

Pre- and Post-Genocide Mayan Oral Histories

Ava Berinstein, Linguistics Advisor on the Guatemalan Radio Project has been granted the 2012-2013 *Central America Visiting Scholar* award at the David Rockefeller Center of Latin American Studies at Harvard University. Her project, "Pre- and Post-Genocide Mayan Oral Histories" will provide research support to translate and disseminate a collection of Q'eqchi' Mayan narratives that Berinstein collected while doing fieldwork in Cobán, Alta Verapaz, in 1978. In addition, it will provide support for her continued efforts to collect oral histories from a group of contemporary Mayas living in the "sanctuary" city of Somerville, Massachusetts.

The project vision intersects with the Cultural Survival mission to broadcast original Indigenous oral histories on community radio stations in Guatemala; continue efforts to revitalize Mayan language and culture; and build awareness of the modern Maya diaspora.

The project focus is twofold: First, it focuses on the dissemination of Berinstein's (1978) collection of 18 digitized Q'eqchi' Mayan oral histories. These narratives form the core of the pre-genocide collection. Rituals, legends, personal histories, and religious customs are narrated in an oral tradition that is rich in couplets and parallel structure that dates back to ancient times. As elders die, this verbal art has become threatened and is at risk of extinction.

The second project goal is the collection of post-genocide Maya oral histories. Surprisingly, there is a little known Maya community in Somerville, MA. As it turns out, Somerville is a "sanctuary" city and many Mayas have come here from Guatemala. Through planned (recorded) interview sessions with Maya consultants our goal is to: (a) understand the dynamic of this post-genocide community in exile; and (b) understand how exile status affects Maya language maintenance and language shift. With support from the Polinsky Science Language Lab at Harvard University and its NGO partnership with *Wuku Kawoq'*, Berinstein will lead interviews to gain an understanding of the Maya diasporic experience; and to increase knowledge of Mesoamerican culture as well as contemporary economic and political issues that the Maya of Central America and Somerville face.

The products of this project include both U.S. and Guatemalan components. For U.S. dissemination, a compilation of Maya pre- and post-genocide oral histories (practices and personal experiences) will be translated in English and Spanish. In addition, in collaboration with Cultural Survival's Guatemalan Radio Project (GRP) and with the permission of the consultants (respectful of anonymity), GRP will broadcast a selection of the recorded Maya diasporic oral histories from the Somerville Kaqchikel, Mam, and K'iche' consultants on their respective community-based local radio stations in Guatemala. This includes: Kaqchikel Radio Juventud in Sololá, Solola; Mam Radio Xobyol in Todos Santos, Huehuetenango; and K'iche' Radio Maya in Momostenango, Totonicapán. In this way, we hope to utilize radio to promote Mayan self-identity and as a tool to connect a diasporic community to their homeland.

This documentation of oral histories from members of an ethnic and linguistically diverse Mayan community will contribute to our limited understanding of Mayan life in exile and to the ethno-historical account of this little known Somerville Maya community. It is from here that we can begin our story about Mayan life in exile and its effects on language and cultural survival.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=nxnIBCuzR1M