

NIKTÉ SIS IBOY

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



Nikte Sis Iboy is an Achi Maya from Baja Verapaz, Guatemala. She is Director of the Asociación Oxlajuuj Keej Maya' Ajtz'iib or OKMA, an institute in Antigua, Guatemala, devoted to the study and preservation of Maya languages.

In this interview she discusses:

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Interview transcript (translated from Spanish)

OKMA and its activities

Q: What is OKMA?

Nikté: OKMA is a non-governmental association that operates with outside funding. It was established in 1990. It was basically the idea of foreign linguists that had come here to study Maya languages. According to the opinion of some of the Maya, it was necessary to train Mayas so that they themselves could investigate their own languages. And everyone agreed.

It was principally Nora England's idea to found OKMA. She was a linguist who had been working in Guatemala since the 1970's. So five of us Maya, together with Nora

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England, were the ones who started OKMA, and our main objective was to do linguistic studies of the mother tongues that we spoke. So when we started, we worked on five different Maya languages.

We've now been working for approximately 15 years. And our main goal has always been the same – linguistic studies. As a result of our work, we've written different kinds of grammar books, descriptive grammars, normative grammars, pedagogical grammars, all in different languages. We've been able to work on 14 Maya languages up to this point. Not all of the materials we've worked on have been in all 14 languages because everything depends on the specific project, the financing, but we're always able to do four or five languages every round. So that's how we've moved ahead with the linguistic work.

We've also started to carry out other types of activities, like the training of Maya workers in linguistics, so that little by little more of us Maya will be able to do this kind of work. We've seen the great need that results because of the social and political situations that the Maya community faces these days. The government isn't interested in seeing Maya languages develop, spread or be updated, so we can't wait for the government to do it. So we're doing it in order to somehow elevate the social status of Maya languages.

The involvement of OKMA in the study and teaching of Maya epigraphy

Among OKMA's other activities is the study of Maya epigraphy. It's one of many important studies for us since 1989, when we were being trained by Nora England in Francisco Marroquín's linguistic project, that's when we met Linda Schele (may she rest in peace) and Dr. Nikolai Grube.

We met them, and they came to head up a workshop on Maya epigraphy here in Antigua, Guatemala, and we participated in that workshop. Ever since then we've had an interest in, and the desire to know more about, our history based on Maya writing. For us it's very important, I mean, it's a basic part of our work, because we basically work on Maya languages. And Maya epigraphy includes many cultural details, of the world vision, the ideas of our ancestors.

We've heard legends or sacred rites from our grandparents and parents, things they've told us, things we've seen come to pass. For example, customs, rituals, and also ideas about Mother Nature, the cornfields, the sun, and everything celestial that is sacred to us. And for some time we didn't have any explanation as to where these ideas came from, or

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what they meant, what kind of messages our parents and grandparents were giving us in respect to those ideas that were kept alive in the oral tradition.

But when we saw some of the ideas embedded in Maya writing, we were surprised that those ideas have existed for a long time and they've stuck around until today – with variations, but the central idea is the same. Let me give you an example. I remember that when I was little my father used to tell me that because I was a woman I had to walk to the cornfield every now and then and walk around its edges, walk in the center, because a cornfield needs a woman to be happy and to grow – so that it grows strong and yields many ears of corn, because feminine strength gives the cornfield energy. And when Linda talked to us about creation, I realized how the corn god was being dressed by women. So Linda explained to us the importance of the participation of women in that rite, preparing the corn god...

In my case, I've been discovering and comparing so many things that my parents and grandparents told me with what I learn in the history of Maya writing. So that gives us a reason for our existence – it helps us discover our roots, and in some way it helps us strengthen our identity as Mayas. So that's why that activity is so important for us, and why there's a workshop on Maya writing that Nikolai comes here to work on and direct one week each year. We later realized that there are a lot of people interested in Maya writing but that it's hard for them to come to a week-long workshop without basic knowledge of Maya epigraphy. That's why we've created a small workshop as an introduction before Nikolai's classes. So for two days in May or June there's an introductory class for beginners. Afterwards they can participate in the main workshop because they understand the topics a little better. So, that's basically what our main activities are, and we also try to apply Maya writing to our daily activities.

For example, when we publish a book we put the name of the book in Maya writing [in glyphs], in the Western alphabet [in a Mayan language using Roman letters] and then the name in Spanish. If we have an activity, a workshop or something like that, and we give diplomas, the diploma is written in Maya glyphs, in the Western alphabet and then in Spanish. So we're using Maya writing little by little as well.

Q: Where were you born, where are you from?

Nikté: My “official” name is María Juliana Sis Iboy. The Maya name that I have is Nikté [a Mayan word for “flower” and a metaphor for the soul] and I adopted it in 1990; it's the name I use the most right now. I'm from the linguistic group known as Achi Maya. I'm from the department of Baja Verapaz in the municipality of Salamá, a region

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in the north of Guatemala. I studied to be a teacher, at a school in the interior called the Normal School for the Eastern Region. It's a school for Maya people, and that's where I took a class called Indigenous Language. That's where I began to write down my first words in my mother tongue. So I always wanted to learn more about writing down languages, and then I was invited by the Francisco Marroquín linguistic project to take an introductory course in Mayan linguistics. That's when I went to Antigua and started studying Mayan linguistics as well as epigraphy.

Q: Can you tell us about your impressions of the 1989 Antigua workshop?

Nikté: Yes. Well, in terms of working with Linda, I think that first experience was very, very good for me, it was excellent, because it was the first time I able to specifically see the writings of our ancestors. I mean, before then I had some idea that they had some kind of writing system but I didn't have access to knowledge about that writing. So, when she explained to us what it was like, when she gave us a small introduction to the writing system, it seemed very beautiful, very logical; although it was difficult to recognize so many of the symbols they used, once you understood them it was easy to write using that system.

So it was amazing to be able to write a few small sentences using the writing system of our ancestors. So that really impressed me. And that same year, if I remember correctly, we were studying the Tablet of the 96 Glyphs. We were analyzing it and in that group we had ten different linguistic groups – there were more people but we represented ten languages.

Q: Can you talk about the tablet?

Nikté: In 1989 we were working on the Tablet of the 96 Glyphs. We broke into groups based on language, and at the end of the workshop we had a version of the tablet in ten different Maya languages. So that really made an impression on us, because we never imagined it was possible to read the message behind that tablet in our own languages. So I think that's one of the things we got back, that motivated us to continue studying Maya writing, to understand things a little more and to continue on with the epigraphy workshops.

So my impression of working with Linda was of a person who was very culturally sensitive in terms of the Maya community. And she loved it, she always paid attention to what we had to say, to our comments, and she always related what we had to say with the messages found in Maya writing. She and I in particular became good friends. I went to

Linda's house a lot when she lived here in Antigua, because I liked to talk with her and she would tell me what she knew about epigraphy, about shared traditions. I loved to listen and relate that to what I was learning about Maya culture. We went out to altars, sacred altars, to celebrate Maya ceremonies. She was very involved in Maya culture and was immersed in it, she tried to live it. There was a question, a phrase she told me once that I liked that said, "I study Maya writing so that I can learn about Maya culture, about your vision of nature, but the advantage you have is that you live it. I study it, you live it. That makes a big difference," is what she told me.

So that was really exciting, to learn about our history thousands of years ago, and to know that those things still exist, they're a part of our oral tradition; before, we never really gave them much thought, because we didn't know where they came from, but now we know their roots and we appreciate that, and want to learn more and more every day.

The difficulty of sustaining and reviving Maya traditions during the repression and persecution of recent decades.

Q: Can you talk about the importance of the linguistic studies?

Nikté: Yes. At a certain point we did an analysis of our social and political situation as a Maya community. Everyone knows about the repression in the 1970's and '80's; well, for long time there's been a direct repression of Maya communities and a lot of people died, a lot of our leaders, but without a doubt I think this war has given us something positive, and that's the energy to move forward, to not bow our heads and be conquered. On the contrary, since our brothers have passed onto the other side, they give us the strength we need to go on. And to consolidate ourselves little by little into a more united Maya community, much stronger, although sadly right now we're pretty divided for a number of reasons but there's always the idea, the desire to bring us together bit by bit as one single Maya community.

I think that all the problems the Maya people lived through, and that in some ways we are still experiencing, make us see the need to understand ourselves better, in order to ward off the total alienation of our community. For example, I think we've all suffered, or at least the majority of those of us who work at OKMA, in some way we've all suffered war firsthand. They've assassinated our blood brothers, and we ourselves have suffered some kind of persecution.

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Before coming to OKMA I was working on a project with the Catholic church in San Miguel Chicaj in Baja Verapaz. And the job had to do with revalorization of Achí Maya culture in Baja Verapaz, and one of the important elements we were working on was language, and we were using language as a means of communication with God, and began to practice some Maya rituals, and that brought me negative consequences because the non-Maya people didn't share those ideas, and they began to threaten me and then come after me to see how they could make me stop doing that kind of work.

Then I finally had the opportunity to continue my education and that's why I came here, in order to study at a university. Then I stayed here to work at OKMA.

Q: What other things do you want to do?

Nikté: Well, on the one hand I'd like to ask foreign linguists, epigraphers, archaeologists and anthropologists to keep sharing what they learn in their investigations of the ancient and modern Maya people with us; that makes us stronger, it helps us to know ourselves better. There aren't yet many Maya professionals who can do that type of work and so we do need their help. I'd also like to tell my Maya brothers and sisters (specifically the ones who reject the help of foreigners because they say that foreigners don't know anything about us, that only we know our own history), that that's not true. There are so many things in our community that we haven't had the chance to learn about, and without a doubt the foreigners have. So we should accept the help that foreigners offer in order to learn about and write a true, complete history of our own community.