

LOLMAY GARCIA MATZAR

Interviewed February 15, 2005 in the offices of OKMA, Antigua, Guatemala



Lolmay Garcia Matzar is a linguist at the *Asociación Oxlajuuj Keej Maya' Ajtz'uib* or OKMA, an organization in Antigua, Guatemala, an institute devoted to the study and preservation of Maya languages. Himself a Kakchiquel Maya from the district of Solala, Garcia Matzar was an early student in the first hieroglyphic

workshops in Antigua and now teaches workshops in hieroglyphic literacy.

In this interview he discusses:

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- [The importance for the Maya of the preservation and study of their history and languages.](#)

Interview transcript (Translation from Spanish)

His work at OKMA

Lolmay: I'm from a community in Sololá called San Andrés de Metaja (sp?). I spent all of my childhood and part of my adolescence there and I studied at a local school. What we call basic studies I did at a pro-cooperative (sp?) institute. After that I went to the capital to continue my studies so that I could become a teacher. I graduated in 1988. But what happened that was important for me, I think, is that after studying in the capital it was difficult to be indigenous. Even my family said I had to speak Spanish and not Kakchiquen Maya. So I was studying a lot in those years and what happened is that I was nearly losing my culture. I remember that when I finished my studies in the capital I became... I was a different person. When I got out of school my hairstyle was different,

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I dressed differently, and so people said, “OK. That’s someone who’s not part of our community.” In 1989 they invited me to participate here. Or rather, at the end of 1988 I was on vacation when they invited me. People from the linguistic project came to see if I wanted to study Maya languages here in Antigua. So I said, well, I’m going to think about it; I didn’t have any plans yet, it was November or December or something like that. And then in January there was an application period. And they chose me to study Maya languages. So my background was a little different because I had studied in the capital and then I came here to Antigua and I was sort of myself again – thinking indigenously again and all that, you know? Discussing how important it is to speak the language. Keeping the culture alive, cultural elements, that’s important. So I changed again, turning into a person who was able to help Maya languages, bilingual education and all of that.

It was in those years, in 1989, when they had the second hieroglyphic writing course taught by Linda Schele. And that’s where I started in on hieroglyphic writing. I was very interested in the topic even though I didn’t have much knowledge of it at the time and all that. Now I do, or rather in the last few years I’ve started to see how important it is. Even reading the texts I realize that this is the history they never, ever taught me in school. So it’s very, very important for us because it’s the history we don’t know. We know the official history – but the official history tells us that the Spanish came, they conquered, and that was that. That’s the history we know, we don’t know anything about Xalam Balam (sp?), we don’t know about Pacal Balam, we don’t know which ruler was in Tikal on what date. Even in school they told us, you know, for example, “The Pipíl Indians lived on the Southern Coast.” And even now in some schools they keep teaching inaccurate facts about specific cultures and languages in different regions of the country.

So the basic core interest for us at OKMA is the study of Maya languages. And starting recently everything related to languages in order to make public everything necessary for teaching, and that’s why we’re creating educational materials. So we have pedagogical grammar guides and we’re doing the same with virtual material on CD’s that people can study on their own. I think I’m talking kind of fast but basically--

The Antigua hieroglyphic workshops

Q: (What was your relationship with Linda Schele?)

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Lolmay: Well, in 1989 I took a basic course. And from there we started learning more about specific topics, always repeating the basic information each year but focusing on specific topics. So we studied Tikal, we studied Copán and Quiriguá, we studied Yaxchilán and Palenque trying to put into practice what we were learning. I mean, the structure, how you read a text, where and how you find information on dates, events and people. That was the basic structure of each of those courses. So we were learning a little of what I was teaching this morning, right. And then we were interested in what we were learning – for example the relationship between Tikal, Calakmul, Caracol. So that's very important. I know and have seen some of that information, we had a workshop on pottery and then we had some basic idea about the codices. So I think I now have some basic knowledge about each of those topics, right. So that's what we want to put into practice now.

We've been doing that with the workshops we organize each year. Every year we put together two or three of them, one for beginners, one intermediate and one advanced. The beginning and intermediate workshops we teach ourselves here at OKMA with Federico Fahsen's help. The more advanced course that focus on a specific topic used to be taught by Linda and then after 1998 Nikolai continued all the work that Linda initially taught us, right. I think that sums up my experience.

The importance for the Maya of the preservation and study of their history and languages.

Q: (Can you talk about the importance of Maya history and language?)

Lolmay: There are various situations. One is the history after the Spanish invasion – everything that the Maya were building when the Spanish arrived, even though it was falling into ruin, was basically cut off. From there on out they taught us, or rather they still teach us, that the Maya don't count for anything. That's how backwards this country is, that's why it's in such a poor spot. Even so, there were slogans around the time of the 500-year anniversary that said, "They cut off everything but our roots." So it's important for us in spite of all those instances, rather, first the conquest and then everything... For example, it's not important for us that in 1821 Guatemala gained its independence from Spain because we're still in the same boat we were in before. I remember reading somewhere that if someone indigenous spoke Spanish and wore non-native dress they said, "Well, he's worthy of dressing that way because he speaks Spanish and not some indigenous language." So there has always been discrimination of that sort. What most

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people in Guatemala don't realize is that there have been indigenous movements since the very beginning – since the start of the Caste Wars in the Yucatán, the war between some Kakchiquel Maya rulers and the Spanish for example, and that history isn't taught in schools.

So studying this, having the opportunity to study it, is important for us – that's the situation we live in now. Later on, after the conquest and even in the '40's, there have always been indigenous movements, right. But in the '40's there was an academic push where, for example (even though it's a governmental institution), the Summer Linguistic Institute was created... No, sorry, the National Indigenous Institute. Being run by the government, it was pretty important. I was reading a document from the second congress organized by the Indigenous Institute and even then they were saying things that we still say today, like, "Look, we have to speak the language, we want them to allow us to speak the language, education should be bilingual or in Maya." So everything we talk about today was being faced back then as well. There were workshops back then. Later on, various institutions were established with goals that were completely separate from politics. Maya organizations. And in the 1970's for example, armed conflict began. From the beginning of the Maya conflict until more or less the signing of the peace treaty, there was a certain decadence in those institutions. Various new institutions that cropped up and were trying to help the indigenous movement fell apart. Even so, immediately after those years of fighting, that's when other kinds of Maya institutions with other objectives were born – objectives like the strengthening of the Maya languages, education, the women's movement, the peasant's movement, etc. So those were started anew.

After that push, after the "Consulta Popular" referendum, and after all of those high expectations, what we gained was important for us even though, as many colleagues say, "We lost the 'Consulta Popular' referendum." It's like they fell apart again. Since then, everything is a little up in the air. So it's not that, for example, now we ask ourselves, the Maya, what we want. I say that first we have to, that is to say, we all have to agree. For example, we need a national agenda; a national Maya agenda. Because right now each institution does... We do linguistics, we do a little education, there are institutions like the CMN for example that do education; The Linguistic Project, which has to do with teaching languages; The Academy of Maya Languages, which is like the head of the linguistic movement, and education. The GB (SP?) is also trying to teach bilingual education, keeping an eye on politics, trying to see how to do it better...

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Lolmay: I was telling you that right now we all have to have a common objective. The Maya community, the indigenous communities of Guatemala, we should have a common goal – that is, we're going to do this in education, this in justice, this in keeping the language alive, etc. We should all be working towards the same goal. I think that's what we need. Of course, we've gained a lot of ground in... at the national level, even in the government. There are a lot of things they question. For example, is indigenous participation in the government important or not... There are a lot of opinions about that. Some say yes, because if we don't get involved in politics right off the bat we'll always be on the outside looking in. Other say that yes it's important but not right now, not until we create an indigenous or Maya political party and have our own alternatives.

So, there are topics like that are important to address and discuss with the people they affect. But we've done a lot, I think. We put out a lot of books and people say that OKMA does a very technical job, very advanced, of a very high level. And we say yes, that's our objective. Because that's the base so that we can create documents that are more... for example, for education. The linguistic base is there and then you can apply that to whatever you want. That's our job. There has been a lot of work done on bilingual education for example, the creation of Mayan language schools, where there's a discussion of how much Mayan language and how much culture there should be.

Because if I'm not mistaken, I think there's an example... The schools follow the national curriculum, and then there's a Mayan language course, a course on Maya music, a course on Maya mathematics, but they still follow the national curriculum. So I think those are the things we have to talk about to improve ourselves.

Q: (Why are language and writing important?)

Lolmay: Well, for two reasons I think. One is that right now there's a lot of discussion, or rather there has been a lot of discussion, about cultural elements...if cultural elements shape Maya ideology or what role cultural elements play in the self-identification of a person. There are a number of criteria about that – for example, one is that they're very important. They're important cultural elements even though they don't define identity. Because, for example, many Maya don't speak their language now. But they feel Maya, they say they're Maya, they present themselves as Maya, you know? And on the other hand, many people... I for example sometimes put on a native shirt, or what's called a Maya shirt, but the majority of men have lost that tradition. But that doesn't mean they're not Maya. Yes, they are Maya. So that's a little of the discussion we have about cultural elements, if they're important and if it's worth the effort to keep them alive.

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And part of all that tradition is language. What happens many times is that we identify with the 'glorious past.' So we say, "I'm Maya, I see Tikal, Copán, etc., the various monuments that there are, so I identify myself as Maya." But sometimes I say, "Eh, I'm Kakchiquel." Well, to be Kakchiquel is to be Maya, it is Maya, but sometimes I self-identify as Kakchiquel. So there's some talk about that but the point here is that, for example with the writing – for us it's very important to recover what we have lost: The language. Every day the language is slipping away. Even majority languages, what are called majority languages, those that have two or three million speakers for example. What's happening is that those languages are being lost very quickly. One example I'd like to mention is Kakchiquel.

Even though there are a lot of Kakchiquel speakers because it's spoken by people in the center of the country, the language is slipping away. The children in my community no longer speak Kakchiquel. That means that in ten or fifteen years my community will be a monolingual, Spanish-only community and not a Maya-speaking one. And I think that's why we're stressing these studies. That's why it's important to keep the language alive, why it's important to write it so that in their classrooms and even in their homes these children speak their language again. Part of what we want to recover is the writing, the Maya writing system, and for me that's why the language itself is important. In terms of hieroglyphic writing, it's important for us because it's through the writing system that we learn our own history. Today I was talking to the group I teach and I showed them an example of Stela 12 from Yaxchilán where it shows the death of Pacal Balam, of Jaguar Shield, and then the rise to power of Yaxun Balam (SP?) ten years later. We don't know about that. They don't teach us that in school. That's why it's important. Because otherwise kids grow up with the idea that, well, the Maya aren't good for anything. Everyone else is. So for us, what we want to do is get that message across to children and adults so that they're better aware of it.