

ANTHROPOLOGICAL LINGUISTS AID IN CULTURAL SURVIVAL

[Editor's Note: The following two articles are written by anthropological linguists who have gone beyond the traditional work of accumulating vocabularies and grammars to bringing their linguistic expertise back to the native American speakers whose languages they have studied. Dr. Robert Laughlin and Dr. Kathleen Bragdon describe, respectively, their work with a Mayan community in Chiapas, Mexico and the Passamaquoddy of Maine.]

ME AND SNA JTZ'IBAJOM (The House of the Writer)

My work with the Mayan Indians of Chiapas in southern Mexico began in 1959. I was a member of the Harvard Chiapas Project, whose goal was to document culture change in a Mayan community. There I met Romin Teratol, a Tzotzil Mayan Indian who was employed as a puppeteer of the National Indian Institute (INI). My wife and I moved briefly into his mother's second house and began learning his language. My predecessor in the project, Lore Colby, had typed up a provisional dictionary, but it was just a start. Soon I was collecting folk tales and thereby adding vocabulary to the dictionary. Then I collected dreams. However, when I suggested the possibility of publishing those dreams, I was advised that I should be able to analyze them according to Freud, Jung, and who knows who else. So I decided it would be easier to compile a thorough dictionary. This process took the next 14 years, and in 1975 *The Great Tzotzil Dictionary of San Lorenzo Zinacantán* was published. The following year I published *Of Shoes and Ships and Sealing Wax: Sundries from Zinacantán*, based on the journals of Romin and his neighbor, Antzelmo Peres, who had become my collaborators. They had twice travelled to the States to finish our opus and offer a description of life in another world.

Eventually the collections of folk tales and dreams were published in Tzotzil and English: *Of Cabbages and Kings: Tales from Zinacantán* (1977) and *Of Wonders Wild and New: Dreams from Zinacantán* (1976).

Selections from these have recently been published in *The People of the Bat: Tales and Dreams from Zinacantán* (1988), Carol Karasik (ed.). My most recent publication, *The Great Tzotzil Dictionary of Santo Domingo Zinacantán* (1989), is a translation and reordering of a 16th century Spanish-Tzotzil dictionary that I found in my home town of Princeton in 1974.

In 1982, aided by the Mayan poet, Jaime Sabines, brother to the governor of Chiapas, Mexico, a group of Tzotzil Mayan Indians who had worked with me or with anthropology colleagues over many years secured funding for a writers' cooperative and published two bilingual booklets. However, the governor's term was ending, and, lacking further support, this light was permanently cut. I was then approached by the late Romin's son, Xun, by Antzelmo Peres, and by Maryan Lopis Mentés of neighboring Chamula, whom I had known for many years. I had hoped, during the many years of my anthropological and linguistic research, that



somehow my work might return to Zinacantán. I saw this as an opportunity --an opportunity to help bring Mayan literacy to Chiapas.

By chance, a conference that same year celebrating "40 years of Anthropological Research in Chiapas" was scheduled to begin. I urged my Mayan friends to address the many assembled anthropologists and linguists. This they did, explaining, "You have awakened our interest in our own culture, you have published many studies, but always in other countries where we never see the results. Our young people are now literate in Spanish and think they are very smart, but they don't know a quarter of what their fathers know. We would like, at least, to put on paper our customs for the sake of our children and grandchildren."

The next few years, aided by Cultural Survival, a human rights non-profit organization, we founded Sna Jtz'ibajom, a Tzotzil-Tzeltal writers' cooperative.

Currently the cooperative publishes bilingual booklets in two Mayan languages; these booklets cover history, oral history, and customs. The cooperative has also established a puppet theater, a live theater, and a weekly Tzotzil-Tzeltal radio program. The puppet theater draws on folk tales, but also presents didactic skits on alcoholism, medicine, and bilingual education. The live theater has dramatized a folk tale and created a family planning play.

The cooperative also has started a Tzotzil literacy project. Initially I contacted two religious scribes and a secretary of the school committee of Zinacantán to teach. Currently the teachers (who have never been teachers before, and hence, have not been taught to scorn their own culture), give two hour classes in Tzotzil twice a week in their own homes to 10-12 of their neighbors. The interest in the project was so great that one teacher requested to teach overtime.

Those eligible to participate in the literacy program must already be minimally literate in Spanish. Initially there was some discussion as to whether women should be allowed to take classes. The idea of women and men spending time together in the evening at first made many feel

uncomfortable. One prospective student thought that learning Tzotzil would enable him and his girlfriend to write secret messages to each other since his father only knew Spanish. In two years, the project has awarded 500 diplomas to men, women, and children in two communities. Presently we have two directors, 14 teachers, and 144 students enrolled each semester. Although Tzotzil is not the government or official language, that has not discouraged the Mayans' enrollment in the evening language classes. Students are encouraged to record personal and family histories as well as to produce creative writing. Stories are reviewed and edited by Sna Jtz'ibajom. The federal publisher has agreed to print 3,000 copies of each work submitted by the cooperative. Students give the following reasons for learning Tzotzil: to improve their Spanish by working with translations, to learn, to become smarter, and to appreciate their own tradition.

Besides the personal enrichment the students receive from learning to read and write their native language, the Mayan society also benefits through the national and international recognition the cooperative is receiving. The cooperative's success has been due in part to the talent of its members as writers, actors, artists, and/or teachers, and also to the great pride that the people have in their culture and their new desire to be literate in their mother tongue, to "become smart."

We have already come a long way since our beginning eight years ago. We next would like to see the establishment of culture centers in each community, linked to a Mayan Academy of Letters based in San Cristóbal, where teachers could be trained to spread our activities throughout the Mayan areas of the state.

My first responsibility to the cooperative as an anthropological linguist has been to train its members how to write their language correctly. While spelling is quickly learned, the decision as to where words begin and end is a problem even for linguists. For example, should the particles to and ox, when they occur together, be kept separate or merged?

Second, the economic crisis in Mexico, severely restricting government funding,

combined with the lack of a tradition of charitable giving in Mexico, forces the cooperative to look outside for support. Very few foundations grant internationally, and of those a very small number support cultural projects. Even then, support is limited to two to three years, so it is difficult to plan for the future. I have been able thus far to steer the cooperative to appropriate foundations. For a weaving cooperative, self-sufficiency may be possible, but for writers?

As a member of Sna Jtz'ibajom, I see the significance of the project as strengthening the Mayan culture for the Mayans themselves and offering an alternative to the non-Mayan media barrage. Just as important, the cooperative is awakening an interest among non-Indian Mexicans in their Indian heritage and informing the outside world that Mayan culture is alive and flourishing.

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AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL LINGUIST LOOKS AT PASSAMAQUODDY

The mist was rising off the inlet, the tall spiky outlines of the weirs just visible through the haze, as I drove for the first time into the small Passamaquoddy Indian reservation at Pleasant Point, near Perry, Maine. The reservation is spread out in a sinuous pattern, running along the shore of the inlet, and ending short of a narrow isthmus that bears the road running towards Eastport, a fishing/resort community on the coast. The conspicuous landmarks of the community include the Wabanaki Mall, where signs for the restaurant, auto repair shop (now closed) and grocery store are in Passamaquoddy and English, the native-run supermarket, and the Passamaquoddy Museum, home of the Passamaquoddy Bilingual-Bicultural Program.

I have come to begin a study of the Passamaquoddy-Maliseet language. Passamaquoddy is a language of the eastern sub-group of the Algonquian

language family. I am already familiar with a related language, Massachusetts, which I have studied with Dr. Ives Goddard, with whom I co-authored *Native Writings in Massachusetts*. Massachusetts, however, is an extinct language, and what is known about it comes from writings left by native speakers who became literate in their native language in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. My plan is to study Passamaquoddy and thereby to familiarize myself



with a living Algonquian language, for the comparisons it will make possible with Massachusetts, and for the insights it will give me into language use. For instance, do people within the community use Passamaquoddy in formal as well as informal situations and does speech differ among different age groups?

At the Wabanaki Mall, shoppers and employees speak softly in Passamaquoddy. I catch perhaps one word in five. Fortunately for me, all speak English as well. I purchase a basket and ask about the maker, a woman still living at Pleasant Point and well known for her skill. I am then directed to the Passamaquoddy Museum to meet Joseph Nicolas and David Francis, two Passamaquoddy men who have