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Mayan language revitalization, hip hop, and ethnic identity in Guatemala

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the language ideologies and linguistic practices of Mayan-language hip hop in Guatemala, focusing on the work of the group B'alam Ajpu. The members of B'alam Ajpu use a mix of Spanish and Mayan languages in their music and run a school that combines lessons in hip hop (rapping, break-dancing, etc.) with efforts to promote the use of Mayan languages among children. The language ideologies associated with B'alam Ajpu intersect and challenge the ideologies associated with both language revitalization and with hip hop. The linguistic practices of B'alam Ajpu also challenge hegemonic assumptions regarding ethnic identity in Guatemala.

Keywords: language revitalization, hip hop, identity, Mayan languages, Guatemala

Introduction

Research on language revitalization across indigenous communities demonstrates that the language ideologies in these communities are far from uniform either within or across communities. As Field and Kroskrity note, “American Indian language ideologies not only are historically very different from each other but today, *even within a single community*, as complex, heterogeneous, contradictory, or even contentious” (2009: 7). In many indigenous communities, language revitalization efforts have further complicated the mix of language ideologies by introducing Euro-American language ideologies that differ from traditional indigenous language ideologies in a number of ways. For example, Euro-American language ideologies are

characterized by linguistic nationalism which equates the use of a single language with a national identity (Anderson 1983, Silverstein 1996). This linguistic nationalism typically involves iconization in which the linguistic features associated with social groups “appear to be iconic representations of them, as if a linguistic feature somehow depicted or displayed a group’s inherent nature of essence” (Irvine and Gal 2000). In Native communities, such iconicity between language and identity may result in the essentialization of ethnnic identity as uniform and homogenous (e.g. Bunte 2009, Field 2009) and in indigenous purism associated with linguistic uniformity (Kroskrity 2000: 337). This linguistic nationalism often conflicts with indigenous ideologies of variationism in which in which dialectal variation is not hierarchized but is instead naturalized as the expected outcome of family and individual differences.” (Kroskrity 2009: 193). In Guatemala, such a variationist language ideology has traditionally linked linguistic variation with local village identity, so that particular forms of speech are understood as resulting from the natural variation across regions.

The introduction of linguistic nationalism among the Maya in Guatemala conflicts with this variationist view by presuming an essentialist view of speakers of a single language as sharing a common identity (see Reynolds 2009, French 2010, Fox Tree 2011). In addition, language ideologies in indigenous communities may differ from Euro-American ideologies in terms of their understandings of the functions of language. While Euro-American ideologies may “emphasize the denotational and referential functions of “words for things,” many Native Americans possess language ideologies that view language and speech more “performatively” – as a more powerful and creative force that “makes” the natural and social worlds they inhabit.” (Field and Kroskrity 2009: 10). These competing views of the function of language may complicate efforts at language revitalization (Whitely 2003).

This paper examines the ways in which emergence of hip hop music in Mayan languages challenges the nationalist language ideologies associated with language revitalization in Guatemala. The paper focuses on the group B'alam Ajpu, who perform in a mix of Spanish and three Mayan languages (Tz'utujil, Kaqchikel, and K'iche') that are spoken around Lake Atitlán in central Guatemala. Although B'alam Ajpu is not officially associated with other organizations involved in language revitalization (such as the Academy of Mayan Languages of Guatemala), they strongly promote the use of Mayan languages both through their music and through their independent educational programs. The language ideology of B'alam Ajpu promotes an understanding of language variation as natural and language function as performative, in sharp contrast with the promotion of standardized varieties associated with language revitalization.

As with language revitalization, studies of language and identity in hip hop show tension between conflicting language ideologies. In particular, hip hop artists negotiate between linguistic forms that index participation in a global hip hop movement (or Hip Hop Nation) and an ideology of “keeping it real” by proudly emphasizing local identities and local language varieties that index artists’ commitment to their communities of origin (Alim et al 2009). The ways in which hip hop artists negotiate this tension varies across different types of linguistic communities. The spread of hip hop into secure national languages like German (Androutsopoulos 2009), Japanese (Condry 2004), or Korean (Lee 2004) often involves lexical borrowings from African American English or appropriated poetic structures. For example, Japanese hip hop uses patterns of rhyme borrowed from Western hip hop (Tsujimura and Davis 2009). In contrast, for speakers of minority and indigenous languages, the celebration of marginalized vernacular culture in hip hop may allow speakers of so-called endangered languages to construct hip hop identities grounded in indigenous languages or minority cultures (see Alim et al 2009). Across global contexts, some rappers see

hip hop as a universal movement (that cannot be “owned”), while others emphasize historical or political connections with African American culture. Thus, artists in minority cultures may produce hip hop identities through alignment with the history of discrimination, ethnic violence, and language denigration found in the African American roots of hip hop. For example, Brazilian rappers (Roth Gordon 2009) use alignment with African American culture to challenge the ideology of Brazil as a “race-less” nation. Similarly, aboriginal rappers in Australia use hip hop to emphasize the similarities between their own historical experiences of racial discrimination and those of African Americans. In the case of Mayan language hip hop in Guatemala, rappers produce music that incorporates elements of hip hop with lyrics that maintain highly traditional Mayan poetic structures. Members of B’alam Ajpu recognize that hip hop may challenge the denigration of Maya languages in Guatemala in the same way that early hip hop celebrates a denigrated language variety (African American English).

The research presented is primarily based on fieldwork conducted in the summers of 2013 and 2014 in San Pedro la Laguna and Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. In addition to interviews and ethnographic observations, I worked closely with Tz’utu Baktun Kan (the only Maya member of the group) to analyze various song lyrics, focusing primarily on the songs from B’alam Ajpu’s recently released album, *Jun Winaq Rajawal Q’ij/Tributo a los 20 Nawales* (Tribute to the 20 Nawals). Because Tz’utu does not use the standard orthography associated with the Maya Movement (the Unified Mayan Alphabet), I worked with him to use this analysis in order to standardize the spellings (but not variation within or between languages) in the written lyrics before the CD was released in July 2015. In the fall of 2014, I spent an additional two weeks working with Tz’utu in Kentucky where he gave various concerts and lectures about hip hop in Guatemala.

Ideologies of ethnic identity and language revitalization in Guatemala

Dominant understandings of ethnic identity in Guatemala have traditionally been based on a binary opposition between two ethnic groups, *indigenas* (indigenous) and *ladino* (non-indigenous). Although the Maya are not the only indigenous group in Guatemala, the Maya make up the majority of the nation's population and the term *indigena* is typically equated with Maya identity specifically. The distinction between indigenous and *ladino* identity is primarily cultural. The strongest markers of indigenous ethnicity have traditionally been the use of traditional clothing and speaking Mayan languages (von der Berghe 1968: 519). Because the ethnic division is primarily cultural, it has been possible for individual Maya to "pass" as *ladino* in specific contexts (or permanently) through cultural assimilation. Although movement in the opposite direction (*ladino* becoming indigenous) was possible, it was typically limited to cases of interethnic marriage (von der Berghe 1968: 520). Discourses of identity in Guatemala have long privileged *ladino* identity as inherently superior, with Maya identity being portrayed as primitive and ill-suited for life in contemporary society (Montejo 2005, Hale 2006).

Of course, the binary opposition between Maya and *ladino* ethnicity erases the many distinctions within these two categories and marginalizes those who do not easily fit into either category, including Chinese Guatemalans or other indigenous groups such as the Xinca (Uto-Aztecan) or the Garifuna (Arawakan). The binary ethnic model also produces a chasm between *ladino* and Maya that is wider than that found in most other parts of Latin America. The concept of *mestizaje*, or mixed indigenous and European culture, is not widespread in Guatemala. In contrast to *mestizo* identity in countries like Mexico, *ladino* identity in Guatemala is not generally viewed as involving aspects of indigenous culture. Given that language is central to ethnic categorization in Guatemala, language ideology has played an important role in maintaining *ladino*

dominance. Within the dominant language ideology, Mayan languages have been viewed as *dialectos* (i.e. not “real” languages) that have no place or purpose in contemporary global society.

Following the ethnic violence of the Guatemalan Civil War in the early 1980s, a cultural revitalization and civil rights movement gained ground among the Maya. This Maya Movement has come to play an important role in Guatemalan cultural politics (Cojti Cuxil 1997, Fischer and Brown 1996, Fischer 2001, French 2010, Gálvez Borrell and Esquit Choy 1997, Montejo 2005, Warren 1998). Language revitalization has been central to the Maya Movement (England 2003, French 2010). In addition to efforts at standardization and bilingual education, there have been efforts to break down the strict compartmentalization (Kroskrity 2000: 337) between the contexts in which Spanish or Mayan languages are used. This involves the introduction of Mayan languages into new domains, including literature (Barrett 2014), journalism, and software (see Romero, this volume). This challenges racist language ideologies by demonstrating the potential utility of Mayan languages across all social contexts.

The ethnic ideology of *ladino* superiority is founded upon a stereotype of the Maya as primitive, unintelligent, and incapable of participating in modern society. Despite abundant counter-evidence, today’s Maya have been traditionally depicted as entirely detached from their pre-Columbian Maya ancestors. As Montejo notes, “Indigenous people have been rejected as active participants in the social, economic, and political life of the country. A hegemonic nationalism has been created in which the ancient Maya are glorified and the present Maya are disdained...” (2005: 4). This ideology of Maya identity relies on the idea that due to the “collapse” of Maya culture, the Maya disappeared before the conquest. Hale quotes a Ladina who encapsulated the dominant ideology as follows:

...[T]here is no such thing as a pure Mayan. They say they are Mayan, but this is a lie. When the class of *señoríos* (nobility) was founded, the Mayas already had disappeared. There are no authentic Mayas...Authentic Mayas no longer exist, and this business about teaching people Maya culture is a pure lie. It really bothers me when they refer to themselves as Mayas. (Hale 2007: 153)

The rise of the Maya Movement has challenged this view through emphasizing forms of cultural continuity, such as the maintenance of the Maya calendar and the genetic unity of the Mayan language family. Language revitalization has been the cornerstone of the Maya movement and the period following the war has seen numerous efforts to standardize Mayan languages and expand their use into new domains (e.g. England 2003, French 2010). The ideology of pan-Maya unity is also an important issue in the Maya Movement and linguists in the movement worked on reconstructing proto-Maya to provide evidence for the unity of Maya communities and their direct relationship with their pre-Columbian ancestors (England 2003). Similarly, efforts to standardize specific languages have attempted to emphasize forms that are shared across language boundaries in order to increase the potential for cross-linguistic intelligibility (England 2003). Despite the ideology of pan-Maya unity, language revitalization efforts in Guatemala have largely adopted a Euro-American language ideology founded on the idea that each “nation” has a unique language (Reynolds 2009, French 2010, Fox Tree 2011). Identity in Maya communities was traditionally associated with an individual’s native town or village rather than with a language group. The introduction of officially-recognized linguistic communities (*comunidades lingüísticas*) associated with specific languages introduced a new level of identity hierarchically above local town identity (as, for example, a speaker of Tz’utujil in addition to a person from the town of Santiago Atitlán). These linguistic communities are official arms of the national Academy of Mayan Languages of

Guatemala, a government agency that oversees the standardization and promotion of Mayan languages. The officialization of language boundaries has entrenched the new language-based identity categories, sometimes creating divisions between communities that make efforts at pan-Maya unity quite difficult (see French 2010).

The last two decades have thus seen an important rise in discussions regarding multiculturalism in Guatemala. Public expressions of Maya identity are now common and the use of Mayan languages is accepted across a much wider range of social contexts. Although this acceptance of Maya identity and Mayan languages has recognized the internal diversity within Maya communities, it has not challenged the general *ladino/indigenous* binary understanding of ethnic identity. Within this binary, there has not been much interest in Maya culture among *ladinos* and *ladino* resentment to the resurgence of Maya culture is widespread (Hale 2006). Indeed, critics have argued that the new multiculturalism reinforces forms of inequality. For example, Emilio del Valle Escalante (2009) writes:

The reaffirmation or ‘revitalization’ of Maya languages acquires a degree of empowerment only to the degree that these languages serve indigenous peoples as a means to communicate among themselves, not in the sense that the other or the nation would adopt a bi(multi)lingual norm. In the intercultural model proposed [in Guatemala], indigenous peoples should adopt the dominant culture in order to move within environments of the nation and modernity; the other is not required to learn from indigenous peoples. This interculturality continues a relationship of power that assigns indigenous peoples – their languages, cultural specificities, cosmovision – to a position of subalternity in relation to *ladinos*.” (del Valle Escalante 2009: 150)

Thus, while language revitalization has definitely created an environment in which the use of indigenous languages is more accepted, it has not increased multilingualism or encouraged *ladinos* to learn Mayan languages and participate in Mayan cultural practices. As del Valle Escalante (2009) notes, contemporary multiculturalism in Guatemala is fairly one-sided and Maya are largely still expected to assimilate to *ladino* culture and learn Spanish while *ladinos* do not generally take interest in Maya culture.

B'alam Ajpu and Maya hip hop

The emergence of indigenous hip hop challenges dominant ideologies of language and identity in several ways. The participation of indigenous artists in global hip hop is in opposition to ideologies that view indigenous languages as incompatible with contemporary global culture. The very idea that one could be Maya and be a rapper is in itself a strong challenge to hegemonic understandings of Maya identity in Guatemala. The members of B'alam Ajpu promote an ideology that they call Hip Hop Cosmovision that links the politics of hip hop with the term *cosmovision*, a common term in the Maya Movement to refer to Maya understandings of the world. Thus, Hip Hop Cosmovision, involves a specifically Maya view of hip hop culture (and vice versa). Within this view, Maya hip hop as a direct descendant of the African American struggle for civil rights. Within Hip Hop Cosmovision, the rise of hip hop in Guatemala marks the end of a 52-year cycle that began with the early roots of hip hop in New York in the 1960s. Within the Maya calendar, a full *calendar round*, the period between dates on which the 260-day lunar and 365.25-day solar calendars coincide, lasts 52 years. Thus, the members of B'alam Ajpu hold that the roots of hip hop were formed in the 1960s in New York, but that the culmination of the hip hop (52-year) calendar round coincides with the dawn of a new era marked in 2012 by the ending of the 13th baktun (a cycle of 144,000 years in the Mayan calendar). Within the ideology of Hip Hop

Cosmovision, the rise of hip hop among the Maya marks the beginning of a new spiritual and musical era marked by a unique indigenous hip hop style.

The ideological alignment between the struggles of African Americans and Mayas makes a strong political statement in the context of cultural revitalization in Guatemala. While not entirely equating the Maya experience with that of African Americans, it draws parallels between the Maya Movement and the Civil Rights movement in the United States and the sorts of musical innovations that have emerged from both contexts. Hip hop comes to index a specific stance towards human rights and places hip hop musicians in opposition to various forms of ethnic inequality in Guatemala. Thus, for members of B'alam Ajpu, hip hop identity is associated with much more than musical tastes or even participation in an artistic movement. Rather, to identify with hip hop is to openly support a multicultural Guatemala in which Maya culture plays a central role. Indeed, members of B'alam Ajpu refer to their country as *GuateMAYA*, marking a shift from a "Guate" that is "bad" (*mala*) to one that recognizes itself as a Maya nation.

In addition to their music, the members of B'alam Ajpu run the *Casa Ahau Escuela de Hip Hop*, an educational program which teaches rapping, break-dancing, and painting to children in the town of San Pedro la Laguna. In both their educational work and their music, the members of B'alam Ajpu challenge dominant views of both Maya and *ladino* identities. The Casa Ahau School of Hip Hop was founded in 2011 by the three members of B'alam Ajpu: Dr. Nativo, MChe, and Tz'utu Baktun Kan. While Tz'utu identifies as Tz'utujil Maya and raps in Mayan languages, Nativo and MChe (who do not identify as Maya) rap primarily in Spanish, beat box, or perform instrumental accompaniments. Although Nativo and MChe may use specific Maya words or phrases, their choice to rap only in Spanish reflects the ideology of "keeping it real" by not claiming an identity that conflicts with their non-indigenous background.

The Casa Ahau School was intended as a way to provide opportunities for children who typically spent their spare time begging tourists for spare change. Although the school has had sporadic supports from international grants for artistic endeavors, the school generally operates on a minimal budget (often meeting in the open air or indoors by candlelight when electricity was unavailable). The school teaches art, break dancing, and rap. At the time of the research present here, the school had eleven students (four girls and seven boys, all Maya) who work together in designing and painting murals and putting on dance performances. For example, in 2012, the students performed a piece called *Popol Hip Hop Wuj*. The performance presented the Maya creation myth through hip hop dance accompanied by a mix of electronic hip hop rhythms, beat boxing, and music performed on traditional Maya instruments. The group has also painted public murals in the town of San Pedro la Laguna. The murals are related to specific political messages, such as protecting the environment, maintaining traditional Maya culture, or remembering victims of the genocide during the civil war.

Within the Casa Ahau School, elements of hip hop are reconfigured to create alignment between hip hop and Mayan culture. Hip hop culture is often said to be composed of four elements: rap, graffiti art, break dancing, and scratching or dj-ing (Stovall 2006). Given that scratching is not a viable element in the context of the school (without electricity), Casa Ahau teaches hip hop as having three elements (rap, art, and dance) corresponding to the three stones traditionally used to make a hearth (or *xkub'*) in Maya culture. The three stones of the *xkub'* are said to have been first placed in the creation of the world, where the world tree (or *axis mundi*) grew from its center. The use of the *xkub'* hearthstones recontextualizes the elements of hip hop from a specifically Maya perspective.

The songs taught in the school reflect the goals of language revitalization within the Maya Movement – encouraging children to use the language among themselves, the use of Mayan languages in new domains, and an emphasis on the connection between language use and cultural knowledge. The lyrics to the songs are written in collaboration with local *aj q'ijab'*, or “daykeepers”. An *aj q'ij* (plural = *aj q'ijab'*) performs a number of spiritual and cultural roles in Maya culture, including the providing spiritual and personal advice based on understanding the Mayan calendar and the preparation and burning of ceremonial fires in order to communicate with the Maya ancestors or *nawales* (spiritual forces within nature). These ceremonial fires typically involve the creation of ornate arrangements of offerings to the ancestors which are burned as the *aj q'ij* recites prayers. In composing the Maya lyrics for songs, the members of B'alam Ajpu ask a local *aj q'ij* to perform such a ceremony to ask the ancestors and/or *nawales* to transmit knowledge concerning specific topics (such as the importance of specific days in the Maya calendar). The *aj q'ij* then closes his eyes and begins to recite the words he receives, while Tz'utu hurriedly copies down the words to use as the basis for hip hop lyrics. Thus, Tz'utu does not claim to actually write Mayan lyrics, but rather refers to the process as “downloading” lyrics from the *nawals* or ancestors. After the *aj q'ij* has channeled the lyrics, Tz'utu arranges them into hip hop songs working with MChé and Nativo to set them to music. The group works together to translate the meaning of the lyrics, which MChé then uses to compose Spanish-language versions of the songs. In addition to teaching the songs at the Casa Ahau School, the members of B'alam Ajpu perform regular concerts and record the songs for wider distribution.

The lyrics of the songs emphasize language maintenance and cultural revitalization. In the song *Nutzij* (My words) by Tz'utu Baktun Kan (2011) for example, the lyrics index the authority of the *Libros de Chilam Balam* (written in Yucatek Maya), to argue for maintaining Mayan

languages and traditional ways of dress (the two most salient indexical markers of Maya identity). Indeed, the phrase *our language our clothes* has emerged in multiple Mayan languages as a diphrastric kenning indexing the totality of Maya culture in the context of revitalization (Barrett, in press). Diphrastric kennings are pairs of complementary words that together convey some metaphorical meaning (Knowlton 2002). Examples include “our father, our mothers” to mean “ancestors” or “wind, rain” to mean “storm”.

1) *Nutzij* (My words), Tz’utu Baktun Kan (2011)

Pa Chilam B’alam xtz’ijb’ax kan wi In the (*Libros de*) *Chilam Balam* it is written

Jo’ Walk’wal Let’s go, my children

Mimestaj li qatzij Don’t forget our language

Pa Chilam B’alam xtz’ijb’ax kan wi In the *Chilam Balam* it is written

Jo’ Walk’wal Let’s go, my children

Mimestaj li qatzyaq don’t forget our clothing

Similarly, the song *Q’aq’* (The flame, Tz’utu Baktun Kan 2012) teaches traditional ritual practices, such as the practice of lighting candles at sacred sites to give thanks to the ancestors:

2) *Q’aq’*, Tz’utu Baktun Kan, 2012)

Kintzij le nukotz’i’j, tik’ama k’a li nutzij, I light my candles, receive my words

Kintzij le nukotz’i’j, kinmaltyoxij chewe I light my candles, I thank you

Kintzij le nukotz’i’j, tik’ama k’a li nutzij, I light my candles, receive my words

Kinmaltyoxij chewe juntira li xekan chew I thank you for everything you have left for me.

B’alam Ajpu first CD includes a cycle of 20 songs about the 20 *nawales* associated with the 20 days of Maya lunar calendar. These songs are intended to teach the children the meaning of each *nawal* and to pass on the information that the ancestors hope children will remember about

each day. The songs also teach children new vocabulary, particularly in terms of words related to cultural traditions. In some cases, the lyrics received from the *aj q'ij* contain archaic forms that are no longer in use or words specific to the register of ritual language. These archaic forms serve to frame Maya identity as deeply rooted in pre-Columbian culture, so that the hip hop lyrics index an understanding of historical memory (even though the words involved may no longer be remembered). The inclusion of older forms serves as a means of bringing Maya identity closer to its pre-colonial form, but also offers an opportunity to re-introduce older forms into contemporary languages. In such cases, Tz'utu discusses the meaning of the word with the *aj q'ij* in order to properly teach its meaning to the children and to be sure that the Spanish translations (performed by MChe) accurately reflect the original Maya lyrics. The process of writing songs through an *aj q'ij* teaches the children traditional ways of communicating with and showing proper respect for the ancestors and *nawales*. The school thus combines the goal of opening new domains for the use of Mayan languages with the goal of maintaining traditional cultural practices.

In addition to teaching traditional cultural knowledge through the contents of the lyrics, the songs teach children the poetic structure of traditional forms of Maya ritual language. Mayan poetic traditions involve producing parallel structures across all levels of grammar (Sam Colop 1994, Barrett, in press). These forms of poetic parallelism in Tz'utu's songs match those found in hieroglyphic texts or early colonial documents written in Mayan languages (such as the *Popol Wuj*). Similar poetic forms can also be found in contemporary Mayan ritual discourse (Ajpacaja Tum 2001) and in older forms of Tz'utujil folk music (O'Brien-Rothe 2010). However, contemporary ritual discourse and folk music both contain large amounts of Spanish borrowings, while Tz'utu's hip hop lyrics contain no Spanish at all. The similarity between pre-Columbian poetic structure and Tz'utu's lyrics can be seen in the following examples. The first is from a pre-

Columbian carved bone found at the site of Tikal in Guatemala and the second is from a 2011 song by Tz'utu Baktun Kan):

3) Carved bone from Tikal, Hieroglyphic Maya (Hull 2003: 397):

- | | | |
|----|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1. | ub'aak xikuup ajaw ch'ok, | The bone of <i>Xikuup Ajaw Ch'ok</i> , |
| 2. | ub'aak ? ajaw ju-?, | The bone of ? <i>Ajaw Hu-?</i> , [Ajaw Hul B'aak] |
| 3. | ub'aak ? b'aakal ajaw, | The bone of <i>B'aakal Ajaw</i> , |
| 4. | ub'aak k'uhul b'aak ajaw tz'ul b'aak, | The bone of <i>K'uhul B'aak Ajaw Tz'ul B'aak</i> , |
| 5. | ub'aak xukuup ajaw ch'ok, | The bone of <i>Xukuup Ajaw Ch'ok</i> , |
| 6. | ub'aak ? ajaw hul b'aak | The bone of ? <i>Ajaw Hul B'aak</i> , |
| 7. | ub'aak ??, | The bone of ?? [B'aakal Ajaw] |
| 8. | ub'aak k'uhul b'aak ajaw. | The bone of <i>K'uhul B'aak Ajaw</i> . |

4) Nutzij (Tz'utu Baktun Kan 2011)

- | | | |
|----|------------------------------|--|
| 1. | Li wi' numam xepe che ato'ik | your grandchildren have come to help you |
| 2. | ruk'in li qatz'ijb', | with our writing |
| 3. | ruk'in li qab'ix | with our singing |
| 4. | ruk'in li qatzij... | with our words |
| 5. | ruk'in li qaxajoj | with our dances |
| 6. | ruk'in li qatz'ijb', | with our writing |
| 7. | ruk'in li qab'ix | with our singing |
| 8. | ruk'in li qatzij | with our words |
| 9. | ruk'in li qaxajoj | with our dances |

Both the bone carving text and the hip hop lyrics contain repeated quatrains involving the substitution of a single syntactic constituent (in both cases a noun phrase). The Tikal text in 3) uses the frame “the bone of X” while the hip hop text in 4) uses the frame “with our X.” Both of the texts repeat the quatrain with the substituted constituents occurring in the same order. The structure of the quatrains follows traditional Maya couplet structure (discussed further below).

In terms of phonology, Maya poetry includes alliteration (parallel phonemes or features), but does not typically involve rhyme (parallel syllables). The lyrics in 2) above show alliteration in the repetition of the affricate [ts], and its glottalized counterpart [ts'] in combination with

repetitions of the phoneme /j/ (a voiceless uvular fricative) through the repetition of the words *tzij* (“words”), *ko’tz’ij* (“flower, candle”), and *tzijj* (ignite).

Lexical parallelism is found in the use of diphrastic kennings. While Tz’utu’s lyrics include traditional kenning pairs, they also include the use of innovative kennings, such as *our language/our clothes* (as in example 1 above). The lyrics also include morphological parallelism, involving the repetition of a particular suffix. For example, the song “B’atz’” (*thread*, one of the 20 Nawals, B’alam Ajpu 2015a) contains the phrases *B’atz ru-k’am-al le qa-k’aslem-al* [(The day) B’atz is the umbilical cord of our lives] and *xojo-b’-al B’atz’-al q’ij* [The dance of the day of B’atz’]. Both phrases involve repetitions of the suffix *-al* (which produces an abstract noun from a noun root) in the words for umbilical cord and lives.

The songs also involve numerous cases of syntactic parallelism, the most widely discussed form in Maya poetry (Tedlock 1983, Sam Colop 1994). The basic form of syntactic parallelism in Maya poetics involves a pair of clauses that differ in only one syntactic constituent, as in example 5 from *Nutzij* (Tz’utu Baktun Kan 2011) :

- 5) Atet xatk’eje’i pa taq *poqonal*. You have lived through hard times
 Atet xatk’eje’i pa taq *k’achelaj*, You have lived in the forest

As with other forms of Maya poetics, parallelism may also occur at units larger than the couple, as in the triple in example 6 (also from *Nutzij*)

- 6) Naq che tak’utuj cha *katnumestaj*, Why do you ask me to forget you?
 Naq che tak’utuj cha *katnuchajij*, Why do you ask me to protect you?
 Naq che tak’utuj cha *katnuloq’oj* Why do you ask me to love you?

Finally, Tz'utu's lyrics also contain examples of extended parallelism, which involves lists of repeated clauses with substituted constituents like those found in couplets and triplets. This is also a common feature of traditional Maya poetics. An example is given in 7) from B'atz'

(B'alam Ajpu 2015a):

7)	
K'o li aq'a' chikij li AK'ALA	Your arms are over (protect) the children
Cha ma jun ta keq'a, ma jun ta KIQAN.	Who do not have arms, who do not have legs
K'o li aq'a chikij li AK'ALA	Your arms are over (protect) the children
Cha ma jun ta kexikin, ma jun ta qeWECH.	Who do not have ears, who do not have eyes.
K'o li a q'a chikij li AK'ALA	Your arms are over (protect) the children
Cha k'o chik kixmachi toq keALAXI.	Who already have mustaches when they are born.
K'o li aq'a chikij li AK'ALA	Your arms are over (protect) the children
Cha k'o chik keey toq keALAXI.	Who already have teeth when they are born.

The extended parallelism in example 7) contains four couplets organized into two quatrains. The first line of each couplet is the same, while the second line of the couplet varies between the two quatrains. Forms of parallelism such as these can be found through pre-Columbian hieroglyphic texts and early colonial documents. Although these types of parallelism found in these examples are highly traditional, they work well as forms of hip hop due to repetitions that reflect patterns found in other forms of hip hop (such as repeated catch phrases from a hype man). However, unlike most forms of hip hop, there is no rhyme or regular meter in Tz'utu's music, reflecting the traditional form of Maya poetic genres (Tedlock 1983, Barrett in press).

The structure of B'alam Ajpu's Maya lyrics are quite distinct from the Spanish lyrics in bilingual songs, such as those in the Tribute to the 20 Nawals. Spanish lyrics, composed primarily by M'Che are structure like traditional western hip hop lyrics, with the expected line-final rhymes and forms of internal rhyme common in hip hop poetics (Alim 2006). The following is part of the chorus from the song for Aaj, the *nawal* of corn:

8) Aaj (B'alam Ajpu 2015b)

La Vara: la Milpa: símbolo de Nuestra FUERZA	The land, the milpa, symbol of our STRENGTH
Harmoniza nuestro Ser con la NATURALEZA	Harmonizes our being with NATURE
Que empieza y progresa el retorno a la NOBLEZA	That starts and leads to the return of the NOBILITY
Comienza en la Columna, termina en la CABEZA	It starts in the spinal cord, it ends in the HEAD

In addition to the end rhymes, there is an internal rhyme in line three (*empieza* which patterns with the end rhymes). The final line of this chorus also includes a cluster of alliteration that is typical of Spanish and English hip hop lyrics where the sounds /k/ /m/ /n/ are repeated in a regular pattern: k m n n k m n m n n k (Comienza en la Columna, termina en la CABEZA). Thus, as in Andean hip hop (Hornberger and Swinehart 2014), Spanish and indigenous-language lyrics display a clear division between traditional Indigenous and Western poetic traditions.

Although the curriculum at the Casa Ahau School is founded in hip hop culture, efforts at language conservation and revitalization are equally central to the Casa Ahau program. In addition to encouraging children to use the language in new contexts and teaching about Maya culture, the program introduces children to traditional Maya poetic forms that they would not likely hear in other contexts. Thus, while the school teaches contemporary hip hop culture, it simultaneously emphasizes the relationship between contemporary and pre-Columbian Maya cultures. Cultural continuity between pre-Columbian and contemporary Maya is critical to challenging ideologies of ethnic identity in Guatemala, which typically holds that today's Maya have no legitimate connection to their pre-Columbian ancestors.

Language ideology and ethnic-hip hop identities

Although dominant ideologies of Guatemalan ethnicity have attempted to delegitimize Maya connections to pre-Columbian culture, these ideologies simultaneously hold that the Maya are unable to adapt to contemporary modern society. Given the stereotype of the Maya has

backward and disinterested in the world outside of their local region and, in particular, the language ideology that views Mayan languages as *dialectos* unable to convey abstract thought, the idea of a Maya hip hop artist rapping in Maya is in and of itself a serious challenge to hegemonic understandings of Maya identity. Challenges to dominant discourses of Maya identity must simultaneously demonstrate a connection both to modern global society and to pre-Columbian Maya culture.

In the music of B'alam Ajpu, this dual challenge is addressed in a number of ways. Although performances of B'alam Ajpu are in general just like any other hip hop concert, the group incorporates a number of elements to index pre-Columbian culture. In concert, the members of B'alam Ajpu wear black and white face paint in patterns taken from pre-Columbian art. They also wear white woven robes with traditional sandals, so that their physical appearance indexes pre-Columbian Maya imagery. Although they work with a DJ with tracks mixed in a studio, the music of B'alam Ajpu also involves a number of traditional Maya instruments, including marimba, *tambor* (a type of wooden drum), deerskin drums, and turtle shells. According to Tz'utu, the choices of traditional instruments were based on the murals of Bonampak, which include a portrayal of a musical performance. The members of B'alam Ajpu also burn a traditional ceremonial fire during their concerts whenever possible. For a recent series of concerts in Kentucky (where building a fire indoors was not possible), Tz'utu created an alternative digital film backdrop involving rapidly changing and moving elements of Maya culture, including the hieroglyphs for the 20 Nawals, numbers written in Hieroglyphic Maya, pre-Columbian drawings, and phrases like *Mayahackers* and *Cosmovision Maya*.

Although Tz'utu's music and performance align with the general revitalization focus of the Maya Movement, his music also challenges current trends within the movement. As noted above,

the Maya Movement has largely adopted a Western language ideology in which language is equated with national identity. This has resulted in standardization efforts for specific languages, but has also created new divisions between communities (see French 2010). In response to the sorts of problems this creates for pan-Maya identity, Tz'utu argues that the process of language standardization creates divisions between Maya communities even though it claims to promote pan-Maya unity. Although Tz'utu's hometown, Santa María Visitación, is a Tz'utujil-speaking town, it borders on regions where Kaqchikel and K'iche' are the dominant language. Rather than perform in a purist version of Tz'utujil, Tz'utu blends together elements of all three languages (Tz'utujil, Kaqchikel, and K'iche'). When transcribing lyrics channeled by the *aj q'ij* (which may contain elements of multiple languages) and when organizing those lyrics into songs, Tz'utu often incorporates forms from Kaqchikel and K'iche' in addition to Tz'utujil. In some cases, this blending of languages follows expected patterns of code-switching, in which a single word or phrase from one language is embedded into a longer segment of Tz'utujil. However, in other cases, Tz'utu creates blended words that reflect aspects of the pronunciation of a related word in different languages. For example, the word meaning *strength*, or *fight/struggle* occurs frequently in the Tribute to the 20 Nawals. The word is slightly different in each of the three languages, as shown in 9)

9) Words for “strength, struggle” in three K'ichean languages

Kaqchikel	<i>chuq'a'</i> [tʃuq'aʔ]
Tz'utujil	<i>chuhq'a'</i> [tʃuhq'aʔ]
K'iche'	<i>chojq'ab'</i> [tʃoxq'abʔ]

Although Tz'utu sometimes uses the form from one of the three languages, his most common pronunciation of this word is *chojq'a'* ([tʃoxq'aʔ]), in which the first syllable is that found in

K'iche' and the second syllable is that found in Kaqchikel and Tz'utujil. The result of such language blending is a unique variety that is recognizable as Tz'utujil, but is more easily understood by speakers of Kaqchikel and K'iche' compared with other (more widely-spoken) varieties of Tz'utujil. Indeed, when playing B'alam Ajpu's music to speakers of Kaqchikel or K'iche', listeners often assume the lyrics are in another dialect of their own language (rather than in Tz'utujil). On the one hand, this combination of the three languages serves in "keeping it real" as, in most respects, it is similar to the mix of languages that Tz'utu knows from being from a language contact zone. However, it also serves to make his music understandable to a wider audience of Maya speakers. For Tz'utu, the goal of developing a mutually-intelligible variety serves to unite speakers in ways that standardization cannot. Indeed, although he realizes that it is not a realistic possibility, Tz'utu says that his fantasy would be singing hip hop in a form of proto-Maya that could be understood by speakers of all of the different Mayan languages both in Guatemala and in Mexico. At one point, Tz'utu took his lyrics to a Tz'utujil linguist at the Academy of Mayan Languages of Guatemala in order to have his self-developed and unorthodox orthographic choices converted into the Unified Mayan Alphabet. However, the Academy linguist converted the lyrics entirely into a standardize form of pure Tz'utujil. For Tz'utu, this was entirely unacceptable because it not only made his music inaccessible to speakers of Kaqchikel and K'iche', but it also created a division between linguistic communities that he had made great effort to overcome. Because of my familiarity with both Kaqchikel and K'iche', Tz'utu then asked me to standardize the spellings without altering the original mix of languages found in the lyrics.

The use of Mayan languages in the music of B'alam Ajpu' thus works against dominant Guatemalan language ideologies in ways that both align with and challenge the alternative language ideology of the Maya Movement. By rapping in Maya, B'alam Ajpu' follows the general

trend of the Maya Movement of bringing Mayan languages into new social domains (such as popular music). However, his decision to mix languages into a Kaqchikel-K'iche'-Tz'utujil blend goes against the broader trend within the Maya Movement of promoting unified and standardized varieties of individual local languages.

While Tz'utu is Tz'utujil Maya, both Dr. Nativo and M.Che identify as *mestizo*, using the ideology of hybrid culture to challenge the traditional divide between *ladino* and *indigena* (indigenous) in Guatemala. As noted above, the other members of B'alam Ajpu (Dr. Nativo and M.Che) work with Tz'utu to adopt translations of the Maya texts into Spanish lyrics (in addition to the Tz'utujil forms). Del Valle Escalante (2009) notes that the idea of *mestizo* culture has never been widely adopted in Guatemala. In addition, he argues that when interculturality and *mestizaje* have been promoted in Guatemala, they have always resulted in the compartmentalization of Maya culture that maintains the dominance of the *ladino* majority. However, the cultural projects of Casa Ahau and B'alam Ajpu are all highly focused on the promotion of Maya culture and Dr. Nativo and M.Che participate in the very ways that del Valle Escalante sees as rarely possible. For example, all three artists worked together in carving a stela commemorating the 2012 ending of the 13th baktun. The stela, with a Tz'utujil text written in hieroglyphic Maya, was placed in front of the Tz'utujil cultural museum in San Pedro. The participation of non-Maya in such a project suggests that indigenous hip hop allows for the formation of an alternative *ladino* identity indexed through direct participation in cultural revitalization projects.

In his critique of multiculturalism in Guatemala, del Valle Escalante notes that even among *ladinos* who support the Maya Movement, there is rarely an effort to learn details of Maya culture or to attempt to learn Mayan languages. However, M.Che is highly dedicated to both learning and teaching aspects of Maya culture and regularly uses phrases from Tz'utujil both in everyday

conversations and in his Facebook posts. For example, MChe always carries a calendar conversion chart with him in order to determine the nawal of individuals he encounters as an opportunity to introduce them to the Mayan calendar. Through mutual participation in hip hop culture, the members of B'alam Ajpu work to overcome the ethnic divide in Guatemala in a way that places Maya culture at the center of Guatemalan national identity.

In both his Spanish-language raps and in rhymes he composes for social media, MChe focuses on promoting political hip hop that challenges the racism and ethnic inequality in Guatemala. An example of promoting political hip hop can be seen in the following Facebook post from June 2014:

10) Facebook post by MChe

NO todos los HipoPAZ Rimas sobre sus Autos	Not all hip hoppers rhyme about their cars
Con pantalones hoga2, Braggin' cuenta lo que es	With pants hanging down, braggin' about what it's like
Estar tras las Rejas...	To be behind the bars...
Ten cuidado con las IDEAS mas Altas de ti MISMO	Be careful that the your own best ideas
No son solo las opiniones de todos los DEMÁS	Aren't only the opinions of everyone else

Here, MChe contrasts commercial hip hop with political hip hop like the music of B'alam Ajpu and encourages other hip hop artists to avoid the ubiquitous stereotypes associated with commercial forms of hip hop in order to promote political change.

In another Facebook post from September 2014, MChe responded to the celebration of Guatemalan independence from Spain:

11) Facebook post by MChe:

1821 – Mil Ochocientos VeintiUNO	1821 – Eight hundred Twenty-ONE
Fue la Independencia per solo para UNOS	Brought Independence but only for SOME
Maya, Africanos, Mestizos en el TIMO	Maya, Africans, Mestizos in the SWINDLE

De <i>ladinos</i> que se hizo en ese PERGAMINO	That <i>ladinos</i> made in this PARCHMENT
Que se firmo un : 15 de SEPTIEMBRE	That was signed: 15 th of SEPTEMBER
Nunca dejo A LOS PUEBLOS LIBRESZZZ	Never made THE PEOPLE FREEEE

In this post, MChe demonstrates the distinction between *mestizo* identity and *ladino* identity. He links *mestizos* with Africans and Maya as belonging to those groups that did not gain any political advantage through independence from Spanish colonization. While one could view this as a form of appropriating the oppression experienced by other ethnic groups, the intent seems more geared towards promoting a form of identity that is politically aligned with the aims of the Maya Movement but does not go so far as to claim Maya identity. Indeed, in describing his own ethnic identity, MChe often defines *mestizo* as *los que no sabemos quiénes somos*, “those who don’t know who we are.” Thus, *mestizo* identity is largely undefined, but is clearly positioned in opposition to *ladino* identity (and more closely aligned with Maya identity).

In addition to producing contexts for broader intercultural exchange, hip hop also makes it possible for language revitalization to move beyond indigenous communities through a jump in scale (Blommaert 2010) from local use within the community to global recognition. In 2013 and 2014, for example, Tz’utu gave performances in London, Bogotá, Los Angeles, Nashville, and Lexington, Kentucky. In early 2015, an article from the Guatemalan newspaper, *Prensa Libre*, was translated into English and picked up by the Associated Press, so that news of B’alam Ajpu’s Maya rap was printed in a number of American newspapers, including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Soon after, B’alaj Ajpu’s music was featured as part of a National Public Radio report on indigenous popular music in Latin America. Thus, through hip hop, B’alam Ajpu has drawn international attention to contemporary Mayan languages in ways that traditional forms of language revitalization have not been able to achieve.

Through the discourses of hip hop identity, B'alam Ajpu is able to construct social spaces that allow fluidity across traditional boundaries between identity categories in Guatemala. Like other language revitalization projects, Tz'utujil hip hop challenges hegemonic language ideologies that limit the contexts for expressing Maya identity. It is through hip hop that B'alam Ajpu is able to promote Mayan languages not only as viable for contemporary Guatemalan society but also as an integral part of an international cultural movement. Hip hop also allows for emergent identities that also challenge the problems inherent in many forms of interculturality in Guatemala by allowing non-Maya to construct emergent identities in which being Guatemalan inherently involves participation in aspects of Mayan culture.

Conclusion

Language revitalization and hip hop are both global movements with profound effects on local understandings of identity. In the Maya hip hop music of B'alam Ajpu, these two trends come together to produce a variety of challenges to the dominant understandings of ethnic identity in contemporary Guatemala. The blending of Mayan languages in the raps performed by Tz'utu serve to challenge ideologies that view Maya identity as incompatible with contemporary global movements such as hip hop while simultaneously challenging the adoption of Western language ideologies by activists within the Maya Movement. The participation of non-Maya rappers in music that is primarily in Mayan languages and is performed on traditional Maya instruments challenges the traditional *ladino*/Maya division in ethnic identity that impedes multicultural projects in Guatemalan society. The unified efforts of Maya and non-Maya towards a shared goal of promoting and preserving Maya culture through hip hop creates a unique space that promotes an alternative to dominant understandings of Guatemalan national identity. Through these efforts, B'alam Ajpu works to take the *mala* (bad) out of Guatemala and replace it with a national

Guatemalan identity in which being Guatemalan requires support for efforts at Maya cultural revitalization.

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