Study Guide

YUCATEC MAYA DEAF SIGN

by Hubert Smith

An extra to the 4-part series, *The Living Maya*, which was broadcast on PBS and is distributed by DER.
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Director’s Statement

In 1976, I set out with a group of researchers to visually document Yucatec Maya society in a single community. This project resulted in the 4-part series, The Living Maya, which was broadcast on PBS and is distributed by DER.

Our search for a filming site had gone on for weeks, traversing villages all over Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula. We finally wound up in the South, and late one afternoon, rolled on to the plaza of Chichén or, “Mouth of the Well.” The broad grassy expanse was alive with activity. Little kids chased one another, as well as the occasional turkey. Older ones raced up and down a basketball court, and adult men gathered in conversational groups. The greeting we received was friendly, yet serious. The village contained our ideal criteria in terms of population, government structure, and other social characteristics, but this hearty greeting helped us settle on Chichén as the site of filming. We offered our well-rehearsed speeches, explaining that we had come to locate a community and live there for a year, documenting Maya life as it is lived in the Yucatan.

However, it was impossible to ignore the use of sign language in the study village. In fact, the deaf men had been particularly welcoming and were a big factor in our choosing to settle there.

Now it is time to share a story solely about them.
Introduction: The Modern Maya

The Maya people of Mexico’s Yucatan peninsula are the largest population of some 7,000,000 Maya living in Southern Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras. These are primarily peasant farmers whose communities dot thousands of acres of low scrub forest. The Yucatec Maya rely on subsistence slash and burn (swidden) agriculture, which requires substantial land areas. Villages are located in the middle of large parcels of forest. The Maya allow most of the jungle to grow wild, and cultivate small patches each season. This intentional “resting” of jungle areas places small populations within large woodland areas thus producing a kind of isolation on each community. Since very ancient times, communities had reserved their common land base. There were very few roads and only forest paths connected them to the outside world.

Deafness & Sign Language in Mayan Communities & Beyond

For the Maya people, the necessity to marry and produce productive families seemed stronger than pursuing far-flung partners. This resulted in a situation ripe for the expression of recessive genes. It became relatively common for close relatives to inter-marry, and in some cases this produced profoundly deaf children or, more rarely, children with albinism. The incidence of recessive deafness in the USA at the time of filming was about one fifth of one percent; however, in the study village of Chican, the figure was a full three percent—fifteen persons in 500.

Deaf children in the Maya community experience a different upbringing than those living in western society. Neither the families of deaf children nor their doctors promote sending children to boarding schools, where they might learn Mexico’s national sign system—but would be removed from their peers. Rather, the children are raised in their communities and are taught Yucatec Maya Sign Language by family and village members.

Maya children learn Yucatec sign at an early age and are able to perform well in traditional roles. They interact easily within their families and, to a slightly lesser extent, the greater community. Males become farmers and hunters as well as husbands and fathers. Females run their households, handle family money, and raise small animals and cultivate gardens around the home. Husbands and wives are both doting parents and unusually hard workers. The men are notably gregarious as well as competitive.

The connection between isolation and high incidence of deafness is not unique to the Maya. There are pockets of deaf persons in many nations. Most of these occur where populations have been isolated for lengthy periods. Many have adapted by creating their own signs for communication. There are 34 recognized sign languages in the world, primarily formed on islands or in isolated, rural communities. One such example is Martha’s Vineyard Sign Language, which was invented and used on that island off the coast of Massachusetts from the early 18th century to 1952. The deaf and their hearing neighbors in these communities have been determined to communicate rather than succumb to any notion of disability.

How We Came to Film Yucatec Deaf Sign

While in Chican in 1976 to film for The Living Maya, we were not particularly interested in the deaf community or its use of sign language, although we filmed quite a few sequences showing interactions involving both deaf and hearing members of the community using signs. In 1977, the original filming for The Living Maya Series series was completed, but the project leaders continued to wonder about the significance of the large deaf community in Chican—was it a short-term occurrence or something more permanent? On seeing preliminary footage, Margaret Mead, a member of the project’s Advisory Panel, remarked, “the language is fine but what is remarkable is the entire community uses it!” With these questions in mind, the project directors contacted American Sign Language researcher, William Stokoe, who in turn reached out to faculty and researchers who might help investigate at Gallaudet University, the nation’s first college for the deaf.

One of these researchers, linguist Robert Johnson, traveled to Chican three times and amassed considerable data on the sign language there. Johnson thought that the large numbers of deaf community members was likely not limited to Chican. So, in 1988, Johnson along with director Hubert Smith, traveled to nearby (and some further-flung) communities. As Johnson had suspected, deaf persons and Yucatec deaf sign language were found in abundance. Smith, however, was stunned. No one had offered information on those other deaf, nor had he thought to look for himself. Anecdotal evidence further suggested that Maya persons as far removed as Guatemala share some signs with the communities around Chican. Johnson’s research showed that Yucatec deaf sign was, indeed, a language and not a simple gestural system as some had erroneously claimed.
Film Sequences

This observational documentary is composed of three sequences. The first shows linguist Robert Johnson searching for pockets of deaf Maya and the origins of Maya Deaf sign, and is accompanied by two signing conversations.

A SEARCH FOR THE ORIGINS OF YUCATEC MAYA DEAF SIGN

This sequence follows linguist Robert Johnson (Gallaudet University) as he tries to figure out if Chican is an isolated case (as the filmmakers were told by genetic experts), or if sign language use is a more widespread phenomena among the Maya. This search and Johnson’s ideas about the antiquity of the deaf and their sign language, are presented here.

CONVERSATION ONE: SNAKE ENCOUNTER

Jose, at the far left, Santos, in the middle and Severiano on the right, were resting after a morning of work. Note that Santos’ face is spattered with dirt after his work in the orchard, digging holes by hand with an iron rod, plus copious water to lubricate the heavy work. Severiano had gone out to his family cornfield where his saga of the snake began. Finally, Jose had been engaged weaving hammocks. Note that Santos, the youngest, but a born leader, is at the center of attention. He listens with impatience to Severiano’s story but quickly grabs the floor to re-enact his own far less dramatic snake encounter. This sequence was chosen due to its complexity. It demonstrates the efficiency of the Yucatec Maya deaf sign. It was filmed in 1977 on 16mm film.

CONVERSATION TWO: COURTSHIP & MARRIAGE

In the final sequence, village bachelors tackle a common topic: who can carry out a successful courtship? This conversation is less complex than the previous, but was chosen for its frank good humor. It also displays a hearing man participating in the conversation. He not only understands, but also contributes to the conversation using deaf sign.

Examples of various Yucatec Maya deaf signs
Making the Film

EDITING

Sequences are shown in three different ways:

1) The entire sign conversation in real-time. The genius of the language is in its efficiency; Real-time would display that conveyance.

2) The same conversation in extreme slow motion with single signs highlighted and subtitled. This was done to isolate discrete signs by introducing the individual signs slowly.

3) The same conversation rendered in sentences as understood by the speakers. Though the individual signs are translated literally in the second pass, the participants of the conversation may understand them differently. Much like slang phrases are understood differently than their literal meaning.

METHODS OF TRANSLATION

Working with the Colli family, I played back all conversations on 16mm film and rocked the footage frame-by-frame using key numbers at every 20 frames or every second. Separate signs were marked according to the information given by the Colli family and my own observations.

Hubert Smith working with the Colli Family to translate deaf signs being studied in a viewer to isolate discrete motions
Resources


MacDougall, Jennifer Paige Being Deaf in a Yucatec Maya Community: Communication and Identity Negotiation. Doctoral Dissertation, Department of Sociocultural Anthropology, McGill University (Montreal, Quebec, Canada) July 2012.

Acknowledgements & Credits

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Produced under a grant from The National Endowment for the Humanities

A Special Thanks to the Colli Family

DVD edition:

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