

FAMSI © 2000: Eduardo Pérez Vaíl

Oral History of Concepción Chiquirichapa and San Martín Sacatepéquez, Guatemala

Research Year: 1998

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Contemporary

Location: Quetzaltenango, Guatemala

Sites: Concepción Chiquirichapa and San Martín Sacatepéquez

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Introduction

The Mam language is a western Mayan language, belonging to the Mamean branch (Kaufman, 1974). It is one of the most widely spoken languages in Guatemala, in terms of both number of speakers and geographical range. It is spoken in the departments of Huehuetenango, San Marcos, Quetzaltenango, and Retalhuleu, encompassing a total of fifty-eight municipalities within these four departments. As demonstrated by its history, it is one of the languages best preserved by its speakers, although it is also the best example of the linguistic diversity that may exist among the Mayan languages. Based on criteria of similarity and difference and geographic distribution, students of the language have divided Mam into four major regions: Northern, Southern, Central, and Western. Each region is further diversified according to each municipality. For this reason, it is possible to find numerous dialectal differences, some stronger than others.

Concepción Chiquirichapa and San Martín Sacatepéquez are predominantly Mam-speaking municipalities in the department of Quetzaltenango. Both are located to the southwest of the city of Quetzaltenango and share territorial boundaries. In both municipalities, the climate is cold, although, owing to its location adjacent to a pass leading to the south coast, San Martín also includes warmer zones. As may be expected, the two communities preserve several dialectal differences, which are more or less significant. Comparing the two municipalities, overall differences are seen on a lexical level, but also in certain phonetic features, such as accent. For example, San Martín is characterized by a final accent, whereas Concepción speakers place the

accent on the penultimate syllable. Because the team of linguists who participated in this project included speakers from other municipalities and regions, including Cajolá and San Ildefonso Ixtahuacán, it is possible to illustrate some of these dialectal differences ([Table 1](#)).

TABLE 1 Some dialectal differences in Mam					
	<i>thin</i>	<i>thunder</i>	<i>We saw it.</i>	<i>naked</i>	<i>There aren't any.</i>
San Martín	xwit'	q'ankeyaq	qile'	xhb'a'j	tlo'
Concepción	k'li'x	q'ankeyaq	qliye'	xhqi't	tla'
Cajolá	jiitx'in	k'inkaaq	qile'	xhalchi	mixhti'
Ixtahuacán	sky'i'l	q'ankeyooq	qila	sli'nk	nti'

Methodology and Results

The aim of this project was to transcribe and translate (Mam to Spanish) interviews with twenty-two people of Concepción Chiquirichapa and San Martín Sacatepéquez, between the ages of twenty-three and about eighty years old. Three were men, and twenty were women. Fifteen persons were from Concepción; eight were from San Martín. The interviews were developed by Matthew Looper, and conducted by Julia Victoria Sánchez Hernández, Sandra Beatriz Sánchez Hernández, and Susana Leticia Sánchez Hernández of Concepción in 1996 and 1997. Funding for the interviews was partly provided by the Centro de Textiles Tradicionales Nim Po't (director: Frank Lee Mays).

The questions asked during the interviews were based on separate prepared lists for men and women. They solicited basic information such as age, place of birth, etc., as well as information concerning weaving technology and fibers, change in clothing styles, other visual culture such as bags, raincoats, baskets; relationships to the southern coast, and special textiles associated with life stages and ceremonies. An emphasis was placed on information about the costume of women, taking into account that this is the gender that conserves it most completely and is primarily responsible for its manufacture and, as a result, its transmission from generation to generation.

After funding was provided, the sixty-minute tapes containing the interviews were collected from the interviewers in Concepción and from Nim Po't in Antigua. Members of the transcription and translation team were selected from my own team of workers at

Oxlajuj Keej Maya Ajtz'iib' (OKMA). Because of the length of the project, some of the original team members had to suspend their work, and other workers had to be found. Searches in San Martín and Concepción were without result; however additional personnel were found in Cajolá (for transcription and translation) and later in Chimaltenango, for data input. The team responsible for the transcription and translation of the interviews included Armando Vaíl, Romero Edilberto Pérez, Aníbal Dagoberto Pérez A., and José Reginaldo Pérez. Zoila Luz García, Juana Perén Quechenoj, and Glenda Perén Mayor were in charge of computer data entry. The program used for data entry was Word Perfect 7 for Windows. My responsibilities included organizing the project, revision of data in Mam and Spanish, and also final formatting of the data and editing. The resulting document of 486 pages, presented in Mam and Spanish, is entitled, "Entrevistas acerca del traje Mam de los municipios de San Martín Sacatepéquez y Concepción Chiquirichapa, Quetzaltenango: T-xi'len qxb'aalin ojtxi' ax ja'lin."

With respect to the transcriptions, translations, and corrections, several problems were encountered. Firstly, because the equipment used to record the interviews was not sophisticated, some tapes were difficult to hear and others were incomplete. Occasionally, the ordering and sequence of interviews was confused, owing to the interviewers' placement of multiple interviews on a single cassette. The considerable dialectal differences among the interviews, especially with respect to specialized weaving terminology, also made the work of translation difficult. It was necessary to travel to San Martín and Concepción in order to secure aid in the translations through clarification of these terms. Despite this research, there are several terms whose translation into Spanish was not possible, and it was deemed best to leave them in the original language. As far as the final editing and presentation in Mam, a standard orthography (established by the Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala) was employed. However, because it was not the principal purpose of this project nor has a final proposal for standardization been accepted, spelling of words was not standardized. This decision preserves much of the dialectal variation encountered in these two linguistic communities.

Final Status of the Project

Upon completion of the project, Matthew Looper, Frank Lee Mays, and I considered the possibilities for its publication. We believe that the results will have much importance in the field of ethnographic textiles, owing to the information they contain concerning the history of textile production of the southern Mam peoples. Until this project, most of this information was totally undocumented. We have discussed the possibility of a joint publication of the work by CHOLSAMAJ and Nim Po't, and have begun the process of consultation for the final editing, image production, and layout.

Deceased: Eduardo Pérez Vaíl

ANTIGUA, GUATEMALA (OKMA). The young Maya linguist Eduardo Pérez Vaíl (B'aayil) died at age 29 in a car accident on August 22, 2001. B'aayil was a linguist from the Mam community (from Cajolá Quetzaltenango) who worked in OKMA beginning in 1994 and was the author or coauthor of *Txoolil Qyool Mam: Gramática Mam* (1997), *Gramática Pedagógica Mam* (1999), and *Tx'ixpub'ente tiib' qyool: Variación dialectal en Mam* (2000), as well as numerous articles and conference papers. B'aayil was a coordinator of Oxlajuuj Keej Maya' Ajtz'iib' (OKMA) and also gave classes in linguistics at the Universidad Rafael Landívar. He is survived by his wife, Magdalena Pérez Conguache, two daughters, his parents and several brothers and sisters. Mayan linguistics will sorely miss his acumen, his enthusiasm, and his numerous contributions to his own language and to Mayan languages and linguistics in general.

Submitted 11/01/1999 by:
Eduardo Pérez Vaíl