Language Loss and Wellbeing among the Ch’orti’ Maya

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The Ch’orti’ Maya
Descent of Mayan Languages
1994 Census: 68,154 Ch’orti’ inhabitants in the Departamento of Chiquimula, Guatemala

Speakers of Ch’orti’ Mayan:

- 1768-70: 22,000 (Cortés y Larras)
- 1921: 20,629 (Wisdom 1961)
- 1950: 25,000 (Oakley 1966)
- 1975: 32,000 (Kaufman, in Tzian 1995)
- 1980: 27,300 (Tzian 1995)
- 1984: *52,000 (Herrera, López, in Tzián)
- 1993: *52,000 (England 1993)
- 2005: 12,000 (Hull 2003)
- 2007: 10,000 (Schumann 2007)

*oft-cited incorrect estimate, reflecting number of ethnic Ch’orti’, not number of speakers
In the century before 1990, many children were not being taught Ch’orti’ since Spanish was considered the language of “opportunity” and Ch’orti’ was commonly associated with the status quo, i.e., agricultural subsistence living.
The literacy rate in Spanish is about 45% for men and 5% for women (López García and Metz 2002:175, 191).

Both government- and privately sponsored education in Ch’orti’ has been implemented with some success in certain areas.

Ch’orti’ is not spoken at all in many hamlets in the Ch’orti’ area.

In Camotan, once the religious capital of the Ch’orti’, there are perhaps 5-10 speakers left today, even though 65% of the population is ethnically indigenous.
Today, Jocotan, the principal Ch’orti’ town, has become essentially a non-Ch’orti’-speaking locale, even though 82% of the people are ethnically indigenous.

Even in the 1930s Wisdom made the following observation on those living in and near Jocotan:

“These families usually pride themselves on their degree of Ladino culture: their older members still speak Ch’orti’ fluently, but the younger adults can barely converse in it, and most of their children know only a few words” (1940:7).
Language and discrimination

• Ch’orti’ is principally a language of the home and cornfield today.

• It is, however, still used in most situations in many of the smaller hamlets in the mountains.

• Fear of discrimination causes most to switch to Spanish when they come to bigger towns such as Jocotan, Camotan, or Olopa.
“Shame” and Psychological Trauma

- In Ch’orti’ society “shame” or “embarrassment” (*sub’ar*) is considered a powerful cause of illness.

- If one trips and falls in front of others, the “shame” will “weaken” their immune system and make them highly susceptible to malicious evil spirits who will infect them with illness.
“Shame” and Psychological Trauma

- If a couple is caught having sex in the woods, the “shame” will immediately weaken their spirits and they will fall sick within a day or two.

- *E winik ch’uwan e takin sakb’u’b tu’nuk’ umen e sub’ar tya’ atajwina taka upox ta k’opot.*
- “The man was infected with *takin sakb’ub*’ sickness in this throat because of embarrassment when he was found with his extramarital lover in the forest.”
“Shame” and Psychological Trauma

- This can be extended to “shame” from speaking one’s native language, Ch’orti’.
- Researchers on language and wellbeing should also look at the detrimental effects shaming has on those who speak other languages.
- This makes efforts to instill pride in one’s language all the more crucial.
The growing influence of Spanish

- More than 90% of Ch’orti’ speakers are bilingual in Spanish.
- Borrowing and code-switching are natural consequences of such bilingualism.
- Ch’orti’ has traditionally had no mechanism for creating new words other than borrowing.
Ayan ub'an e nawal. Ayan konde awayk'a inte' kawira otro war ache'na war a'jk'una i en un de repente maja'x war a'jk'una. O otro war ache'na ganar, otro war a'jpna uyespíritu umen tzuk animal maja'x e ti'n kawira war uche pelear. Kawayk'a kawira kora toro. E toro pega ulatyo'b' ub'an. Mal revelo pues, mal sueño, awayk'a inte' uwira ke' war ulati e wakax. Ja'x k'ani ulatyo'b'. K'ani achamesna.

Spanish
Ch’orti’
Some Spanish forms were appropriated and purposefully used *in place of* already existing native terms.

Traditional healers actually replaced Ch'orti' ritual terms with Spanish ones when the communities were heavily monolingual.
Spanish was the language of prestige, and using unknown terms elevated the status of the healers, much like the “doctor talk” (Fisher 1993) of today.

Thus, power relations were reproduced through the use of esoteric terms, be they Ch’orti’ or Spanish.

Their semantics often changed considerably since they represent complex cultural notions.
**Systematic replacing of ritual nouns**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A’si tamar enyax</th>
<th>ensak</th>
<th>Meaning (Translation)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>munición</td>
<td>munición</td>
<td>They play on the green incense piece, the white munition piece.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>copal</td>
<td>copal</td>
<td>They play on the green incense, the white incense.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bamba</td>
<td>bamba</td>
<td>They play on the green incense piece, the white incense piece.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xarten</td>
<td>xarten</td>
<td>They play on the green pan, the white pan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ollita</td>
<td>ollita</td>
<td>They play on the green pot, the white pot.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bambita</td>
<td>bambita</td>
<td>They play on the green incense piece, the white incense piece,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>incensario</td>
<td>incensario</td>
<td>They play on the green incensario the white incensario</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>humazon</td>
<td>humazon</td>
<td>They play on the green incensario the white incensario</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results of appropriation on ritual terms:

- the loss of the numerous native terms for ritual objects and concepts

- the lexicalization of Spanish terms with new meanings, e.g. *vapor* = ‘infectious heat emanating from a person’s body caused by malicious spirits’
Language Loss and Wellbeing

- For some Ch’orti’ there is a inherent connection among
  - ritual practice
  - ritual language
  - wellbeing

Photo by Johanna Kufer
• There has been a coordinated elimination of community-wide ritual practice.

• Causes:  1) fears of *brujería* ("witchcraft, sorcery")
  2) non-native religions (primarily Catholic and Protestant influences)

• Ritual specialists ("padrinos") are often pressured into not practicing, or are simply killed.
“Witchcraft accusations have become so rampant that rituals are practiced only privately...the most important specialists, the rain-calling padrinos, were killed long ago or forced to go underground, while diviners, healers, and midwives continue to be murdered as well” (Metz 1998:334).

Causal links

- loss of ritual specialists > loss of ritual > loss of ritual language (i.e., divine petitions) > human suffering
“Koner...mixtuk’a e padrino, mixtuk’a e rogante. Por eso war kache sufrir.”

“Today...there are no more padrinos, there are no more petitioners. That’s why we are suffering.”
“The most important native religious specialist is the *padrino*. The padrinos...are the leaders of all the community religious activity, as only they know how to recite the prayers and perform the ceremonies.”

“These *padrinos* are the only individuals who “have permission” from God and the native deities to perform the rain-making ceremonies, the agricultural ceremonies, and the transition rites, and only they know how to conduct them.” (Wisdom 1940:373-374)
“Kone'r war kawira ke‘ mixma'chi' k'ani uk'ajti e jaja'r tartaka ke' kone'r maja'chi'x ak'ub'espa kasati'x kak'ub'seyaj oni'x ani konde turu ani e Chico Garcíá xe' uk'ajti ani e jaja'r. E winik ira uk'ajti ani e jaja'r, i ob'na ani uk'ajti. B'an koche'ra ani oni'x ma'ni tuk'a e wina'r tuno'r xe' apa'k'tz'a'ni tu'yok chor tuno'r ani alok'oy tuno'r xe' no'n ani kapa'k'i alok'oy tu'yok chor.”

“Today we are seeing that nobody will pray for rain simply because today no one believes anymore, we have lost our beliefs that we use to have when Chico Garcíá was alive who prayed for rain. This man prayed for rain, and he was able to pray. Thus in this way there was no hunger in the past, everything that was planted in the cornfield, everything sprouted; everything that we planted sprouted in the cornfield.”

Kerry Hull, field notes
Killing of Ritual Priests (Padrinos)

- *Konde ja'xir uk'ajti ani e jaja'r ma'ni tuk'a e takinar koche' kone'r. Kawira ayan me’yra takinar, koche’ kone’r. Kawira ma’chi’x alok’oy e nar. Ma’chi’x alok’oy e ch’um. Ma’chi’x alok’oy tuno’r xe’ kapak’i, e b’u’r e kuskus. K’anix ataki umen e takinar.*

- When he [the assassinated padrino, Chico García] prayed for the rain there wasn’t drought like today. We see lots of drought, like today. We see that now the corn no longer sprouts. Now the pumpkins no longer sprout. Now everything that we plant no longer sprouts, the beans, the sorghum. Now it’s all going to dry up because of the drought (Hull 2003:289).

Kerry M. Hull, “Verbal Art and Performance in Ch’orti’ and Maya Hieroglyphic Writing” (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2003).
Traditional ritual practice > wellbeing

• “Asi es koch a ucho'b' ani ninoy. Ayan ani e nar, e b'u'r, tuno'r, ma'chi koch a kone'r.”

• “That [i.e., performing ritual prayers] is what my ancestors used to do. They had corn, beans, everything, unlike today.”

Kerry Hull, field notes
“Ub’an toyb’ir ani umen e pak’ab’ob’. Utoyo’b’ ani uyok e chor ub’an. Uk’ajtyo’b’ ani e k’ek’wa’r twa’ matuk’a unumse ub’a. B’anixto koche’ra ani katurar ixnix. K’otoy yajk’in e pak’ab’ob’ uxejb’o’b’ u’t e pak’ab’ ira uchamsyo’b’ i konde chamay. Inton ka’y e takinar ub’an este ke’ kone’r ma’chi’x k’ani ak’axi koche’ no’n kak’ani. Ma’nakix watar e jaja’r.”

“Also, a payment [an offering] was made by the people. They also made a payment in the cornfield. They asked for strength so that nothing bad would happen to it. Thus in this way were our lives in the past. The day came that the people despised this person and they killed him. And when he died, then the drought also started. Right up till today it still doesn't rain as we want it too. Now the rains no longer come.”

Kerry Hull, field notes
La Limosna: Payment Ceremony

Photos by Rafael Girard
“I can still see it now, there was sufficient everything. There were chickens, there were turkeys, there was an abundance of everything. Today, we are seeing that there is no longer anything. The harvest is gone, there is still some but just a little bit of corn is still sprouting, but by pure inner strength, the tiny sorghum. But in those days, ooooooh God, there were beans. Now there isn't anything. The people stopped harvesting. There were *chapaneco* beans, now they don't harvest them. There were *perom* beans, now they don't harvest them.…. The harvest is gone because, truly we lived wonderfully back then; it was a wonderful time. Not like we see today.” (Hull 2003:234-235)
• Concurso Literario Idioma Ch’orti’. The Academy of Mayan Languages, Guatemala (K’ulb'il Yol Twitz Paxil), 1999.

• Contains poems written by Ch’orti’ about their language.
Language, Identity, and Wellbeing

1. Niwojroner war ab'ixk'a, i ja'x upejk'en,
2. niyuxinar inwajk'u twa' ukorpa'r.
3. Ojronik chi k'ani o'jron xe' ma'chi ak'ampa.
4. Ne'n niwojroner ma'chi innajpes.

1. My language is living, and it is what speaks to me,
2. I would give my heart (life) to protect it.
3. Let speak he who wants to speak what serves no purpose.
4. But my language I will never forget.
5. I have lost my white clothing, I have lost my sandals,
6. But my language I will not let be lost.
7. Let speak he who wants to speak what serves no purpose.
8. But my language I will never forget.
Insati nisaksak b’ujk,
Insati nixanab’.
I have lost my white clothing,
I have lost my sandals.

- Yukatek Mayan: “pants and sandals” is a kenning for “religion,” showing just how closely related specific clothing can be to cultural and religious ideology.
Uk‘ek’wa’r e Ojroner Ch’orti’
(“The Strength of the Ch’orti’ Language”)

1. Kawojroner ye' na'tanyaj,
2. war ani awayan kocha inte‘
3. k'opot xe' axujra yer unuk',
4. umen e morajtun pak'ab'ob'.
5. Ye'ra war asutpa ab'ixk'a,
6. ya a'chpa kocha inte' tajte',
7. a'xin wa'kchetaka tichan,
8. Nukta' ajkanseyajox morojsenik ib'a twa' ixpatna.
9. Upater kawojroner Ch'orti'.
10. Era ja'x uyojroner e K'ulb'il Yol Twitz Paxil
11. patne'nik.
Uk’ek’wa’r e Ojroner Ch’orti’
(“The Strength of the Ch’orti’ Language”)

1. Our language and our knowledge,
2. were sleeping like a
3. plant that was cut at its neck,
4. by the ladinos [non-Ch’orti’].
5. And now it is returning to life,
6. there it is rising up like a pine tree,
7. going quickly upward,
8. You wonderful teachers, gather yourselves to work,
9. on behalf of our Ch'orti' language!
10. This is the language of K'ulb'il Yol Twitz Paxil,
11. go to work!

agricultural imagery
B'ijnusyaj Ch'orti' ("Ch'orti' Thought")

1. Uwarar e k'in, ye' makchan,
2. taka utz'ijb'ar uchektes
3. yu'bixk'es e ojroner Ch'orti'
4. xe' war ani awayan kocha inte'
5. uch'ajnar ch'um taka uyutir,
6. xurb'ir uwi'r umen e morajtun
7. pak'ab'ob' ixni'x.
8. Era war asutpa a'chpa
9. kocha inte' tokar,
10. twa' uwech'e e chijrja' a'xin
11. tama tuno'r ujor e rum Ch'orti',
12. pak'i'k u't e ch'um, kuxpak,
13. ch'i'k, uyu'yari'k uyutir.
1. The rays of the sun, and the rainbow,
2. with its colors it makes it appear
3. and it brings to life, the Ch'orti' language
4. that was sleeping like a
5. squash vine with fruit,
6. its roots cut by the ladinos long ago.
7. Now it is rising again
8. like a cloud
9. in order to go sprinkling showers
10. all over the surface of the Ch'orti' land.
11. Let's plant squash! Let's sprout!
12. Let's grow! And let's bear fruit!
Ch’orti’ language loss is associated by some Ch’orti’ with progress in a modern world.

For some others, however, language loss is symptomatic of their health and economic woes.
Final thoughts

- Some believe the abandonment of most traditional ritual practice and the killing of ritual specialists have led to a loss in ritual language and the correct prayers.

- Drought, malnutrition, and sickness have been the result.
Recent efforts to revitalize traditional ceremonial practice and ritual language hope to remedy the situation.