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Itzaj Maya Documentation

Research Year: 1998

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Post Classic

Location: Petén, Guatemala

Site: Itzaj Maya Language, San José

Summary

The primary objective of this project was to complete a draft of a reference grammar of the Itzaj Maya language with the assistance of don Fernando Tesucún, a native of San José, Petén, and one of the last fluent speakers of the language. The Itzaj Maya preserved Mayan culture, including writing, until they were conquered in 1697, approximately a century and a half after their neighbors were overwhelmed by the Spanish invaders. The grammar follows a published text collection and a dictionary for Itzaj Maya, and is the final component of documentation for this endangered language.

Fernando Tesucún came to Carbondale, Illinois, for two months of intensive linguistic research during June and July, 1998. During this time, the Principal Investigator completed drafts of the final chapters of the grammar in consultation with don Fernando. Together they rechecked all of the data used in the examples. They alternated working together on data checking and clarification of grammatical points, and working alone on individual tasks. Mr. Tesucún transcribed and translated a number of audiotapes and videotapes of Itzaj conversations and narratives that had been recorded previously. This work was a secondary objective of the research and will be used in developing a CD-ROM documenting Itzaj Maya language and culture.

The resulting Itzaj Maya Grammar is a comprehensive grammar and it is hoped that it will serve as a reference for anthropologists, linguists, epigraphers, and others interested in Itzaj Maya language and culture.

Submitted 11/01/1998 by:

Charles Andrew Hofling

Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Linguistics

Department of Anthropology

Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

NOTE: The Itzaj Maya Grammar will not be presented in its entirety. FAMSI will present the [Table of Contents](#), [Preface](#), [Acknowledgements](#), and the [Sources Cited](#).

For a copy of the complete documentation contact:
The University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City

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Itzaj Maya-Spanish-English Dictionary by Charles Andrew Hofling with Félix Fernando Tesucún ©1997 ISBN 0-87480-550-3

ITZAJ MAYA GRAMMAR

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Preface

The Itzaj Maya language is a member of the Yukatekan Maya language family, along with Mopan Maya, Lakantun Maya, and Yukateko (Yucatec) Maya. All are spoken in the Mayan lowlands of Guatemala, México, and Belize. Itzaj Maya is severely threatened with extinction. It is a native language to perhaps several dozen older adults, most of whom are at least in their seventies and who live in San José, Petén, Guatemala, on the shore of Lake Petén Itzá.

In the last decade, efforts to revitalize the Itzaj Maya language and culture have attracted local interest in San José, but the future of the language and associated traditional culture is uncertain (Hofling 1996). The Mayan Language Academy of Guatemala (ALMG) continues to take an active interest in supporting language revitalization.

While the details of the history of the modern Itzaj remain unclear, it is generally agreed that their ancestors ruled the last major independent polity in Mesoamerica, which remained independent of the Spanish until 1697, a century and a half later than most of their neighbors (Jones 1998). At least some Itzaj Maya migrated to the Petén from Chichén Itzá in pre-contact times, perhaps returning to a former homeland, and intermingling with inhabitants of the Petén at the time of their arrival or return (Hofling 1991:1-2; Rice, Rice, and Pugh 1998).

After the Itzaj capital on the island Noj Petén was subjugated by the Spanish in 1697, Mayans were forced to live in missionary towns, including San José, or flee into the forest (Jones 1998). Although intergenerational language transmission was seriously disrupted in the 1930's, San José is an isolated pocket where the language has survived until the present. The economy of San José was dominated by traditional

subsistence agriculture and the extraction of forest products, especially chicle, the latex used in the manufacture of chewing gum, until the 1970's (Schwartz 1990). For information on traditional culture see Hofling (1991), and Hofling and Schwartz (1995).

I began research on the language in 1979 and have studied it ever since, intensively since 1990. Félix Fernando Tesucún has been my primary language consultant since the beginning of my study and deserves much of the credit for the documentation of Itzaj Maya. I have long been aware of its precarious language status and of variation in the linguistic competence of possible language consultants. Early on I was convinced that Fernando Tesucún was as fluent a speaker as any, an excellent teacher, and a pleasure to work with. I therefore decided to rely on him above all others and to strive for depth of description and understanding of his idiolect, rather than attempt to describe variation among speakers of differing degrees of fluency.

This grammar completes the basic documentation of the Itzaj Maya language, complementing the earlier volume of texts (1991) and a dictionary (1997). I have attempted to integrate the three and hope that they will be used together. This work has been done under time pressure and many points merit further research. All documentary materials including fieldnotes and tapes are archived at the Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica in Antigua, Guatemala, and at the Center for Native American Studies at the University of California at Davis.

This grammar builds on the work of Schumann (1971) and on my own dissertation (1982) but is far more extensive and comprehensive in its coverage than these early works. I have been guided both by current Mayan linguistic models, especially those of Comrie (1989), Givón (1984, 1990), and those found in Shopen (1985). It is my hope that this grammar will be useful to the general linguistic community as well as to Amerindianists and Mayanists.

Acknowledgements

The project of documenting the Itzaj Maya language has taken me over twenty years. Grants in support of various aspects of this work began with a pre-doctoral Fulbright Fellowship to Guatemala, 1979-80. A University of Kentucky Summer Research Fellowship (1988) supported text collection. Intensive work on grammatical research began in 1991-93, supported by the National Science Foundation (NSF BNS-9009259). I received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities for work on the dictionary during 1993-95 (NEH/RT-21447-93) and another grant from NSF to continue grammatical research during 1996-98 (NSF SBR-9507876). I received a Summer Research Grant from the Southern Illinois University at Carbondale and a grant from the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI) to complete research on the grammar during the summer of 1998. I am very grateful to all of these institutions for their support of this research; none of them is responsible for any of its shortcomings.

Over the course of this research I have benefited from the help of hundreds of people and dozens of institutions and cannot hope to thank all of them adequately. In the early to mid 1990's I was based at the Department of Anthropology at the University of Cincinnati. I sincerely appreciate their support of this project and especially want to thank Rhoda Halperin, Joseph F. Foster, Vernon Scarborough, Pat Mora, and Barry Isaac. Since then, I have enjoyed the support of my colleagues at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, who have provided an immensely stimulating environment for interdisciplinary anthropological research and a haven for Mayan studies. I am especially grateful to Don and Pru Rice, and Vice Chancellor Victoria Molfese for their support of this project. I also thank my students, especially my student assistants David Carlson, Laura Moll, and Bill Duncan.

Many colleagues in Guatemala have encouraged this work. I especially thank the Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala, the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia de Guatemala, the Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica (CIRMA), and Oxlajuuj Keej Maya' Ajtz'iib' for their interest and support. I also thank CIRMA for archiving the Itzaj documentary materials in Antigua, Guatemala. The community of San José has always welcomed me and encouraged my work and I hope that it is useful to them. I especially thank doña Castora Collí for keeping my household together in the field.

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I am grateful to the University of Utah Press and its director, Jeff Grathwohl, for supporting the publication of the documentation of the Itzaj Maya language over the last decade. I also thank Richard Firmage and Rodger Reynolds for their editorial assistance.

This book is dedicated to my teachers. In particular I would like to acknowledge my intellectual debt to Marshall and Mridula Durbin, Bernard Comrie, Fernando Tesucún, and my parents, Madelyn L. and Charles K. Hofling.

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