Some Thoughts On
The Question of Orthography
Used in Writing the Yucatecan Maya Language

The opening and the closing papers of the Workshop entitled "*Indigenous Literacy in Mesoamerica and the Colonial World*" both touched on the question of orthography. The opening paper, "*Where There's A Will There's A Way*" given by Victoria Bricker, focused on the question of the variations in orthography used in writing the Yucatecan Mayan language[1] in the Colonial period, while the closing paper, "*Alfabetización en Idiomas Indígenas en Guatemala: De La Autonomia A La Colonización Y A La Colonialidad*" by Jorge Raymundo, asked the question to what extent the orthography of the various Mayan languages should be controlled by governmental organizations.[2]

As noted in the paper by Bricker, throughout the Colonial period there were variations in orthographic representations of words which depended upon the predilection of each writer. However, it is well to note that despite these variations in general there was a consensus in terms of which consonants and vowels were to be used to represent specific sounds.

In her book "*A Dictionary of The Maya Language As Spoken in Hocabá, Yucatán*", Bricker lists the consonants and vowels, and for the consonants gives a table which shows their phonetic value and the corresponding symbol or symbols used in writing Colonial texts:

Phonetic	Colonial
§	(on antecedent vowel), k, th
b'	b
¢	tz
¢'	ɔ, dz
č	ch
č'	cħ
h	h
k	c
k'	k
l	l
m	m
n	n
p	p
p'	p̣, pp[3]
s	ç, z

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[1] Known by the speakers of the language as Maya Than or Mazeual Than, or simply Maya.

[2] While Jorge Raymundo was primarily thinking of the Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala, or ALMG and its reach into the indigenous languages of Guatemala, Mexico has a sister organization called Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas, or INALI which was set up to control the orthography of the various indigenous languages of Mexico.

[3] I would like to add here the letter "**s**" which was also used by certain writers, as for example the anonymous writers of the *Chilam Balam of Tizimin* and the *Ritual of the Bacabs*.

š	x
t	t
t'	th, tħ
w	u, v
y	i, y

For the vowels, the standard ones are **a**, **e**, **i**, **o**, **u**, used in the manner similar to that which is used to represent vowel sounds in most European alphabets. However, since there are four ways in pronouncing vowels which Bricker lists as Normal, Low, High and Glottalized, it is here that we begin to see variations in orthographic representations as used by the Colonial writers. This is especially true in how the vowel followed by a glottal stop is represented, something which Bricker explored in the paper presented at the Workshop.[4]

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**Some Historical Background
On the Development of Latin Script Orthography
for the Yucatecan Mayan Language**

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When the Spanish arrived and established themselves in Yucatan in the mid 1500's the religious orders immediately set about converting the Maya to Christianity. One of the methods by which they hoped to do this was getting their message translated into the Mayan language. Various members of the upper class of Maya, thus people who had probably been educated in the use of the Mayan hieroglyphic writing system before becoming Christianized, became involved in various ways in this effort. Such names as Juan Cocom who was a close friend of Diego de Landa and Gaspar Antonio Chi Xiu who was a protégé of Landa and later the Spanish court official interpreter, both of whom were related to Mayan ruling families, come to mind.

A major part of this effort to get proselytizing material translated into Mayan involved forming an orthography for the Mayan language from the Latin script. This was done fairly quickly and in a surprisingly uniform manner when one considers the rather variable and sloppy orthography of the Spaniards at the time. When one compares the uneven effort at writing Mayan words in Spanish literature of the period, for example that of Landa and Lizana, with the Mayan literature written by the Maya themselves, it would seem that the Maya played a very important role in helping the Spanish friars develop a Latin script orthography for the Mayan language. The implication of this rapid development of the Latin script orthography for the Mayan language is that in essence hieroglyphic norms for writing the language were being transliterated into the Latin script and that thus the transition from using hieroglyphs into using the Latin script for writing Mayan happened rapidly and in a fairly seamless manner.[5]

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[4] For a fuller look at the vowel followed by a glottal stop and historical background on the reason for this orthographic convention see Victoria Bricker's article "*The Last Gasp of Maya Hieroglyphic Writing in the Books of Chilam Balam of Chumayel and Chan Kan*". In particular, see page 43 for comments and graphic examples. Also very relevant are her concluding remarks made on pages 47-48.

[5] For an example of the carry-over of hieroglyphic practices into Latin script see Appendix A.

Unfortunately there is no indication of how extensive the involvement by the Mayan speakers in the formation of Latin script orthography was. In any case, by 1557 when the Mani land treaty was written the use of the Latin script for the Mayan language seems to have been fairly well established and the orthography, which remained in use until the late 1800's, fairly well standardized.[6]

In the late 1800's some changes in the standard Mayan Colonial orthography began to appear. These changes, as far as can be determined, were brought about by the fact that in order to typeset material in the Mayan language the typesetter either had to have special typefaces made to represent those special letters which were invented in the 1500's for Mayan orthography or he had to introduce substitutes from his standard type fonts. Some printing houses did indeed go to the trouble of having these special letters made, but most did not. As a result, it slowly became customary to use these substitute orthographic conventions in written Mayan. These changes in fact only involve four symbols,[7] so the change was not a drastic one. In any case, by the early part of the 20th century this new orthographic convention had become the standard and is to be found in the works of Lopez Otero, Pacheco Cruz, and Redfield / Villa Rojas. This convention was also generally adopted when writing out Mayan names and words such as town names and surnames.

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**The Mexican Government
Imposes a Standardized Orthography
On Indigenous Languages**

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In the 1970's Ramón Arzápalo Marín introduced a simplified version of the phonetic alphabet into his class on Yucatec Mayan at UNAM so that his Mexican students could have a better grasp on how to pronounce words based on their experience with the standard Spanish orthography. Over time some of these students became "important people" within various government agencies such as INAH, the SEP and most importantly for indigenous languages, the Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas, or INALI. As these agencies began to look at the question of how Mayan words should be spelled in such things as bilingual text books for the SEP and signs at Mayan ruins the students of Ramón applied what they had learned from Ramón, apparently oblivious of the fact that there existed an extensive and well documented, if, at the time, rather difficult to find literature in the Yucatecan Mayan language which was developed by the Maya themselves.

During my first work session with René Acuña at UNAM in 1991 I had the chance to visit with Ramón on various occasions. During one of these visits the subject of the "new" orthography came up. He said that he was rather sadden to see that his ersatz orthography had been taken over by these people and now was being pushed as the "official" orthography for the Yucatecan Mayan language. It

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[6] An exception to this statement is that Beltrán in his *Arte* published in 1746 discarded the use of the **ç** and substituted **z** in its place. While this new orthographic convention did not take hold immediately, by the time the well-known 19th century Mayan scholar Juan Pío Pérez was active in the mid 1800's the use of **z** throughout written texts became fairly common.

[7] These four symbols were **ɔ**, **p̵**, **ħ** and **y̵**.

was never his intention that such should be the case, but for some reason when he would bring this matter up with his former students they were not interested in hearing him out about the question of retaining the traditional orthography for the Yucatecan Mayan language.

Compounding this problem was that during writing of "*Nomenclatura Etnobotánica Maya*" published in 1976 and later in the "*Diccionario Maya Cordemex*" published in 1980 Alfredo Barrera Vásquez, apparently also at the bidding of the officials in positions of power, scrapped the standard orthographic convention in favor of the "new" orthography.[8] [9]

Here is an example of the type of change which took place in the *Cordemex*. First, a couple of entries from the *Calepino Maya de Motul* as they appear in the original text:

γ e: punta como de alfiler, agu[j]a de espinos y cosas assi. ¶ ye puɔ, ye alfiler, &: punta de aguja, de alfiler, ettz.

γ e: filo o corte de cuchillo, espada, hacha, &. ¶ ci ye in cuchillo: agudo esta mi cuchillo; agudo tiene el filo o corte. ¶ ma ci ye; binaan ye; manaan ye in cuchillo: esta boto mi cuchillo. ¶ de aqui: ye ca: el filo o filos de la piedra de moler. ¶ ma ci ye a ca: bota esta tu piedra de moler.

These two entries were transcribed, combined into a single entry and changed to read as follows in the *Cordemex*:[10]

E 1: filo o corte de cuchillo, espada, hacha, etc; **ki' ye in kuchiyo:** agudo está mi cuchillo, agudo tiene el filo o corte; **ma' ki' ye, bina'an ye in kuchiyo:** está roto mi cuchillo; de aquí **ye ka':** el filo o filos de la piedra; **ma' ki' ye a ka':** rota está tu piedra de moler, punta como de alfiler, aguja, de espino y cosas así; **ye puts', ye "alfiler":** punta de aguja, punta de alfiler, etc. ...

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[8] In one of my last visits with Don Alfredo he bemoaned the fact that the *Cordemex* was published very prematurely. Juan Ramón Bastarrachea Manzano, one of the team members who worked on the compiling of vocabulary entries for the *Cordemex*, was sent to Mexico City with boxes full of cards in order to sit with the typesetter and get the book into print. The prime reason for this hurried publication was that the six-year term of office was due to end and the president, José López Portillo, wanted the book published while he was still in office.

[9] There is some question about how much Alfredo Barrera Vásquez had to do with the introduction of the new orthography. As pointed out by Victoria Bricker in her article "*Linguistic Continuities and Discontinuities in the Maya Area*", Barrera Vásquez was one of two linguist who prepared the *Cartilla Maya-Español* for publication for the SEP in 1946 in which a precursor for the orthography used in the *Cordemex* was used for writing the Mayan language. However, when I asked him about the introduction of this new orthography he seemed want to distance himself from its introduction and usage. Now, looking back on it and given what Bricker has to say on the subject, it is not clear to me why he portrayed himself as a person who was not responsible for its introduction given the role he played first with the *Cartilla*, and then later with the publication of *Nomenclatura Etnobotánica Maya* and finally the *Cordemex*.

[10] In some cases the transcriptions in the *Cordemex* leave much to be desired. For example, the entry from the *Calepino Maya de Motul* which appears to read "letzolve cuseadelan te despues de lepp ta oltzil" (but which should read: "letz, &: vease adelante despues de lepp ta oltzil.) is transcribed in the *Cordemex* as "**LETSOL U'E'** 1: cuzca."

Since the publication of the *Cordemex* the "official" orthography has morphed over time and gone through several revisions. There was thus a moving target which for some time was rather difficult to keep up with.

An example of the more recent "sanctioned" orthography is given in the following text which was written by Desiderio Lázaro Dzul Polanco and appeared in *K'aaylay 21*, published in September 4, 2007. It is accompanied by a reversed transcript of the text in which I transposed the text using standard Colonial orthographic practices. The purpose of so doing was so that the reader can compare the two orthographies side by side.

Le áanalte'oba' ts'íibta'abo'ob yéetel (alfabeto) le ts'íib ch'a' nu'ukta'ab tu ja'abil 1984, le xan lela' éejenta'ab tu ka'atéen ti' jump'éel much'táambal beeta'ab tu noj kaajil Campech, tu ja'abil 2006. Le much'táambala' beeta'ab tumen kúuchil ku k'aaba'tik INALI. In tukultike' te'exe' táan a k'áatchi'itike'exe' ba'axten leti' le ts'íiba'. Tumen le ts'íiba' leti' ku meyaj ti' le kúuchilo'ob tu'ux ku ka'ansa'al mejen paalalo'obo' bey xan tu'ux ku ka'ansa'al nukuch máako'ob, ku meyajta'al xan tu kúuchil u ka'ansa'al maaya t'aan wa ti' Mola'ayo'ob.

Le analteoba ɔibtaboob yetel (alfabeto) le ɔib cħa nuctab tu haabil 1984, le xan lela ehentab tu caten ti humppel mucħtambal betab tu noh cahil Campech, tu haabil 2006. Le mucħtambala betab tumen cuchil cu kabatic INALI. In tucultice texe tan a kat chiticexe baaxten leti le ɔiba. Tumen le ɔiba leti cu meyah ti le cuchiloob tuux cu canzaal mehen palalobo bey xan tuux cu canzaal nucuch macoob, cu meyahtaal xan tu cuchil u canzaal maya than ua ti Molayoob.

As is common practice in texts published by people in the bilingual education business, this paragraph is accompanied by the following Spanish translation:[11]

El alfabeto utilizado en el contenido de la revista es el de 1984 y ratificado en el 2006 en un foro realizado en Campeche y coordinado por el INALI. ¿Por qué el de 1984? Porque es el que más se utiliza por las instituciones oficiales, por algunas facultades de la Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, por las Academias de Lengua Maya, así como por las escuelas particulares que enseñan la lengua maya.[12]

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[11] As pointed out by Jorge Raymundo, for some workers in the bilingual education system the ultimate purpose of requiring texts used in bilingual education to be given both in the native language and Spanish is to facilitate the transition of the monolingual indigenous student from being monolingual to being bilingual, and to eventually have the indigenous student become a monolingual Spanish speaker.

[12] Personally, the Mayan in this text is nearly incomprehensible to me, somewhat akin to the type of writing the early Franciscan friars would produce when trying to write sermons in Mayan. How the poor parishioners managed to sit through these sermons without a display of mirth as would be the case today is hard to imagine. The *Discursos Predicables*, published in 1620 by Fray Ioan Coronel, is replete with this type of pseudo-Mayan. There are however a fair number of sermons

Some Final Thoughts

For many languages which use the Latin alphabet, it is not the job of the orthography to represent exactly the sounds produced when speaking that language, but rather to give a visual representation to which the reader puts a sound based on that person's experience with the language. Were this not so then the English language in particular would be hopelessly mired in unintelligible sets of symbols. Viewed from this light, the Colonial orthography developed for the Mayan language of Yucatan did a remarkably good job at approximating how the language was spoken.

Given this thought and added to it the visual simplicity of the Colonial orthography when compared to the orthography which is being imposed by the Mexican governmental agencies as shown by the brief passage above, it is indeed a shame that the people from INALI and allied groups are working so diligently to impose their orthography on the Yucatecan Mayan language. There are even efforts to transcribe some of the Books of Chilam Balam and other pieces of Yucatecan Mayan literature using the "official" orthography. A similar situation would be if Germany had conquered England in the 1940's and decided that the English language as presently written is a hopeless mess (which it is to my way of thinking). They then set out to impose some order on English by imposing German spelling practices on English. What then becomes of all of the great works in English? Think of all of the works which would have to be thus transcribed using the imposed orthography.

This is the situation in which the Yucatecan Mayan language presently finds itself. Unfortunately there is no counterbalancing effort to preserve the Colonial orthography, a system which was developed and used by the Maya for more than 400 years, and which served them well through all this time.[13]

"Numay u cici olal balcah,"[14] or as the Mayans say today, "Bey le baalo."[15]

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in this work which are reasonable, and the conjecture is that these comprehensible sermons were written by native lay people such as the indigenous maestros cantores.

[13] Quite the contrary: my brother-in-law is a bilingual teacher in the SEP in Yucatan. Because bilingual texts were slow in coming into the hands of the bilingual teachers, in 1991 he asked his sister, or should I say my wife Alejendra, to prepare for publication some of the stories which we had gathered and transcribed using the traditional orthography. These were to be accompanied by Spanish translations. This was done and a 60 page book was presented to my brother-in-law who in turn asked permission from his superiors to get the book printed up for his bilingual classes. Permission was denied because the orthography in the Mayan portion of the book was not sanctioned by INALI. Apparently having no text book at all was better in their estimation than having one which reflected the standard way of writing the Yucatecan Mayan language.

[14] Probably a Franciscan translation from the Latin phrase "Sic transit gloria mundi." See the *Calepino Maya de Motul*: Numay .l. numay v than: cosa transitoria, finible, perecedera, y momentanea que passa de presto. ¶ numay v cici olal balcah: de presto passa la gloria del mundo. Somewhat parallel is the following entry: Nicliz: cosa finible que tiene fin. ¶ nicliz v cici olal balcah: finible es la gloria del mundo.

[15] Literally: "That thing is like that", or as we would say, "That's the way it is."

Appendix A

The glottalized vowel has generally been recognized in Colonial orthography and is most often represented by doubling the vowel. This has led to some confusion though when the vowel is followed by a glottal stop but not reduplicated such as would be the case for one syllable words of the "CV" type or the "V". In these cases in Colonial times some writers would write the double vowel symbol even though such a symbol was seemingly not called for. For example the following words, which are pronounced with a vowel followed by a glottal stop, were often written using the double vowel convention:

Standard orthography	Alternative Colonial orthography
ha (water)	**haa**
na (mother)	**naa**
che (tree, wood)	**chee**
chi (mouth, edge)	**chij**
i (hawk)	**ii**
cho (mouse)	**choo**
uo (bull frog)	**uoo**
tu (stink)	**tuu**

In each case the vowel sound immediately after its enunciation is cut off by closing the glottis and the vowel is not reduplicated although the colonial orthographic convention would seem to indicate that the vowel is to be reduplicated. This convention of writing the double vowel as a representation of a vowel followed by a glottal stop may well be based on a hieroglyphic convention, at least according to how Landa showed the hieroglyphs for **le** (lasso / to catch an animal or fish using a lasso)[16] and **ha** (water). For the word **le** Landa's illustration is a bit misleading because he (or the copyist who made the copy of this portion of the text) places the two hieroglyphs

which comprise the hieroglyphic representation for **le** touching each other and also touching the hieroglyphic representation of **le** itself.[17]

For "water" Landa states that the word is written hieroglyphically **a** - **ha**. However, again there is a problem. In between what Landa shows in his "alphabet" as being one of the symbols for **a** and the hieroglyphic representation for water is his symbol for **h**, which in Spanish is pronounced "a-che". Upon closer inspection of his symbol for **h** it becomes apparent that in fact what is being represented in a slip knot of the type which the Maya use for tying things which they want to be able

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[16] See *Diccionario de San Francisco*: Lee: lazo, enlazar. ¶ tin leah chich: enlazó al pájaro. ¶ lebel a cah tu men cizin: engáñate el demonio. Compare with *Calepino Maya de Motul* in which the doubling of the vowel in not represented: Le: lazo para caçar o pescar, y caçar y pescar con lazo. ¶ in leah chich:

[17] In the graphic given here I have separated the **e** from **l** and both of these from **le**. For the original representation and the page from Landa in question as a whole see below.

untie easily.[18] One of the words for "knot" is **ach**.[19] What is not clear is why Landa felt it was necessary to introduce this hieroglyphic representation for **h** in this collection of glyphs.

Hieroglyphic researchers have also found this convention of placing the vowel to be followed by a glottal stop in the hieroglyphic cartouche in pre-Columbian hieroglyphic writing.[20]

It must be stressed that the Colonial writers were uneven in applying this convention of writing vowels followed by a glottal stop using the double vowel symbol and just as frequently wrote these vowels using the standard orthography. They were also uneven about writing the double vowel symbol in the case where a glottalized vowel is present in a word, thus with some frequency writing a word which has a glottalized vowel as if it was a regular or elongated vowel by writing it with a single vowel.

Another case which shows a lack of uniformity is in the writing of diphthong vowels. For example, **ay** and **ai** can be used interchangeably. However there is a tendency to use **ay** as the representation for the vowel sound known as "long i" in English and to reserve **ai** as the representation of a pair of distinctly pronounced vowels **a** - **i**.

> **hay**　flat, stretched out, extended
> **hai**　pertaining to water, from **ha**, water.

In the second case **hai** is pronounced **ha**-**i**.

The exception to this is the following, in which the most common spelling of the vowel sound "long i" is with **ai**, although examples of the use of **ay** are also to be found:

ain / ayn　　crocodile

Other examples of alternative ways of writing diphthong vowels include **ey**, **oy** and **uy**, for which somewhat less frequently the symbols **ei**, **oi** and **ui** are used.

There are of course examples of texts written in the Colonial period which do not follow the orthographic rules as set out here. A prime example is the text sometimes referred to as the *Crónica de Oxkutzcab*, written by Joan Xiu on May 29, 1685. Most noticeably in this text both **g** and **h** are employed to represent the phoneme **h**.
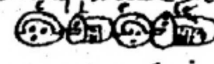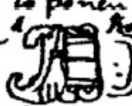
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[18] Probably one of the best examples of this type of knot is the one used in tying ropes to the "brazos" or string ends of hammocks in order to be able to hang hammocks from hammock hooks.

[19] See *Calpino Maya de Motul*: Ach: apretar lo que se ata. While here and in other vocabularies **ach** is given only as a verb, the word is also used as a noun.

[20] See for example pages 8-10 of "*Ten Phonetic Syllables*" by David Stuart, Volume 14 of Research Reports on Ancient Maya Writing.

de las partes otro, y assi viene a hazer in infinitum como
se podra ver en el siguiente exemplo. Le, quiere dezir laço
y caçar con el, para escrivirle con sus caratures aviendo
les nosotros hecho entender que son dos letras lo escriviã
ellos con tres puniendo a la aspiracion de la ʔl, la vocal, e,
que antes de si trae, y en esto no hierran aunq̃, os ens é si
quisieren ellos de su curiosidad. Exemplo.
despues al cabo le pegan la parte junta. Ha. que quiere dezir
agua porq̃ la hache tiene a. h. ante de si lo ponen ellos al
principio con a. y al cabo desta manera Tambiẽ
lo escrimen a partes, de la vña y otra vna manera yo
no pusiera aqui ni tratara dello sino por dar cuenta entera
de las cosas desta gente. Mamhati quiere dezir no quiero, ellos
lo escrimen a partes desta manera.

Sygue'se su a, b, c.

De las letras que aqui faltan carece esta lengua
y tiene otras añadidas de la nuestra para otras
cosas q̃ las ha menester, y ya no vsan para nada destos
sus caratures especialmente la gente moça q̃ an aprendido
los nros

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