one of the many words I scribbled down in my journal during the three short days our missionary team was in Petén, Guatemala. The brief encounter with the Maya was only long enough to get a glimpse of the way one of the Maya dialects looks and sounds. Obviously, with no prior or subsequent training in the language, we were not experts; nor were the children of the village versed in Spanish, although they were learning it as a second language in their makeshift village classrooms. For both the gringo in awe of the rustic sounds of the Mayan language and the Mayan children of the impoverished village in Petén, proficiency in the target foreign language was far from a reasonable goal.

Proficiency in any language as defined by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) requires more than a mere understanding of the words and phrases of speech. If one aspires to be an advanced speaker, he or she must also have a base knowledge of the culture of the target language as well. The SIL International (1999) stated that to qualify as an advanced listener, the candidate must not only comprehend the ideas of a dialogue, but also “show an emerging awareness of culturally implied meanings beyond the surface meanings of the text” (¶ 2). Furthermore, for qualification in the superior proficiency levels, the listener must have “sensitivity for its social and cultural references and its affective overtones” (SIL International, 1999, ¶ 1).
In other words, the listener must be able to detect the emotional inferences that exist beyond the surface dialogue.

As defined by ACTFL, proficiency in foreign languages not only requires verbal, written, and listening competency, but also an understanding of the culture. Without a proper cultural context, many of the language’s idioms, stories, and jokes would not make sense to non-native speakers. For example, if we call someone a “Scrooge” in English, the listener must have a proper background of that familiar Dickens Christmas story to understand that the speaker is calling the person a miser. Without an understanding of its culture, the target language is simply a memorized string of equivalents to a mother language. Unknowingly, the speaker of a foreign language may offend a native speaker because of lack of exposure to the target language’s cultural norms. For this reason, a person that aspires to become proficient in any language must not focus solely upon the words, but upon the culture that has formed around the people who speak it.

An integral part of the Hispanic culture (whose language I am studying) is its strong link to indigenous roots. Each ancient civilization of Indians – Inca, Aztec, and Maya being among the most popularly studied – encountered the Spaniards as they arrived in the New World. As the two worlds collided, power struggles and conflict led to the formation of a new social order that has continued developing to this day. The contemporary Latin American population contains remnants of this interaction between the followers of Christopher Columbus and the natives who lived during the conquest of the New World. In fact, the modern Latin American culture is the result of a mixing of the Spaniards and its indigenous populations (Mestizo, 2007). The Spaniards who
arrived to the New World took wives for themselves from the native Indian population, creating the new class called mestizos (mixed). The descendants of the mestizos form what is today the ladino class of Latin America.¹

Not all Indians were so closely linked to the newcomers – those that did not intermarry with the Spaniards retained their indigenous blood ties, and many of their descendants have kept this pure line of Indian blood. This contrast between the mixed descendants of the mestizos and the pure indígenas has resulted in a plethora of racial and social issues (which in many cases have manifested themselves as problems) in the Latin American countries.

This discourse will address some of the problems the Indian population has faced in the past (specifically among the Mayan Indian civilization that still inhabits parts of Guatemala today) and the struggle their people face as they continue adapting to the dominant ladino culture. The Maya’s presence in Guatemala has been a rich source of anthropological and political study for years, yet at times their people have been the target of discrimination and strife. The most recent decades have seen an increase of scholars who are interested in the issues that surround the Mayan people. Now, many scholars are asking questions about the modern Maya: who are they? How do they relate to their ancestors? Moreover, how does their cultural background tie into their presence in the modern world?

*Part I: Who are the Maya? Their History, Conflict, and Struggle for Identity*

According to the Agreement on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous People, which was drafted in 1995 for the Guatemalan government, certain characteristics define

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¹ A more elaborate definition of mestizo and ladino can be found (Mestizo, 2007) and (Ladino, 2007).
a person as being essentially Maya. The elements of ‘Mayaness’ listed in the agreement are quoted as follows:

(a) Direct descent from the ancient Mayas;

(b) Languages deriving from a common Mayan root;

(c) A view of the world based on the harmonious relationship of all elements of the universe…the earth is the mother…and maize is a sacred symbol…This view…has been handed down…through material and written artifacts and by an oral tradition in which women have played a determining role;²

(d) A common culture based on the principles and structures of Mayan thought…philosophy…scientific and technical knowledge, artistic…values of their own…community organization based on solidarity…; and

(e) A sense of their own identity. (United States Institute of Peace, 1995, ¶ I.2)

Though the characteristics listed above are elements of Mayan identity, the mental image that many tourists form of the ‘traditional’ Mayan Indian is not always correct. Popularization of the story of the ancient Maya has often distorted the way outsiders view the living Maya. As Fash (1994) stated, “earlier Western academics had put the Maya on a cultural pedestal; some publicity seekers seem to delight in knocking them from it” (p. 187). Fash gave the example of a book he reviewed which said the Maya had a “bloodlust” and a “penchant for warfare” (p. 187). He also noted that the media, in its quest for pleasing consumers, often forgoes scholarship to appeal to its audience; the

² In an article, Fash pointed out that the oral tradition of the Maya has helped shape and maintain its culture (1994).
opinions formed in a movie theater or in popular television shows (i.e., The *Discovery Channel*)\(^3\) may carry over into the real views we have of the modern Maya.

The recent movie *Apocalypto* (Apocalypse), released in 2006, is another example of the media’s distortion of Mayan life. Lemenick (2006), writer for the *New York Post*, confirmed this in his review of *Apocalypto* when he stated, “forget your history lessons about what an advanced civilization the Mayans were. Here they're bloodthirsty savages, who seem to have even forgotten they invented astronomy…” (¶ 8).

Despite their depiction in film and television, the contemporary Maya do not behave like bloodthirsty savages who have an affinity towards warfare and sacrifice; neither do all Maya look like the docile old women wearing the traditional *huipil* dress and making a craft to sell at a market. Though there are many inhabitants of Guatemala who have maintained strong ancestral ties to the ancient Indians, their social behaviors have not conformed entirely to their ancient counterparts. For example, in his discussion of the influence of political and economic conditions on Mayan identity, anthropologist Fischer (1999) sketched a more modernized, yet distinctly Mayan image in the persona of Domingo, a modern Mayan priest. Domingo lives not in a stick and mud hut, but in a two-story cinder block home in one of Tecpán’s central urban areas. He does live off the land, like many natives, but instead of sustenance farming, he has two trucks to use for hauling produce for farmers – he has a lifestyle that is far removed from the ones of his ancient ancestors.

\(^3\) This example is referenced because in the Summer of 2007, this author had personal experience watching a series on the Discovery Channel about ancient Maya. Because it gave no accounts of how their modern counterparts are faring today, viewers may be left misinformed about how the modern Maya live today.
Domingo’s way of life may stand in stark contrast with what many think is the traditional Mayan way of life; however, these apparent advancements in the way he lives do not constitute an abandonment of his Mayan cultural ties. He still considers himself a Mayan religious specialist, and he faithfully keeps the ancient 260-day Mayan calendar (Fischer, 1999, p. 476). Thus, there seems to be an attempt at balance in Domingo’s life: while he does not forsake the modern amenities and economic advancements that are available to him, he still appreciates and maintains much of the Mayan heritage that makes his people unique.

The balance between cultural maintenance and assimilation into the ladino culture has been a constant struggle for those who seek to revitalize the Mayan way of life. Many Mayan activists have been pushing for equal treatment of their people by demanding the right to maintain their cultural ties to the ancient Mayan civilization. These demands, however, can be an impediment to progress among the Maya. To gain the recognition and political influence necessary to overcome the ladino domination against which they are fighting, the Maya must adapt to their developing society. These two goals – cultural revitalization and modernization for influence – continue to be a source of conflict for the Maya who seek to propel their people over the supremacy of the ladino government.

Nonetheless, why do the Maya feel the need to struggle against the ladino community in the first place? A brief look into Mayan history will provide a backdrop for this question.
**Historical background of the Maya.** To understand the facets of the Mayan culture in a modern context and its role in the modern Latin American world, it is appropriate to consider the history that has shaped them into who they are today. The Mayan people are an indigenous Indian population that once occupied the entirety of southern Mexico and the region of modern-day Guatemala before the Spanish Conquest began (see map in Appendix A). Archaeological digs and investigations have revealed much about the lives of the ancient Maya; however, much remains to be proven about their culture and way of life.

Although much mystery remains about the culture of the ancient Maya, archaeologists have been able to divide their history into periods, each of which describes the way the culture of the Maya developed into the one it is today. Based on ancient Mayan remnants such as the ones found in religious ceremonial centers and the ancient text of the Popol Vuh, Maya history falls into the following periods:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archaic period</td>
<td>7000–2500 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Preclassic period</td>
<td>2500–1000 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Preclassic period</td>
<td>1000–400 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late Preclassic period</td>
<td>400 BC–AD 250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Classic period</td>
<td>AD 250–600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late Classic period</td>
<td>AD 600–800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminal Classic period</td>
<td>AD 800–1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postclassic period</td>
<td>AD 1000–about 1517</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact/Colonial periods</td>
<td>Begin approximately AD 1517</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Webster, 2000, p. 69)

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4 The Popol Vuh is an ancient Mayan text written in the 16th century (Arias, 1995, p. 254) that gives their account of the creation of the world. This document is one of the few references (besides hieroglyphs and temples) that scholars have to study the ancient Maya.
The periods that most pertain to this study and the analysis of the Mayan cultural changes are the Classic, Postclassic, Contact and Colonial periods. Historians say that for centuries before the arrival of the Spaniards in the Contact/Colonial period, the Mayan Indians had lived as one of the most advanced civilizations of the New World. They developed their own form of governance, a sophisticated hieroglyphic writing system, extensive artwork, and a complex religion (Thompson, 1970). After the peak of cultural advancement (the Classic Era), the flourishing Mayan civilization went through a cultural decline and entered into the Postclassic Period, for reasons which are disputed among modern scholars.

Although the Mayan culture went through the decline, it left a rich cultural tradition that anthropologist Fash (1994) said is “daunting in its diversity and intoxicating in its creativity” (p. 182). In fact, many scholars would agree that the Mayan culture has left more of its ancient relics – in both its archaeological ruins and in the remnants of its people – than any other pre-Colombian culture (Fash, 1994). This, according to Carlsen and Pretchel (1991) makes the Maya among the most researched people groups of the 20th century.

After the decline of the Maya, their people went through another bout of cultural turbulence. The Spanish Conquest of the region of Guatemala began around the year 1524 when Pedro de Alvarado led his men through that area to conquer the land in the name of their country and of their God (Lovell, 1988). This invasion began the Contact period of the Maya timeline. The Spanish who came to Central America claimed to be

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5 For further discussion of the technology of the ancient Maya in areas such as agricultural advances, historical engravings, trade, and warfare, see pages 185-193 of Fash’s article (1994).
fulfilling God’s commission to convert the indigenous people to Catholicism; however, more than anything they seemed to be seeking riches and glory. One can see these ambitions reflected in the words of conqueror Bernal Díaz del Castillo when he said, “we came here to serve God and the King and also to get rich” (Lovell, 1988, p. 29).

Many factors affected the Maya’s capability to resist the Spanish advances on their land. Most detrimental to their defense against the newcomers, however, was disease. Lovell (1988) attributed the native’s inability to resist the Spanish to the diseases that the newcomers brought from the New World. Since the Maya had no immunity to the diseases the Spanish carried, they died in droves, thus depleting the Mayan population. Principally because of these diseases, the Mayan population decreased between 75-90% during the century of the invasions (Thompson, 1970). Historian Fuentes y Guzmán, who lived through the spread of the epidemics, attested to the fact that smallpox and measles ravaged his generation, killing eight out of ten natives and leaving the living as “veritable walking skeletons” (Thompson, 1970, p. 53). Many Indians who survived the Spaniards’ diseases either fled from their sacred ancestral lands and into the uninhabited mountainsides, or faced enslavement on Spanish haciendas (Hanlon, 1997).

Following the pattern of history around the world, the lighter skinned Spaniards (peninsulares and criollos) governed the darker skinned mestizos, who enslaved the indígenas (Thompson 1970). Besides an exchange of blood-ties, Thompson reported that the Spanish also introduced the Catholic religion to the Maya (in many cases insisting
that the Maya adopt its customs) (1970, p. 162). As will be discussed later, the enforcement of Catholicism upon the Maya was not entirely successful\(^6\).

This exposure to the ways of the New World – in its people, diseases, and religion – bore great consequences for the Maya. The cultural exchange that took place between the Maya and Spanish worlds left the Mayan culture permanently altered. Never again would the pre-Contact Mayan world exist again. The Conquest alone, however, is not entirely responsible for the shaping of modern Mayan thought and custom. A more recent event has also touched the lives of the Maya, and it has greatly affected the development of their culture: the civil war in Guatemala.

**Guatemalan civil war.** During the second half of the 20th century, Guatemala went through many military and civilian governments, as well as a 36-year guerrilla war rife with human rights violations. The principal source of violence stemmed from heated disagreements between the Guatemalan Government and the rebel guerrilla force: La Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG). The Maya, though not largely involved in the fighting, became a target of the hostility between the government and the guerrillas. According to the CIA World Factbook (2007), around 100,000 people died or disappeared between the 1960s and 1990s because of the war – the majority of those casualties were Maya. A large percentage of Mayan deaths were the result of government anti-guerrilla campaigns (the *scorched earth* policy) that destroyed between 450-600 Mayan villages in the upsurge of terror from 1980 to 1984 (Hanlon, 1997).\(^7\)

Unfortunately, many Indians were terrorized by guerrilla neighbors and were thrown into a dispute that had little to do with them or their way of life (Bargo, 2005).

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\(^6\) Maya religion will be discussed in the section entitled *Implications for the Gospel.*

\(^7\) The variance in this figure is due to the discrepancy between the Guatemalan government’s low count and the UN Truth Commission report, which states that over 600 villages were destroyed.
During the years of fighting, approximately one million Guatemalans fled from their homes to escape violence (CIA World Factbook, 2007). In Hanlon's analysis of the refugee camps in Chiapas (Southern Mexico), the majority of the Guatemalan refugees residing in that camp were the Maya who were forced to leave during the escalated violence of the late 1970s and early 1980s (1997). Even in the asylum of a refugee camp, Hanlon noted that the Maya faced "deprivation, malnutrition, mistreatment, and military attacks" (p. 3). When President Vinicio Cerezo took office in 1986, he promised the refugees that they could return to their homes or any place they desired; however, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) documents, those who returned to Guatemala could not return to their homes. Instead, they were moved to "development centers" after they entered the country, much of the time due to unsafe conditions in their home regions (Hanlon, 1997, p. 4, 5).

The violence of the civil war did not cease until December of 1996, when a peace treaty was signed between the Guatemalan government and the guerilla rebels. As a part of this peace agreement, the government formed the Agreement on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous People (United States Institute of Peace, 1995). The equal treatment contract explicitly discusses and prescribes solutions to many of the problems that the Maya have been facing. One of the most important advances that the contract makes is its recognition of the Maya as a people group that is integral to the Guatemalan culture, yet one that has been a subject of discrimination. This realization on the part of the Guatemalan government is indeed an enormous achievement, even if the effects of the agreement did not manifest themselves immediately. In the introductory statement of
the agreement, the Guatemalan government admits that its dealings with the Maya had not been entirely just, for it states:

- the indigenous peoples have been particularly subject to de facto levels of discrimination, exploitation and injustice, on account of their origin, culture and language; that this historical reality has affected and continues to affect these peoples profoundly, denying them the full exercise of their rights and political participation...[and] that the international community...has recognized the aspirations of the indigenous peoples who wish to gain control over their own institutions and forms of life as peoples. (United States Institute of Peace, 1995, Intro., ¶ 5)

To facilitate the changes that would help resolve the discrimination issues, the government agreed to make some fundamental changes in its dealings with the Maya.

In the words of the Agreement on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous People, government policy towards the Mayan culture must shake loose the patterns of the past and must now be “oriented to focus on recognition, respect and encouragement of indigenous cultural values” (United States Institute of Peace, 1995, ¶ III.2).

One of the fundamental ways in which the Guatemalan government is focusing on Mayan cultural values is the decentralization of the educational system, which allowed the Maya to be taught literacy in their native tongue. The Agreement also gave the Maya rights to land and natural resources for personal use (such as sustenance farming, wood harvesting, etc.). Considering that just a few decades before, the Maya were pushed from their lands and into refugee camps, this decision was a major step in the government’s
amends with the Maya. The Maya also received rights to rename their areas of occupation and their children with native names, and dress in indigenous attire. Furthermore, the government agreed to facilitate and encourage cultural development among the Maya. In Section III.3 of the Agreement, it states, “the Maya…are the authors of their cultural development. The role of the State is to support that development by eliminating obstacles to the exercise of this right, adopting…legislative …measures…and ensuring the participation of indigenous persons in decisions on the planning and execution of cultural …projects” (United States Institute of Peace, 1995).

Although the violence officially ended and the Maya received rights on paper, the Maya still endured discrimination. In an analysis of the Mayan refugee camps in Mexico, Hanlon (1997) noted, “reality for the people of Guatemala rarely has reflected the textual and verbal representations the world receives from the government announcements and agreements” (p. 4).

M. Bargo (2005), reporter and writer for the *Humanist*, visited the villages of Chicaja and Maribach in 2001 to meet with international human rights witnesses. Bargo (2005) interviewed the natives of the area about their experiences with the civil war, and it soon became apparent that “the wounds of a decades-long war don’t heal with the mere signing of a paper. Atrocities continue even today…” (p. 23). A peace treaty cannot restore the mothers and fathers of broken families; it cannot bring peace to the war-stained realities of those who lived through the violence, nor can it erase the discrimination that the Maya still suffer after the violence has ended.

In spite of the domination, violence, bloodshed, and discrimination the Maya have endured, their people still represent the majority of the Guatemalan population, and they
have maintained much of their ancestral heritage (Arias, 1995). Even more noteworthy is the reality that this majority population does not have considerable influence in the Guatemalan government. In recent years, however, the Maya have been gaining representation from Mayan political figures after centuries of their absence in government rule. Those Mayan activists that have gained influence in politics have been targeting the hostility their people endured and are now using it as a catalyst for action. Fischer (1999) noted that “the violence [of the civil war] has fundamentally changed the way Mayan peoples view the world…bringing that which was formerly unthinkable into the realm of possibility” (p. 487). As horrifying as the war may have been for many of the Maya, it has offered them with a means to make changes for their people. Mayan activists, seeking that change, took advantage of the injustices their people endured to promote development for the Maya (Arias, 1995). This movement towards equal rights for the Maya is called the Pan-Mayan Movement.

The Pan-Mayan movement. For many Maya, the history of their ancestors bears major significance for those who live today. The historical ‘injustices’ of the Conquest and the civil war that the Maya have endured spur many Mayan leaders to seek rights and fair treatment for their people. These Mayan activists believe that the best course of action for their people is to unite the Maya and raise the “cultural consciousness” of the people in order to gain recognition and representation. To do this, they propose uniting the Maya by stimulating areas of their heritage such as the ancient Mayan languages, hieroglyphs, dress, religion, and way of life (Fischer, 1999). Mayan activists claim that this manner of revitalization will spur cohesiveness among the Maya and pull them
together, creating a unified group that will then have more power to control their own existence.

Before the peace treaty of 1996, Mayan activists were already working to provide their people with opportunities to progress and renew their ‘lost’ culture. In the early 90’s, changes started taking place that would secure the route for the advancement of the Mayan civilization. The five countries that house Maya archaeological sites\(^8\) signed the Declaration of Copán in 1993, in which the countries agreed to conserve and protect the sites in their possession (Fash, 1994). Also in 1993, Alfredo Tay was appointed the first Guatemalan Mayan Minister of Education (Arias, 1995). With this appointment came the reintroduction of Mayan hieroglyphic writing that emphasized the revitalization of Mayan culture. This recognition and promoting of Mayan culture was not solely relevant within the Guatemalan circle – it also took effect in America. For example, at the 1990 American Anthropological Association conference in Chicago, several scholars performed a religious ritual to commemorate the Mayan culture (Arias, 1995). Thanks to the human rights movements during the civil war, the popularity of the Mayan cause was growing more popular, and the attempts to revitalize their heritage began to receive more outside support than before.

Working in favor of the call for cultural revitalization is the resistance to change that the Maya have experienced since the Spaniards came to America. Carlsen and Prechtel (1991) claimed, “despite Spanish efforts, Mayan culture has been far more resilient and self-directed than many scholars have believed” (p. 24). The Agreement on Identity and Rights bore witness to this fact when it stated, “the Mayan identity…has

\(^8\) Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, and Mexico
shown an age-old capacity for resistance to assimilation” (United States Institute of Peace, 1995, ¶ 1.2—see Mayan Religious Orientation, below).

On the other hand, a study done after the Guatemalan civil war by Bargo (2005) disagrees with this claim by showing that cultural assimilation has been prevalent in many Mayan villages. An interview with the natives showed that the younger people of some Mayan villages had culturally disconnected with their ancestral roots. Because the children were severed from Mayan tradition (because of refugee relocation or the death of parents) they could not identify common indigenous lullabies or stories, nor could they name helpful or harmful plants in the forest that their ancestors once used for food and medicine. According to Bargo (2005), the civil war “not only decimated the few generations that had endured it, but it had irreversibly interrupted the entire history of a culture and a way of life” (p. 24).

Some extreme activists may view this cultural loss as a result of government oppression that needs to be overcome by cultural revitalization, and for this reason, they continue to advance their goals to “protect” their people. The fact remains, however, that the majority of the actual Mayan population are not preoccupied with changes in their language, dress, or way of life – nor do they see these changes as a rejection of their ancestry. K. Warren (1998) demonstrates this attitude in the account of an activist family in the Kaqchikel village of San Andrés Semetabaj. Don Gustavo, the father of the family, said, “to really recover Mayan culture, we would have to return to the ways of our ancestors. To recover everything…we would have to go back to the kitchen and cook on the floor over the three stones…But these intellectuals don’t have hearth stones, they probably have something even better than my wood stove” (Warren, 1998, p. 181).
This discussion of the difference between cooking on the traditional hearthstones or in a ‘modern’ stove is one example that shows change within a culture is not necessarily negative. Throughout history, cultures have not been static – on the contrary, they have proven themselves versatile and dynamic. In fact, this change is not only natural, but also it is oftentimes necessary – this is true in the case of the Mayan Indians. In their country, discrimination, disease, and poverty are still rampant today – seventy-five percent of the Guatemalan population live below poverty line. With sixty percent of the population being Maya, it is evident that an overwhelming majority of the Maya are living in extreme poverty (U.S. Department of State, 2005).9 If the Guatemalans (in this case, the Maya) are to overcome these statistics, change is fundamental. As Fischer indicates, the Maya are not crying out against lofty theories. What they seek is a rejecting of “racism [and] inequality” (1999, p. 475). This sort of change may entail taking some steps toward a more integrated lifestyle by learning the Spanish language and relating to the dominant ladino class.

Part II: Which Way? Cultural Revitalization or Modernization?

Fash (1994), describing the condition of the contemporary Maya said, “the Maya world stands on a threshold between past and future scholarship, and more importantly, between an indigenous people hailed widely as the most advanced in the New World and other cultural traditions not necessarily interested in the survival or prosperity of Maya civilization” (p. 181). A constant tug of war takes place between those who hold the Mayan traditions in high esteem and those who do not. In today’s context, Fash could be appropriately describing the positions of Mayan activists and the opposing ladino culture.

9 Official census data indicates that 43% of Guatemala’s population is Indian; however, due to the limited nature of the census, unofficial estimates tend to be greater, near 60%.
Opponents to this revitalization of Mayan culture (who tend to be part of the ladino communities of Guatemala) differ in their opinions of what would be beneficial for development among the indigenous people. While the Maya believe that reviving the ancient Mayan culture is most beneficial for their people, many in the ladino community take the modernist stance that says progress can, and should be made by eliminating the elements that define the Maya (e.g., languages, dress, etc.) (Fischer, 1999). Without those characteristics that identify the Maya, they would blend into the ladino community and would have better chances of finding a job and advancing in society. This assimilation into the ladino culture, according to those who hold this view, would lead to progress in the Mayan communities.

According to Fischer (1999), supporters of the modernist view are not interested in the well-being of the Mayan culture, but they are merely trying to disguise the dominance of ladino supremacy with a “façade of progressivism and global community” (p. 475). Those in disagreement would argue that the very values the activists are promoting are hindering the Maya from progressing and gaining a better life for their people. Regardless of which side of the argument is ultimately ‘better,’ both have manifested themselves in Mayan history.

An area of change that has advanced Mayan modernization is the improvement in Mayan education over the last few decades. The first steps in Mayan education were taken in the 1960s when a division of the Catholic Church helped provide the Maya with the opportunity to attend primary and secondary schooling (Arias, 1995). The peace accords of 1996 furthered educational progress by establishing bilingual education for the
Maya, which has helped them increase literacy and expand their ability to produce political figures.

Although the Maya have been under outside rule since the sixteenth century, their people are gaining representation in the government and are making progress in society. Since the early 1990s, the number of local Mayan political representatives has been growing. This growth, however, has not always been supported by the general public of Guatemala. In an online article about Guatemalan peace, Foreign Minister Stein stated that, "when you [tell] a Guatemalan…that at some point half of our National Assembly will be comprised of indigenous people…many…d[on’t] like it at all. Because the image that we grew up with was that indigenous people were servants. But it's bound to change" (Davidson, 1998, ¶ 10).

Indeed, opposition to the Maya holding political positions did wane. In 1993, the first Mayan cabinet member was elected, and later Rigoberto K’emé Chay was elected mayor of Quetzaltenango, the second largest Guatemalan city (K’emé Chay was also the first Mayan candidate for the 2003 presidential election) (Arias, 1995). In addition, Mayan politician Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil was foundational in establishing territory rights, congressional representation, participation in public planning, and the codification and implementation of Mayan law. Arias pointed out that Demetrio’s policies were essential in creating autonomy for the Maya (1995). The rise in Mayan political figures has given substance and power to the Mayan movement and the push for a cohesive Mayan population. One of the major issues of the Mayan movement is the promotion of indigenous languages.
Language maintenance. Guatemala is home to more than 42 indigenous languages, each separate and distinct from one another (Miller, 2003). For the Mayan activist, the maintenance of these languages is one of the key issues pertaining to Mayan identity. In the 1995 Agreement on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous People, the Guatemalan government seemed to be making progress in the area of language maintenance. In writing, the government gave the Maya the right to speak their native tongues, and it made reforms which obligated the government to “recognize, respect, and promote” the Mayan languages (United States Institute of Peace, 1995, ¶ III.A.2.a).

More specifically, the agreement called for the following actions:

(a) encouragement of native language use in education
(b) using indigenous languages when administering social services
(c) training bilingual judges/interpreters to communicate in court with natives
(d) improving indigenous language status (such as using them in mass media, promoting institutions that use them, etc.)
(e) granting indigenous languages official status with the Guatemalan government. (United States Institute of Peace, 1995, ¶ III.A.2)

Indeed, the government did give indigenous languages official status. Today, twenty-two indigenous languages of the Proto-Mayan family are recognized in Guatemala (Hawkins, 2005). Despite these encouraging results, in the ladino dominated culture, it is becoming more essential for the Maya to learn Spanish. In order for the Maya to benefit from the economic system, they must have a basic understanding of the dominant language.
Linguist D. Crystal (2000) notes that urbanization has heightened the influence of Spanish on indigenous languages, but increasingly, even inhabitants of rural areas may need to speak Spanish because of political, economic, and social reasons. Even after the promotion of Mayan language use in the Agreement on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous People, the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (National Statistic Institute) still defines literacy as the capacity to read and write a basic paragraph in Spanish (Hawkins, 2005, p. 59). Because of these issues, many of the Maya must make decisions about what language they will teach their children, and whether or not they should keep their own indigenous language. The decisions they make will determine the way Mayan languages and culture will develop for future generations.

Even if the Maya choose to teach their children Spanish, very little monetary support is available to fund efforts in bilingual education. This is unfortunate, since these programs would both help maintain indigenous languages and would offer Spanish as a second language to the Maya, (this would look much like the English as a Second language programs in the United States). Without proper funding, bilingual programs for the Maya are nearly impossible to put into practice, for each of the indigenous languages is distinct and they would all require different teaching materials and instructors, etc. In a third-world country such as Guatemala, implementing a workable educational system is a challenge. The mere idea of a viable bilingual educational system is truly a lofty goal.

Much like in the United States, the dominant language of Guatemalan politics seems to take precedence over the minority languages. Spanish is the language of the government, of business, and of education. If an indigenous person does not have a basic knowledge of Spanish, he is limited in his ability to advance economically and socially.
For economic advancement, the Maya have been seeking education in the urban areas of Guatemala. In Hawkins’ (2005) analysis of language loss in Guatemala, he notes that as literacy increases by one percent, language maintenance among the indigenous population decreases by 0.3 percent (p. 68).

Mayan activists have been especially wary of language loss patterns within the indigenous language groups. Hawkins emphasizes that language loss for the Maya is a concern because language is an integral part of Mayan identity (Hawkins, 2005). There are many ways in which languages change over time, but an especially ‘dangerous’ example of linguistic change in the Mayan languages is called “code switching.” W. Collins (2005) defines this linguistic pattern as the “alteration of linguistic varieties within the same conversation” (p. 242). In the case of the Maya, the original Mayan language incorporates whole phrases of Spanish into the Indian language, and it retains the Spanish linguistic patterns (such as morphology, syntax, phonology, etc.) Collins provides a clear example of this linguistic phenomenon with the Mam Mayan language: “Ex atzin jun-tl n-okin te *cocina, o quiere decir* ja’ n-b’ant-e wab’j” (2005, p. 243).

In this example, the underlined portion (my emphasis) is a phrase that came directly from Spanish and remained intact. Often, the Indians cannot distinguish the Mayan and Spanish words in their speech, and they will continue to use them as if the words belong to their native tongue.

This “unfounded” corruption of the native language has many Mayan activists concerned. For this reason, Mayan leaders have taken steps to preserve their heritage through language maintenance. In 1985, Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil began to push for the

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10 Though there are some facilities for education in indigenous literacy at what Hawkins calls “specialty” schools, most education beyond the third grade is taught in Spanish.
official revitalization and recognition of Mayan languages. In the 1990s, the Academy of
Mayan Languages was founded on the model of the Círculo Linguístico Francisco
Marroquín. These two organizations pushed to systemize the Mayan alphabet and
publish dictionaries in each of their languages (Arias, 1995). These advances were the
first steps in promoting Mayan language and literary creativity since the writing of the
Popol Vuh in the 16th century (Arias, 1995). Since then, Mayan literature, in the ancient
and modern form, has drawn the attention of linguists (Campbell and Kaufman, 1985).
Their studies have established appreciation for Mayan oral literature, folklore, rituals, and
religion; these advances in language have also stimulated the admiration of Mayan life
and culture among researchers.

This recognition of Mayan culture is precisely what the activists are hoping will
promote fair treatment for their people. In his article, Arias (1995) highlights the idea
that Mayan organizations and their outspoken political advances are examples of
“cultural agency,” which he defines as “concrete processes dealing with the
reconfiguration of cultural spaces that enable subjects, often peripheral or subaltern, to
empower themselves” (p. 251). Indeed, it appears as if the Mayan activists are trying to
use their unique ethnicity and language as opportunities to seek equality and democracy
for their people.

One must be careful, however, to recognize the other side of the dichotomy in
language maintenance. The Maya are living in a ladino dominated culture, and it is
becoming necessary for the Maya to learn Spanish. From everyday activities – such as
shopping or selling at the market and searching for employment, to being a functioning
member of society – knowing the dominant Spanish language is indispensable.
Implications for the gospel. The last area of review, in the author’s opinion, is perhaps one of the most important issues to address concerning the lives of the Mayan Indians. As followers of Christ, we must ask ourselves how the struggle to maintain Mayan culture affects not only the advancement of an ancient culture in a modern society, but also the advancement of the gospel of Christ in the hearts of the Maya.

Historically speaking, the Maya were an animistic people group that worshipped many gods and considered every object to be alive and a part of their destiny. When the Spanish came to the New World and started the Conquest of the Maya, much of the original belief system of the Indians changed. Often by force, the Spanish would convert the Maya into Catholics, which transferred many Catholic customs into the Mayan religion and rendered many of the ancient customs obsolete. As the Maya chose to adapt and survive, old customs gradually began to disappear (Thompson, 1970).

With the Spanish Conquest came the insistence that the Maya cast off animistic rituals. Today, however, the Guatemalan government (as described in the Agreement on Identity and Rights) endorses indigenous forms of spirituality. This recognition is surely a display of political correctness, but its impact on Mayan religion is undoubtedly great. As the 1995 Agreement states, the Guatemalan government agreed to, “secure respect for the exercise of [Mayan] spirituality in all its manifestations, and particularly for the right to practice it, both in public and in private by means of education, worship, and observance. Recognition is also given to the importance of the respect due to indigenous spiritual guides and to sacred ceremonies and holy places…” (United States Institute of Peace, 1995, ¶ III.C.2).
Even with the right to practice animistic worship in its purest form, the majority of the Maya do not; the Catholic influence of the Conquest has not worn away so easily. Today most of the pantheon of ancient Mayan rituals has disappeared from Mayan beliefs, and they no longer worship the gods from their hierarchy of leaders (Thompson, 1970).

Though the Conquest insisted on the abandonment of animistic worship, it did not convert the Maya to Catholicism as easily or efficiently as the Spanish religious leaders would have hoped. As previously stated, the Maya were resistant to cultural change – this is also true in the area of religion. In the words of D. Tedlock, "the spiritual conquest [of the Maya] has in fact never taken place" (Carlsen and Pretchel, 1991, p.24). Instead, the Maya adopted a syncretism – or a blending – of ancient polytheistic beliefs and Catholic rituals.

Scholars explain this mixing of beliefs in various ways. Some say that the Maya adopted Catholic rituals to survive (lest they be killed by the Spanish who were trying to convert them). J. Early (1983) explained the religious syncretism as a way to compensate for their failure to ward off the Spanish. He said that the Maya needed an explanation as to why their own gods could not protect them from the Spanish. To account for this, they incorporated the more powerful foreign gods (the Catholic saints) into their own religion (Early, 1983). Carlsen and Pretchel (1991) stated that this incorporation “helped maintain cultural stability, [and] may actually have had a revitalizing effect” for the Maya (p. 37).

The syncretism of Mayan beliefs with the Catholic religion of the invaders not only helped the Maya survive, but it also helped them retain many of their own religious
customs. When the Maya seemed to be adopting some of the Catholic beliefs, the priests assumed they were converting to the Catholic religion and ridding themselves of animistic beliefs. Although Catholicism has played a major role in Mayan religion, in recent years a marked departure from the adherence to Catholic practices has occurred.

The predominantly Catholic culture of Guatemala has seen a great rise in Protestant groups. Though no precise survey of religious affiliation exists, the Guatemala International Religious Freedom Report estimates that roughly 40 percent of the Guatemalan population is primarily evangelical (U.S. Department of State, 2005). This data does not mean that the Mayan Evangelicals are free from the influence of other beliefs, or that their faith is beyond syncretism with other practices.

Research done by E. Fischer has shown that many Mayan communities are religiously diverse, incorporating Protestants, Catholics, Mormons, agnostics, and others into their society (1999). In Tecpán, the Kaqchikel Indians explained that although their people belong to different religious affiliations, there exists only one god. This seems like a gearing towards monotheistic belief in the one Sovereign God, however, the Maya believe the god is more of a “cosmic, vitalistic force rather than the corporeal entity that ‘god’ denotes in the Western tradition” (Fischer, 1999, p. 479). The Indians explain that they have so many different religious groups because people perceive the “god” in different ways. This catch-all definition of ‘god’ could cause confusion among the Maya who seek Christian forms of religious expression.

While being sensitive to cultural uniqueness, the Christian should be aware that syncretism among Mayan Indian groups is still prevalent, and it affects their spiritual beliefs. The International Religious Freedom Report states that indigenous Catholics and
Protestants alike may also observe some of the Mayan forms of spirituality (U.S. Department of State, 2005). In comparison to the Evangelicals, the Catholic Church seems more tolerant of these traditional Mayan practices when they do not interfere with their doctrine (such as the worship of the saints), but even the Mayan members of evangelical churches have been known to perform traditional Mayan rituals in secret (U.S. Department of State, 2005).

A move that has facilitated the continued practice of ancient Mayan religion is the Guatemalan government’s decision to support Mayan forms of spirituality by protecting religious ceremonial places. Section III of the Agreement on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous People stated that “changes shall be made in the regulations for the protection of ceremonial centers in archaeological areas to ensure that such regulations permit the practice of spirituality and cannot be made an impediment to the exercise of spiritual values. The Government shall promote…the free practice of indigenous spirituality” (United States Institute of Peace, 1995, D.4).

What does this religious diversity mean for those concerned about Mayan cultural integrity and the spreading of the gospel? According to Fischer (1999), this variation of religious beliefs does not affect Mayan cultural stability: “ethnicity (Indian or ladino), not religion, is the most salient category of identity and plays the more prominent role in shaping individual agency” (p. 479). Though religious affiliation may be a part of defining a person’s beliefs, it does not detract from the concept of being essentially Maya.

Therefore, evangelists need not worry about stepping over “cultural maintenance” boundaries and offending those who cling to ancestry and the revitalization of Mayan
Mayan Culture

Instead, they should be sensitive to cultural needs while proclaiming Christ. Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 9:20-23 tell of his ability to rise above his own personal (and perhaps cultural) preferences to win the lost: “To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law…I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some…” (New International Version).

Conclusion: A Balanced Approach

In the Agreement on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous People, the Guatemalan government itself recognizes that the cultural identity of Guatemala would be deficient were it not for the presence of the Maya (United States Institute of Peace, 1995). Even those not particularly fond of the idea of Mayan cultural revitalization may agree that the ancestry of the Maya forms the root of Guatemalan heritage. Furthermore, the Agreement states that the development and progress of Guatemalan society depends in part on this culture (United States Institute of Peace, 1995). This alone emphasizes that in some sense, the Mayan culture is essential to the societal equilibrium of Guatemala, and it is therefore necessary to encourage and support the Maya to continue their efforts of cultural advancement.

Although the peace treaties and agreements of the late 1990s have affirmed the cultural validity of the Maya and agreements of the government, the Maya must be careful not to allow this notion to impede progress in other areas. As Mayan activists continue to push for cultural recognition and the revitalization of their pre-Colombian ancestor’s rich legacy, they should also consider the necessity of development and progress in society.
Regardless of how fervently some Mayan activists may cling to the idea that the Maya as a whole must revitalize and maintain their ancestral roots to survive in a ladino world, many of their own people are open to a more ‘modern’ lifestyle. Like the Mayan religious specialist Domingo, many Maya welcome the comfort an urban lifestyle may bring to those who are accustomed to living in stick huts and cooking on traditional hearthstones. In reality, the common Mayan man and woman do not want to lock themselves into an antiquated way of life, nor do they seem to be doing so. On the contrary, the Mayan culture has continued to be dynamic; their survival and resilience in the face of continued military oppression demonstrates their inclination towards resilience and adaptation. Thus, the modern Mayan culture is not a simple copy of ancestral patterns, but as P. Hervik (2001) stated, it is a “self-conscious cultural resynthesis in the face of extraordinary pressure and conflict” (p. 356).

For the betterment of both the Maya and those who do not hold the Mayanist worldview, a bridge between the appreciation of a rich culture and the modern world must exist. As the Maya continue to develop with their society, they will be balancing the progress of modern man and the maintenance of their ancestors’ legacy. Whether or not they build the bridge that links the two worlds depends on them. Their freedom to take these strides and make their own choices represents one of their greatest victories since the decline of their ancient civilization.

*Personal Experience*

The conclusions of this research are not simply a collection of ideas from the books, articles, and research of other people. Though their opinions and experiences are valuable to the results of this work, I have also had personal exposure to the life of the
Mayan people. Upon visiting Guatemala in the summer of 2006 with the Spanish Institute of Liberty University, I was fortunate to encounter people of Mayan descent in several different contexts – each of which demonstrated a different dimension of the Mayan way of life. Each day, I recorded my interactions with the Maya in my journal, and it is this source that I reference in the discussion that follows.

The most traditional of the contexts in which I experienced the Mayan life was located in the northeastern lowlands of Guatemala, in the remote jungles of Petén. On the 25th of May, our team traveled from Zacapa and onto the dirt road that lead us to a wooden cabin next to the Río Gracias a Dios (literally translated, the “Thanks to God River”). The jungle house in which we resided was far removed from any other sort of civilization, but a short ride down the dirt road brought us to the small Mayan villages of Arenales, Chicacadenas, and El Calvario. Our team of Spanish and Nursing students visited each of the Mayan villages to participate in the medical clinics and ministry that we offered there.

In the villages, one could immediately see the evidence of ancient Mayan civilization written on the faces of the people. Their skin was darker than the mestizo’s skin, their noses were broader, and their stature was often more petite when compared to the mestizo (see Appendix B to view some of the pictures I took during the visits to the Mayan villages). In addition to the appearance of the people living in the villages, the only language they spoke (aside from a few male translators) was a dialect of Mayan. Several of our group members tried to converse with the children in Spanish, but they did not understand (although they nodded their heads and pretended to know what we were saying for the first few minutes!). The children’s exposure to Spanish seemed to be
minimal, and limited to the occasional lessons they received in the small cinderblock village classroom that had Spanish teaching materials posted on its walls. This, in my opinion, is a small piece of evidence that the attempts at bilingual education for the Maya are not as enforced or as effective as the Agreement on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous People suggested it would be.

Another indicator of the more traditional lifestyle of these Mayan villagers was that most of the women and young girls wore handmade clothing and the traditional *huipil* dress that identifies to which clan they belong (those that did not wore skirts bought or traded in town). In contrast to the female population of the villages, the men and boys wore a more westernized style of clothing, donning t-shirts or collared shirts and shorts.\(^{11}\) This observation may find substantiation in the findings of Hawkins, who stated in his article that Mayan men are more likely to westernize and stop wearing the *traje* than the women\(^ {12}\) (Hawkins, 2005).

The account of the interaction I had with the Maya of Petén would be lacking without a more personal view of the people. I had the opportunity to connect with the people as I helped translate in the medical clinics. Because our medical staff had a limited working knowledge of Spanish, I, along with a few other students from our team, translated their questions and suggestions into Spanish, while the few Mayan men who knew Spanish spoke their native dialect to the villagers who sought medical help. It was a rather long (but rewarding) three-way interaction, but it gave me the chance to converse with the translators afterwards and glean some knowledge from them about the way they live. In the town of Chicacadenas, one of the male translators was enthusiastic about my

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\(^{11}\) In the pictures of Appendix B, one can see the differences in dress among male and female Maya.

\(^{12}\) This is because the men are the first ones to leave the villages in pursuit of work (Hawkins, 2005).
Mayan Culture

interest in their Mayan dialect. As I scribbled the Mayan words he gave me in my journal, we also talked in Spanish about his opinions of life in the jungle. From his standpoint, knowing Spanish was essential to his economic success. Without it, he said, he could go nowhere. His opinion definitely corresponds with the outside research I have done in the past year.

Though one of our team’s objectives was to administer medical help to the villages, another important goal was to expose them to the message of the gospel. Needless to say, the language barrier proved to be a major stumbling block in the completion of this goal. Through drama and a translator, however, we were able to communicate the message (in perhaps a limited manner, but a few men seemed to understand the message and asked for salvation). The problem lies, however, in the fact that the team left the village the very same day these conversions took place. Without a mentor or deeper understanding of the faith they need to place in Christ, there will probably be no development in their relationship with the Creator nor more advancement of the gospel in those villages. Just as syncretism of religious beliefs took place when the Maya were converted to Catholicism, it is likely that the faith those men put in Christ will be mixed with their current Mayan beliefs.

This backwoods traditional experience with the Maya was but one of the locations in which I was introduced to their lifestyle. A profoundly different experience awaited me in the capital city of Guatemala. As I rummaged around the market, waiting for my chance to go to the post office where a package awaited me, I was fortunate to meet a middle-aged Mayan man who was making a living by selling soccer jerseys. In every way except a broad Indian nose, the man appeared to be mestizo – he was dressed in
trendy jeans and a nice shirt, and he did not have an accent when he spoke Spanish. When I started a conversation with him, he confirmed that he was a native Indian, and he still knew his native tongue. As we chatted, it was apparent that he had no desire to appear Indian or live as they do. He was very content to be selling his merchandise in the market.

I was also given an opportunity to see a mixture of the traditional and modern elements of Mayan living. In the cities our team visited (such as Antigua, Zacapa, and Chiquimula), both old and young Mayan women were selling goods for profit. Their products ranged from fresh flowers to wooden flutes, beaded bracelets, and woven handbags. Some of the women knew Spanish well, but others barely knew the numbers they needed to say in order to make a sale. As tourists poured in and out of the market, their natural inclination seemed to be to gravitate towards the women clad in the traditional Mayan outfit. With perhaps a desire to experience something out of the norm, they would go to their booths and buy the “authentic Indian-made” merchandise to give to their families back home.

Each of the people in these encounters provides a different dynamic of Mayan culture. As the earlier story of Domingo demonstrates, there can be a way to balance the maintenance of a unique culture and economic progress. The lives of the male translators in Petén, the Mayan man at the capital’s market, and the women selling crafts in the smaller cities all attest to this need. Whether or not the Maya take advantage of the opportunities for economic and political advancement depends on them. *Paso a paso*
(little by little) they are taking the changes necessary to accomplish these goals. That, in the words of a Mayan child, is “oos chavil!”\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{13} Translated: “Very good!”
References


Appendix A: Region of Maya Occupation before the Conquest

Figure 1 (Vail, 2005).
Appendix B: The Faces of the Maya in the village of Chicacadenas and Arenales, Petén

14 Pictures taken by the author