# Being Deaf in a Yucatec Maya Community: Communication and Identity Negotiation

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## *Abstract*

*My dissertation sheds light on multilayered experiences of identity in an indigenous, Yucatec Maya community where both deaf and hearing persons use sign language. Owing to the history of Spanish colonialism in this region, and as a result of state approaches which see deafness as pathology, the peoples of Chican acquiesce to assumptions about their identity without necessarily emulating these assertions within community life. At the time I carried out fieldwork, identity assertions in Chican appeared to be reactive, therefore ephemeral, rather than based on some inherent essentialized quality. This was the case for deaf members of the community, and also for the community at large, both of whom negotiate identity labels strategically and continually in a passive form of resistance to hierarchical traditions of social labeling. I consider subjective, collective, and imposed identities in light of local and global assumptions about what it means to be Deaf, or to be Maya.*

*Methodologically, I use ethnographic inquiry to explore the nature of communication in my field site by engaging passively with my interlocutors in their daily life activities. Allowing local people to carve out my role in the community, I became engaged in educational and recreational workshops facilitating my observance of integrated sign language use. Becoming aware of disjuncture between local perspectives and state approaches, especially toward deafness, gave rise to my founding a non-profit organization called YUCAN Make a Difference A.C. The activities of YUCAN suggest the utility of ethnography as a means to bridge local initiatives with state efforts at facilitating community wellbeing.*

## *Résume*

*Ma thèse explore les diverses expériences identitaires au sein d'une communauté indigèn Maya Yucatec où les personnes sourdes aussi bien que les personnes entendantes se servent du langage des signes. De par l'histoire coloniale de la région, autrefois sous domination espagnole, ainsi qu'en raison de l'approche étatique qui médicalise la surdité, la population de Chican ne s'oppose pas aux suppositions faites quant à leur identité, sans pour autant émuler ces affirmations au sein de la vie communautaire. Lors de mon travail de terrain dans la région de Chican, les affirmations identitaires semblaient émerger en réaction à des circonstances spécifiques et étaient donc plus éphémères que fondées sur des caractérisitques essentialistes. Ceci était le cas à la fois pour les membres sourds de la communauté et l'ensemble de la communauté en général. Ces deux groupes négocient leurs dénominations identitaires de façon stratégique et continuelle, par une forme de résistance passive aux traditions hiérarchiques de l'étiquetage social. Dans ma thèse, je me penche sur les identités subjectives, collectives et imposées en les mettant en lien avec des hypothèses locales et globales erronées portant sur ce qu'il signifie véritablement d'être «Sourd» ou «Maya».*

*Pour ce qui a trait à la méthodologie, j'ai mené une enquête ethnographique, en interagissant passivement avec mes interlocuteurs dans leurs activités quotidiennes, pour explorer la nature de la communication sur mon site de terrain. Laissant aux habitants de la communauté le soin d'y définir mon rôle, j'ai pris part à des sessions éducatives et récréatives; ceci a facilité mes observations de l'utilisation du langage des signes. Ma prise de conscience graduelle des différences entre les perspectives locales et les approches de l'état, surtout par rapport à la surdité, m'a encouragée à fonder une organisation à but non lucratif nommée YUCAN Make a Difference A.C. Les activités de YUCAN soulignent l'efficacité de la méthode ethnographique comme moyen d'établir une collaboration entre les initiatives locales et les efforts de l'état visant à promouvoir le bien-être de la communauté.*

## *Resumen*

*Mi tesis se enfoca en múltiples experiencias de identidad presentes en una comunidad Maya en el estado de Yucatán, en la cual las personas sordas así como las que no lo son, utilizan el lenguaje de las señas para comunicarse entre sí. Abarcando parte de la historia de la colonización española de esta región, así como el enfoque y punto de vista del estado, el cual cataloga la sordera como una patología, no obstante la población de Chican acepta estas suposiciones acerca de su identidad pero no necesariamente las adoptan en su vida cotidiana dentro de la comunidad.*

*Durante el periodo de mi investigación de campo, dichas afirmaciones deidentidad parecían ser reactivas en incluso efímeras mas que ser basadas en un cierto tipo de calidad inherente. Este era el caso de los miembros sordos de la comunidad, pero también para la comunidad en general en la cual ambos negociaban sus etiquetas de identidad de una manera estratégica y continua, como una forma de resistencia pasiva hacia las tradiciones jerárquicas del etiquetado social. Mi trabajo se centra en las identidades impuestas, subjetivas y colectivas ligándolas con las hipótesis y afirmaciones locales y globales acerca del significado de ser Sordo o Maya.*

*Metodológicamente hablando, realizo averiguaciones etnográficas para explorar la naturaleza de la comunicación dentro de mi área de trabajo, interactuando pasivamente con los interlocutores así como en sus actividades cotidianas, permitiendo que la gente local forje mi rol dentro de la comunidad e involucrándome en talleres educacionales y recreativos facilitándome de esta forma la observación del lenguaje de señas empleado. El hecho de darme cuenta que existía una gran diferencia entre la perspectiva local y el enfoque del estado hacia el tema de la sordera me impulsa a fundar una organización sin fines de lucro llamada: YUCAN Make a Difference A.C. El objetivo de dicha institución es proponer la utilización de la etnografía como un puente entre las iniciativas locales y los esfuerzos del estado facilitando así el bienestar de la comunidad.*

## *U chan tsoolil le ts'íiba'*

*Le in ts'íiba' ku t'aan tu yóok'ol u ya'abkachil bix u ye'esikuba máaxo'ob u kajnáalilo'ob jump'éel u chan maaya kaajil Yucatán, tu'ux le máaxo'ob kóoktak, bey xan le ma' kóoktako', ku paklan tsikbalo'ob xma' t'aanil, ikil u péepeksik u k'abo'ob. Kin táakbesik u k'ajlayil kóojik jkastelan wíiniko'ob te'e lu'umo'oba', bey xan bix u na'ata'al lela' tumen le jala'acho'obo', máaxo'ob a'alik le kóokil bino' jump'él k'oja'anil; u kajnáalilo'ob túun Chicane' ku ejemtiko'ob lela', ba'ale' ma' jach tu béeykuntiko'ob tu kuxtalil le chan kaaja'.*

*Tu k'iinilo'ob in xak'al meyaj te'e kaajo', u yila'al bey k'oja'anil le kóokilo', bey la'ajlajkil chéen jump'éel bix u beetik u yu'ubikuba wáa máaxe', ts'o'okole' chéen jun chan súutuk u xáantal, mix tu taal ti' bix u kuxtal le kajnáalo'obo'. Leti' le je'el túun ku yúuchul ka'ach ti' máaxo'ob kóok te'e kaaja', ba'ale' bey xan ti' u chuuka'an le kajnáalo'obo', tu'ux u ka' jaatsilo'obe' sáasamal ku bin u ketunketko'ob máaxo'obi', ikil u chan pets'ko'ob le bix u yila'alo'ob tumen le jala'acho'obo'. In meyaj ts'íiba' ku t'aan tu yóok'ol bix u yila'al máak, ts'o'okol xane' kin tsayik yéetel ba'ax ku ya'ala'al te'e kaajo', bey xan ba'ax ku ya'ala'al yaanal tu'ux tu yóok'ol ba'ax u káat u ya'al Máak Kóok wáa Máak Maaya.*

*Tu yóok'ol bix tin meyajtile', tene' tin xak'altaj bix suuka'an u kuxtal le kaajo' tia'al in jach ojéeltik xan bix u tsikbalo'ob tu kúuchil in meyaj, ikil in táakpajal yéetelo'ob te'elo' bey xan ti' le ba'axo'ob suuk u seen beetiko'obo', bey túuno' ka na'ata'ak tumen le kajnáalo'ob le meyaj kin beetik te'e kaajo', in jo'olintik u mejen meyajil ka'ansaj yéetel báaxal tia'al ma' u talamtal in wilik bix u tsikbalo'ob xma' t'aanil ikil u péepeksik u k'abo'ob. U béeytal in na'atik jach táaj nojoch u jela'anil bix u yila'al le kóokil tumen le kajnáalo'ob yéetel le jala'acho'obo' tu ts'aj ten u tuukulil in káajsik jump'éel múuch'kabil: YUCAN Make a Difference A.C. Le múuch'kabila' ku kaxaantik ka meyajta'ak le xaak'alil bix u kuxtal le kaajo' tia'al u sinik jump'éel u bejil meyaj ichil ba'ax ku beeta'al tumen le kajnálo'ob yéetel le jala'acho'obo', ikil u yáantaj tia'al u ma'alob kuxtalil le kaajo'.*

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# Introduction

In Chican, the realities of being a speaker of the Yucatec Maya language, or being deaf, contrast with external perceptions which portray indigenous and/or deaf people in disadvantaged or derogatory terms. My analysis of this complex situation draws attention to the impact that the naturalization of identity labels has on both deaf and Maya peoples living in the community of Chican, Tixmehuac, Yucatán, Mexico.[1] Through selectively asserting specific aspects of their individual and/or collective identities, the people of Chican are strategically, albeit inadvertently at times, reconfiguring public perceptions that assume their collective inferiority within state society based on their status as indigenous, or as deaf, people.

In his book *Meztizo Logics*, Jean-Loup Amselle (1998) points out the significance of context in the emergence of identity assertions, a point which may be as relevant for Mayan speaking peoples who are subject to essentialization of their culture, as it is for Deaf persons asserting a cultural identity.[2] Amselle suggests that approaching social phenomena as concrete visions of tradition, custom, and culture, or as nation, overlooks conditions that give rise to the creation of these entities (1998). In the case of both Deaf and Maya[3] identities, these assertions emerge in situations of social discrimination.[4] The embodiment of Maya identity as a means to engage publics[5], and the assertion of Deaf culture, represent parallel processes occurring at either end of the identity repertoires available to Mayan speaking and deaf persons. Having a recognized cultural

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[1] In the social sciences, identity is a vague term, but one that is indispensable for self definition. Social psychologists suggest that identity is related to "nationality, gender, individual character, personality, psychological needs, social memberships, personal preferences, likes and dislikes, prejudices, projections and identification, group characteristics, inter-group conflicts, and personal uniqueness" (Verkuyten 2005:40).

[2] Deaf persons who use sign language exclusively, and who consider themselves members of Deaf culture, use a capital "D" (see Section 3.5, *Deaf culture*, for discussion).

[3] Although my research critically reviews the significance of the label "Maya", I use the term to refer to the indigenous peoples encountered by the Spanish when I refer to historical sources that employ this identity term. Also, the value of the identity term Maya cannot be overstated within transnational perception, which is heavily linked to what is known as Ancient Maya civilization.

[4] In some cases, stigmatized identities are imposed and at other times they are asserted as a means of self determination.

[5] In the contemporary *transhuman* environment, those with claims of culture mediate and collaborate with distant publics in the strategic assertion of their identities (Niezen 2010:1-3).

identity serves both parties in particular contexts. Despite the negative connotations of being indigenous or being deaf, at times these identities are asserted in a strategic form of appropriation. This shows us the arbitrary nature of identity and directs attention to the hierarchical social circumstances through which identities emerge. As a result of the colonial encounters in Yucatán, indigenous identity continues to hold primarily negative connotations within state society. Likewise, the presence of deafness in the community of Chican is also understood, from an outside perspective, as a negative disabling condition. My research investigates the means by which the people of Chican invert negative assumptions about their identity, within community life.

# 1 OVERVIEW

The situation for deaf people in Chican presents exceptional circumstances for investigating the relationship between language and experiences of social integration or alienation. In Chican, the ratio of deaf to hearing people is approximately 30 in 1000[6] whereas elsewhere in the world deafness occurs at a rate of approximately 1 in 1000 (Andrews, Leigh, and Weiner 2004:16-17; Schein and Stewart 1995). At the time of my doctoral fieldwork, between 2007 and 2009, the population was approximately 612, including 18 deaf people.[7] Intriguingly, the residents of Chican have developed an elaborate sign language – independent of Mexican Sign Language – that is used by both deaf and hearing members of the community. In this context, where sign language use is widespread within the entire community, deafness may not pose the same constraints for social participation as it does elsewhere, where sign language use is much less common. As linguistic minorities operating within the broader context of Yucatán, speakers of Yucatec Mayan and users of the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language represent a double minority.

[6] As in other places where deafness and sign language are prevalent – such as in Bali, Indonesia, Akan, Ghana, mid-18th century Martha's Vineyard, and in Al Sayed, Israel – hearing loss is likely caused by an autosomal recessive gene (Branson, Miller, and Marsaja 1996:39, 41; Fox 2007:7; Groce 1985; Nyst 2007).

[7] The community leader provided me with a handwritten list of all local residents over the age of one. To maintain the anonymity of my research subjects, this list does not appear in my dissertation.

The group of Deaf people who share a common language – American Sign Language (ASL) in the United States and Canada, or Mexican Sign Language in Mexico (MSL) – consider themselves members of a distinct culture involving a shared world view characterized by sign language use (Andrews, Leigh, and Weiner 2004: 10-13,25-35; Lane 1999 [1992]; Lane, Hoffmeister and Bahan 1996; Moores 1996:151-163; Padden and Humphries 1988; Schein and Stewart 1995:151-192; Senghas and Monaghan 2002; Schien 1993; Marschark and Spencer 2003:3-8; Wol and Ladd 2003:151-163). On the other hand, in the context of Chican there may be no need for deaf people to cite hearing ability or communication modality as a defining feature of their identity.[8] Rather, acceptance of sign language use within the community means that deafness may not be considered as a disability, and no specific Deaf identity has emerged. In cases where sign language use is widespread among both deaf and hearing people it may form part of a wider system of communication rather than operating as a determinant of group membership. Exploring the relationship between language use and social participation, and also between uses of language and identity definitions, I seek to understand the way local persons in Chican relate to one another, and to outsiders, thereby negotiating their position within the world around them. Since deafness may not act as a defining feature of identity in this context, I investigate experiences of deafness and sign language use by devoting attention to daily life experiences more generally, through observation and participation.[9]

Inquiries into indigenous identity followed naturally from my study of the apparent acceptance of deafness without prejudice in Chican since local relationships, within the community and in opposition to state society, reveal that deafness and indigeneity orient community identities in variable ways depending on context and intention. Findings of an eighteen month fieldwork study are

[8] Given the apparent absence of Deaf cultural identity in Chican, I use deaf with a small "d" when discussing deafness in Chican.

[9] Ethnographic processes involving "observant participation" foster collaborative representations of co-experience between ethnographers and interlocutors, thereby moving beyond ideas about the objective-subjective relationship between anthropologists and their interlocutors (Lassiter 2005:61-64; Tedlock 1991; 1992:xii).

framed in broader discussions of local social life and indigenous experiences of identity in the context of Yucatán, Mexico. The conclusions I put forth regarding local experiences of being in Chican are related to the relationship between shared understandings of language, expressed in both the spoken and signed medium, and also to the contextually sensitive acceptance or rejection of identity labels associated with indigeneity.[10] I consider social constructions of difference and disability as hegemonic processes by which diverse peoples have been classified in opposition to state and biomedical ideals of normalcy. These established norms are often based on constructions of pathology and disability, or they derive from evolutionary European models of civilization that guided colonial approaches toward the indigenous peoples of the Americas (Mbaku, Agbese & Kimenyi 2001). Drawing on the accounts of my interlocutors, my dissertation highlights the relationship between communication and experiences of social belonging by outlining the effects that language has, in both subjective and objective formulations of identity, for collective experiences and as a means of social differentiation.

## 1.1 Framing my research questions

I use ethnographic inquiry to shed light on local strategies for maneuvering within state society as indigenous (colonized) and/or deaf (disabled) peoples who have been subjected to circumscribed definitions of their identities, resulting in experiences of social discrimination. My findings elucidate the contradictions inherent in contextually sensitive identity assertions related to being deaf, and to being Maya. In the context of state society, identity labels and ethnic classifications may marginalize vulnerable peoples, or the bearers of those

[10] I use the term indigenous to describe peoples who inhabited geographic territories prior to colonial implementations of state society, and identify with one another based on shared heritage, customs and language. In some cases, collective assertions of indigenous identity are defined using legal terminology, and assertions of indigeneity are based "on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited a country, or a geographical region, at the time of conquest or colonization...and who, irrespective of their legal status, regain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions" (Article 1 of the ILO Convention 169 Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries (1989), *in* Niezen 2010:114). At other times, as in the case of my field site, labels of indigenous identity are not often harnessed as a means of self determination within the state, or as a category of belonging shared with transnational indigenous peoples.

labels may harness popular perceptions of their identity, appealing to public sympathies for profit or benefits of various kinds (Martín 2001:165-193). In my field site, clear identity distinctions based on understandings of deafness and sign language use, or related to symbolic representations of Maya identity, are overshadowed by generalized community struggles for improved access to socioeconomic, educational, and medical resources. Chican is consistently described as a community that has been "marginalized or abandoned".[11]

As my fieldwork progressed I gradually began addressing some of the most pressing physical and psychological needs expressed by local peoples, emulating a combination of development and humanitarian approaches stemming from my sensitivity towards rights violations experienced by the Mayan speaking peoples living in Chican. Gaining insight into local concerns and initiatives for community improvement led to my founding a nonprofit organization nationally. I intended the founding of *YUCAN Make a Difference A.C.* with the support of various branches of the government, to facilitate collaborations between community residents and state institutions thereby enhancing the sustainability of social programs carried out in this region.

As I explore my research questions surrounding deafness, I recount state efforts to improve the quality of life in the community of Chican, noting the humanitarian activities of religious organizations in providing basic resources for local peoples from time to time.[12] In some cases, inappropriate approaches towards deafness by both state and religious organizations – promoting speech and hearing training or the use of foreign signed languages – distract attention

[11] One article appearing in the *Diario de Yucatán* is titled "*El reto de la marginacion*" (The challenge of marginalizatin) blaming the "problem" of deafness in Chican on intermarriage between relatives in the community (*Diario de Yucatán, 23 de Julio* 2007). Another article discusses the controversy over the opening of an *expendio* (a beer stand) in Chican, presenting a photo of the central plaza captioned: "The image says everything about the total abandonment of the community of Chican" (*La imagen lo dice todo demuestra el abandono de la comunidad de Chican*) (*Por Eso Diciembre* 2007:31).

[12] Recent literature discussing humanitarianism links the institutionalization of the movement to the founding of the Red Cross in the mid-nineteenth century in response to instances of war (Redfield and Bornstein 2010:6). The founding of the United Nations after the Second World War, and the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, provides a legalistic framework for identifying socio-cultural, economic, and political violations suffered by local peoples under colonial regimes (Redfield and Bornstein 2010:3-6).

from more pressing community needs. Also, devaluing the sign language used in the community, by promoting the use of Mexican Sign Language (or Signed Spanish), reenacts familiar colonial models seeking to replace local Mayan languages with Spanish. My research in Chican also exposes conceptual gaps associated with the application of biomedical principles of health and disability onto the community without regard for context specific socio-cultural understandings.

Although being deaf is unproblematic within the community, outside perspectives towards the presence of deafness in Chican hinder local capacities for gaining access to available state resources in some cases. Social assistance programs are often directed exclusively toward deaf residents, mimicking models of development that are designed without regard for local experiences and understandings, thereby rendering them relatively useless, if not altogether disruptive.[13] Historically, models of development have been criticized for providing unsustainable or inappropriate solutions to the social problems caused by European models of progress (Escobar 2005:343; Illich 1978).[14] Even though twentieth century trends of decolonization sought to move beyond evolutionism, asserting theories of relativism and functionalism that recognize patterns within cultures, efforts to decolonize diverse peoples often reenact binary conceptualizations privileging modern Western society (Ferguson 2005:144-1).

## 1.2 Structure

My dissertation is separated into eight chapters, beginning with this brief overview (Chapter 1). Chapter II introduces readers to my research questions, describes my field site, and reviews previous studies carried out in the community. I also discuss my methodological approach in some detail, making

[13] Although my dissertation exposes flaws in state approaches toward community improvement in some cases, it is important to note that government representatives expressed sincere interest in assisting the community, and expressed gratitude for my bringing social issues to their attention.
[14] Early social theorists such as Lewis H. Morgan and Edward B. Tylor articulated theories of human progress by labeling forms of civilization in terms of human social development, asserting that diverse peoples classified as “savage” or “barbarian” represent living examples of a previous stage in the development of civilized, European society (Ferguson 2005:140-142; Morgan 1987 [1877]:vii; Tylor 1884:90-91).

explicit the techniques I used to gain insight into the bases of identity in this context. Aside from the theoretical and historical explorations reviewed in Chapters III, IV, and V, prior to beginning my doctoral research I studied local languages, identified key interlocutors, and set up appropriate living arrangements in the community. Local narratives and personal experiences are included in my explanation of methodology, illustrating the efficiency of particular techniques for addressing my research questions. I make sense of how multi-modal communication affects local experiences through passive participation within locally relevant fields of experience including agriculture, education, economy, kinship relationships, recreational activities, social relations, ritual activities, and by listening to local concerns about the wellbeing of community members within state society. Observing the way experiences of being deaf cut across distinct social spheres, I engaged with people in a variety of local settings. In this way I was able to assess the way social, cultural, and psychological aspects of community life are interwoven in an interdependent patterning within which deafness acts as constitutive feature.

Chapter III provides readers with some background information about deafness and sign language use, and contemplates the significance of sensation and perception for linguistic and social experiences.[15] A review of medical versus cultural models of deafness provides a template for making sense of the situation in Chican; the inclusion of deaf persons into regular social life in Chican draws attention to the shortcomings of adhering exclusively to medical, or cultural, models of deafness. Similar to the way the Spanish language or the Christian religion were imposed during the colonial period, state and other apparently altruistic social programs are now imposing medical models of deafness onto the community without regard for local understandings involving the widespread use of the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language. To contextualize the situation for deaf

[15] I also contemplate ethnographic studies of sensation, and discuss the utility of embodied approaches toward experience and language.

persons living in my field site, I briefly discuss instances where widespread use of sign language has been noted elsewhere among indigenous peoples.[16]

To make sense of identity classifications within contemporary transnational society, Chapter IV explores individual and collective experiences of identity, especially for Mayan speaking peoples. Analyses of colonial interactions with indigenous peoples suggest that colonial conceptions of local "traditions" as immutable customs characterizing indigenous forms of life were sometimes *created* through colonial codification thereby undermining the adaptability of indigenous peoples, and upholding both indigenous and colonial structures of inequality (Ranger 1983:250, 254, 262). Today, the creative identity assertions of the Mayan speaking peoples of Yucatán, involving the sale of appropriated versions of locally produced Maya crafts in the tourism industry, demonstrate the way popularized understandings of ancient Maya civilization are sometimes cultivated for local economic gain. Leading into the story of colonialism, Chapter IV brings to light the generative capacities of local social actors to retain aspects of customary beliefs and practices while finding ways to accommodate the ever changing pressures of social existence. The Spanish use of identity labeling to achieve a degree of control over the indigenous population during the colonial period continues to shape local experiences today, and self reference among indigenous peoples in the Maya area is anything but straightforward.[17] Highlighting the constructed nature of identity definition, contemporary experiences of Yucatec identity suggest a reconsideration of the term Maya as a naturalized label of self definition.

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[16] The introduction of assistive hearing devices in the Bedouin community of Al Sayed, Israel where sign language use is widespread, provides a compelling comparative example (Fox 2007; Leshem 2008).

[17] The use of the Yucatec Mayan language is a relatively common form for self reference in Chican. Many local people call themselves *maya hablante*, and increasingly, this term is being used by members of urban Yucatán to refer to residents *de pueblo*, literally, "from the village". As such, I often use the term *Mayan speaking peoples* to refer to the residents of Chican. Reference to languages are not capitalized in Spanish, hence my use of a lower case "m" in *maya hablantes* compared to my use of an upper case "M" when I refer to *speakers of the Mayan language*, in English.

Chapter V provides a history of the region where the community of Chican is located, in south eastern Yucatán where the Spanish first set foot upon the American continent.[18] I integrate field anecdotes into my account of colonial history demonstrating the ongoing effects of colonialism in the region where my field site is located, revealing the way customary practices were embedded within imposed colonial ideologies through processes of syncretism. Contemplating the history of Yucatán provides insight into the indigenous people encountered by the Spanish upon their arrival in Mesoamerica, and also, into strategies that enabled the incorporation of forced ideologies into existing Maya visions of cosmology (Farriss 1984; Pagden 1975). The Spanish disassembling of custom through imposing religious and political doctrines was only successful to a degree in that Mayan speaking peoples were able to integrate new ideologies into existing social frameworks thereby outwardly accommodating the intentions of their invaders. In addition, Spanish infiltration was particularly difficult in the region of Yucatán, and repeated instances of indigenous rebellion plagued colonial efforts at settlement.[19] The forms of resistance that emerged in response to European invasion continue to shape relations between Mayan speaking peoples of southern Yucatán within state society (Casteñeda and Fallaw 2004; Farris 1984; Jones 2000, 1989; Nash 2001:219-254; Patch 1993; Restall 2004, 1998, 1997; Roys 1972 [1943]; Rugeley 1996).

I also briefly review the rediscovery of the ancient Maya civilization during the late eighteenth century by travelers and archaeologists, highlighting ideological linkages between the indigenous peoples in Yucatán today and their ancestors who lived in the grandiose early civilizations studied by archaeologists. The defining features of ancient Maya society strongly influence transnational assumptions about Maya identity, which local peoples are expected to emulate in

[18] The term Latin America was created to describe regions that were colonized by Latin European countries such as Spain, France, and Portugal. The American continent itself was also conceived at this time, appearing on navigational maps drawn by the Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci (Winn 2006:3-5).

[19] Recounting a brief history of the War of the Castes, and the brutality of colonial history in the region where my field site is located, brings to light the violations experienced by the Mayan speaking peoples of Yucatán.

some situations.[20] Despite differences between the lifestyles of the ancient Maya people and the Mayan speaking population living in Chican today, ideological similarities that have survived Spanish colonial invasion, including agricultural practices and daily activities, are striking. However, public idealizations of Mayan speaking peoples, assuming their direct connection to archeological heritage and traditions, paint a static picture of peoples as "bounded entities with discrete histories"[21], overshadowing the adaptability of cultural expressions. In Chican, continued syncretism and inclusive approaches towards difference demonstrate the creativity and adaptability of the Mayan speaking peoples living in this region.

In Chapter VI, I discuss state and humanitarian approaches toward assisting the people of Chican. I recount the introduction of biomedical approaches toward deafness, the activities of religious organizations, and also intervention efforts sponsored by the Yucatec Department of Agriculture and the Secretary of Health. I use ethnographic description to highlight local reactions to imposed schemes of social assistance, revealing aspects of community identity related to deafness, and to their situation as impoverished Mayan speaking peoples living in rural Yucatán. Communications between Non Governmental Organization's (NGO's) and state organizations reveal that social politics may act as barriers for local access to state assistance.[22] Even in cases where governments suggest they are willing to provide resources to a community, social structures of inequality privileging elite sectors may prevent this from happening.[23]

After analyzing the effects that external influences are having on the community, Chapter VII describes the situation for deaf persons living in Chican

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[20] Understanding the "rediscovery" of the ancient Maya ruins and civilization during the early nineteenth century not only provides insight into local lifestyles but also into the bases of transnational, popularized understandings of indigenous and Maya identity in Yucatán today.
[21] Niezen 2010:3-6.
[22] After the Mexican Revolution in the early 20th century the National Indigenous Institute (*INI*) was set up to represent the interests of indigenous peoples in Mexico. Unfortunately, this organization has been criticized, like other state agencies, for being structured hierarchically in a manner that precludes indigenous participation (Martín 2001:175).
[23] This phenomenon is described in detail by Harri Englund in his analysis of translation issues surrounding the application of human rights principles in Malawi and Zambi (2006:47-69).

in more detail. Also, I explain the way I embodied the role carved out for me by local peoples as a researcher living among them, presenting alternatives to the etic schemes of special improvement described in the previous chapter. As the residents of Chican became more comfortable sharing their interests with me, they helped contextualize my research questions within locally meaningful frameworks. Once engaged in dialogue about particular topics, my interlocutors began suggesting I act as a facilitator, bridging local initiatives with available state resources. Exploring both community and state understandings, I extend the descriptive customs of ethnography to record emic perspectives on both sides, facilitating their engagement, with potentially positive and sustainable outcomes for the community. I found collaborative approaches towards ethnography useful in this regard, allowing my interlocutors space to express their needs and grievances to me, averting the intimidation that so often characterizes communications between colonized peoples and state authorities.

In the context of my field site I explored ways that interventions may be more sustainably structured by creating alliances between community residents and the governmental institutions responsible for directing attention and resources to the Mayan speaking communities of rural Yucatán. My activities founding the non-profit organization *YUCAN Make a Difference A.C.* gradually set the stage for my participation in community life, enabling me to facilitate communications between Yucatec organizations and local peoples. Also, projects carried out by YUCAN provided a template for understanding local attitudes towards deafness and for observing collective experiences of identity in light of the marginalized status associated with indigeneity, and with deafness, in Yucatán today.

The positive reception I received in Mérida when I explained the needs of the people of Chican to state officials, encouraged my role as a facilitator, and institutions in Mérida began providing me with materials for teaching which fit in perfectly with local ideas about my capacity to act as a teacher in the community.[24] As issues were brought to my attention, I assessed each situation

[24] The *Instituto de Desarrollo de la Cultural Maya* (INDEMAYA) provided me with educational coloring books and also flash card for teaching writing and reading in the Yucatec Mayan

ethnographically, and gradually built an understanding of local struggles (and initiatives) enabling me to present issues to the government in local terms. In this way, my ethnographic engagement provided a tool for the design of appropriate and sustainable social programs in the community.

Chapter VIII presents a critical summary of my research findings and explains the realizations I made over the course of analyzing the experiences I had, and observed, while I was living in Chican. I begin by allowing my interlocutors to summarize using their own voice, by recounting instances where local comments exemplified the attitudes towards deafness I witnessed while living in the community. I then summarize some of the most salient aspects of the way local peoples operate collectively in Chican, and detail the attitudes I uncovered which make the inclusion of deaf persons into social life possible in this context. Highlighting specific challenges relating to deafness and sign language use in Chican from the perspective of the state, I draw attention to the way local acceptance of sign language use effects collective experiences of identity in positive terms, yet may contribute to the marginalization of the community within the framework of state society. I compare state assumptions about deafness and indigeneity to community perspectives, revealing conceptual gaps which sometimes result in local grievances.

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language. The Director of Indigenous Education, a branch of the Secretary of Public Education (*SEP*), also expressed interest in my presence in Chican and gave me specially designed attendance and grading sheets for local educators.

# 2 ETHNOGRAPHY IN CHICAN

The community of Chican is located in the Maya lowlands of Southern Yucatán, Mexico (figure 1).

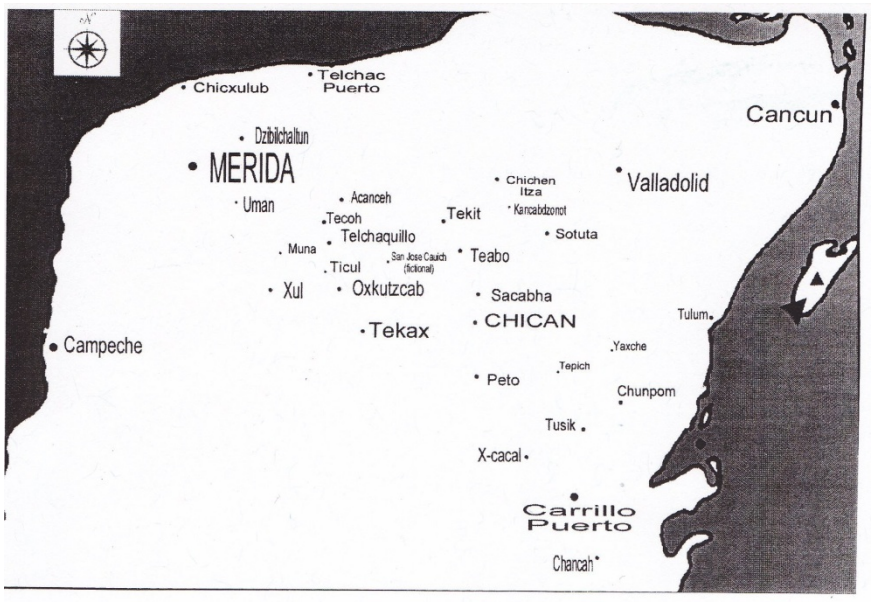


Figure 1: Map indicating the position of the community of Chican in the peninsula of Yucatán, Mexico (Smith 2009).

In 1976, film producer Hubert Smith recorded a population of about four hundred and fifty people in Chican, thirteen of them deaf.[25] However, population estimates vary; in 1977 Malcolm Shuman cites a population of only three hundred people living in this community, twelve of whom were deaf. Mysteriously, Shuman refers to Chican as *Noyha*,[26] a variation I had difficulty clarifying until I spoke with Hubert Smith, who produced *The Living Maya* documentary series filmed in Chican (Smith 1985).[27] Smith explained that with the idea of "protecting" the community's location, he and Shuman had created this pseudonym during the 1970's, effectively preventing subsequent visitors from

[25] Preliminary research suggests that this prevalence has a genetic origin (Fox Tree 2009:328; Johnson 1994, 1991; Shuman 1980). However, my dissertation does not verify the causes of hearing loss in Chican. Rather, I concentrate on understanding the relationship between language modality and experiences of social alienation, or integration, for deaf people within the community.

[26] Shuman 1980:144-180.

[27] Hubert Smith continues his involvement with the people Chican, and residents speak highly of him, and welcome his presence in the community.

arriving in Chican. When the people of Chican learned they had been attributed a false name in an effort by researcher Shuman to protect them from "other" outsiders, they indicated that they did not wish to remain isolated, in fact, they welcomed new visitors into their community. Also, community leaders in Chican explained they are capable of making their own decisions in terms of who would be offered entrance, the type of hospitality they would receive, and whether or not their continued presence in the community would be appropriate. These community assertions echo some of the issues arising when well intentioned projects of development impose etic models, associated with capitalist visions of modernity, onto diverse settings without letting local peoples define their interests beforehand (Escobar 2005:341-351). The suggestion that economic improvement necessarily leads to improved community livelihood reenacts evolutionist and colonial rationales, linking financial and material wellbeing to ideas of progress.[28]

In 1986, Professors Robert Johnson and Carol Erting from Gallaudet University visited Chican and cited a population of five hundred residents, including at least sixteen deaf people (Johnson 1991; Johnson 1994).[29] Preliminary research carried out as the basis of my Honour's BA thesis (McGill 1999) indicated a population of approximately five hundred, with fifteen deaf community members. With the birth of over one hundred individuals since then, during my doctoral fieldwork there were approximately six hundred residents living in Chican, including eighteen deaf people.[30]

Johnson explored the concept of "deaf community" in Chican and found there was little, if any, affiliation felt between deaf people compared to the experiences of deaf communities in the United States or elsewhere in the world (Carty 2006; Erting, Johnson, and Smith 1994; Higgens 1980; Higgins and Nash

[28] Recent theory suggests that development approaches, which grew out of the era of the European colonial empire, continue to define wellbeing in terms of economic livelihood (Redfield and Bornstein 2010:5).

[29] Gallaudet University is the largest university for Deaf people in the world; the concept of deafness as a *difference* rather than as a *deficit* was promoted there during the late 1980's. Gallaudet University is considered the heart of Deaf culture or the *Deaf World*, as it is known in American Sign Language.

[30] Since that time, sadly, one deaf person was killed in a bicycle accident leaving only seventeen deaf people in the community.

1996; Lane 1999 [1992]; Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan 1996; Lucas 1996; Moores 1996:26-28; Padden and Humphries 1988; Sacks 1989; Schein 1993; Senghas and Monaghan 2002; Van Cleve 1993). When Johnson visited Chican he arranged a meal for all deaf community members, which to his knowledge, was the first of its kind (Johnson 1994). I was cautious in this regard as the notion of a "Deaf community" may not be relevant in the Yucatec Maya context; I never unnecessarily brought deaf people together exclusively during my fieldwork. The apparent lack of group identity between deaf people in Chican is compelling in itself, and my approach toward fieldwork involved gaining the confidence of community members so that they felt comfortable operating freely in my presence, without highlighting any particular aspect of their experience for my benefit. Although deaf people of like age and gender do seem to enjoy socializing together, hearing people are often present as well, so close ties between deaf people are based primarily on their getting along rather than on the shared characteristic of deafness. In this sense, the usual assertions about the bond felt between members of Deaf culture, as an identity asserted transnationally, do not serve the same function as they do elsewhere in the world. Contrary to ideas about the central role that sign language plays in the consolidation of Deaf identity elsewhere in the world, in Chican sign language use does not appear to be paramount for deaf self understanding; rather, the use of sign language forms part of mainstream communication in Chican (MacDougall 1999). The use of sign language by hearing people means that deaf residents have access to the same sources for self definition as the entire community, thereby averting characterizations of deafness as problematic and as a disability to be overcome. Preliminary studies carried out in Chican depict the phenomenon of deafness and sign language use in positive terms, related to the use of sign by hearing people, enabling deaf people to participate freely in social life (Johnson 1991, 1994; Shuman 1980; Shuman and Cherry-Shuman 1981).

Previous studies note that no deaf people are married, and cite this as a potential disadvantage of being deaf (Shuman 1980:146). But over the course of my Honour's BA fieldwork (1998), I learned that one deaf woman was married to

a hearing man, and they have a deaf son. As I became better acquainted with residents during my doctoral fieldwork, I realized that nine of the eighteen deaf residents are married, with two of these unions being between deaf adults. These seven couples have produced eleven children, nine hearing and two deaf. Of the remaining nine unmarried deaf individuals only six are old enough to marry; a young male adult, an adolescent girl[31], two middle-aged female siblings who live together, and an elder male and female. The remaining three unmarried deaf persons living in Chican are minors (two boys and a girl). Early assumptions about the difficulties deaf persons would face in becoming married may represent the imposition of etic, negative viewpoints surrounding deafness onto the community when actually deafness does not appear to present significant issues for marriagability in Chican.

The presence of deafness and the use of sign language have been noted elsewhere among Mayan speaking populations, and correspondences between the depictions of hand shape forms within ancient Mayan hieroglyphs are intriguing (Fox Tree 2009:338, 344, 353-358; MacDougall 1999:28-29). However, establishing the antiquity of the sign language used in Chican, and relating it to the complex of signed languages termed *Meemul Tziij* by researcher Erich Fox Tree (2009), requires further linguistic analysis and ethnographic investigation. Even though Fox Tree (2009:361) suggests that the sign language used in Chican can be called *Meemul Tziij of Chican*, as it may be part of the language complex he refers to as *Meemul Tziij*, I am hesitant to use this terminology before further research has been carried out to establish correlations, or divergences, between the sign languages used in the Maya area.[32] Even though a higher than typical incidence of deafness has also been noted in the *K'iichee'* Maya township of

[31] Although this resident is only fifteen years old, I indicate that she is eligible to be married as she has already passed her fifteenth birthday, marking a right of passage for Yucatec girls into womanhood (after which time they are officially permitted to date and to wear makeup) (MacDougall 2003:268-269).

[32] I use the term Yucatec Mayan Sign Language when discussing the sign language used in Chican, and referred to it as such during a presentation I made at the *Dia de Lenguas Maternas* as a participant in a panel titled, *el mayo yucateco en sus diversas formas de comunicacion* (*El Centro Peninsular en Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales de la Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico, Mérida, Yucatán* (March 2009).

Nahuala (or *Nawala'*), Solola, Guatemala, in that context the local sign language is used as a "language of solidarity for an impoverished local underclass of deaf and hearing residents" who occupy a subordinate position within the township (with a population of approximately 65,000 residents) (Fox Tree 2009:329). The incidence of deafness in Nahuala is cited at a lower rate than in Chican, of approximately 21:2000, but Fox Tree suggests that local prohibitions against discussing childhood disabilities make this estimate unreliable (2009). This apparent discrimination against deaf and disabled persons in the Nahuala context corresponds more with the discrimination against sign language characteristic elsewhere than it does with the inclusive quality of life in Chican. My investigations into the phenomenon of sign language use in Chican concentrate primarily on understanding the *absence* of such discrimination rather than on establishing grammatical correspondences between the local sign languages and other sign languages used by speakers of Mayan languages. However, given the approximate rate at which languages are "disappearing" today – an estimated half of the 6000 languages used in the world today are expected to disappear over the next century – I acknowledge the importance of recording and analyzing the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language, and I encourage efforts to do so in the near future (Crystal 2004:47-63).[33] Research into the sign languages used in relatively isolated indigenous communities suggests that increasing social mobility may result in deaf individuals coming into contact with nationally dominant sign languages thereby endangering their native maternal sign languages (Nonaka 2004; Meir et al. 2010:274).

To further explore the unique perceptions of deafness present in Chican, and also to shed light on individual and community experiences of identity more generally, I now describe the setting of my field site in more detail. I explain the methodology I used to approach my research questions through recounting the daily life routines and experiences of both deaf and hearing people in Chican.

[33] The Mexican national non-profit organization, *YUCAN Make a Difference A.C.* plans to carry out further evaluative research for devising a locally acceptable and sustainable strategy for recording the sign language used in Chican potentially reinforcing its continued use in educational and medical settings (preliminary sketches of three vocabulary items appear as Appendix 1).

## 2.1 Daily activities

Chican is located approximately ten kilometers off a main highway, along a narrow road that was paved in the1970's. Once inside the community, the streets range from red earth to cement, with some areas of raw limestone bedrock that cannot be maneuvered safely without a pickup truck. The flowers are abundant and spectacular in Chican, adding rich color to the landscape of red earth. Chickens, dogs, and colorfully plummed turkeys wander along semi-paved streets lined with orange, mandarin, lime, mango, banana, avocado, and palm trees.

Men practice *milpa* farming, the slash and burn subsistence agriculture carried out by the indigenous peoples of Central America since ancient times, and rights to the family *milpa* plot are highly valued especially as a defining characteristic of masculinity (Coe 1993; Farriss 1984:39, 416; 1918; Gann and Thompson 1937 [1931]; Knopf 1995; Pagden 1975; Sharer, Morely, and Brainerd 1983 [1946]; Thompson 1967 [1954]).[34] During the summer, temperatures hover around forty degrees Celsius with high humidity, and over the course of the year the heat subsides minimally with daytime lows rarely dipping below twenty-eight degrees. However, between 2007 and 2010 temperatures were significantly cooler in the winter months (December – February) and access to warm clothing and blankets became an issue for indigenous peoples in rural Yucatán who sleep in hammocks, often without blankets. Tattered towels drape the shoulders of many women wearing the customary thin cotton dress, keeping them warm.

After eating breakfast at 6:30AM many men head to the *milpa* fields, or to hunt, while women keep open-hearth breakfast fires burning throughout the day. Responsible for raising children, women also tend house gardens where they grow *cilantro* or *yerba buena* (spearmint) and beautiful flowers including geraniums, hibiscus, bougainvillea, and tubular pink flowers. By late morning women and young girls fill the streets with colorful plastic bowls balanced on their heads, heavy with kernels of *maize* (corn) to be ground into *masa* at the local *molina*. The sound of *masa* being slapped between women's hands, and then crafted into

[34] The term *milpa* is borrowed from *Nauatl*, meaning cornfield (Smith 2009).

tortillas baked on the *comal* (open hearth fire/stove), awakens appetites at mealtime.

Local beliefs about the importance of corn are ever-present, and people often discuss their *kol* (corn field) and the importance of eating tortilla daily. *Maize* is also known as *gracia,* "grace" in the religious sense, signifying local beliefs in the sacred nature of corn as representing an aspect of life purified by God (Smith 2009:255). My neighbor and I discussed the centrality of *waa* (*tortilla*) and especially the process of making *tortilla* (*pak' aach waa*) to experiences of family based *milpa* agriculture and dietary preferences, as well as to women's role within family and community life. She explained, "*Tulaakal le x-chupal ku paacho'ob. Jach jaats'uts u meentaaj le waa'o'ob saansamal"* (All women make tortillas. It is a very beautiful process to make tortillas every day). After living in Chican for some time I became so accustomed to eating tortilla on a regular basis that there was nothing I craved more for breakfast than a hardened tortilla from the night prior with a cup of instant coffee. My neighbor was pleased with my comments about feeling unsatisfied unless I eat tortillas with my meal, as if that were an indication that I now belonged in the community. Rubbing her stomach with a look of satisfaction on her face she agreed, saying, "*k'aabet a jantik jun p'iit waa sansamal mame' mata'al a na'ataj"* (you must eat a bit of tortilla daily or you will not feel full).[35] Although the people of Chican do not describe their relationship to *maize* in ideological terms per se, they do suggest that maize is the source of their survival.

[35] Complementary to Chican perspectives about the centrality of *maize* to daily experience, the *Popol Vuh* explains that *maize* is the source of human life. Refer to Section 5.9 *Mayan Wirting,* for further discussion of Mayan textual sources such as the *Popul Vuh*.

Figure 2: A woman in her kitchen displaying the corn she rubbed off from the cob before bringing it to grind into *nixtamal (masa or* cornmeal in English) at the *Molina* (Chican 2008).

Historically, beliefs about the sacred nature of *maize* (corn) and the cyclical nature of the cosmos conflicted with Spanish efforts to commodify corn in this region, through implementing a cash economy. What the Spanish considered wasted land, the Maya saw as resting land being nurtured under the forest of the gods (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1962 [1934]:42-47; Reed 2001:10-13, 54). The practice of swidden agriculture customarily carried out by peoples living in the Maya area involves the clearing and burning of trees and brush where crops are planted and harvested; the clearnings then left unplanted to regenerate. This system, also known as slash and burn agriculture, is sometimes misunderstood as being wasteful, although it is not when practiced properly (Smith 2009:261). The continued significance of *maize* in Chican today demonstrates the resilience of indigenous ideology and sustenance practices through the colonial period; ongoing faith in creation myths, as recorded in 18th and 19th century chronicles, complement contemporary common sense understandings about the sacred nature of corn in rural Yucatán today.[36] Colonial period writings suggest that people were actually molded out of *masa* (*maize* dough called *ix-tamal* in Maya) by the First-True-Father (*Hun-Nal-Ye*), on top of the First-True-Mountain *(Yax-Hal-Witz)* (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:138-139, 431).[37]

[36] Identical to the technique used in ancient times, the residents of Chican practice *milpa* farming using a stick to make a hole in the ground where kernels of corn are then placed.

[37] Iconographic inscriptions at the Classic Maya sites of Palenque and at Bonampak illustrate the emergence of the *Maize-God* from a cleft in the First-True-Mountain (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:138-139, 431).

Family properties include a few structures with at least one building for sleeping and a separate structure for cooking. Kitchens are wattle and daub, made from hard packed earth with a roof of thatched palm leaves blackened on the interior with soot and burned oil. At mealtime extended family members customarily sit on wooden blocks, cinder blocks, or small boulders around a low wooden table but plastic chairs are gaining popularity especially in newly constructed cinderblock homes.[38] Chicanos scoop food from shallow plastic bowls using *tortillas* rather than utensils. The brave eat *chile habanero*, slicing small peppers in half and rubbing their potent juices onto *tortillas* before filling them with food. Meals typically consist of eggs scrambled in *manteca* (pork lard), beans, tomatoes, squash, *camote* (sweet potato), spicy *escabeche* made with turkey, and more rarely, a beef soup called *chocolomo.*[39] Increasingly, families also cook chicken noodle soup made from packages such as *Knorr*. For farmers, *pib* is a simple meal that can be brought to the *milpa* field, to nibble on and help to sustain energy while at working the hot sun. Similar to *tamales*, made using corn meal baked with beans or chicken inside, *pib* is a regional delicacy that is widely served in Yucatán on the *Dia de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead). Held on November 1st and 2nd, the Day of the Dead marks the time when deceased relatives return home to visit family, and this national Mexican holiday is a time for honoring family in general, both living and dead (Norget 2006:56). In Yucatán, on the first day of this holiday, alters are set up with offerings of food, drink, candles, and incense to honor deceased children; deceased adults are honored on the second day of the ritual. Extended families in Yucatán gather together, eating *pib* throughout the two day ceremony. The presence of death can be felt everywhere, but not in negative terms; embracing death in a sense, people

[38] As a visitor to the community, upon entering people's homes I was always presented with what I affectionately called the "token red plastic chair", at least one of which is present in each home. Over the course of my fieldwork, as my positioning in the community became less conspicuous, people began offering me their low-strung hammocks as opposed to the plastic chair. I never enjoyed being offered this chair as it placed me much higher up than people sitting low to the ground, working against my efforts to achieve a passive integration into community life without highlighting my presence there as a researcher "studying" local life ways.

[39] *Chocolomo* is a delicacy available on weekends when the owner of a small store slaughters a "*wakax*" (a steer) in the centre of town at the *palacio principal* (the central town square).

display miniature ceramic skeletons dressed in costumes in their homes. During the Day of the Dead ceremonies *pib* is filled with chicken, pork, beans and *chile*. But in Chican a simpler version of *pib* made with corn, beans and *chile* (without meat) is eaten more regularly.

*Habenero* peppers are a famous aspect of Yucatec cuisine that are cultivated in Chican at the *parcela*, a plot of land located just outside the community that was set up about thirty years ago. Originally meant for citrus farming (oranges, limes, mandarins, etc), the land is equipped with an irrigation system and a green house. Today, the most common crops are cilantro, radishes, squash, watermelon, tomatoes, green peppers and *habenero* peppers. Ideally, produce is transported about forty-five kilometers to the city of Oxcutzcab, home of the largest fresh produce market in Southern Yucatán. Widely known for their sale of oranges, Oxcutzcab means *paseo de las naranjas* in Yucatec Mayan (path of the oranges). Fresh vegetables from Chican are also sold at the market in Tekax located about thirty kilometers away, but transportation is an ongoing issue.[40] Both deaf and hearing men work at the *parcela*, and sign language is especially useful for communication in this context across the lengthy fields.

*Tacos* are served at formally planned social gatherings, at festivals, and at government sponsored workshops, where they are provided as a means to encourage residents to attend. On holidays associated with either the Catholic Church or the Presbyterian *Templo*, *tacos* are also provided free of charge to community residents. In preparation for local events, women layer soft corn *tortillas* with turkey, purple onion, *cilantro*, tomato, avocado and *habanero* pepper, piling them into cardboard boxes in great numbers. At birthday parties and holidays, sticky white bread sandwiches filled with loads of mayonnaise or pink cream mixed with frozen peas, and sometime ham, are served as well. Some of the animals hunted in southern Yucatán are deer, squirrel, iguana, armadillo,

[40] At the time of my fieldwork between 2007 and 2009 there were only fifteen vehicles in Chican.

wild birds, and the occasional jaguar.[41] The eldest deaf man in the community enjoys hunting and does so regularly. I asked middle-aged men if this deaf man was especially revered for his hunting skills and they affirmed that he was a good hunter, as are many men in the community, but they did not relate this situation to his being deaf.[42]

During periods of crop failure the government provides some donations of *maize* to the community, but increasingly, residents are forced to purchase *maize* at the local store.[43] There are two *molinas* in Chican, one powered by gas and the other by electricity, where women bring their plastic bowls filled with fresh corn kernels to be ground into *masa* (ground corn paste). Environmental constraints on seasonal yields of *maize* mean that purchasing corn to be ground locally and then made into tortillas (or buying ready-made tortillas) is becoming essential for survival. Over the course of my fieldwork I saw the first *torterilla*[44] built in Chican providing people with the opportunity to purchase, rather than make, their daily bread.[45] At first, people said they would only use this facility for parties, "*chen le fiestas*", to relieve woman of producing large volumes of *tortillas* for social gatherings. But *poco a poco* (little by little) I saw whoever had any money buying *tortillas* on a regular basis.

While seeking to improve the economic wellbeing of impoverished peoples, ironically, state approaches toward development in Yucatán have their origins in models of European colonialism, emulating evolutionary frameworks

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[41] Sadly, I saw a baby jaguar killed and skinned for his pelt. The family told me that they were not going to eat the meat but rather leave the carcass outside for other animals to consume. The fact that the jaguar (*balam*) was considered sacred in ancient Maya cosmology is emulated here in appropriated form; whereas jaguars would not have been killed by the ancient Maya, the killing of this jaguar for the value of its pelt suggests that jaguar reverence persists although now in commodified form.

[42] Given common discussions about the heightened observational capacities of deaf people I thought people might relate observational skills to hunting skills; however, no one mentioned any correlation.

[43] When women in Chican use maize donated by the government, tortillas have a distinct, decidedly less delicious flavour than those made with corn harvested locally.

[44] A *torterilla* is a store with a corn grinding machine and ovens where *tortillas* are baked and sold by weight.

[45] *Tortillas* purchased at the *torterilla* do not taste the same at all; they are lighter in color and pastier than those made locally.

that associate improved social conditions with the linear models of progress concentrating on economic development. In the case of Chican, stimulating cash economic activity through the installation of a *torterilla* is having an adverse effect on community wellbeing. Tempted by the option to buy, rather than to make tortillas, increasing numbers of residents (primarily men) are leaving the community to work for profit in urban Yucatán, contributing to an increased incidence of sexually transmitted diseases in the community. What is missing in this case are parallel health education programs, an assessment which could have been reached through consultation with an ethnographer familiar with local customs and practices. Unfortunately, multilateral development agencies may prefer not to undertake preparatory ethnographic evaluations for fear that the implementation of projects may be slowed down and hinder their ability to receive subsequent funding (Edelman and Haugerud 2005:45-46; Nolan 2002:237).[46]

## 2.2 Preliminary ethnographic research

I first visited the community of Chican in the summer of 1998. At that time I was engaged in research for my Bachelor's degree in socio cultural anthropology at McGill University (Honour's thesis 1999). That summer was the fourth and final year I was involved with a Maya archaeology field school in Belize where I was becoming increasingly focused on understanding Maya ideology.[47] Arriving in Chican, I had difficulty with the complete absence of bathroom facilities let alone assessing where or how it was appropriate to bathe. There were no showers present then, and people bathed by reusing plastic lard buckets, scooping well water onto their bodies using a *jicara* shell (a natural item resembling a coconut rind, but thinner). Slightly disoriented, I chose an

[46] Examples of large scale agencies include, the United Nations, the US Agency for International Development, the Ford Foundation, the National Science Foundation, OECD, the International Monetary Fund, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the World Conservation Union, the Inter-American Development Bank, the World Health Organization, or Britain's Department of International Development (Edelman and Haugerud 2005:40-43).

[47] I worked with an archaeological field school called the Social Archaeology Research Program (SARP), run through Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario by Dr. Gyles Iannone. I began as a student in 1996 and continued to work with the project, eventually supervising excavations at the site of *Minanha* (*mina'an ja* means "no water" in Yucatec Mayan).

abandoned chicken coop as a washing area during my stay.[48] At that time I did not speak the Yucatec Mayan language and knew only basic Spanish. Ironically, despite these linguistic challenges, the study of local communication was the concentration of my Bachelor's research. My passion for understanding the nature of the sign language use in Chican complemented local enthusiasm for my presence in the community, and as I engaged with my interlocutors we filled in the gaps with multilingual spoken and signed communication.

Carrying a relatively large video camera from the 1980s, I meandered along unpaved earth and limestone roads trying to capture what I could of the use of sign language. I carried out semi-formal interviews with groups of deaf men, inquiring about their participation in economic activities, family life, religion, recreation and social experiences in general. The community leader (*el comisario*), who is democratically elected every three years, acted as a translator during interviews since he speaks Yucatec Mayan, the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language, and basic Spanish. At that time knowledge of Spanish in Chican was quite limited but as a result of intermittent hurricanes and droughts causing crop failure, residents were seeking employment in urban areas with greater frequency, and the use of Spanish, spoken with a Mayan accent, was becoming more commonplace.

I asked interview questions and led group discussions in Spanish that were translated into Yucatec Mayan, and then into the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language for deaf people. When the *comisario* was not present, people spontaneously interpreted my words into sign language so that deaf people could follow the conversation. Upon reflection, this spontaneous interpretation is itself indicative of the answers I was seeking during interviews; experiences of social integration for deaf people in Chican are shaped by peoples' spontaneous use of sign language in social circumstances. Walking through the streets I was continually

[48] Although today there are a few showers present in Chican, people continue to bathe in the customary manner. In the same way, residents refuse to use ceramic toilets and I often saw toilets piled with clothing and goods. With little water management infrastructure present in the community, toilets are placed atop a hole in the ground without regard for their proximity to well water sources.

struck by the obvious use of sign language, and at times it was difficult to determine if people were deaf, or hearing.

## 2.3 Doctoral fieldwork preparation

Between 1999 and 2004 I studied Spanish and the Yucatec Mayan language in Mérida. My language studies included introductory and intermediate courses at the *Academia de Maya,* a course at the *Universidad Autonoma de Yucatán* (UADY) called "*Cursos de Lengua Maya para Investigadores"*, and practical workshops at the *Instituto para el Desarrollo de la Cultura Maya del Estado de Yucatán* (INDEMAYA) which were designed for state employees scheduled to carry out work in rural communities where Yucatec Mayan is the primary language spoken. I also took private lessons to familiarize myself with common expressions and to ensure that I could formulate research questions effectively in the local language. However, owing to the continuum of language modalities present in Chican, it was not until I lived there for an extended period of time that I began to produce and understand language in local terms. The on-going development of my own language skills provided a continual source of insight into local experiences of language, sensation, and expression. Conversing with deaf and hearing people together, I experienced how multi-modal communication feels, having gaps in my understanding filled in variably with spoken Yucatec Mayan, Yucatec Mayan Sign Language, and a Mayan dialect of Spanish.

When I carried out my Bachelor's research in 1998 there were nine deaf males and six deaf females living in Chican. Unfortunately, I did not become acquainted with any deaf women at that time. Being among the first few foreigners to visit the community I found it difficult to communicate with local women altogether. Perhaps owing to apprehension about my status as a foreign female speaking Spanish, not Mayan, women rarely approached me during my initial stay; they were generally timid in my presence, whispering amongst themselves in small social circles. With few exceptions, middle-aged women living in Chican communicate using spoken or signed Yucatec Mayan

exclusively, and aside from adolescents and men seeking work outside the community, residents express little desire to learn Spanish.[49] Before beginning elementary school, children in Chican do not speak Spanish at all. Rather, Yucatec Mayan persists as the maternal language spoken by families, at home and at social gatherings, throughout the community; the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language is used as well.

A number of men were able to communicate with me in Spanish, and I spent a good deal of my free time socializing at the local store where I discussed deafness and sign language with people who passed by. Aside from the people I had arranged to live with, and the deaf men with whom I carried out interviews and focus groups, people seemed hesitant to approach me altogether. Yet gradually, even as an English-speaking woman with only basic knowledge of Spanish, Yucatec Mayan, and the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language, I managed to become involved with people's lives inasmuch as I developed a basic understanding of local values and lifestyles. A few families admitted me into their lives during these preliminary experiences and I developed a generalized understanding of attitudes towards deafness. As my preliminary fieldwork was coming to a close (1998) I sensed people beginning to open up and share their lives with me, and I realized that more in-depth fieldwork was possible, and necessary, to reach the understandings I sought.

Repeated visits to Chican while I was carrying out research for my Master's degree, between 1999 and 2004, instilled confidence in local people about my presence in the community, and now speaking some Mayan, women involved me in their daily activities such as child care, cooking, weaving and gardening.[50] Although they laughed when I spoke Mayan we were able to communicate, and as I accepted invitations to a growing number of women's

[49] By the time I began my doctoral research in 2007 many previously unilingual women had cultivated skills in Spanish.

[50] My Master's research investigated the processes of appropriation that take place when transnational commodities cross cultural borders. I was working with a SSHRC funded project called Culture and Consumption which was run through Concordia University under the supervision of Dr. David Howes. My fieldwork was carried out in Yucatán and I published an article based on my thesis called "Transnational commodities as local cultural icons: Barbie dolls in Mexico" (MacDougall 2003).

households, their interest in sharing their lives with me became increasingly tangible. We agreed that my presence in the community constituted a cultural exchange, a learning experience for us all.

## 2.4 Living arrangements

Residences are wattle and daub, made with mud-brick walls and palm-thatched roofs. However, owing to hurricane damages over the past decade, in 2003 the government donated one hundred cement block houses to Chican – roughly one house per extended family.[51] At that time I was setting up living arrangements to pursue doctoral fieldwork in the community, and in line with State initiatives aimed at improving the durability of homes, I arranged for the construction of a simple one-room cement block house akin to those donated by the government, for use during my fieldwork.[52]

Deliberating where to live, I conversed with local residents about the accommodation options available in the community. Unfortunately, interest in my presence seemed to be causing social dilemma, and one family even offered to vacate their primary residence so that I could live there, to ensure that I remained close to extended family homes. Others suggested I build an additional structure on their family *solar*, but when I began to sense competition between families, many of whom assumed that my house would be donated to their family afterwards, I decided it was best to deal directly with the local person in charge of land use and distribution, *el comisario ejidal*. Following this meeting, I visited what he referred to as a communally owned piece of land located on the edge of the local *ejido* where I could build a simple five by five meter residence using cinder blocks and cement. With guidance from the *Instituto de Desarrolo de la Cultura Maya del Estado de Yucatán* (INDEMAYA) a contract enabling me to

[51] Recent hurricanes have caused significant damage to the landscape of Yucatán, including the destruction of homes as well as severe flooding and infrastructural damage. Hurricane *Isodoro* (2002), Hurricane *Wilma* (2005), and Hurricane *Dean* (2007) were especially intense.
[52] An eight-year contract for the use of my land was drawn up, in consultation with community leaders and with assistance from a lawyer employed at the Institute for the Development of Maya Culture in Yucatán (INDEMAYA).

live in Chican while carrying out doctoral fieldwork was drawn up.[53] I drew a sketch of the structure I envisioned and hired a local deaf man to take care of building of my house.[54] Aside from logistical considerations about where and how to live, I realized the need to enrich my approach towards fieldwork. Situating myself strategically within the community, ensuring my involvement across the different spheres of social life, I gradually overcame language and communication barriers that were present during my preliminary research. However, my subsequent interactions with the community also caused me to reflect on the efficiency of the techniques I had initially used for gathering data. Having relied primarily on semi-formal interviews, I worried that in some cases interlocutors may have crafted their viewpoints reflexively rather than speaking and acting without reservation.

## 2.5 Research approach

When I returned to the community for my doctoral research in 2007, four key interlocutors from my Bachelor's research eagerly described their experiences with the media – reporters from a popular national television channel called *TV Azteca*, who had recently visited Chican to investigate the "problem" of deafness. They reacted to reporters by quoting, almost verbatim, the responses they had given during the preliminary interviews and focus groups I had carried out in 1998 indicating that deafness was not, in fact, considered problematic in the community. Given the potential effect my research had in validating the locally inclusive approach towards deafness in Chican, I realized that my interests may have fostered local confidence in expressing viewpoints deviating from state perspectives, but also that semi-formal interviews may not be the most effective means for assessing local understandings. Likewise, I noticed residents modifying their perception of deafness to accommodate negative media or state attention, expressing whichever "attitude" towards deafness fit in with official

[53] Following the initial contract written in 2003, in 2010 a new contract enabling me to use this residence for an additional ten years was certified.

[54] Travelling outside of Chican with this deaf man, to purchase the materials required for building my house, provided me with insight into knowledge of the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language across rural Yucatán (see Section 6.3, *Communicating effectively in southern Yucatan,* for discussion).

perspectives. For example, deaf residents accepted the hearing aids they were given in 2007 which they only wear when state officials are present (see Section 6.6, *Hearing Aids*, for discussion).

More recently, during 2010, a national social program called *Iniciativa Mexico* visited Chican promising large sums of money if their community were to "win" a national competition aimed at improving the quality of life for those less fortunate in Mexico. Feeding into the interviewers' assumption that deafness is the principle factor stifling the socio-economic wellbeing of the community, I witnessed a man whom I knew well, who has immediate deaf family members and who is fluent in the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language, lament deafness as a negative and disabling condition, even suggesting that deaf members of the community are living in isolation (Video illustration available at, http://www.iniciativamexico.org/programas2010).[55]

The above mentioned video explains that the people of Chican live in silence, and the host, a well intentioned woman named Abigail, is brought to tears as she sits in a humble thatched-roof house in Chican recounting the suffering faced by deaf residents living in this context. Obviously unaware that hearing aids have already been provided to many deaf residents in Chican, or that sign language use is widespread among hearing residents, she proposes that supplying deaf residents with hearing aids will miraculously cure the condition of deafness, thereby improving the quality of life in the community. In a recent analysis of the way biology may be used as a tool to define the needs of subjects receiving humanitarian aid, anthropologist Miriam Ticktin suggests that, "a new political economy of hope linked to biology and to new biotechnologies" plays out differently depending on the position of subjects within transnational regimes of biopolitics (Ticktin 2010:175-178, 194-195). In the case of Chican, where deafness does not threaten individual health or community wellbeing, the biological integrity of local peoples is disregarded by humanitarian efforts aimed at curing the condition. In as much as identifying illness can sometimes assist

[55] http://www.iniciativamexico.org/programas2010. Access date: December 2010.

people suffering from poverty in pursuing their cases[56], in Chican, humanitarian efforts defining deafness in biomedical terms, as pathology, have an adverse effect in undermining community needs for improved access to health services overall.

Assuming that deaf residents who do not communicate using spoken language experience a high degree of social isolation and have limited social opportunities, Abigail arranges for all deaf residents to leave the community on a day trip to the beach – as if it were *deafness* preventing local beach excursions. Actually, access to transportation or funds for accommodation outside the community – as well as the challenges of leaving interdependent family networks for daily survival – mean the entire population including deaf persons, are not often able to visit the ocean. In the end, she brings the only all-deaf family in Chican, deaf parents with two children, on an airplane to Mexico City. Once there, they are literally "displayed" on stage and expected to smile and laugh, as Abigail inserts their new "gifts" of hearing aids into their ears, asking them naively, if they can now hear. Inexperienced with speech, two of the four deaf individuals elicit some type of sound, and everyone claps vigorously.

Considering the complexity of using hearing aids effectively, and also that they do not provide a miraculous cure for deafness – let alone taking for granted assumptions that deafness poses problems of isolation in Chican – the story recounted above raises issues concerning the rights to privacy (especially when undergoing medical intervention) of the deaf individuals living in Chican. The situation also provides insight into local propensities to modify perceptions of deafness to fit in with imposed, external characterizations of the condition as being problematic. When Abigail asks hearing people in Chican if they feel badly that they are unable to communicate with their deaf relatives they agree, lamenting that deaf persons living in Chican experience a high degree of social alienation. My experiences living in Chican suggest that this is simply not the case; widespread use of sign language among hearing persons enables deaf people ample opportunity for social participation. Whereas my preliminary research in

[56] Bornstein and Redfield (2010:149-151).

Chican seemed to foster local pride in the use of sign language to communicate with deaf persons, negative media or government attention towards the phenomenon of deafness in Chican seemed to cause residents to conceal positive viewpoints toward deafness. To avoid producing essentialized visions of culture – in this case deriving from humanitarian efforts to cure deafness – I recognized the shifting nature of identity assertions in my field site and whenever possible, I avoided questioning attitudes toward deafness directly. As Jean-Loup Amselle suggests in *Meztizo Logics* (1998), decontextualizing cultural traits runs the risk of producing inaccurate static representations which are actually flexible and shifting. In the case described above, Abigail presents deafness as a disability causing tremendous suffering in Chican thereby decontextualizing deafness from the sociocultural framework within which it is couched, and interpreting it as a disabling condition. On the other hand, Amselle contrasts essentialist visions of culture, made by outsiders, to anthropological experiences explaining that "Every anthropologist with genuine field experience… knows that the culture he observes dissolves into a series or a reservoir of conflictual or peaceful practices used by its actors to continually renegotiate their identity." (1998:2). In parallel to this, the peoples of Chican negotiate expressions of self understanding variably depending on circumstance. [57]

By the time my doctoral fieldwork was underway, I had enough experience with local tendencies to represent themselves differently – depending on context and circumstance – that I was often able to discern local motivations underlying particular forms of self representation. Gradually, I noticed that this was not only the case with local attitudes towards deafness but that the people of Chican also qualify experiences of indigeneity variably, depending on the context. The terms used for self reference in response to state ideals or to viewpoints

[57] The definitive reasons why local peoples appear to modify their answers depending on whom they are speaking with were not completely clear; generalizing the intention of individuals would be an essentialization. The lengthy history of subordination faced by indigenous peoples in this region may have fostered feelings of apathy about expressing local perspectives to authorities, and local compliance with state perspectives regardless of contradictory understandings within the community suggests the marginalized position of Chican within the state. I sometimes sensed that residents were deliberately crafting their responses to fit in with whatever approach they imagined held the promise for financial gain, or to improve access to resources.

coming from Mérida, or in the face of foreigners, tend to align themselves with the terms used by these sources; disadvantaged social constructions of indigeneity are positioned hierarchically within state and transnational constructions of social identities. On the other hand, local self definitions are asserted comparatively among the communities of rural Yucatán, presenting more stable categories for self reference related to regional affiliations, maternal language use, or agricultural practices.

Since the unproblematic attitudes towards deafness I recorded during my Bachelor's research seemed idealistic, I concentrated on carrying out participant observation passively, in regular social settings, to investigate contexts of sign language use while noting access to the transmission of important social messages between deaf and hearing residents. To counter the possibility of inadvertently leading my interlocutors, I approached residents without exhibiting enthusiasm for the remarkable situation for deaf people in the community. Although residents were aware of my interest in deafness and sign language, being cognizant of the influence that my presence may have on local identity expressions, I was cautious about investigating attitudes towards deafness through direct questioning. Rather, I assessed the significance of sign language use for both deaf and hearing people by becoming passively involved with local patterns of communication. I avoided the use of semi-formal interviews wherever possible, and explored the topic of deafness more subtly, engaging with the methods of participant observation.

Achieving in-depth understandings of the tacit aspects of communication modality choice, I let the community define my role in daily life. In this way I assessed peoples' attitudes towards deafness via their *behavior* rather than by analyzing how they *claim* to feel about deafness. I did my best to account for people tailoring their viewpoints to fit in with ideas about my research interests surrounding deafness and sign language by engaging in conversations and activities that local people deemed important and appropriate. Ethnographic approaches that emphasize synchronizing the goals of ethnographers with the needs of interlocutors fit in well with the way I interacted with community residents, allowing for flexibility in my research design (Lassiter 2005:20-24;

Spradely 1979:14-15). Investigating experiences of deafness in the community meant letting local peoples, both deaf and hearing, guide my research design; rather than isolating deafness as the primary aspect of social life I sought to understand, I used participation across the spheres of social life as a means to investigate the significance of deafness within economic, recreational, religious, educational and social spheres.[58] This framing of my research approach resembles Malinowski's recommendations for the practice of ethnographic enquiry. He says, "One of the first conditions of acceptable ethnographic work certainly is that it should deal with the totality of all social, cultural and psychological aspects of the community, for they are so interwoven that not one can be understood without taking into consideration all the others." (1984 [1922]:xvi).

My involvement with the community for over a decade prior meant they were comfortable with my interest in deafness and sign language, and seemed to welcome my return to live amongst them for an extended period of time. With improved language skills and a good sense of my research sample, people began opening up about their personal lives providing me insight into social dynamics including the inter-familial tensions underlying community life. I used my personal experiences, learning signed and spoken Maya simultaneously, to explore attitudes towards communication. Our initial conversations were filled with laughter directed at my language errors, which I found useful for cultivating a sense of comfort with my presence rather than emphasizing my role as an anthropologist who was apparently "studying" them and their ways of life. The challenges I faced learning local languages were an effective means for breaking down representational models that have been criticized for privileging the researchers' perspective, echoing the tendencies of social classification characteristic of colonial Yucatán. For indigenous people in Yucatán, language

[58] Unless I was inside a home where no deaf persons were present it was extremely rare to attend any type of social or community event where deaf persons were not present; the use of sign language is seen in most public settings.

plays a key role in the continuance of local customs, and despite the colonial imposition of Spanish in the area, *Maaya T'aan* (the Mayan language) remains the primary language used in Chican. The majority of communities located in rural Yucatán now speak Spanish to a high degree; Chican is quite unique in that with few exceptions, the majority of children speak Mayan exclusively before they begin school.

Positioning myself in a subordinate position linguistically – people clearly enjoyed laughing at my difficulties with the Yucatec Mayan language – my persona became less authoritative and people confided their personal experiences during our conversations. By "authoritative" I am referring to ideas active in my field site about the seemingly unconscious reiteration of colonial models whereby state officials, or foreigners, are assumed to hold political power of some kind and seek to transform local life-ways through imposing new models onto the community without local participation or consent. In a movement away from the tendency for ethnographers to produce asymmetrical dialogues – highlighting the ethnographer's interpretation over the experiences of local consultants/ collaborators/ field associates/participants/interlocutors involved with fieldwork – as much as possible I allowed local peoples the opportunity to participate in the directions I took for exploring my research questions. Models of collaborative anthropology emulate this approach in many regards, drawing primarily on instances where researchers and local peoples collaborate in the production and recording of knowledge (Lassiter 2005:18-22). Further, humanitarian approaches having their origin in ethnographic practice are more likely to emerge constructively in contexts where researchers are collaborating with consultants, rather than "studying" them. Allowing the people of Chican to outline my involvement in daily life activities provided them with a degree of control over the representations my analysis would produce; the social position of deaf residents I witnessed, and also issues faced by the entire community, were

brought to light via my participating in activities the community felt were emblematic of meaningful experience.[59]

The practice of engaged ethnography lends itself to the way I approached fieldwork, as I became involved with community life and activities without restricting my fields of observation to activities wherein I knew deaf persons would be present. Nancy Scheper-Hughes uses the term "engaged ethnography" to describe her engagements with peoples involved with the illegal organ trafficking industry in Istanbul. Pushing the limits of ethical standards characterizing the ethnographer-interlocutor relationship, she acted as a participant in the organ industry (expressing interest in purchasing a kidney for her husband at one point) thereby using her ethnographic training to "interrogate human behavior on the margins of the global (medical) economy" (Scheper-Hughes 2009:12-13). Similar to the way that Scheper-Hughes concealed her research intentions to the medical industry, during my research, I did not express any particular viewpoint towards deafness or sign language use to my interlocutors, or to medical and state officials. However, in the case of my research, local peoples and medical professionals were aware of my interest in deafness. The similarity between my own, and Scheper-Hughes' engaged ethnography involves our common efforts to gain insight into local experiences of biomedical activities by *not* expressing our own opinions toward the phenomena we were investigating. In my case, in order to gain insight into community experiences and biomedical approaches toward the community I tried not to express my opinions about the comparative benefits of sign language use, or medically imposed models of hearing aid use and speech therapy.

## 2.6 Data recording

Living in Chican for over eighteen months, I engaged with people using informal focus groups, participant observation, and educational case studies.[60] I

[59] As a guest living in the community people seemed enthusiastic about inviting me to attend community gatherings, family dinners and birthday parties. Also, people always made sure I was aware of special events such as the slaughtering of a *wakax* (steer), daily outings to the agricultural crops, religious activities, or community events such as the bullfight or the *jarana* dance competition. Women encouraged me to accompany them to the *molina* to grind corn, and offered to teach me customs of weaving traditional dress.

used informal focus groups to bring together deaf and hearing people, observing their interactions in domestic or social settings wherein discussions involving sign language use could unfold without my prompting. For example, I spent time learning to weave customary dress with women, assisted with the up keep of my house and surrounding land, and brought men together to discuss their agricultural practices (all these activities involved both deaf and hearing people communicating together using sign language). On one occasion, setting out to explore the extent of local agricultural needs, I brought together twelve men, two of whom were deaf. Our conversation went on for hours as we sat in circular formation on the terrace of my residence, while I made a list of resources that could be requested from the *Secretaría de Fomento Agropecuario y Pesquero* (The Secretary of Agriculture and Fishery). The collaborative nature of communication created a feeling of equality between the men, with people combining their knowledge and understandings to generate a full-fledged workable proposal including a scheme for cash crop rotation, pesticides, fertilizers, particular seeds, water management information, transport information and specialty skills which could be provided by particular men. Some men added information about planting techniques, others mentioned seasonal influences such as rainfall, while others were more interested in pesticides, but certainly, if I had not brought all of these men together the proposal would have been much less comprehensive.[61] My explorations of kinship operated in much the same way, with women providing the core of the information and details about local familial relationships. But once again, I could not have accessed understandings about kinship relations without speaking with at least twenty women. Chatting with a few women on the street simultaneously was an effective means for generating well rounded accounts of relationships between particular families, but ultimately,

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[60] Although I do not highlight the use of semi-formal interviews as central to my research strategy I did, at times and in particular circumstances, use semi-formal interview strategies to encourage residents to dialogue about their attitudes towards deafness. For example, I asked some people how they felt about having a deaf child, and I also explored local impressions about education, especially for deaf children.

[61] State reactions to requests for agricultural assistance are discussed further in Section 7.5 *Equality and accommodation*.

it took at least seven group conversations before I could actually produce a comprehensive chart tracing the incidence of deafness in the community.

To maintain the anonymity of my interlocutors I do not recount the occurance of deafness within particular families. I feel this is important as I was able to trace the occurrence of deafness through familial lines, and owing to the ethical implications of genetic testing raised by the Deaf community, I prefer not to make this information available to biomedical practitioners engaged with genetic research surrounding deafness. Based on what I learned about communications between medical practitioners (or audiologists) and deaf persons in Chican, which often take place in Spanish rather than in Mayan (or the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language), I am wary that genetic testing would not be carried out in accordance with bioethical standards that specify informed consent for testing. I am concerned that tests may not be explained in detail, in Yucatec Mayan and then translated into the Yucatec Mayan Sign language, before being administered to deaf people. Also, given the complicated implications that the information gleaned via genetic testing may have, it would be absolutely necessary that counseling be made available to subjects and family members as well.[62]

I used photography and video to capture the nature of experience in Chican, and relied on voice recording in circumstances where writing field notes was difficult or disrupted the regular flow of communication and social experience. I wrote field notes regularly, taking as much time as possible daily to reflect on my impressions. I developed a sense of how local people live and how they feel, participating across diverse fields of sensory experience while concentrating on deafness and the use of sign language. Attending ritual ceremonies such as annual *fiestas*, Catholic Church and Presbyterian Temple services, family gatherings, school graduation ceremonies, and birthday parties (including two formal *quinze años* ceremonies) provided me with insight into the way deaf persons are incorporated into the community via the widespread use of sign language. Another approach I used for exploring questions surrounding

[62] For further discussion of genetic testing and deafness, including the importance of counseling and reactions of the Deaf community to genetic assessments of deafness, see Arnos and Pandya (2003).

experiences of identity, communication, and group belonging in Chican involved hosting activities for children such as reading, games, language workshops aimed at improving literacy, exercise, and recreational activities.

Perhaps owing to the absence of segregation experienced by deaf persons in this context, in addition to exploring the role that sign language use plays in community social life, I also learned about the needs of the population in general. Engaging with what Barbara Tedlock calls the "observation of participation" wherein I did not remove myself from local dialogues and activities in order to observe and analyze situations, I was a participant in many of the anecdotes I recount (Lassiter 2005:62; Tedlock 1991; 1992:xiii). My position within local social life followed from this, and as interlocutors became comfortable with my presence and position within daily life they began opening up about issues relating to health, education, domestic violence, alcoholism, and economic issues.

## 2.7 Appropriate interpretation

To understand what it is like to be deaf in Chican I gradually positioned myself within the community and became involved with key participants who appeared to socialize with a broad spectrum of people in the community. These persons were fluent in sign language, and able to help in situations where I required assistance to communicate using the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language. At the onset of my research I believed it would be necessary to hire a number of field assistants to help with interpretation, but this plan caused problems both logistically and conceptually. Logistically, I immediately sensed feelings of competition between individuals and families to spend time with me, and hiring a number of formal field assistants would have aggravated these community tensions immensely. Consequently, I decided to use informal interpreters when necessary, drawing on the assistance of whichever bilingual community members were present during my interactions with deaf people. This seemed appropriate, especially given that this is the way interpretation operates locally; when deaf individuals require translation to understand spoken language, friends and family relay spoken messages using sign language. For example, the presence of deaf persons at state sponsored workshops carried out in the community did not seem

to pose much issue as friends or family would assist with interpretation as a matter of course.[63] Conceptually, at the onset I struggled with the fact that using translators and field assistants would interfere with the natural flow of communication – which was the focus of my study. As indicated, to overcome this challenge, I requested assistance from hearing friends or family during my communications with deaf people, if necessary. Understanding the ease with which fluent signers could be located for translation gave me insight into the extent of local sign language use, and also into conceptions about who the most fluent hearing signers are in the community. Aside from medical appointments, where privacy may be an issue, there does not appear to be much need for formal interpreters, as deaf individuals operate within social networks wherein sign language plays an active role in communication. Nearing the completion of my fieldwork I had at least twenty-five people, equally split between men and women ranging in age from eighteen to eighty, who were eloquent signers whom I could count on for assistance.[64]

Avoiding the use of formal field assistants for the job of interpretation seemed reasonable since I did not wish to interfere with the usual means by which deaf people operate in the community. In other settings deaf people depend on interpreters, and the absence of this necessity in Chican is one of the most compelling aspects of the social situation for deaf people. Imposing the interpreter model onto the community would have been highly inappropriate and worked against my building an understanding of the unified nature of deaf and hearing experiences in this context. This situation contrasts with the experiences of deaf and hearing people elsewhere, as in Canada for example, where deaf people

[63] I witnessed a hammock-weaving workshop while I was living in Chican. Also, the gender equality workshops arranged by YUCAN, in collaboration with the Institute for Gender Equality of Yucatán, were carried out in spoken Mayan and translated informally to deaf residents by family and friends in the manner I describe above.

[64] In line with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Section 15(1), the Supreme Court of Canada ensures that deaf people are entitled to interpretation in sign language when they receive medical attention at hospitals (Eldridge Decision, 1997). Deaf people living in Chican deal with the absence of formal interpreters in the local medical clinic by having a family member, or a friend, who uses sign language mediate between the deaf patient and the doctor.

rarely, if ever, expect that a hearing person is able to understand or produce sign language in the same way as a deaf person.

## 2.8 Inverted interpretation: accommodating the hearing

Walking along the sunny road one afternoon, in Chican, I witnessed a scorpion-killing and experienced the world of communication the way a deaf person may, in contexts where he or she cannot follow spoken dialogue.

Children without shoes giggled as they tortured the deep-red *alacran* (scorpion) with sticks, eventually squeezing the poisonous venom from its tail with a small stone. I shuffled nervously as the mortally injured creature continued to race about our feet. Deaf and hearing people discussed the situation, which became much more dramatic when I screamed as a teenage boy allowed the now (venom-less) scorpion to weave between his toes.[65] Everyone laughed and signed away, animated in their discussion about my reaction, which was nonsensical in their view. Distressed at what I understood to be a dangerous situation, I became confused as to the meaning of the signed conversation within which I was enveloped. When they realized I was not following the conversation they translated for me from sign language into spoken Mayan: *ma tu beyta' u chi kech, Paige…!"*(he cannot bite you Paige…!). This spontaneous interpretation of sign language into spoken language for my benefit mirrors the way spoken conversations are automatically made accessible to deaf people using the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language.

Children were often available to help with signed language but, depending on the nature of the conversation, at times I required assistance from hearing adults, in which case the children ran off to find the appropriate person for the job. I felt comfortable asking (relative) strangers to help with sign language communications whenever the need arose, but in order to ensure a broad research sample it was important to locate people from different social networks who were close friends with particular deaf people. Identifying particularly fluent hearing

[65] People in Chican, especially children, do not often wear shoes during the day. Otherwise, rubber flip-flops are commonplace; higher quality shoes are not regularly available for purchase in the community.

signers became increasingly important as my fieldwork progressed and my relationship with interlocutors deepened with conversations becoming more personal. It was essential to have a set of hearing signers of varied ages and gender available to ensure that conversations remained within locally appropriate norms for interaction, respecting local networks, age groups, and community tensions.[66] The following story provides an example of the type of experience that gave shape to my understanding of how interpretation works in the community, as I realized the need to draw on particular peoples' assistance to make sense of local experiences involving sign language use, in the least disruptive manner. In the situation I describe below, it was important to have assistance from an adult woman who was a confidant of the deaf subject.

It was late afternoon and I set out to visit three deaf siblings who live together, hoping to learn something about the reasons why none of them are married, exploring any correlation between deafness and marriage. I commented on their lush property and we discussed their two bulls and their garden of mandarin, orange, lime and banana trees, as well as their plants of tomato, radish, cilantro and other herbs. I practiced the signs I knew for these foods and plants and animals and then moved the conversation toward their living together as a family, as opposed to having husbands/wives and children to care for. One of the women became very animated when I asked about this and began signing to me, indicating what I assumed meant that she had been with a man who wanted only her money.[67] She was upset, which I could understand, and her siblings nodded in agreement about the unsuitability of the relationship she described. Assuming that I was following her, she continued, and I began finding it difficult to understand the conversation. There seemed to be concepts, signed vocabulary, I was not capturing. The assumption by deaf people that everyone understands sign language was an interesting phenomenon, and I was taken aback, at first, by deaf

[66] One of the middle-aged deaf women I knew often discussed her having been abused by her ex-boyfriend. Owing to the delicacy of the conversation, and the importance of my reacting appropriately to her experiences, I called on another middle-aged woman, who was her friend, to assist with these communications.

[67] The sign I assumed signified "money" is made by placing hand left palm face-up in front of body at chest level and tapping the back of the right hand onto the left palm.

people assuming I was fluent in the local sign language. In other contexts it is rare to encounter deaf persons who assume that hearing people will understand their use of signed language. In the case of Deaf cultural identity, for example, the use of sign language is associated with the Deaf World and held in contrast to the hearing world (Betcher 2008:61; Davis 2008:322). The fact that deaf individuals in Chican assumed I would understand the details of their signed conversation suggests that they are accustomed to being understood, and that no distinction between the worlds of experience for deaf and hearing residents exist in this context.

I later learned that I had misunderstood the conversation recounted above, entirely. The sign I assumed to represent "money" actually signifies being hit, beaten, or physically abused. The personal content of this type of conversation, which became more frequent the longer I remained in the community, meant that I had to selectively seek out gender and age appropriate assistants who were bilingual signers on good terms with particular residents. But again, the subtlety with which I had to do this was key to my not disrupting the regular flow of communication.

Once I understood how interpretation operates in the community I rarely found myself in a situation where I was unable to communicate. I did face some challenges in learning to communicate effectively using spoken and signed Yucatec Mayan languages; however, local reactions toward my linguistic experiences provided me with insight into the inclusive model of social life active in Chican. Given the history of discrimination faced by colonized peoples for use of their maternal languages, and taking into consideration the imposition of Spanish in the region – reiterating age old models purporting the superiority of European languages – I used my linguistic inadequacies as a means to temper local apprehensions about my presence, as a foreigner, in the community. I found that being open about my struggles with language bred confidence in local peoples about their own linguistic abilities and forms of communication, making them feel increasingly comfortable in my presence as time went on. At the onset, for example, some residents were shy about being unable to read, but after some

time of communicating with people in their own terms – using a mixture of spoken and signed Yucatec Mayan as well as Spanish – people became more expressive about their experiences and needs involving education, family life, subsistence activities, and especially about issues surrounding health. I often commented on the beauty and complexity of the Mayan language, admitting my desire to improve my language skills, asking for vocabulary clarification and additional explanations regularly. People seemed to enjoy assisting with my communications. Rather than insisting that we speak Spanish, as visitors to the community have done in the past (including state officials and also proponents of Catholicism, Presbyterianism and Jehovah's Witness) I encouraged families in their continued use of the Mayan language(s) while raising their children. My enthusiasm fit in well with awareness, within the state and nationally, about the importance of fostering literacy in the Mayan language. The currently used phonetic Mayan alphabet was established in 1984 at the *Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala* (ALMG), and since then more emphasis has been placed on the importance of literacy for the continuance of the Mayan language in Yucatán. In any case, the ongoing development of my communication skills provided me with insight into local patterns of communication, and in some ways helped to temper local conceptions about my being wealthy, breaking down conceptions of my authority as a researcher.[68] Ironically, in my efforts to dissuade people from assigning me an authoritative position as a researcher – achieved in part via being honest about my eagerness to learn from *them* about local customs and communication – over time, residents decided that I should be given the authority to present their needs to state organizations. I was receptive to local ideas about my position in the community, eventually assuming the role of facilitator they envisioned for me (Lassiter 2005:3-25). Ideas about my presence in the community coming from Mérida and also from the state officials with whom I had the opportunity to encounter, also contributed to the way my persona unfolded in

[68] I was told on a few occasions that some members of the community believed I was very wealthy. In an effort to dissuade people from asking me for cash, those people I knew quite well said they explained I was a student, and that I did not actually have a job.

the community, allowing local peoples a degree of control over the way they are represented outside of community life.

For example, I was invited to participate in family gatherings for special events such as birthdays, or holidays such as the Day of the Dead where specific ritual meals are prepared. While I was living in Chican I was invited to two *quinze años* ceremonies – one for a hearing girl and another for a deaf girl. These elaborate birthday ceremonies for young women mark their entrance into womanhood, and are a right of passage for young women in Yucatán after which time they are "officially" allowed to wear makeup and to begin romantic relationships. The two parties were virtually identical in that no special provisions were made to accommodate the deaf *quinzeniera*. An equal number of deaf persons were present at both ceremonies and the use of sign language was pronounced. An interesting aspect I noticed at the ceremony for the deaf girl was that the band hired to play at the event (including a bright light show and electric musical instruments) were completely unaware the birthday girl was deaf. Clearly, the people of Chican had not forewarned the band that she was deaf and they continually "spoke" to the birthday girl, providing her with encouraging dance instructions to which she did not respond. The reasons why no one in the community felt it necessary to inform the band that she was deaf, even when they began mumbling frustrations about her being unresponsive into the microphone, were unclear to me at the time. When I discussed the situation with residents afterwards they simply shrugged their shoulders and laughed as if I were asking about a very trivial aspect of the event. For them, what was important was that they, the community, enjoyed the event; they seemed unconcerned that the band had appeared frustrated at being unable to communicate with the birthday girl. It may be that by these means the people of Chican exhibit agency over the way they will be represented within the larger framework of Yucatán.

## 2.9 Contextualizing my study: Mérida perceptions

Although the community of Chican is little known across Yucatán – at least 85% of individuals I spoke with in Mérida[69] had never heard of Chican although everyone knew the names of other *pueblos* located within a half hour drive from Chican – when discussion of the community did occur, deafness was always mentioned. And perceptions of the situation coming from Mérida are very negative in that the occurrence of deafness is assumed to be the result of interfamilial marriage without discretion, owing to lack of education.

When I first visited Chican in 1998 I did not meet anyone in Mérida who knew of the existence of the community, although when I mentioned the presence of deafness in my field site, some people claimed they were aware of this (unfortunate) phenomenon in rural Yucatán, but were unaware exactly which community was "afflicted". Since then, periodic media attention has been discussing the extreme poverty and lack of resources in Chican, and also contemplating the so-called problem of deafness in the community. One article appearing in the *Diario de Yucatán* was titled "*El reto de la marginacion*" (*The challenge of marginalization*) (*Diario de Yucatán, 23 Julio 2007*). Another article, accompanied by a photo of the relatively bare central plaza of Chican, was captioned, "*La imagen lo dice todo demuestra el abandono de la comunidad de Chican"* (*The image says everything about the total abandonment of the community of Chican)* (*Por Eso, 31 Diciembre 2007*). The high occurrence of deafness in Chican is cited in both articles, feeding into public sympathies circulating in Mérida about the poverty and challenges faced by Mayan speaking peoples living in rural Yucatán. Owing to media attention such as this, Chican has recently become reasonably well known within the state owing to the high incidence of deafness, and social programs aimed at "curing" the condition always seem to be underfoot. Variance in attitudes towards deafness in Chican, compared to those in Mérida, was striking with outsiders perpetuating medical models which envision deafness as a disabling condition to be overcome.

[69] Mérida is located approximately 120 kilomters north of the community of Chican.

To develop a perspective of understandings in Mérida, I carried out semi-formal interviews and hosted focus groups. At the onset I used deafness to orient discussions, gradually uncovering impressions about the situation in Chican, but invariably conversations led to deeper discussions about the plight of indigenous peoples living in Yucatán more generally. I spoke with hundreds of people about Chican, on a regular basis, and encountered ideas about the marginalized status of the community including assumptions about poverty, lack of education, absence of hygiene, and alleged ignorance. Ideas about indigenous peoples being "ignorant" derive from the denigration of indigeneity that took place during the colonial period, and also, residents of Mérida blame the poor educational opportunities available in rural indigenous communities. When the high incidence of deafness was mentioned, people almost consistently asserted that the situation was due to the ignorance of the peoples of Chican associated with negative assumptions about the intelligence of colonized Mayan speaking peoples, and their consequent propensity to intermarry.[70]

Approximately two thirds of the middle class sector of urban Mérida felt compassion for the difficult living circumstances within many rural communities, while the remaining third were relatively indifferent toward the issue. Instances of indifference could be described as a sense of hopelessness for the possibility of improving the situation for indigenous peoples in Yucatán. At one point, while engaged in a conversation with a family in Mérida, a middle-aged man questioned my ambition to improve the quality of life for local indigenous peoples. He laughed sarcastically and rolled his eyes at me, grabbing my arm gently, saying, "*la única forma en la que México puede cambiar o mejorar, es eliminando la corrupción; sólo el día en que se acabe el mundo y se vuelva a reinventar*" (The only way that life in Mexico could ever change or improve, is if corruption was eliminated; that could only happen if the world ended in an apocolypse and was then recreated anew).

[70] In fact, in Chican there is only one case of a marriage involving first cousins who are deaf. For further discussion of inherited deafness and genetics see Andrews, Leigh and Weiner 2004:44-50, and Scheetz 2012:69-71.

Owing to state perceptions about deafness being highly problematic, in some way preventing community improvement, my interest in deafness likely cultivated public perceptions in Mérida about my having altruistic intentions stemming from the assumption that I was there to help deaf residents in some way. As outlined in my research questions, that was clearly not the case. However, even towards the end of my fieldwork when I visited the *Secretaría de Desarrollo Social* (SEDESOL) office to discuss future research that could be carried out in the community addressing broader social issues such as improved education, medical care, etc. the Director immediately complimented my intention to "cure" deafness in Chican. I soon found myself in the ever so familiar conversation that ensues when sign language is mentioned, explaining that sign language is not a "universal" language and that actually, the people of Chican have their own sign language which is used by both deaf and hearing residents. Misunderstandings surrounding deafness and the use of sign language persist, especially in Mérida where oral approaches toward the education of deaf children are strongly favored. Continuing, I clarified that I simply sought to investigate the use of sign language among both deaf and hearing persons in the context of an indigenous Mayan speaking community in rural Yucatán. And that by these means, I sought to explore theoretical questions about the nature of human perception, communication, and social inclusion, shedding light on the implications that sign language use may have for deaf persons as linguistic minorities operating within societies structured around hearing and spoken language. After hearing my explanation, which I had already recounted on various occasions, he expressed interest in the situation for education and sign language in the community, seemingly inspired by my ideas about reinforcing the continuance of the sign language through educational programs to be carried out in the future.

In Chican, my interlocutors reiterated the obviousness of sign language as a mode of communication on a regular basis, and whenever I approached the topic of deafness directly, inquiring as to whether deaf individuals participate in particular social or economic events – such as religious gatherings, sports,

economic activities or education – I was regularly told that deaf people are very intelligent, "*son muy intellegente*." This view contrasts sharply with the history of linguistic and cognitive oppression that deaf people have experienced elsewhere in the world owing to misconceptions about the relationship between speech and intelligence. To make more explicit the exceptional circumstances in Chican I now provide a brief social history of deafness and sign language, and discuss the relationship between sensation and experiences of communication.

# 3 BACKGROUND ON DEAFNESS, SIGN LANGUAGE, & SENSATION

As far back as the seventeenth century, linguists and phoneticians at Oxford were comparing the properties of signed and spoken languages. Published in 1680 by George Dalgarno, *Didascalocophus* explores the way that language can be produced and communicated through audition and speech, or by means of vision and movement (Dalgarno 1971).[71] Remy Valade wrote the first grammar book on French Sign Language in 1854 (Armstrong, Stokoe, and Wilcox 1995). At that time, people believed that signs imitated objects and events the way that an artist paints what he sees before him (Kendon 2004).

The writings of Aristotle (384-322 BC) gave rise to the idea that language and thought are dependent on one another and that since deaf children are unable to speak, they are uneducable (Bender 1970:20; Schein and Stewart 1995:8-9). The association of speech with intelligence led people to believe that because deaf people could not speak they could not think. Deaf people became known as "deaf and dumb" and were often placed in mental institutions (Burnet 1835). In early dictionary definitions, the word "dumb" meant, "devoid of the power of speech; deaf and dumb from birth", however, over time the term dumb came to signify

[71] The introduction, written by R.C. Alston, cites other linguists at Oxford who have written about this subject (Dalgarno 1971:introductory note).

"markedly lacking in intelligence: stupid" (Merriam-Webster 1991 [1983]:388; Frederick C. Mish et al.).[72]

While exploring the social position of deaf people in Chican I often encountered situations where individual deaf people were highly respected, irrespective of their being deaf, and even *owing* to their deafness. People of all ages described their view that deaf people have heightened observational skills, and everyone I spoke with acknowledged the capacity of deaf people to communicate fluently using sign language. These comments were uniformly accompanied by a very casual demeanor, making me feel as if my inquiries were rather mundane, taken for granted understandings that were obvious to everyone but myself. In comical situations, I noticed the use of sign language by deaf people to comment on aspects of behavior that hearing people may not express as succinctly in spoken language, and in small group settings deaf people often make commentary inciting widespread laughter. For example, seemingly unthreatened by my presence in the community, or at least somewhat accustomed to my being there, adults found it amusing when a small child appeared nervous in my presence. When upon seeing me, babies or toddlers became physically shy, hiding behind parents or crying, a deaf person may poke fun at the situation, teasing the child for their apparent apprehensions about my differences. Within an atmosphere of loud music and spoken conversation, many people explained that their deaf friends are more likely to pick up on visual cues that may be humorous. Because I did not always understand why laughter erupted in the room, the phenomenon of appreciating deaf people for their sense of humor was explained to me repeatedly at family dinners or *fiestas*, with deaf people often taking centre stage in conversations, making everyone laugh.

In Chican, impressions about deaf intelligence are related to the locally shared perception that deaf people are more observant than hearing people, hence more adept at producing humorous (unexpected) commentary. When a deaf

[72] Researchers Schien and Stewart report that when children were born deaf in ancient Greece they were apparently left to die (1995:8). Because of the difficulty in determining deafness as birth, this historical assertion may be questionable.

person point outs what they perceive someone else is feeling, which may not be apparent to hearing individuals, people are impressed by their social sensibilities. Simply put, in the words of an elderly woman, "*son muy gracios porque les observan todo* (they are very funny because they notice everything).[73] Even during my preliminary research carried out in 1998, a middle-aged hearing man explained, "*No hay problema por los mudos. Siempre hay algien quien sabe usar señas. Algien va a explicar en señas si el sordo no entiende"* (There is no problem for deaf people. There is always someone who knows sign language. Someone will explain in sign language to the deaf person if they do not understand) (MacDougall 1999:31). I repeatedly encountered this attitude surrounding the unproblematic experiences of being deaf in Chican; people reiterated the obviousness of sign language as a mode of communication on a regular basis. When I approached the topic of deafness and sign language use directly, my interlocutors expressed views that inverted Aristotle's assumptions about the relationship between speech and intelligence.

In contrast to Aristotle, Plato refers to the use of signs by deaf people as akin to the use of speech by the hearing, to name the world around them. This discussion appears in the dialogue "Cratylus" (360BC) where Socrates debates the relationship between human perception and the naming of the external world of things. In dialogue with Hermogenes, Socrates suggests that language is arbitrary, implying that processes of naming are not intrinsic to the objects or concepts being named, rather, that language emerges contextually in whichever means facilitates communication. Socrates says, "If we had no faculty of speech how should we communicate with one another? Should we not use signs, like the deaf and dumb?" (Plato 2008:397).

In line with this assertion about sign language representing a natural alternative to spoken language, the people of Chican name objects, explain concepts, and communicate in whichever language modality suits the context or

[73] As she explained that deaf people are very observant, she accompanied her speech with the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language for observation. It was common place for people to do so when they mentioned their impressions about the heightened observational skills of deaf persons.

expresses a concept most efficiently. Locally, deaf residents are sometimes called "*mudos*" (mutes) implying that they are not able to speak. However, being "mute" does not for them, as it did for Aristotle, imply that they are unable to communicate intelligently.[74] The view that deaf people are somehow privileged in sensory terms contrasts sharply with medical models of deafness seeking to "cure" the condition of being deaf through using assistive hearing devices (Armstrong 1990; Armstrong, Stokoe, and Wilcox 1995; Bell 1969 [1883]; Gallaudet 1899; Lane 1999 [1992], 1993, 1976; Lane and Grosjean 1980; Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan 1996; Marschark and Spencer 2003; Marschark and Spencer 2010; Moores 1996; Padden and Humphries 1988; Schein and Stewart 1995:29-62; Senghas and Monaghan 2002; Studdert-Kennedy and Bellugi 1980).[75]

## 3.1 Approaches toward signed languages

In the late nineteenth century spoken language was linked to the development of civilization (Baynton 1993:92-112; Rée 1999:271-292, Stam 1976:260; Tylor 1886). United States Colonel Garrick Mallery believed that the analysis of sign language provided insight into the passage of man from savagery to civilization (Baynton 1992:42; Mallery 1972 [1881]:7-26). In 1877, when Colonel Mallery was transferred from the US army to the Bureau of Ethnology at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C., he was commissioned to carry out research with upwards of one hundred Indians from a variety of 'tribes', recording variations and similarities in their usage of signs (Mallery 1882; Mallery 1972 [1881). He described the signs used by Absaroke, Apache, Arapaho, Arikara, Assinaboin, Atsina, Banak, Blackfeet, Caddo, Cheyenne, Dakota, Fox, Hidatsa, Kaiowa, Kickapoo, Kutine, Lipan, Mandan, Ojibwa, Osage, Pani, Shaptin, Shoshone, Tennenah, Ute, Wichita, and Wyandot peoples (Mallery 1972:112-232). Mallery noticed that sign language enabled communication between tribes

[74] Circumstances where deaf people are deprived of education and have not developed skills in formal signed or spoken language also suggest that the inability to communicate does not actually imply lack of intelligence (Curtiss 1977; Lane 1976; MacDougall 2001a; Marschark and Spencer 2010).

[75] The reaction of residents in Chican toward the use of hearing aids is discussed further in Section 6.6, *Hearing aids*.

who spoke different languages, spread out over vast geographical regions (Clarke 1885; Cody 1970; Farnell 1995; MacLean 1898; Mallery 1972 [1881]; 1882; Sayce 1880; Tomkins 1969; Tylor 1886). E. B. Tylor's writings explain this phenomenon as well, citing widespread sign language use between peoples spread across the Hudson Bay to the Gulf of Mexico (Tomkins 1969:94). Despite the misguided assumption that the Plains Indian system of communication, which involved both speech and sign language, was inferior to European languages, Mallery thought that signs could be arranged grammatically.[76] He explored dialectical variations in sign languages that were assumed to be universal (Mallery 1882:16-17; Rée 1999:285-286; Tylor and Bohannan 1964 [1865]:15-16, 24). In a 1918 publication titled, *Sign talk; a universal signal code, without apparatus, for use in the army, the navy, camping, hunting, and daily life*, Scott and Powers discuss the common use of sign language between the Indian tribes of New Mexico, Western Manitoba, and Montana, especially among the Crow Indians and the Sioux (Tomkins 1969:94).

When W. P. Clarke (Captain of Second Cavalry in the United States Army) was sent to assist in resolving the Sioux-Cheyenne war in 1876 he noticed that they, like other Indian tribes, were fluent in a mutually intelligible sign language, enabling intertribal communication (Clarke 1885). Clarke became proficient in the sign language which was apparently "of great value" to him during subsequent interactions with Indians living in Manitoba, Minnesota, Dakota, Montana, Nebraska, Utah, Wyoming, and Idaho (Clarke 1885:5-6). He recounts that he used sign language almost constantly during his time with the Sioux, Cheyenne, Pawnee, Shoshone, and Arapachoe peoples, and later, with the Crows, Bannacks, Assinaboines, Gros Ventres of the Prairie, Mandans, Ute, and Arikarees tribes (Clarke 1885:5-6). In 1863 the missionary Lewis F. Hadley wrote *Indian Sign Talk*, explaining that knowledge of sign language enabled for a better understanding of the habits, manners, religious beliefs, mythological stories, and customs of the Indians (Clarke 1885:18; Kroeber 1958:1-19). Cases

[76] Plains Indian Sign Talk (PST) is used in conjunction with, or independently of, spoken language.

where sign language use continues among indigenous peoples, both deaf and hearing, demonstrate the integrative potential that signing holds for deaf individuals within mainstream society, and also imply that European linguistic models privileging speech over sign may have actually detracted from the complexity of linguistic expression, rather than vice versa.

European officials involved with colonial settlement in the Americas and in Australia carried out early studies of indigenous sign languages. Accounts written in the nineteenth century cite the antiquity of sign codes as a form of human expression and suggested that the use of sign languages by North American Indians was testimony to their inferior status on an evolutionary scale. Colonial studies concentrating primarily on the signs used by hearing aboriginal and Indian peoples, as opposed to those used by the deaf, almost uniformly suggest that signed languages were inferior to spoken languages (Farnell 1995; Kendon 2004; Madell 1998; Mallery 1880b, 1972 [1881]; Sayce 1880; Seton, Scott and Powers 1918).[77] Nineteenth century indigenous usage of gesture, signed speech, mime, and pantomime were deemed "natural" forms of communication and contrasted with spoken languages which were regarded as "cultural" or civilized (Farnell 1995:36; Tylor 1886; Tylor and Bohannan 1964 [1865]:10).[78] Gesture and signed communication were regarded as inferior to spoken languages, therefore assumed to characterize a lesser stage of human evolution (Baynton 1992:291; Stam 1976:260; Tylor 1886:547; Whitney 1875). Because indigenous spoken languages were considered rudimentary as well, it was proposed that gesture and sign were used to convey meanings that indigenous languages could not alone represent (Farnell 1995:34; Henson 1974:18; Tylor 1964 [1865]:32).

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[77] Nineteenth century sources were often recorded by U.S army officials and missionaries who were not trained in data collection. As such, the work of Garrick Mallery, for example, was followed up in the twentieth century by anthropologists such as Farnell 1995, Kroeber 1972, and Sebeok and Umiker-Sebeok 1978.

[78] Assertions about the "natural" quality of the sign language used in Chican are discussed in Section 6.7, *Shouting out loud for Mexican Sign Language*. The suggestion that the sign language used in Chican is somehow inferior to sign languages which have been formally recorded mimics the colonial devaluation of indigenous languages in favor of Spanish.

In his book *Native America Talking Signs* (1998), historian Michael Kelly explains that between 1600 and 1900 the signs used by American Indians were intelligible across at least one hundred local language groups (Kelly 1998:8). He relates this intelligibility to similarities in the cultural heritage of the people of the Americas, especially in terms of their nomadic lifestyle. Elsewhere in the Americas, closer to my field site, Franz Blom cites the use of signs by the peoples of Yucatán when they first came into contact with the Spaniards. He recounts that they asked "by signs" where the invaders had come from (Blom 1971 [1936]:14). Other sources explain that the Maya Indians used signs to greet their invaders (Clendinnen 1987:6).

Although it seems likely that sign language has been used in the region of Yucatán for some time, extensive comparative regional studies would be required to verify this theory. The people of Chican assert that sign language use began in the community after the birth of a deaf child some eighty years ago and my kinship studies confirm that all deaf people living in Chican today are related to this elderly deaf man's grandfather.

## 3.2 Characteristics of signed languages

The belief that sign language may have preceded spoken language fostered the idea that spoken languages are somehow superior to signed languages (Moores 1996; Schein and Stewart 1995:1-18; Stam 1976:242-250; Whitney 1875). Supporting this idea, anthropologist Edward B. Tylor proposed that spoken language was the principal instrument in the development of civilization and that the signs used by both the aboriginal inhabitants of North and South America, and by the deaf, were "primitive signs" that were a vestige of "prehistoric times" (Baynton 1996:26-28, 36-38; Rée 1999:284; Tylor 1886, 1964 [1865]:21; Van Cleve 1993:92-112). His association of sign language with "primitive" peoples devalued both indigenous and deaf people in evolutionary terms (Baynton 1992:283-286; Rée 1999; Sebeok and Umiker-Sebeok 1978; Tylor 1886; 1964 [1865]:34). In his 1865 publication, *Researches into the early history of mankind and the development of civilization*, Tylor said, "Gesticulation

goes along with speech, to explain and emphasize it, among all mankind. Savage and half civilized races accompany their talk with pantomime much more than nations of higher culture" (1964 [1865]:36).

In his article, *The gesture-signs of savages and deaf mutes*, Tylor also explains the ease with which indigenous people communicated with "deaf-mutes" implying that deaf people were akin to indigenous peoples on an evolutionary scale (Tylor 1886:547; Van Cleve 1993:99-100). American philologist William Dwight Whitney supported theories about the inferiority of sign language, asserting that it may have been a precursor to spoken language but that by means of "natural selection and survival of the fittest the voice gained the upper hand" (Whitney 1875:291). The publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) reinforced the idea that indigenous peoples represented a previous stage of evolution; he cited the use of signed communication by indigenous and deaf peoples in the Americas to support of his theory (Baynton 1992:36-55, 1993; Darwin 1896; Farnell 1995; Mallery 1972 [1881]:11-26). In his 1896 publication, *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals*, Darwin explains that sign language is "used by the deaf and dumb and by savages" (Baynton 1996:54; Darwin 1896:61-62; Schein and Stewart 1995).

William Stokoe's *Sign Language Structure* (1960) and *A Dictionary of American Sign* (1965) changed our understanding of the sign languages used by the deaf (Armstrong, Stokoe, and Wilcox 1995:5-8; Stokoe 1960). Stokoe's analysis of the phonological and morphological components of sign languages led to the recognition that signed languages constitute *bona fide* languages[79] (Klima and Bellugi 1979; Moores 1996; Padden and Humphries 1988; Paul 2001; Pettito 1994; Rodda and Grove 1987; Sebeok and Umiker-Sebeok 1978; Senghas and Monaghan 2002; Siple 1978; Wilbur 2003). As linguistic analyses continued, it was established that signed and spoken languages exhibit the same levels of

[79]Stokoe established a set of terms for the analysis of signed languages corresponding to the linguistic terms phonology, allophone and morphophonemics; from the Greek root *cheir*, meaning hand, he coined the terms cherology, allocher and morphocheremics for the study of sign language (Stokoe 1960:ix).

grammatical organization (Pettito 1994:2). Each sign is lexically structured phonetically, phonemically, and syllabically; both signed and spoken languages combine meaningful units into complex signs and then sentences, according to language specific morphological and syntactic rules (Battison 1978; Brentari 1991; Fischer and Siple 1990; Lane and Grosjean 1980; Liddell 1990; Liddell and Johnson 1989; Lucas 1990:11-238; Padden and Humphries 1988; Padden and Perlmutter 1987; Sandler 1986; Stokoe 1960; Stokoe 1990:1-10; Studdert-Kennedy and Bellugi 1980; Studdert-Kennedy and Lane 1980; Wilbur 2003). Sentences are then bound together coherently, forming pragmatic discourses that respect linguistic organization rules (Wilbur 2003). But since sign languages operate in the spatial rather than the auditory medium, meaning is generated differently in signed languages compared to spoken languages (Klima and Bellugi 1979:38-40; Lucas 1990; Schein and Stewart 1995:29-62; Siple 1978:10-14).

Saussure's structuralist conception of the linear nature of languages led to phonocentrism – a privileging of the significance of sound in language – thereby devaluing languages produced in the visual-manual-kinesthetic modality (Myers and Fernandes 2009). The organization of sign is simultaneous rather than sequential; lexical meaning is generated by virtue of the movement of hand shapes within physical space rather than via the sequencing of spoken words (Bailey et al. 2002:xi-xii; Padden and Perlmutter 1987; Voltera and Erting 1990). The fact that sign takes place in the visual field, which is accessible by means of public communication in Chican, means that technologies enhancing sound to reach public audiences are not essential for ensuring access to social messages.

Artificially created sign based code systems are different from the sign languages used by deaf people (Schick 2003:219-231).[80] Manual codes for spoken languages do not possess the grammatical features that sign languages do; manual codes mimic the structure of spoken languages. Although sign codes may be easier for hearing people to understand (since they are already familiar with the

[80] These systems are meant to replicate exactly spoken languages using signs and do not operate according to the grammatical principles of natural signed languages.

grammatical rules of English), these systems are more difficult for deaf people to learn than are sign languages; manual codes of spoken languages have different syntactic principles than signed languages (Pettito 1994:2; Schein and Stewart 1995:104-105; Tomkins 1969:66-67). The syntax of sign language involves movement in space, wherein a single sign often signifies both an agent and an action by virtue of its position in signing space. The syntax of spoken languages, on the other hand, is mostly linear and sequential (Armstrong, Stokoe, and Wilcox 1995:12-13).

Sign language is not universal; as with any language, sign languages are distinct in every country and/or linguistic community. For example, in Québec, the sign language used by deaf people, associated with the French speaking population, is called *Langue des Signes Québécoise* (LSQ) (Gaucher 2009; LaChance 2007).[81] *Langue des Signes Québécoise* is distinct from American Sign Language (ASL) and also from the signed language used in France (Branson, Miller, and Marsaja 1996; Brentari 1991; Pettito 1994). In Mexico, in addition to the sign language used in Chican, the language used by the Deaf in urban Yucatán and across the country is *Lenguage de Senias Mexicano (LSM)*. Universalist assumptions about the mutual intelligibility of sign languages stem largely from misunderstandings about the iconic nature of signs, when most signs are arbitrary rather than gestural (iconic) (Bailey et al. 2002:xix-xx; Branson, Miller, and Marsaja 1996:43; Messing and Campbell 1999). In a recent anthropological analysis of sign language, Nancy Farnell (1995) suggests that sign language and other gestural systems have been systematically devalued precisely because iconic aspects of signs have remained in focus to the exclusion of both arbitrary and indexical aspects that also exist at all levels of their linguistic structure (51). Making her point explicit, Farnell explains that the Plains Indian sign for "buffalo" (forefingers placed atop ones head) is readily understood in contexts where hunting is practiced, whereas in urban environments, this sign may be misinterpreted as meaning "devil" or any sort of horned animal, or even some

[81] Both Charles Gautier and Nathalie LaChance have done extensive research into the nature of Deaf cultural identity in Francophone Quebec.

kind of hat or hairstyle" (Farnell 1995:50). Another example is use of the same sign to mean "happy" in ASL, and "afraid" in Inuit Sign Language (hand open, palm towards the body brushed up repeatedly at mid chest level) (Bailey et al. 2002:302; Personal Communication (MacDougall 2009).

Situations that are similar to Chican, characterized by widespread sign language use among hearing persons, suggest that conceptions of perception and expression are not restricted to spoken language among all peoples. Anthropologist Nora Ellen Groce studied hereditary deafness and sign language use on Martha's Vineyard Island in the towns of West Tisbury and Chilmark where for over two hundred years, from about 1750-1950, deafness was widespread due to a hereditary condition (Groce 1985). British settlers apparently brought the autosomal recessive gene for deafness to the New World from Kent, England during the 17$^{th}$ century. In her book, *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language*, Groce describes the ease with which deaf people participated in social life due to the fact that everyone, both relatives and the general public, knew sign language (Groce 1985:2-3). Attitudes towards the condition of being deaf were not negative, and deafness was not stigmatized. This situation suggests that disability is an arbitrary social category characteristic of large-scale societies where competition and individual productivity are highly valued (Groce 1985:106-107).

Studies carried out among indigenous peoples in Nicaragua, Indonesia, Korea, Ghana, Guatemala, Australia, New Zealand, Israel, Providence Island, Nunavut, and among the Plains Indians of North America present comparable circumstances to Chican in some regards, in that sign language appears to form part of the broader system of communication (Divale & Zipin 1977; Du Bois 1978; Farnell 1995; Frishberg 1987; Kendon 2004, 1988; MacDougall 2001a, 2001b; Mallory 1882, 1880a, 1880b; Nyst 2007, 2003; Meir et al. 2010; Polich 2005; Sayce 1880; Sebeok & Umiker-Sebeok 1978; Tomkins 1969; Washabaugh 1981; Washabaugh, Woodward and DeSanti 1978; Woodward 1978). Although these studies are compelling, reports concentrate primarily on the linguistic properties of sign languages, or speculate about their origins, rather than exploring

the socio cultural circumstances giving rise to and facilitating widespread and ongoing communication in the visual spatial modality without prejudice. In their article, *Emerging Sign Languages*, authors Irit Meir, Wendy Sandler, Carol Padden, and Mark Arnoff distinguish deaf community sign languages that emerge through educational contact among deaf persons, to village sign languages; they suggest comparative potentials between these sign languages based on their apparently recent emergence (Meir el al. 2010:271-272, 274-275). However, linguistic emergence among peoples drawn together by deafness for educational purposes, and giving rise to social communicative bonds, is perhaps distinct from the widespread use of "village sign languages" among indigenous peoples. Marginalized by the state in ideological and socio-cultural terms, attention to the existence of community-wide sign language use among indigenous peoples may have been overlooked in light of derogatory, colonial ideals; an absence of historical records prior to those available for deaf educational institutions does not verify the *recent* emergence of indigenous sign languages. These authors advise caution when comparing apparently "new sign languages" owing to divergent research methods coming from linguistics, psychology, or anthropology. My ethnographic analyses, acknowledging the uncertaintly surrounding the history of sociocultural circumstances where both deaf and hearing indigenous persons use sign language – and where deafness is not stigmatized – support this caution.

My research does not involve formal analysis of the sign language used in Chican. As already indicated, I became involved in the daily experiences of local peoples, thereby gaining insight into the nature of attitudes surrounding communication and experiences of being in a community wherein deafness is not a stigmatized condition, but an accepted quality. As my fieldwork progressed I realized it was not attitudes towards deafness that begged investigation per se, but attitudes towards communication in general. The way public perceptions external to the realities of daily life were affecting subjective experiences of being, irrespective of identity labels, was a key element that caught my attention. I gained insight into discrepancies between local experiences and popular assumptions about local experiences by engaging with the methods of participant

observation. Considering the way residents of Mérida envisioned my research interests exemplified external understandings about the people of Chican in some regard. Despite my persistent and almost repetitive indication that I was simply interested in local social experiences involving sign language use, assumptions about my being there to "help" deaf residents overcome their deafness, sensitized me to external perceptions of deafness as problematic in the community.

Linguists, psychologists, social scientists, and biologists have demonstrated that the sign languages used (primarily) by deaf people are natural human languages that emerge spontaneously and are passed down from one generation to the next (Baynton 1992:108-131; Pettito 1994; Stokoe 1970, 1990:2, 2005 [1960]). Evidence from neurological studies of language acquisition supports the idea that sign languages are equivalent to spoken languages. In terms of acquisition schedule, deaf children who are exposed to sign language from birth go through the same linguistic maturation cycle as do hearing children. Both deaf and hearing children go though stages of syllabic babbling (7-10 months), variegated babbling (10-12 months), jargon babbling (12 months and beyond), first word stage (11-14 months), etc. (Parrill 2005; Pettito 1994:4-5, 1987; Pettito and Marenttet 1991; Schick 2003:219-221; Singleton and Supalla 2003). For babies exposed to sign language, babbling involves the production of repetitive gestures and hand shape formations. Even hearing children who are exposed to sign language, rather than spoken language, begin to babble in the manual mode (Pettito 1994:6, 1987; Pettito and Marenttet 1991; Schick 2003:219-224). In addition, neuropsychological studies strongly suggest that the same areas of the brain are involved in processing signed and spoken language (Xu, Braun, Gannon, Emmory and Smith 2010)

Captain W.P. Clarke of the United States Army noted sign language skills in deaf children as early as 1884 while he was living among the North American Indians. In his book, *Indian Sign Language* he explicitly states, "I have seen the little three-years-old child of a deaf-mute Indian hold up its tiny hand and carry on

conversations (without any attempt at vocal speech) which would do credit to any child of that age."(1885:9).[82]

It is now widely accepted that linguistic communication can take place in either the visual or the auditory modality; both systems operate according to unique formational rules (Goldin-Meadow and Mylander 1994; Morford, Singleton, and Goldin-Meadow 1995; Volterra, Beronessi, and Massoni 1994; Voltera and Erting 1994; Washabaugh 1986). In addition, comparative studies of signed languages indicate that like spoken languages, signed languages are grammatically distinct from one another and are not analogues of the spoken languages with which they co-exist (Armstrong, Stokoe, and Wilcox 1995:5; Li 1999; Lucas 1990; Miller 1991; Pettito 1994; Stokoe 1990:1-8; Stokoe 2005 [1960]).

## 3.3 Deaf education

More than ninety percent of deaf children are born to hearing parents and, upon realizing their child is deaf, parents are encouraged to use assistive hearing devices with the promise that their child will learn to speak. Even though these methods are not always effective, medical practitioners and professionals subscribing to audist[83] perspectives – which see hearing and spoken language as essential for participation in regular social experience – do not always present alternative approaches (involving the use of sign languages) to hearing parents who are exploring the communications options available for their deaf child (Calderon and Greenberg 2003; Lane 1993:272-291; Moores 1996). Upon graduation from high school, the average reading level of deaf adolescents is commensurate with eight and nine year old hearing students, but this situation is not – as evolutionary theory suggests – indicative of lack of intelligence (Marschark and Spencer 2003:95-147; Paul 2001:97). More likely, literacy

[82] Complete book title: *Indian Sign Language with brief explanatory notes of the gestures taught deaf-mutes in our institutions for their instruction, and a description of some of the peculiar laws, customs, myths, superstitions, ways of living, code of peace and war signals of our aborigines* (Clarke 1885).

[83] Tom Humphries describes *audism* as the view that, "one is superior based on one's ability to hear or to behave in the manner of one who hears (Humphries 1977 *in* Bauman 2004:13; Myers and Fernandes 2009:31-32).

problems among the deaf are related to the limitations (and failings) of deaf educational models, and the inherent difficulties involved with auditory processing experienced by deaf individuals.

The oral method involves teaching spoken language through the use of phonetics and associated methods. But because deaf people cannot hear, or have serious hearing impairments, phonetic approaches for teaching literacy can be problematic for many deaf children. Nevertheless, oral techniques continue to dominate the educational system worldwide. Oral educational models see the integration of deaf children into the larger society as extremely important. The idea is to normalize and assimilate deaf children by teaching them to speak (Baynton 1992:16; Branson and Miller 1993). Even though oralism, augmented by powerful hearing aids or the cochlear implant, is successful in some cases, it is not miraculous. In addition to the difficulties deaf people face with spoken communication, purely oral teaching methodologies may hinder their ability to communicate amongst themselves using sign language. Also, it is worth considering the sociological and psychological effects that may result from children and parents having no shared language for communication during the critical period for linguistic development. Deaf children who are placed directly into mainstream education with an emphasis on their integration into spoken language comprehension and production, may face a negation of the way they are naturally experiencing the world perceptually, through vision. Some members of the american adult Deaf community fear that such children may lack important adult role models during their formative years as communication between young deaf children with their hearing parents, and hearing teachers, may be very limited (Scheetz 2012:26-47). [84]

My fieldwork in Chican presents a situation wherein hearing adults make themselves accessible to deaf children, as parents and as role models, via learning sign language. The approach of teaching the hearing parents of deaf children to

[84] I only briefly touch on the long standing debate between proponents of oral versus signed communication (Section 3.4, *Oralism* and 3.5, *Deaf culture*); these debates are well documented elsewhere (Andrews, Leigh, and Weiner 2004; Lane 1999 [1992]). More recently, these deliberations have become known as the Bilingual-Bicultural (Bi-Bi) versus the auditory-verbal therapy approach.

communicate using sign language is not currently widely accepted, and medical practitioners and educators continue to emphasize the possibilities for the normalization of deaf children via teaching them spoken language exclusively. Nevertheless, interest in the use of sign language for communication does appear to be growing, especially among parents who feel they may be able to establish linguistic communication with their hearing children (prior to the usual language explosion that happens at approximately two years of age) using sign language (Acredolo and Goodwyn 2002). However, the idea that babies can learn to produce sign language before they are able to produce spoken language resonates with long standing ideas about the inferiority of signed languages, in terms of linguistic complexity.

Proponents of oral education affiliated with the use of assistive hearing devices, and those who advocate the use of (natural) signed languages, disagree vehemently about how to approach deaf education (Gordon 1892; Lane 1993; Ling 1984; Numbers 1974; Scheetz 2012; Van Cleve 1993).[85] During the late nineteenth century, arguments about the superiority of spoken to signed languages were fervent, and oral methods for deaf education took precedence over instruction in signed languages. Prior to that time sign language was accepted as essential for educating deaf students, and during the better part of the eighteenth century communication in signed language was used for the education of deaf children in schools (Gordon 1892; Van Cleve 1993). However, at the second International Congress on the Education of the Deaf (ICED) held in Milan, Italy in 1880, the exclusive use of oralism in schools was established. It was decided that the use of manual communication of any kind would prevent, or restrict, the growth of speech and language skills in children; the use of sign language became strictly forbidden in schools for the deaf (Baynton 1993:4; Moores 1996). Although that decision was recently overturned at the 21st ICED meeting held in Vancouver, British Columbia (2010), recognizing a Deaf person's right to

[85] The documentary film *Sound and Fury* (2000), and its sequel, *Sound and Fury: six years later* (2006) reviews current debates in deaf education. For more information see http://www.pbs.org/wnet/soundandfury/.

education in sign language if they so choose, oral educators continue to believe that the use of sign language will have adverse effects on the development of speech and language in deaf children.[86]

## 3.4 Oralism

Alexander Graham Bell (1847-1922) was a leading figure in the establishment of oral education for deaf children in the United States. He considered himself a teacher of deaf students and wrote a number of influential papers and speeches on the topic of deafness and education. One particularly controversial paper, titled *Memoir Upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race*, explains his negative perception of deaf residential schools (Bell 1969 [1883]; 1920:339-341; Bruce 1973; Van Cleve 1993:283-286). Bell thought that residential schools for the deaf, where sign language was being used, should be abolished as he feared that interaction between deaf people would lead to the production of a "defective race of human beings" (Bell 1969 [1883]:41). He believed exclusively in oral methods of education and thought that signing would impede the development of speech.[87] His primary opponent, Edward Miner Gallaudet, promoted a collaborative approach which incorporated both signing and speech training.

In 1864 Edward Miner Gallaudet (1837-1917) became the president of the National Deaf Mute College in Washington D.C. At the time, education for deaf people was largely based in sign language, and Gallaudet was a leading figure in establishing a *combined* method, incorporating some speech training into deaf classrooms (Valentine 1993). He recognized the success of oral instruction in some cases, and implemented it in schools across the country. Yet even though sign language use was forbidden in schools, deaf people continued to sign in private, and what is now called American Sign Language persisted as the preferred language for the majority of deaf people in North America (MacDougall

[86] Details about the 2010 conference in Vancouver can be found at, http://www.wfdeaf.org/news/21st-international-congress-on-the-education-of-the-deaf-iced-in-july-2010-in-vancouver-canada.

[87] It is important to note that Bell was a complex figure, and was himself married to a deaf woman who was educated through his oral methodology.

1991).[88] Even though he had originally promoted the *combined* approach, in retaliation to Bell's pure oralism, Gallaudet ended up defending the use of sign language for deaf education, and in 1899 he wrote *Must the Sign-Language Go*? (Gallaudet 1899).[89]

Although linguists now recognize that deaf sign languages possess structural qualities equivalent to spoken languages, oralists fear that sign language use will stunt linguistic development in deaf children (Battison 1978; Brentari 1991; Higgens 1980; Lane and Grosjean 1980; Liddell 1990; Liddell and Johnson 1989; Padden and Humphries 1988; Padden and Perlmutter 1987; Pettito et al. 2001, 1994; Sandler 1986; Scheetz 2012; Stokoe 1960; Studdert-Kennedy and Bellugi 1980; Van Cleve 1993). Proponents of oral education prohibit the use of signed communication in favor of increased access to speech information through high-gain hearing aids, directional microphones, radio-frequency microphones, multi-channel cochlear implants, and early spoken language instruction (Baynton 1993; Gordon 1892; Lane 1993; Ling 1976; Marschark and Spencer 2003; Moores 1996:233-259; Numbers 1974).[90] The interdiction of sign language, and the difficulty of teaching speech and reading to deaf children (with no shared means of instructional communication), compromises the social and emotional development of deaf children in many cases (Higgens and Nash 1996; Mindel and McCay 1966). Negative reactions toward medical models of deafness by deaf users of sign languages led to the emergence of what is known as a cultural model of deafness, which does not see being deaf as a pathology to be treated, but as a difference to be celebrated.

## 3.5 Deaf culture

Deaf people who reject oralism, and use sign language exclusively, consider themselves members of a cultural group called "Deaf culture" and they

[88] The sign language used in the United States was only recognized as American Sign Language during the 1960's.
[89] For a review of the shift from manual methods to speech training see Gordon (1892).
[90] Extensive information about Oralism is available on the AG Bell Association website: www.agbell.org. Local oral schools also provide detailed information about Oral approaches toward deaf education, eg; the Montreal Oral School for the Deaf, http://www.montrealoralschool.com/ . Access date: June 2012.

refer to themselves as Deaf, using a capital "D". Members of Deaf culture cite sign language use as a defining characteristic of their shared sense of identity (Lane 1999 [1992]; Lane and Bahan 1996; Moores 1996:26-28; Padden and Humphries 1988; 2005; Senghas and Moanghan 2002). They also assert that Deaf people share a common worldview.

The emergence of Deaf culture in the late 1980's was dramatically brought to public attention with the *Deaf President Now* movement at Gallaudet University, in Washington D.C. (1988). The consolidation of Deaf people into a cultural group provided validation of their deafness as a *difference* as opposed to a *deficit*, as it is perceived by medical clinicians. Deaf efforts to gain recognition as a distinct cultural group may have been driven by the prospect of freedom from the stigma surrounding disability in society, but above that, the choice to use sign language and a preference to associate primarily with other Deaf people culminated in the movement's mantra, *Deaf Pride* (Andrews, Leigh and Weiner 2004:10-13). Yet as useful as the concept of Deaf culture has been as a tool of empowerment for deaf people, the emergence of this cultural identity in response to systematic social discrimination provides insight into the role that social alienation plays in the formation, and assertion, of minority group identities. Experiencing discrimination within the larger society may be less daunting when allied with others who have like-experiences, thereby giving rise to the consolidation of marginalized people into distinct groups within society.

Although linguistic recognition of sign language is key to assertions about Deaf cultural identity, when we examine this group identity, it is worth considering not only factors that *unite* members but also those that *distinguish* members from the larger society. As with any minority group, discrimination may heighten feelings of belonging between in-group members who share similar experiences within the larger society. The solidarity shared between in-group members of marginalized groups, which was absent for them growing up as individuals in the broader society, may give rise to feelings of empowerment associated with oppositional identity assertions.

From a socio-linguistic perspective, deaf sign languages resemble spoken languages (Lucas 1996:259-308). The dialectical variations present in spoken languages are also evident with users of sign language; signing styles are contextually sensitive to factors such as age, gender, education, and socio-economic status (Battison 1978; Pettito 1994:3). As do members of other linguistic communities, users of particular signed languages abide by (tacit) rules of politeness and behavioral norms. They also participate in social clubs, religious organizations, sports events, and enjoy newspapers, journals and other publications (Higgens 1980; Moores 1996:26-28; Padden and Humphries 1988; Schein 1993; Schein and Stewart 1995:162-165).[91] Aspects of social life such as artistic expressions though theatre and dance, or telling jokes, are also present within the Deaf community.[92]

Defining oneself in comparison to a generalized "other", in this case deaf versus hearing, represents an oppositional model of identity construction. With Deaf culture human identity is essentially reduced to two mutually exclusive forms, 1) people in the Deaf World, and 2) people in the Hearing World. Although it may seem easier to accept that some type of shared understanding exists between all Deaf people than it does to envision Hearing people as forming a cultural group, actually, experiences of people with hearing loss mirror the complexity of identity among hearing persons. Just as not all hearing people identify themselves as being members of Hearing culture, not all people with hearing loss identity with Deaf culture. Internal conflict between people who experience any degree of hearing loss pervades discussions about Deaf identity in

[91] Examples of Deaf newspapers are *Deaf News* and *SIGNnews*. Journals include the Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education (Oxford University Press), American Annals of the Deaf (Gallaudet University Press), Deaf Worlds - International Journal of Deaf Studies (Forest Books), Deafness and Education International, and Sign Language Studies (John Wiley & Sons Ltd.).
[92] For further explanation of the "Deaf community" see Ceil Lucas's *Multicultural Aspects of Deaf Communities* (1996), *Understanding Deafness Socially* (Higgins and Nash 1996), *Outsiders in a Hearing World* (Higgens 1980), *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* (Padden and Humphries 1988), *Deaf People* (Andrews, Leigh and Weiner 2004), *Open Your Eyes. Deaf Studies Talking* (Bauman 2008), *deaf subjects* (Brueggeman 2009), *When the Mind Hears. A History of the Deaf* (Lane 1989 [1984]), *Inside Deaf Culture* (Padden and Humphries 2005), and also Erting, Johnson, and Smith 1994; Carty 2006; Lane 1999 [1992]; Moores 1996:26-28; Sacks 1989; Van Cleve 1993.

terms of the way deaf people define themselves, and how they communicate. Members of Deaf culture refer to themselves as Deaf while people with hearing loss who use assistive hearing devices may reject the term deaf altogether, preferring to be called hearing impaired, oral deaf, or hard of hearing, depending on the extent of hearing loss and on communication modality preference.

Deaf studies theorists are now drawing attention to the need to move beyond specific assertions of Deaf identity, aligning Deaf identity with the experiences of persons within other minority groups, suggesting that Deaf identity represents another instance of a hierarchically defined identity category (Davis 2008:322-324). Others draw parallels between colonized peoples and deaf peoples, suggesting that the deaf are akin to any vulnerable marginalized people, having experienced linguistic and cultural colonization at the hands of oral educators (Ladd 2008:42-59). On the other hand, analyses of *deafnicity* (deaf ethnicity) call into question the concept of ethnicity itself, and its value for representing peoples who feel affiliated by virtue of heritage, customs, language, religion and ideology, or shared worldview. Nevertheless, some theorists continue to use modified versions of Adam Smith's concept of *ethnie* (1986) to construct, maintain, and recognize the characteristics of Deaf identity (Eckert 2010:317; Erting 1978; Lane 2005; Lane, Pillard & Hedberg 2011; Smith, Heilbroner, and Malone 1986). Contemplations about deafnicity, including the usefulness of adopting ethnicity as a point for self reference, suggest the potential dangers of asserting categories of ethnicity, or minority status, to define Deaf identity within society in opposition to audism[93] (Davis 2008:323; Dunn 2008:235-249; Eckert 2010:317-319) .

The situation in Chican, where no ethnicity associated with deafness is active, helps clarify deliberations surrounding Deaf identity, contributing to our understanding not only about the role that hierarchies of normalcy have in alienating persons who are different, but also elucidating the way shared

[93] Audism describes an approach toward deafness that privileges hearing and sound thereby stigmatizing deafness. Tom Humphries coined the term audism in his doctoral dissertation, "Across cultures (deaf-hearing) language learning" (1977).

differences within a group may give rise to the emergence of shared consciousness of kind (Guibernau and Rex 1997). Weber suggests that ethnic identities are rooted in presumed affiliations between politically interrelated group members, and that "such an effect is created by the language group, which is the bearer of a specific 'cultural possession of the mases' (Massenkuturgut) and makes mutual understanding (Verstehen) possible or easier" (Weber 1997:19). The situation for deaf people in Chican broadens conceptions about Deaf persons as identifying with one another based on shared experiences of deafness, and especially sign language use, by presenting an example wherein the entire community identifies deafness as an in-group characteristic, thereby averting the emergence of deafnicity.

## 3.6 Deaf culture in Chican?

The principle feature of Deaf culture – sign language use – is strongly present in Chican. However, the fact that hearing people also use sign language detracts from the importance of this feature as a defining characteristic of identity for deaf members of the community. Witnessing the ease with which deaf persons operate socially in this context provides a starting point for exploring the role that communication plays in experiences of social inclusion, or alienation. Although deaf people in Chican use sign language to communicate, acceptance of this mode of communication within mainstream community life makes it seem unlikely that a distinct Deaf identity would emerge. As far as the main tenets of Deaf culture are concerned, deaf people in Chican do share a worldview but it is not socially restrictive in that it is shared with members of the entire community, both deaf and hearing. The crucial elements that make this possible are, 1) the use of sign language by hearing people, and 2) the absence of social discrimination against deafness. In the context of Chican, the coalescence of deaf people into a separate group is unnecessary as there is widespread acceptance of deafness without prejudice. Elsewhere, in situations where hearing people do not use sign language, and *restrict* the use of sign language by deaf people in favor of speech training, deaf people may have limited experiences of communication and Deaf culture may emerge as an adaptive mechanism for coping with relative

experiences of marginalization within hearing society. In the context of Yucatán, state officials, medical practitioners, and special education professionals see the presence of deafness in Chican as highly problematic, placing the community in a similar vulnerable status within the state that members of Deaf culture occupy within hearing society. Unlike in the case of Deaf ethnicity, or Deaf cultural identity, sign language does not act as a defining feature of deaf identity but rather as a tool facilitating deaf involvement in mainstream community identity.

During a gender-equality workshop held in Chican with at least one hundred children present, a deaf boy of five years old assertively rushed to the front of the line at the opening event.[94] Even though the workshop was being carried out in spoken language this young boy was confident in his efforts to lead the group, having received basic interpretation of instructions, in sign language, from his family and friends. This suggests that being able to communicate has positive implications for self assertion, and draws attention to the utility of sign language for deaf participation in social, educational activities. In this case, the local propensity for sign language use helped facilitate this deaf child's involvement in the social program, suggesting the positive impact that acceptance of communication in sign language may have on the wellbeing of deaf residents. The cultivation of self esteem in deaf children, wherein they develop positive or negative feelings about their physical and cognitive attributes, is likely influenced by collective social perceptions of particular phenomena such as deafness (Andrews, Leigh and Weiner 2004:187). As we have seen, viewpoints about deafness as a disabling and undesirable condition were historically linked to difficulties with spoken language, and sign language use was viewed as a primitive form of communication, potentially inhibiting the integration (normalization) of deaf children into regular society. From an obverse standpoint, in Chican, collective acceptance of sign language use averts constructions of deafness as a disabling, undesirable condition. In other circumstances, realizations about the full linguistic potential of signed languages have also

[94] Children went to the front of the *palacio* in *el centro* where the workshop was being held, and they drew images associated with either males or females on large Bristol boards.

influenced perceptions of deafness in positive ways. Owing to mainstream pathological approaches toward deafness as a disability, the group of deaf people who consider sign language use as an aspect of their identity *distinguished* themselves from the general population by asserting the culture of the Deaf, whereas in Chican deaf identity assertion is not necessary for deaf individuals to cultivate feelings of belonging within community life.

Taken in consideration with negative attitudes toward deafness as a disabling condition, it is not surprising that Deaf users of sign language imagine themselves in opposition to the Hearing world, and see themselves as constituting a distinct cultural group related to shared experiences of communication using sign language. On the other hand, the acceptance of sign language in Chican allows deaf individuals access to the same sources for identity formation as hearing people, and no identity specifically linked to deafness has emerged. Other cases where hearing people use sign language with frequency, thereby enabling the incorporation of deaf persons into economic, religious, familial, and social life, have been noted in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts; Heinneker, New Hampshire; Sandy River Valley in the United States, and also among indigenous peoples in the community of El Sayed, Israel (Andrews, Leigh and Weiner 2004:25; Fox 2007). The recent introduction of a cochlear implant in El Sayed, Israel – where sign language use is already widespread among hearing residents – cautions the use of assistive hearing technologies in circumstances where deafness is not understood as pathology.

The documentary film "*Voices from El-Sayed, change comes to the world`s largest deaf community*", chronicles the arrival of the cochlear implant into the Bedouin community of El Sayed, where like Chican, deaf residents communicate freely with friends, family, and work associates using a sign language called Al Sayid Bedouin Sign Language (ABSL) (Leshem 2008; Meir et al. 2010). In this context, audiologists were not able to interest any adult deaf persons in using the cochlear implant, and some deaf men describe their view that the implant would not work, and a deaf person would end up wanting to remove it (although the

implant can be turned off, it cannot be removed from the inner ear without additional surgery).

However, intrigued by the prospect that their deaf child would be able to learn to speak, one hearing family decided to implant their three year old son. Issues began almost immediately, related to limited electricity access (available only from 5PM until midnight) making it impossible for the family to charge the implant without hooking up a loud generator at night, when the young boy is asleep and not using the device.[95] Medical practitioners and audiologists explained to the family (who were disappointed with their son's continued silence after receiving the implant) that they need to work vigilantly to teach him how to speak, and to hear, and they are constantly walking up behind the child banging pots and pans, or blowing into noise makers. The environment within the household becomes slightly chaotic in terms of noise, and viewers cannot help but question the usefulness of banging pots behind a child, rather than communicating with him as they had been doing previously, using sign language. Struggling to elicit spoken language from their boy, the family often uses signs to indicate the items they want him to pronounce. At one point, during a medical appointment where the audiologist allows the father to listen to a simulated version of the way his son is likely perceiving sound, the father says that if he had been made aware of the way the implant would work he would not have gone through with the procedure at all.

In Chican, I am concerned that the use of hearing aids and speech training or cochlear implants may not be introduced by medical practitioners in an ethically sound manner, with adequate and language appropriate explanations, instruction, and support services, and most importantly, with the consent of deaf individuals. And if biomedical approaches do reach the community, in order to respect local communicative customs and ideologies surrounding deafness, they

[95] Preliminary research into the feasibility of using the cochlear implant in this context was obviously not undertaken.

should enhance communication skills, not seek to replace sign language use with spoken language.[96]

By the end of the film the boy who received the cochlear implant in El Sayed is beginning to mimic one syllable words. It would be interesting to carry out another research project in the community investigating local reactions toward the implant, especially coming from other deaf persons. Owing to the widespread use of sign language in this community it seems unlikely that this deaf child will cease using sign language altogether.

## 3.7 Understanding sensation and language

To better understand the significance of communication modality for deaf persons I now discuss the relationship between sensation and language. Historically, the classification of sensory experience led to dualistic conceptualizations about the relationship between consciousness and physical existence. But the idea that the senses are activated through environmental stimuli presumes that the environment exists in some objective form prior to perception. On the other hand, theories about the significance of sensation as a subjective phenomenon, and also as a symbolically mediated aspect of social life, illustrate the embodied and trans-individual nature of experience.

The term *sensorium* refers to the entire sensory apparatus as an operational complex (Ong 1991:28). Historically, differences in the nature of the information gained via distinct sensory channels led to the assumption that sensory modalities operate independently (Rée 1999:332-339). In Western society, common sense understandings have segregated the senses from one another and privileged visual and textual representations over the auditory or tactile (Howes 1991:2-6). Yet despite this disaggregated model of sensory experience, the human capacity to relate perceptual information across different sensory channels enables for comprehensive understandings of apparently disconnected phenomena in the environment (Marks 1978). The sound of a bird chirping may be automatically connected to a bird we see flying overhead, and a slight breeze can without much

[96] My engagement with the peoples of Chican brings to light the need for recognition of the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language as a maternal language used by the residents of Chican.

effort be connected to a ceiling fan swirling overhead.[97] Basically, we understand sensory stimuli holistically, and assume connections between percepts that occur simultaneously. As an illustration of this phenomenon, Voltaire observed that upon having his sight restored a blind man would not necessarily recognize an object that he was already familiar with, by means of touch. "The carriage that I heard, the carriage that I saw, and the carriage that I touched are three absolutely separate objects of my three senses, and between them there is no immediate relationship whatsoever" (1738:16, 78).[98]

Ranking the senses into five capacities dates back to Aristotle. He believed that an intrinsic relationship between the senses and the five natural elements – earth, air, fire, water and quintessence – led to the establishment of the five senses in Western culture (Classen 1993:1-5). Aristotle prioritized the senses in accordance with their appearance on the human body, and sight was placed at the top of the hierarchy followed by hearing, smell, taste and touch. He suggests that sight, hearing, and smell are associated with humanity while taste and touch are considered as animal-like faculties (Synnott 1993:132; 1991:61-65). In *Nicomachean Ethics* he clarifies this evaluation, saying that "sight is superior to touch in purity, and hearing and smell to taste; the pleasures, therefore, are similarly superior, and those of thought superior to these" (1776a; 1984b:1858). In *Eudemian Ethics* he goes on to state, "temperance and profligacy have to do with those two senses whose objects are alone felt by and give pleasure and pain to brutes; and these are the senses of taste and touch" (1230b;1984a:1949).

This scheme for ordering the senses persisted in social theory and was later reiterated by Hegel who suggested that the forehead, eyes, and ears were human while the nose, mouth, and chin were more animal-like faculties (Hegel 2010 [1975]:728-737; Synnott 1993:141). Associating the lower half of the face with animal abilities to locate food through sense of smell, Hegel suggests that the other organs (hearing and vision) are added "only as servants and helpers: the

[97] These assertions depend on individuals having access to the information perceived via the sensory channels mentioned in the examples (vision, sound, and tactility).
[98] This was later verified by research establishing the visual perception depends on early visual learning (Hebb 1949).

nose for sniffing out food, the eye, less important for spying it" (Hegel 2010 [1975]:728).

The empirical formulations of medieval philosophy followed from Aristotle's view that 'nothing is in the intellect that was not first in sensation' ("*nihilest in intellectu quod non primus fuerit in sensu*") (Rée 1999:332; Aristotle 1980:Book V, Sec. 3:113a-113b). The realization that phenomena such as movement, shape, size, and number are accessible through but many sensory channels, not just one, led Aristotle to this idea (Aristotle 1968: Book II, Sec. 6:418a). His observation of the human capacity to distinguish between black and white or bitter and sweet, but not between white and sweet, predicated later formulations about sensation, reflection, and language (Locke 1959 [1689]:Book II, 1 Sec. 3-4:105; Book III, Sec. 1-6:3-7). Rationalist thinkers went on to develop ideas about reflection attributing agency to the mind and to our capacity to reflexively contemplate our own understandings. According to rationalist ideals, the human capacity to interpret sensation logically is the basis of meaningful experience.

Plato also privileged vision in his understanding of sensation but he favored cognition and rationality, as opposed to sensation, in the creation of meaningful experience (Synnott 1993:132). Despite the ordered representational system established by Aristotle, he recognized the problematic aspects of understanding *aesthesis* (sensory perception) in disaggregated terms. He proposed that "common sense" (*sensus communitus*) forms as an internal counterpart to sensory experience enabling the cognitive combination of sensory experience (Rée 1999:332).

The human cognitive capacity for gestalt completion suggests that both vision and hearing operate pre-objectively. For example, the image of an inkblot transposed onto another image does not make the underlying image incomprehensible to the human eye (Figure 3, the letter "B" covered by ink blot). When the inkblot is in place we are able to perceive the underlying image in its entirety. Yet when the inkblot is removed, it becomes difficult to form a

comprehensive understanding of the remaining fragments (Figure 4) (Bregman 2005:32–35).[99]

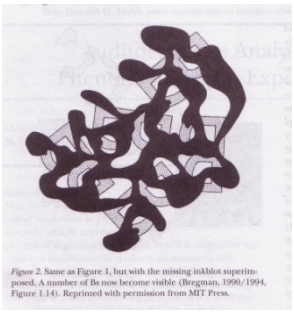

*Figure 2.* Same as Figure 1, but with the missing inkblot superimposed. A number of Bs now become visible (Bregman, 1990/1994, Figure 1.14). Reprinted with permission from MIT Press.

Figure 3 (Bregman 2005:34).

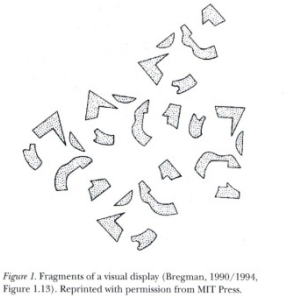

*Figure 1.* Fragments of a visual display (Bregman, 1990/1994, Figure 1.13). Reprinted with permission from MIT Press.

Figure 4 (Bregman 2005:33).

Gestalt completion works at the auditory level as well in that slightly fragmented melodies, when inserted with louder bursts of tone, retain their melodic quality without interruption. The louder tones are perceived as 'hiding' the original tone and the brain restores aspects of the melody it predicts are missing (Bregman 2005:34). These examples imply that the interaction between intellect and sensation alter our perceptual impressions of familiar forms, sounds, or geometric figures.

## 3.8 Perception and language

The growth of the parietal lobe in humans enabled cross-modal association whereby sensory input from more than one modality can be combined into higher order concepts and images. This cross modal human capacity makes linguistic operations such as metaphor and figurative speech possible, enabling visual images to act as the basis for understanding linguistic concepts and messages usually made available through sound (words) (Armstrong 2011:9-13). Drawing on this cognitive capacity, concepts can be communicated not only through spoken words but also through the visual images conveyed using signed languages (Napier 1970:181). Vision was privileged in evolutionary terms;

[99] Merleau-Ponty provides another example of perceptual pre-objectivity; he discusses the experience of seeing three lines which once cognized are recognized as a triangle, and suggests that geometric figures are understood in relation to cognitive schemata rather than based on visual information itself (Merleau-Ponty 1962:7).

primates depended greatly on their ability to maneuver their environment via visual evaluations making possible movement between trees, grasping, hunting, etc. Theories about linguistic communication often stipulate a strong gestural component associated with the origins of human language (Armstrong and Wilcox 2003:305-318; Harnard, Steklis, & Lancaster 1976; Wescott and Hewes 1974). The vocal apparatus is the physical conduit for the expression of concepts in spoken language, and the ears provide the receiving channel, via audition. With sign language, concepts are expressed utilizing three dimensional space via kinesthesia, involving hand and facial movements comprehended through vision (Scheetz 2012:100; Wilbur 2003).

Recent studies in neuroplasticity are consistent with Chican assertions about the heightened observational capacities of deaf people, suggesting that cognitive and linguistic capacities taking place in the auditory field for hearing individuals may do so in the visual field for persons who are deaf. In line with theories of sensory compensation, and considering the human capacity for cross modal cognition, it is not surprising that deaf people in Chican express visual representations of their experiences using sign language. What is noteworthy is the incorporation of sign language into regular local communication involving hearing persons as well, and the underlying seemingly uncontested acceptance of sensory compensation theory that appears to make this possible.[100] My experiences living with the people of Chican illustrate that perceptually, and linguistically, residents operate in interrelated terms with the idea of "filling-in" providing the basis for a common sense model that does not privilege the auditory over the visual kinesthetic field for communication.[101]

Walter Ong contemplates the heightened stress placed on audition as a medium of communication. He cites the contemporary importance of the telephone, radio, and television as a movement away from the hyper-visualism

[100] Given the educational options available in Chican it is unlikely that residents are familiar with sensory compensation theory, or the cross modal potential of the human mind in evolutionary terms. Nevertheless, communication modalities, styles, and customs in Chican are demonstrative of these phenomena.

[101] The idea of *filling-in* is discussed further in relation to multi-modal and trilingual language use, and also as a characteristic feature of kinship interdependence in terms of access to resources (see Section 7.8, *"Filling-in" for survival*, 7.9, *Community communication*.).

that emerged with the development of topography during the fifteenth century (1991:27-29). Georg Simmel also contemplated the relative value of sensation by comparing blindness to deafness (1921). He explains that it is easier to make sense out of sound without sight than it is to grasp what is happening in the visual field without sound. Relating this discussion to urban society he points out that the experience of living in a crowded environment surrounded by strangers may be comparable to the alienation deaf people experience on a regular basis. "One who sees without hearing is much more perplexed, and worried, than one who hears without seeing" (Simmel 1921:360 *in* Synnott 1993:148). Eliciting a similar perspective, Helen Keller described the condition of deafness as a greater source of alienation than that of being blind. She asserted that blindness cuts us off from things, but that deafness cuts us off from people. In a letter written to Dr. Kerr Love in 1910 (reprinted in *Helen Keller in Scotland: a personal record written by herself*) she says, "the problems of deafness are deeper and more complex, if not more important, than those of blindness. Deafness is a much worse misfortune. For it means the loss of the most vital stimulus—the sound of the voice that brings language, sets thoughts astir and keeps us in the intellectual company of man" (Keller 1933:68; Van Cleve 1987:36). In her advancing years, after a lifetime in silence and darkness, Keller concluded, "to be deaf is a greater affliction than to be blind...Hearing is the soul of knowledge and information of a high order. To be cut off from hearing is to be isolated indeed" (1933:68; Van Cleve 1987:125). [102]

However, it is noteworthy that the idea that deafness as problematic is not shared by members of Deaf culture, who see deafness as a *difference* providing the basis of an identity shared by others who cannot hear and express themselves using sign language.[103] The idea that deafness disconnects people from one

[102] For further information, and to read quotes from this 1933 source, please see the following link at Gaulladet University Library http://www.gallaudet.edu/library/research_help/research_help/frequently_asked_questions/people/helen_keller_quotes.html. Access date: June 2012

[103] Helen Keller was a student of Alexander Graham Bell, who as explained earlier, was a leading proponent of oral methods of deaf education which understand deafness as a *deficit* and seek to

another, causing isolation, is not the case for deaf persons who embrace the use of sign language and identify closely with others by means of visual communication. As well, deaf individuals who find success with communication using assistive hearing devices may not identify with the assertions made by Helen Keller regarding the relationship between deafness and isolation either. In observing metaphorical constructions of deafness as an isolating condition it is worth taking note of differences between mainstream public perceptions of deafness compared with the self understandings shared between members of the deaf community who feel a sense of belonging *owing* to their deafness. For example, Douglas C. Baynton suggests,

> The most persistent images of deafness among hearing people have been ones of isolation and exclusion, and these are images that are consistently rejected by deaf people who see themselves as members of a deaf community and culture. Feelings of isolation may be less common for members of this tightly knit community than among the general population. The metaphors of deafness – of isolation and foreignness, of animality, of darkness and silence – are projections reflecting the needs and standards of the dominant culture, not the experiences of most deaf people (1997:143).

For members of the Deaf community, deafness acts as a source for feelings of belonging rather than as a source of isolation. Deafness connects deaf people with other deaf people the same way that hearing enables communication between persons who use speech. Differences in attitudes towards the identity shared between deaf persons and that shared (or not) between hearing persons may be related to the fact that society values communication in speech and hearing; those who cannot speak or hear become isolated, and problematic, from the viewpoint of the majority. It seems likely that in situations where speech and hearing are not paramount for communication, or not the only means of communication,

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integrate deaf persons into hearing society via teaching them to speak, and discouraging the use of sign language.

mainstream attitudes towards deafness as an isolating condition may not be as prevalent. Perhaps increased exposure to sign language may transform attitudes that many hearing persons have towards deafness as an isolating phenomenon. Common metaphors in the English language such as "living in silence", or "falling on deaf ears", imply that deaf persons are isolated and unable to comprehend social messages. However, as indicated, this is not necessarily the case. It is worth realizing that a hearing person surrounded by a group of deaf people communicating in sign language would feel as alienated as a deaf person (who cannot hear or read lips) may feel in the midst of a spoken conversation between hearing people.[104]

The situation in my field site indicates that constructions of deafness as a disability may be related to viewpoints about the superior status of the language spoken by the dominant majority, a phenomenon we have also seen in the cases where European colonialist sought to impose their language onto indigenous peoples. The acceptance of the use of sign language as an aspect of language, rather than as a form of communication that isolates deaf persons, may diminish the stigma attached to deafness within mainstream society. Models privileging the role of hearing and speech for social participation have devalued sign language in social terms.

## 3.9 Re-conceptualizing individual and collective experience

Albrecht Durer's *Man Drawing Reclining Woman* marks the beginning of the production of static, objectified versions of reality. He erects a grid between himself and his female subject, objectifying her image, while providing viewers with the opportunity to contemplate self-awareness in artistic production. Sensory anthropologists criticize this technique for its purely visual and objectifying quality; the grid between subject and painter filters out sensations of smell, sound, taste and texture, objectifying the female body (Howes 1991:4-5). The application of linear perspective to artistic production imposed linear structure onto the visual sphere, and generated a bias for representation over actuality,

[104] This is also the case in situations where one does not speak the same language as others.

which persists up to the present day through the images of popular culture (Drobnick 2005:271; Gordon 2005:ii-xxiv; Howes 2005:399; McLuhan 1962; Ong 1991:28-29). Anthropologist Michael Jackson relates the emergence of occularcentrism to a spectator theory of knowledge, citing John Dewey's assertion that "the theory of knowledge is modeled after what was supposed to take place in vision" (Dewey 1929:23; Jackson 1989:5-7).

In Cartesian terms, knowledge depends on human interaction with an external perceptual field. In this way, meaning is based on the interpretation of sensory experience.[105] Cartesian models have permeated common understandings about the relationship between thought and external reality, and experience of all kinds has been coded in dualistic terms (mind/body, subject/object, nature/culture, human/animal, etc). However, social regulations and controls placed on the body have been discussed in terms of *body politics*, which affect both the individual and social aspects of bodily experience (Scheper-Hughes and Locke 1997:6-47; 1994:5). In a similar vein, Michel Foucault contemplates the individualized body as an object that cages the soul through its objectification and its subordination to the dominant forces of society (Foucault 1977:25-31). From this perspective, the body lacks autonomy and is dependent on either individual or collective intellectual assertions for its positioning in the world. Theories about the mind as the subject of culture, and the body as a biological and naturalized object, follow from semiotic, symbolic, and cognitive assertions about the primacy of cognition in human experience. On the other hand, studying communicative behavior symbolically frees ethnography from the confines of linguistic analysis, enabling access to the full semiotic dimension of human affairs (Basso and Selby 1976:1-9; Csordas 1994).[106] An embodied approach to sensation, as an intellectually

[105] The stark separation between mind and matter proposed by Descartes suggests dualistic models for understanding knowledge and experience. Empirical, oppositional conceptualizations allowed for the application of mechanical scientific principles to the natural world, making modern science possible (Frost 1962 [1942]:32-33). Cartesian models assume that science is capable of providing objective accounts of the world of things, as if objects exist independently of the perceiving subject (Hospers 1997:171-199).

[106] Semiotic and symbolic anthropology envision the construction of the cultural world in terms of signs and symbols, while cognitive approaches hightlight the potential of knowledge models to reveal the mind as the source of cultural reality (Csordas 1994; D'Andrade 1995; Geertz 1983).

interpretable system operating hermeneutically, means perceptual experience is shaped by the forces of context while simultaneously evoking the deep structure underlying contextual circumstances.[107] Reconfiguring the subject-object dichotomy underlying the classification of experience and peoples enables for more nuanced understandings of the way subjectivities inform collectively shared models of reality. Ethnographically, to uncover the way subjective ideals of behavior give rise to socially shared dispositions, researchers seek local understandings that operate beneath structured, linguistic representations of reality.[108]

The works of Edmund Leach and Mary Douglas see language as the primary means for categorizing experience and objectifying the world, overlooking the significance of sensation for interpreting individual and social experiences in some regards (D'Andrade 1995; Douglas 1970; Leach 1976; Metzger & Williams 1966:389-407). Moving beyond cognitive models with their tendency to provide conceptual images coded in textual and binary terms, practice theorists advocate that ethnography should *evoke* understandings of behavioral and cultural phenomena by devoting attention to the means by which mental and practical experiences are played out during the course of everyday life (Basso and Selby 1976:1-9; Lave 1988).

In favor of a dialectic perspective of language, the self, and the world as lived-in, Thomas Csordas points to the error in privileging language as the source of self definition.[109] He suggests that subjectivities in force prior to language, deriving from personal experiences of sensation and perception, are not value-free or void of meaning. The paradigm of embodiment can be used to conceptualize the body as an agent in the generation of cultural reality, as well as an object upon which individual and cultural consciousness act (Csordas 1994:5).[110] The cognitive processes that dissociate the body from the mind occur at the level of

[107] My expression of this assertion originates from my reading of Walter Ong (1991:25-30).
[108] Describing sensation in linguistically coded terms privileges structural influences over the subjective experiences of individuals.
[109] Heidegger speaks of language not as representing experience, but as a means by which people "disclose" their being-in-the-world (Csordas 1994:5).
[110] Csordas suggests that the body needs to be re-conceptualized, not as a biological object, but as an experiencing agent (1994:3).

objectification, once the self has emerged from the subjective, pre-objective state of being.[111] Whereas dualistic visions distinguish the mind from the body – thereby separating nature from culture – the concept of embodiment embeds human experience by integrating the mind and body. The emergent paradigm of *emplacement* goes even further, suggesting the "sensuous interrelationship between body-mind-environment" (Howes 2005:7).[112]

Communication provides the means by which the interaction between sensation and consciousness can be performed, and the unified embodiment of these fields implies the ecologically embedded experience of being. Human capacities are realized by virtue of language becoming known, and embodied, at the juncture between subjective sensory experience and structured cognition; linkages between perception, expression, and practice are mutually constitutive forces in lived experience (Csordas 1994).[113] Philosopher David Bohm suggests, "what we perceive through the senses is empty space…is the ground for the existence of everything, including our selves. Things that appear to our senses are derivative forms and their true meaning can only be seen when we consider the plenum, in which they are generated and sustained, and into which they must ultimately vanish" (1983:191-192).

Even though sensations appear as individual, once perceptional impressions are communicated they become representations that form shared conceptual frameworks for understanding the world (Ingold 2000:158, 164). Individual sensations and consciousness are performed through communication, making our experiences available to others. In Chican people take for granted the

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[111] Pre-objectivity relates to a state of being characterized by undifferentiated understandings about existence in time and space (Dreyfus 1995 [1991]:13-29). Heidegger uses *Dasein* to explain the relationship between existence and the process of understanding existence and in this sense *Dasein* does not refer to "what" something is, but simply that something "is" (Dreyfus 1995 [1991]:14, 29; King 2001).

[112] Howes suggests linkages between emplacement and experiences of familiariy associated with feelings of being at home. Conversely, *displacement* is often associated with the experiences of socially marginalized groups (2005:7).

[113] For discussion of the significance of sensation in the social sciences refer to Classen (1998, 1993), Feld (2005, 1991, 1984:179-191), Feld and Basso (1996), Howes (2005, 2003, 1991), Jackson (1989), Ong (1969), Sacks (2005:25-42, 1989), and Synnott (1993). Further, a comprehensive list of references related to sensory research in the arts, humanities, and social sciences appears in the Sensory Formations Series (*Empire of the Senses. The Sensual Reader*) edited by David Howes (2005:404-406).

potential of the visual kinesthetic as a means for social communication. The decision to communicate using speech or sign language in this context is related to the presence of deaf people, but it also reflects broader shared understandings about the relationship between communication and sensory experience. In this way, the social atmosphere in Chican contributes to dialogue surrounding discrimination and the medicalisation of the body associated with socially constructed ideas of normalcy.

Human physical and cognitive variations are only considered as disabilities when they are portrayed as pathological states of being, or characteristics that deviate from standards of human experience deemed "normal" by a neurotypical majority. On the other hand, the concept of neurodiversity suggests that some conditions considered as disabilities are simply natural variations within the human condition (Jaarsma and Welin 2012).[114] Medical or pathological approaches toward deafness seek to "fix" hearing deficits, thereby enabling deaf individuals, who represent a neurodiverse minority, to operate within neurotypical hearing societies. The propensity for linguistic modality shifting in Chican dismantles theories that prioritize and normalize hearing as a condition necessary for communication. The use of sign language in the community means that deafness is incorporated into the locally shared neurotypical communication style, suggesting that sight and movement are useful capacities for linguistic expression. The Chican example demonstrates that being unable to hear may be viewed as a variation of human experience, rather than as a disability in need of a cure, depending on the capacity of the neurotypical majority to communicate using sign language.

## 3.10 Language and social labeling

In cases involving minority groups or socially stigmatized peoples, identity assertions may emerge to counter derogatory social labels. Is Deaf

[114] The term neurodiversity is generally credited to a sociologist named Judy Singer, who was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome, to explain social conceptions of the variable neurological characteristics of the human mind (Singer 1999 *in* Corker and French 1999). The neurodiversity movement emerged during the 1990's via on-line communications between groups of autistic persons, and is now associated with struggles for the civil rights of those diagnosed with developmental or neurodevelopmental disorders (Jaarsma and Welin 2012).

identity based primarily on modality of experience, or should we consider the role social discrimination has played in the emergence of Deaf culture? The situation I examined during my research sheds light on the constitution of group identities, and especially on the internal coherence of minority group identities compared to external assumptions about peoples who are subject to particular identity labels. My findings suggest that the classification of human beings based on shared characteristics does not necessarily reflect self or in-group understandings. In the contemporary transnational environment people often use identity labels strategically, asserting particular facets of their identity in particular contexts so as to gain access to social benefits or to avert social stigma. People are free to define themselves in terms of their career, their role in family life, their education, their athletic skills, and so forth. In essence, identity represents a negotiation of the way people envision themselves and/or the way they are perceived by others.

The hierarchical judgment of languages as being higher or lower depending on modality overlooks the paramount value communication holds between particular people, in particular contexts, for particular purposes. Like the deaf, indigenous peoples have been devalued for their use of local languages, and the imposition of European languages plays a central role in colonial projects. As already discussed, European colonialists believed that the indigenous peoples they encountered, in what is now called America, represented a previous stage of human evolution; indigenous usage of signed language supported this theory (Mallery 1972 [1881], 1882, 1880; Stam 1976; Tylor 1886). By associating indigenous sign languages with deaf sign languages, both groups were devalued in evolutionary terms (Baynton 1996:36-55; Baynton 1993; Darwin 1896:61; Tylor 1886). Indigenous peoples still experience challenges (and racism) owing to historical viewpoints about their inferiority, and of course, as a result of European colonialism.[115] Similarly, nineteenth century ideas linking speech with

[115] Some of the principal tactics used by colonialists to incite social change were the imposition of Christianity, land reform, language education (the imposition of either Spanish, Portuguese, English or French), and taxation (Farriss 1984, Jones 2000, Kicza 1993).

intelligence continue to shape oral approaches toward deaf education which prohibit the use of signed languages in favor of speech training.[116]

Exploring experiences of identity in my field site involved not only analyzing popular and historical conceptions about deafness and sign language, but also thinking critically about the relationship between language and identity classification more generally. In Chican, deafness does not pose constrictions on social identity as much as do hierarchical practices of social labeling that were elaborated in response to Spanish colonialism in Yucatán. The identity of being deaf in Chican does not seem to evoke oppositional identity assertions, but the concept of being Maya may.

Now turning to questions surrounding ethnic labelling, indigeneity, and what it means to embody Maya identity – both historically and in the contemporary transnational environment – I consider the way public viewpoints influence local experiences. Living as a marginalized community within state society, the people of Chican use adaptive measures to deal with deafness, and also to negotiate their identity labels strategically within the framework of state society. The experiences of identity I witnessed in my field site demonstrate the way identity labels can be harnessed as a means to revitalize customary ideologies and practices, stimulating a sense of integrity between members of a community. Conversely, the emerging possibilities involved with selective and variable assertions of indigenous identity in the Maya area today will become clearer.

# 4 MAYA IDENTITY?

## 4.1 The Maya area

The Maya area covers the entire Yucatán peninsula, including the states of Yucatán and Quintanaroo, the eastern portions of Chiapas and Tobasco, all of Belize, the Petén region of Guatemala (and parts of Alta Verapaz), and the

[116] Oral methods forbid the use of sign language, and children are taught to speak through various means, such as feeling the passage of air in their throat or by placing a hand in front of their mouth.

northwestern part of Honduras and El Salvador (Figure 5) (Blom 1971 [1936]:6; Coe 1993:11; Jones 2000:346; Wright 1989:3).

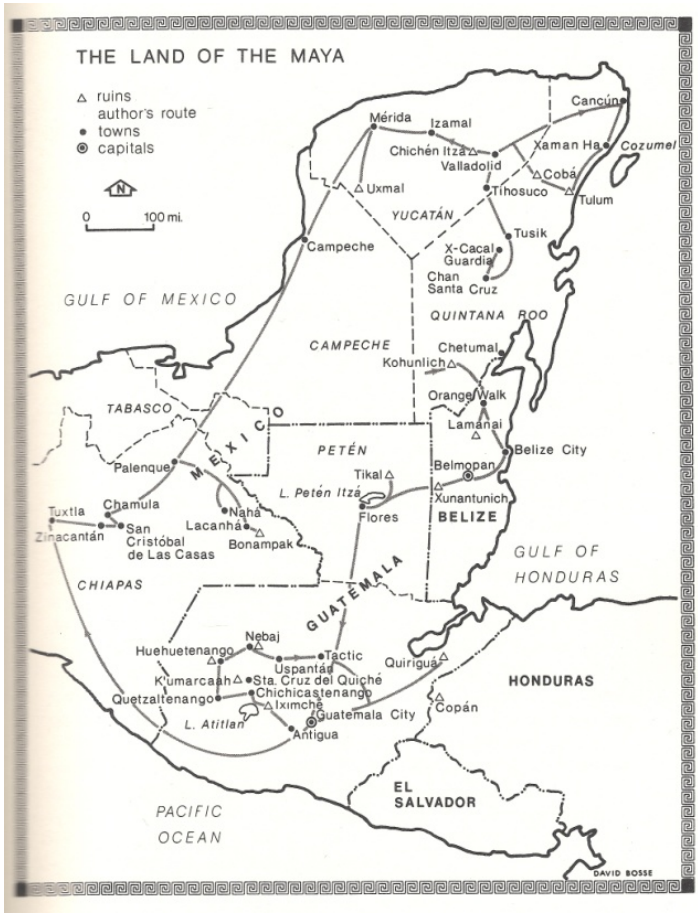


Figure 5: Map of the Maya area (Wright 1989:3)

At least twenty-three Mayan languages are spoken by indigenous peoples across the Maya Area.[117] These languages are divided into three main groups: 1) Queichean, Mamean, Kanjobal, and Chuj in Guatemala, 2) Tzeltal and Tzotzilin in Chiapas, Cholan, Chol and Chorti in the Usumacinta basin and Southern Yucatán, and 3) the Yucatec complex (Hammond 2000:201-202; Molesky-Poz 2006:177).[118] The diversity of these Mayan languages reflects the heterogeneity of the indigenous population living in the region. Even so, popular

[117] The idea that there is a "Maya area" suggests a geographic element to Maya ethnicity. But the concept of a "territory" is itself unstable, and does little to clarify the parameters of being Maya (Castillo Cocom 2004:180; Restall 2004:64-89).

[118] It is estimated that at least one million speakers of the Mayan language reside in Yucatán today (Martín 2001:170)

understandings suggest that the Maya form a homogenous cultural group that has existed since ancient times.

Inquiries into Maya identity followed naturally from my study of the acceptance of deafness without prejudice in Chican. Just as deaf people define themselves using the same criteria as the entire community, they are also subject to the same external misconceptions about being indigenous people living in the Maya area. As I explored identity constructions and models for belonging in Chican it became apparent that being Maya is not a paramount aspect of local identity. Rather, feelings of self definition are related to shared customs of experience involving interdependence between community members within the natural environment to ensure group survival. Religious practices, culinary preferences, recreational activities, and language are more significant for defining ones' place in the community (and within the larger nation of Yucatán, Mexico) than are social labels which are contextually asserted. Being speakers of the Yucatec Mayan language, residents of Chican are often labeled as Maya by outsiders but are considered *mestizo/a* by middle and upper class residents of Mérida, the Capital City of Yucatán.[119]

## 4.2 Considering ethnicity

Ethnicity has been used to describe people of common origin who hold shared values, beliefs, religion, membership in a nation state, similar phenotypical characteristics, or who occupy a minority position within the larger society (Gabbert 2004c:90; Glazer and Moynihan 1976 [1975]:4; Romanucci-Ross, De Vos & Tsuda 2006:1).[120] Since the 1970's sociological, anthropological, and political discourses have been employing the term ethnicity with great frequency – possibly to replace the term race, a universal classificatory concept used to

[119] The confusion surrounding identity terms in Yucatán is related to the impact that Spanish colonialism had in this area which led to the emergence of new identity labels to avoid social persecution.

[120] In 1973 the definition of ethnicity appeared in the *American Heritage Dictionary* as follows: 1. The condition of belonging to a particular ethnic group: 2. Ethnic pride. The tautology of this definition has yet to be clarified in contemporary social theory. However, people continue to use ethnicity as a means to distinguish peoples from one another, recapitulating oppositional categories of "self" and "other".

account for social/biological variation (Fenton 2003:1, 54).[121] The association of race with ethnicity implies that the classification of people into ethnic groups is a natural rather than a social process.

In Latin, the use of *ethnicus* to distinguish pagans from Christians underlay European formulations about national and racial identities, providing the basis for classifying peoples hierarchically based on political organization; those operating on the margins of nation states were distinguished as ethnic minorities (Amselle 1998:6-7). In rural Yucatán, assertions about local identities indeed operate as markers of group identity; this happens at the local level where indigenous people use ethnic labels to identify themselves within the broader social context, and also at the national level where colonized peoples are classified as ethnic minorities thereby subordinating their position within the larger society.[122] Greek conceptions of *polis* and *ethnos* have also been used to distinguish peoples hierarchically, privileging members of city states and degrading peoples who lived in villages (Amselle 1998:6-7). However, it is not cultural differences per se that uphold ethnic boundaries; the assignment and maintenance of shared social meanings and categories are also involved with this process (Banks 1996:1-6; Barth 1969:10, 11, 74, 84; Fenton 2003:106).

Individual variation within ethnic groups implies that ethnicity is not based on natural *or* social qualities, but that the operative knowledge involved with group membership emerges through the combined operation of both social factors *and* natural circumstances.[123] Distinguishing self from other and then classifying one group in opposition to another, possibly due to fear of difference, means that ethnic boundaries operate as mechanisms for self and group definitions within a broader social context (Barth 1969:84; Fenton 2010:199-200). The contextually driven, self-interested nature of self reference in my field site and in Yucatán more generally, exemplifies the disjuncture between ascribed ethnicities

[121] The socio-cultural understandings of Franz Boas and Emile Durkheim rejected ideas about the unequal status of different peoples based on race (Fenton 2003:71-72).
[122] The use of ethnic labeling as a means for maintaining social control is discussed further in Chapter V, *Situating Chican historically.*
[123] Along these lines, essentialist thinking assumes coherence within groups, and distinguishes groups from one another based on the idea of "natural kinds" (Verkuyten 2005:126-127).

and self understandings. Considering the etymology of Maya identity sheds light on the way politically concieved ethnic identities served as social constructions after the colonial encounters in Yucatán. Yet in addition to the relationally constructed ideals of ethnicity that upheld Spanish structures of social inequality, Mayan speaking peoples reserve the right to self determination based on shared affiliations associated with material experiences, commonalities of socialization, and language use (Fenton 2010:200-203).

## 4.3 The mysterious origins of Maya identity

The arrival of the Spaniards in the Maya area caused the subordination of indigenous people to colonial rule.[124] The social inequity that emerged persists in Yucatec society today; prejudice against the indigenous population contributes to their status at the lowest stratum of society (Martín 2001:168-179). The colonial viewpoint fixes Maya identity in the past and does not allow ordinary Maya people the chance to become active participants in their identity formation (Hostettler 2004a:195; Restall 2004:89).[125] In his article, *Lost in Mayaland,* Castillo Cocom explains Yucatec indigenous identity in terms of Mexican nationalism as opposed to Maya ethnicity (2004:179-186).

The term "Maya" does not appear in colonial records until 1677. According to Friar Diego de Landa, the mid-thirteenth century city of Mayapan was named after its residents – a people who called themselves Maya[126] (Casteñeda 2004:181; Landa 1985 [1838]; Restall 2004:67). Inverting Landa's theory, Maya scholar Matthew Restall asserts that the term Maya was not used to describe people at all; it was the city name, *Mayapan* that led to the designation of the residents as "Maya". Interpretation of colonial sources, such as the books of

[124]During the colonial period indigenous people were called *Indios* (Indians) and Spanish conquistadores were called *Españoles* (Spaniards) (Gabbert 2004a:118).
[125] In his book, *The Invention of Tradition*, Terrance Ranger also explains the re-creation of African traditions under European colonial regimes whereby ethnic identities and social definitions were codified and reinforced, thereby overshadowing the presence of multiple tribal identities involving variable assertions of social positioning depending on context (Ranger 1983:247-249).
[126] The Postclassic centre of Mayapan was abandoned in 1441. It had been occupied by the Cocom lineage (former rulers of Chichen Itza) and was overthrown by the Xiu, who eventually allied with the Spanish (Farriss 1984:21).

*Chilam Balam*, also suggest the term Maya was used as an adjective, rather than as a noun of self reference, shared between indigenous peoples after the Spanish arrival to Yucatán in the late fifteenth century. Restall believes the term Maya initially referred to the language *Maaya T'aan*, and to material items of local culture, but was never used to describe people (Hervik 1999:91-110; Restall 2004:64; 2001:75; 1997:13-14). In line with Restall's theory, today the term Maya is used to describe the crafts produced by indigenous peoples living in the Maya area, the ancient Maya ruins, and the Yucatec Mayan language (*Maaya T'aan)*. Indigenous people who speak Mayan do not systematically call themselves Maya (Casteñeda and Fallaw 2004; Castillo Cocom 2004:180-181; Gabbert 2004a:vi, 35, 110-111; Hervik 1999; Restall 2004:75-78). Mayan speaking scholar Juan Castillo Cocom asserts that the Maya do not exist, and may never have. He blames ethnic ascription by others for the emergence of Maya identity, and sees the idea of a unified Maya identity, prior to and through the colonial period, as an essentialization. Despite the convergence of Spanish and indigenous peoples in this region, members of urban society distinguish themselves from indigenous peoples by calling themselves *Yucateco/a*.

Contemporary experiences of peoples living in Yucatán reveal that identity labels are not necessarily congruent with lived experiences. In fact, there is a complete denial of being Maya both in rural Yucatán and in Mérida, where people use *mestizo/a* to refer to speakers of the Mayan language. At the onset of my research I was not aware of the extent to which local social perceptions of indigeneity are oriented by strategies of social ranking based on naturalized, essentialized conceptualizations of ethnicity. When I described my research to residents of Mérida, people consistently assured me that the Maya no longer exist, "*Paige – es que ya – no existe los Mayas*" (Paige – it is just that it is over –the Maya no longer exist). They explained that rural Mayan-speaking agriculturalists are *mestizo/a*, not Maya.[127] My suggestion that members of urban Yucatec society were themselves *mestizo/a* – in that they embody both indigenous and

[127] This denial of the existence of indigenous Maya peoples sensitized me to the enduring effects of colonialism in this region, suggesting that ethnic labeling continues to orient identities hierarchically in contemporary social life.

Spanish qualities – met with fierce resistance. Many people were insulted by the insinuation that they were in any way related to local indigenous peoples, and on a few occasions people cited their Spanish heritage as testimony to their status as *yucateco/a*, as opposed to *mestizo/a.* This phenomenon heightened my sensitivity to the fact that external perceptions (ie; identity labels) may have little bearing on the way people actually understand themselves.

Members of middle-class urban Yucatec society sometimes refer to indigenous people as *indios* or *ignorantes,* insulting someone's intelligence, implying idiocy, or describing someone whose behavior is considered crass. This assertion is based on experiences I had while interacting with individuals from Mérida, who sometimes used the term *indio* colloquially, in a derogatory manner reminiscent of colonial assertions, when discussing Mayan speaking peoples of rural Yucatán.[128] However, with increasing emphasis being placed on government programs promoting indigenous language and cultural revival in the new millennium, over time people in Mérida began admitting the possibility of Maya heritage, especially associated with the use of the Yucatec Mayan language in rural communities.[129] That being said, many people cite the progressive fusion of the Yucatec Mayan language with Spanish as testimony to the *Mestizo*, as opposed to the *Maya*, character of indigenous identity in this region today.[130]

Even though many foreigners relate the indigenous population of Yucatán to the idea of some primordial *Maya* ethnicity – linked to ancient Maya civilization – the term embodies indigenous identity in Yucatán today. As indicated, the residents of Mérida distinguish themselves from Mayan speaking

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[128] In Mérida, I witnessed the term *indio* being used to refer to speakers of the Yucatec Mayan language or, to refer to anyone whose behavior seemed inappropriate.

[129] The *Instituto de Desarrollo de la Cultural Maya* (INDEMAYA) is a particular branch of the Yucatec government devoted to the conservation and continuance of indigenous Maya heritage and language. There is also a branch of the *Secretario de Educacion Publica* (SEP) called *Educacion Indigena* devoted specifically towards educational programs in indigenous communities.

[130] Words such as *tuuch, xiix,* and *wiix* (belly button, armpit, and urinate) among many others, are spoken in Mayan rather than Spanish by the majority of people living in Yucatán. See Appendix 2; *Loteria Yucateca* playing cards, for further examples of the contemporary fusion taking place between Spanish and the Yucatec Mayan language. However, it is worth noting that these playing cards (purchased at a gas station) were printed in 2005; of 54 cards 27 are presented in Yucatec Maya. In the 2010 reprint of these cards, 51 are presented in Spanish and only 3 are presented in the Yucatec Mayan language.

*mestizo/a* peoples by calling themselves *Yucateco/a* (Hervik 1999:95-96). The use of identity toponyms is common in colonized areas and where populations are diverse, such as in Canada where many people refer to themselves as Canadian rather than citing their heritage. In effect, by citing the region they are from rather than emphasizing their ancestry, individuals living in Yucatán are averting identity classification altogether and conveniently denying indigenous heritage. While I was visiting Mérida, a twenty-one year old girl with the Spanish-Maya surname *Montejo-Canto* proudly cited her Spanish descent and denied having any Maya heritage at all. "*Soy de decendencia pura espanol*", she said, emphasizing the "purity" of her lineage. Ironically, family photos displayed on the wall behind her presented her great grandparents wearing customary Maya clothing rather than Spanish style clothing. As a result of colonialism in Yucatán, identity terms referring to Mayan speaking peoples continue to hold negative social conotations within state society. After the colonial encounter the label Maya had little or no value in economic terms; it was used as a means to uphold social structures of inequality (Gabbert 2004a:100-125). Although the Spanish never completely controlled indigenous forms of life, the relegation of *indios* to the lowest stratum of society continues to affect their status today (Mbaku, Agbese and Kimenyi 2001; Warren 1998). Basically, the significance of being Maya does not transcend historical context, and the meanings associated with Maya ethnicity have shifted dramatically over time (Gabbert 2004a:xv).

Owing to continued social discrimination directed towards colonized peoples in the region of Yucatán, assertions of indigenous identity as a means of collective self determination are in their infancy.[131] As well, debate surrounding the idea that Maya identity pre-exists colonially contrived identity labels in Yucatán means that Yucatec Mayan speaking peoples may *never* have identified with the term Maya; embodiment of this identity as a means to foster recognition of pre-colonial indigenous identity would therefore represent an odd process of subjective essentialization for political purposes. The titles of articles appearing

[131] For succinct discussions of the processes of self determination associated with indigeneity in the aftermath of colonialism see Ronald Niezen's publications, *The Origins of Indigenism, Human Rights and the Politics of Identity* (2003), and *Public Justice and the Anthropology of Law* (2010).

in a recent issue of *The Journal of Latin American Anthropology* make obvious the controversy surrounding the use of the term Maya to describe the peoples living in rural regions of the Maya area: "We Are Not Indigenous", "Maya Ethnogenesis", "Re-thinking Maya Identity in Yucatán, 1500-1940", and "Lost in Mayaland" all suggest a reconceptualization of Maya ethnicity (Casteñeda 2004:36-63; Casteñeda and Fallaw 2004; Castillo Cocom 2004:179-188; Fallaw 2004:151; Gabbert 2004c:90-118; Hostettler 2004c:187-198; Restall 2004:64-89). Along the same lines, Mexican anthropologist Quetzil Casteñeda calls for a "radical interrogation of the term Maya and of its usage as sign, symbol, substance, political codes, and boundaries of identity and belonging" (Casteñeda 2004:41). Like Casteñeda, Maya scholars Peter Hervik, Wolfgang Gabbert, and Matthew Restall cite the impact that ethnic labeling has had for the wellbeing of indigenous peoples who are considered Maya today (Casteñeda 2004; Gabbert 2004a; 2004b; 2004c; Hervik 1999; Restall 2004). Adopting a "polyglot identity", anthropologist Juan Castillo Cocom identifies himself as *post-Maya* rather than Maya (Castillo Cocom 2004:182; Italics mine). In this way Castillo Cocom embodies a multifaceted socio-political identity situated strategically within the power relations that govern identity in contemporary society. Castillo Cocom asserts that the term Maya has *always* been multifaceted and that rejection of, or identification with, the label is mainly a political strategy.

In Yucatán, debate surrounding the identity "Maya" may be one of the reasons why the Mayan speaking peoples of Chican are not collectively asserting indigeneity as a means of seeking redress for the effects of colonialism. The denial of the existence of "the Maya" by members of urban Yucatec society poses issues for using this indigenous identity label as a source of empowerment. In the case of Yucatec Mayan speaking persons, the confusion surrounding "who they were" when the Spanish arrived may be impeding the contemporary possibilities associated with indigenous rediscovery of "an essence seen to have once been part of one's inner most being but that was temporarily lost, maligned, and extricated

by outside forces, in some cases for elimination through state sponsored policies of assimilation".[132]

However, despite the absence of an agreed upon identity label with historically grounded underpinnings, shared traditions of agricultural practice and hunting, gender relationships, weaving and clothing traditions, as well as shared language use and ideologies continue to orient lifestyles in Chican, where despite rapid change with the influx of the market economy, community traditions are still passed from one generation to the next. And in reality, Mayan speaking peoples are unified as much by local customs as they are by the ongoing political struggles they face. Basically, the politics of identity in Yucatán are embedded within a homogenizing global discourse that promotes a temporally coherent ethnic perspective of local identity in this region that is disconnected from the daily life experiences of local peoples. Even though some academics deny the existence of the Maya altogether, and local indigenous people do not even refer to themselves as Maya in local discourse, Maya ethnicity is cultivated for its value in the tourist market. Furthermore, within the Maya area the political struggles indigenous peoples face are as distinct as the individuals who experience them, ranging from the identity politics linked to tourism in Yucatán, to the Maya Zapatistas movement in Chiapas, or the Pan-Mayanist movement in Guatemala (Casteñeda 2004:36-63). In some cases ethnicity is used by indigenous peoples to represent their interests in socio-political terms within larger more dominant social networks. On the other hand, dominant political groups sometimes represent subaltern identities as inferior, generating inaccurate depictions of vulnerable or minority peoples associated with their status as indigenous (Harris 1989:599-612; Little 2004:16, 269; Verkuyten 2005:91, 94-95; Wolff 1999).[133]

Since the 1980s, self identification as Maya has been used as the basis of cultural revival movements, as in the case of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas (1994), the emergence of the "*Pueblo Maya*" in Guatemala, the Zapotec

[132] Quotation taken from Niezen's, *The Rediscovered Self, Indigenous Identity and Cultural Justice* (2009:xv-xvi).

[133] In the case of colonialism, indigenous people were not a minority – they were a majority. Nevertheless, once the Spanish assumed domination over the area by means of ethnic social classifications (associated with particular rights and duties), the indigenous population was subordinated.

established *Coalicion Obrero Campesino e Estudiantil del Istmo* (COCEI)[134] in Tehuentepec, Oaxaca, and the promotion of Maya cultural activities by the Yucatec governmental *Instituto para el Desarrollo de la Cultura Maya del Estado de Yucatán* (INDEMAYA) (Gogol 2002:241-242; Martín 2001:180; Personal Communication (c) 2002-2005; Smith 1921 [1830]; Tripp Evans 2004; Warren 1998:3-8). In highland Chiapas, Maya cultural groups are fostering cultural awareness and indigenous pride through forming theater groups, writers' workshops, and a women's photography project (Cancian 1999:173-176; Santiz Gomez 1998, Martín 2001:180). During the pan-Maya movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Lacandon Maya of Guatemala promoted themes of cultural revitalization. To represent their collective interests, the indigenous population unified themselves into the "*Pueblo Maya*" (Warren 1998:3, 8). The assertion of this pan-indigenous identity plays an important role in realizing the Rights of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries, outlined by the United Nations. In 2005 the Maya peoples of Guatemala also facilitated the application of the International Labor Organization's convention 169 (ILO), enabling community members to vote for, or against, projects on their land. By advocating for collective rights they effectively used externally generated stereotypes as a form of self representation, contesting the negative implications of being considered indigenous (Maya) in this region.[135] Maya cultural rights groups such as UNICEF are now involved with the establishment of Mayan language schools, which also contributes to indigenous self-affirmation. Guatemalans host workshops, conferences, lectures, and meetings to contest national representations based on negative depictions of indigenous peoples in colonial records (Warren 1998:148-162). Conceptualizing Maya identity in more fluid terms, strategic self-expressions of Maya identity in Guatemala represent positive possibilities for indigenous people, rather than the replication of derogatory and outdated classifications.

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[134] (Coalition of Workers, Farmers, and Students of the Isthmus).

[135] In the twenty-first century the label Maya is used variously across the Maya World, not only as a marker of identity, but as capital in political battles (Molesky-Poz 2006:177).

## 4.4 Globalizing the Maya

The stereotyping of Maya experiences and customs has become capital in the market economy, reinforcing generalized representations that are used in a derogatory manner to generate less than adequate reflections of experienced realities (Watanabe, forthcoming in Warren 1998:203). Many speakers of *Maaya T'aan* today not only exhibit typical qualities associated with Maya identity (such as *milpa* farming, weaving and textile production, construction of thatched roof houses, and use of the Yucatec Mayan language), they also enjoy satellite television, refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, Coca-Cola, fashionable clothing, and vehicles (Burns 1993; Hervik 1999:168-171). The appropriated forms and uses of transnational products circulating in Yucatán illustrate the means by which local social actors actively appropriate the images they are now accustomed to consuming.

Ideas of primitivism still operate in the marketing industry today, wherein words like "authentic", " traditional", "primitive", or "village" are used to describe Maya crafts and lifestyles in the popular market, insinuating that the Maya have somehow averted modernization (Hendrickson 1996:106-111).[136] Efforts to bring colonized societies into the age of modernity during the mid twentieth century created notions of development versus underdevelopment, situating theories of culture within oppositional constructions of the modern/primitive (Ferguson 2005: 140-151). In her book, *Reclaiming Culture: Indigenous People and Self-Representation*, anthropologist Joy Hendry discusses the misrepresentation of indigenous cultures for display in museums or within the tourism industry (Hendry 2005:1-27, 56-80, 200-217). Maya crafts created for tourism feed into foreign perceptions (and misconceptions) about what it means to be Maya, as if some concrete and temporally static definition exists (Gabbert 2004a; 2004b; Hervik 1999:59-90). The exoticization of Maya culture and life ways involves the sale of "traditional" forms of material culture; these forms are anything but typical. Cultural representations for mass consumption result in new

[136] For a succinct discussion of identity negotiations among colonized indigenous peoples in light of European and now transnational idealizations of local custom, see Terrance Ranger's, *The Invention of Tradition* (1983: 211-263).

and appropriated forms of expression; aesthetic qualities are standardized in an effort to make local crafts appeal to a wider audience (Classen and Howes 1996:178-194; Cook 2000). Participation in the transnational economy causes novel representations of material culture to emerge, such as black versions of customary colorful clothing, hair bands made from cloth intended for weaving clothing, or "Maya coffee" made using ingredients not often consumed by indigenous peoples, making regional styles hybrid products (Hendrickson 1996:106-124; Hervik 1999:112; Howes 1996:1-18; Little 2004:106-119; MacDougall 2003; Nelson 1999:137-138). [137] Indigenous peoples selling customary clothing at market places in Mérida, and in tourist shops, sometimes alter customary color schemes to suit the foreign palate, replacing classic reds, oranges and yellows with purples, blues and greens (Hendrickson 1996; Personal observation 1998-2009).

Appropriated forms of Maya textiles sold within the tourism industry suggest that material expressions of ethnic identity are as flexible as the assignment of ethnic categories. And as indicated, despite efforts to standardize versions of Maya identity within the tourism industry, indigenous identity is anything but concrete in Yucatán (Little 2004:6). Whether involving cultural transformation or not, participation in the tourism industry provides economic opportunity for many members of indigenous communities across the peninsula of Yucatán. The commodification of "Maya tradition" has become essential for the survival of *campesinos* (subsistence farmers) in Yucatán who have little other income (Classen and Howes 1996:178-195; Hendrickson 1996:106-124; Howes 1996:1-18). Hotels, restaurants, stores, and bars provide employment for many indigenous people, and the movement of local products into the hands of tourists facilitates Maya involvement in the global market economy (Casteñeda 2004:36-63; Castillo Cocom 2004:179-187; Fortuny Loret de Mola 2004:225-254; Gabbert

[137]"Maya coffee" is sold in cafés, restaurants, and bars in Mérida and along the coastal towns of the *Riviera Maya*. It is made using espresso coffee, Kahlua, and vanilla ice cream which are not popular items of consumption among indigenous peoples living in the Maya area, who do not customarily have access to refrigeration. In Chican, there are now a few stores with refrigerators and those residents who have their own cooling units sometimes sell small bags of frozen well water to others who do not have access to refrigeration in their own home.

2004b:90-108; Hervik 1999; Hostettler 2004b:129-140; MacDougall 2003:292; Manzanilla Dorantes 2004:147-170). This demonstrates that ethnic classifications – even if they do not represent self understandings – can be used as a source of empowerment.

Studies of the Kaqchikel Maya in Guatemala also demonstrate the local propensity for vendors to adapt contemporary lifestyles for the tourism industry, and to attract anthropological interest (Little 2004:262-265). Here we see differences between the significance of the label Maya for outsiders compared to the way it used by the Maya themselves; outside perceptions are not congruent with indigenous self understandings. However, the producers of appropriated versions of Maya crafts are the local indigenous Mayan speaking peoples themselves; any forms they produce remain their own. The idea that transforming customary forms of material culture results in a loss of "authenticity" is a misunderstanding; assumptions like this produce static identities for living peoples. Anthropologist Peter Hervick suggests that the idea of culture as a thing people can lose has obscured our understanding of the appropriation of global elements into local identities, and of how identities are altered in the process (Hervik 1999:112).

Studies of cross cultural consumption draw attention to the transformation imported products undergo in new environmental and social circumstances, effectively becoming representations of local identities, rather than emulating the qualities they were endowed with at the time of production (Appadurai 1986; Howes 1996:1-18; MacDougall 2003:258-259, 273). To make sense of these fusions and adaptations ethnographers need to let go of static representations and engage with people in their daily lives and activities. We can explore the way past events affect local peoples by recognizing the salience of shared interpretive frameworks for the continuance of culture patterns, while conceiving of current experiences of being-in-the-world as ever-changing (Anderson 2005:iv-xviii, 201; Fabian 2001:23; Gabbert 2004a; 2004b; 2004c; Hendrickson 1996:106-124;

Hervik 1999; Jackson 1989; Little 2004:3-21; Norget 2006:90-91).[138] In some cases tradition and innovation are integrated into indigenous societies in additive rather than culturally destructive processes (D'Andrade 1995; Jackson 1989; Lave 1988).

For example, in Mérida I witnessed people using empty two-liter plastic Coca-Cola bottles as receptacles for Holy Water, carrying them off to Church on Sunday and returning home with the precious liquid inside. In some ways, in this context, Coca-Cola is considered a constitutive feature of identity for many people who consume between one to two liters of Coca-Cola per day. Adults and adolescents explained their preference for consuming Coca-Cola as a defining feature of their identity, and homes are sometimes decorated with Coca-Cola paraphernalia such as kitchenware, towels, place-mats, serviettes, statuettes, curtains and collectables. One family home I visited in Mérida had an entire Coca-Cola patterned living room set (a couch and chairs) for their children. Both in Mérida and in Chican, it is considered inappropriate and thoughtless *not* to have soft drinks available to offer visitors. Similar to the way many people consume coffee with breakfast in the Canada or Europe, two liter bottles of Coca-Cola are present on a majority of breakfast tables in Yucatán, especially in Mérida where most people have personal access to refrigeration. In Chican, cola is widely consumed in the early afternoon with lunch, purchased ice-cold from one of four *tiendas* (stores) present in the community.[139] Despite the high quantities of sugar and caffeine present in many cola's, families in Chican feel positively about providing their children with cola.[140] One sunny afternoon as I stood speaking to an elderly man about the challenges he was facing with his agricultural fields after a hurricane had passed through the region, he lamented having very little cash to provide for his family, including his great grandchildren.

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[138] Heidegger's notion of being-in-the-world explores the way people relate to their experience of being in time and space (Dreyfus 1995 [1991]:13-29; Dreyfus and Rainbow 1999 [1991]84-93; Heidegger 1977).

[139] Families who have a refrigerator in their home may also sell soft drinks.

[140] To my knowledge, diet cola only become available in Chican during 2008 and from what I can tell there is very little demand for dietetic versions. Friends explained that they felt the sugar provided them with energy during the midday heat, especially during the summer months where temperatures reach 45 degrees Celsius.

As we spoke, two small children approached carrying large bottles of Orange Fanta and Coca-Cola. My friend's wife emerged from the house with small plastic cups and the elder began distributing cola to everyone – including a small infant. He looked up at me, paused, and said in a comforting tone, "*para los niños*…" (for the children…) indicating his pride in being able to provide soft drinks for his family, apparently unaware that it may be prudent to exhibit caution when offering young children high doses of caffeine and sugar.[141]

Figure 6: A toddler in Chican drinking Coca-Cola.

The social significance of soft drinks, especially Coca-Cola or Pepsi, operates as a symbol for socialization in general; the same way people in Canada may ask one another to go "out for coffee" suggesting a casual social meeting, in Yucatán friends and associates suggest a *refresco* (a refreshment) implying a brief social meeting or *un descanso* (a break) akin to a "coffee break". Local routines surrounding coffee consumption involve drinking instant coffee at night accompanied by sweet breads purchased from the *panadero* (bread seller), a man who sells bread from his adult sized tricycle in the evenings. In Mérida, the *panadero* toots his tricycle horn alerting families that bread is available for sale on their street. As with consumption patterns and social meanings surrounding cola in Yucatán, appropriated versions of bread have been incorporated into the local repertoire of foods consumed daily. Having their origins in Europe, baguettes and croissants are popular food items called *barras* or *cuernos* respectively. They are

[141] I suggest transnational corporations be held accountable for providing clearer indications of the health risks associated with consumption of their products in diverse regions of the world, with differential access to education.

made with *manteca* (pork fat) rather than butter therefore lacking a crusty or flaky quality. Many of the *pan dulce* (sweet breads) available are coated with sugar and filled with ham and cheese and/or custard. Very recently, a *panadero* began visiting Chican in the evenings; there is no bakery in the community. The *panadero* who sells bread in Chican has an electric tricycle because he visits from a neighboring community.

## 4.5 Maya identity today

Two principle theoretical approaches towards Maya identity exist today. Firstly, those who self-identify as Maya, and are involved with teaching the Yucatec Mayan language, see the continuance of the Mayan language as extremely important for the wellbeing of indigenous communities. The governmental *Instituto para el Desarrollo de la Cultura Maya del Estado de Yucatán* (INDEMAYA), for example, concentrates on reviving a sense of Maya identity in rural communities by developing textbooks and materials in the Mayan language. To familiarize indigenous people with their Maya heritage, INDEMAYA organizes day trips to archaeological sites with guided tours provided in the Yucatec Mayan language. Artistic workshops such as hammock and textile weaving are also on the agenda, as are exhibitions of traditional music, dance, and theatre exhibitions. Organizations like this promote cultural activities in rural communities and reiterate the teachings of colonial Maya texts (such as the *Popol Vuh* or the Books of *Chilam Balam*).[142] In contrast, the second approach towards Maya identity criticizes the use of this ethnic designation altogether. In a recent issue of the *Journal of Latin American Antiquity* theorists argue that social cohesion, solidarity, and group consciousness do not automatically exist among aggregates of individuals who are considered part of a particular ethnic group (Hostettler 2004a:190). Indigenous people who reject the label Maya scrutinize the historical foundations of the term (Casteñeda and Fallaw 2004; Gabbert 2004a; 2004b; 2004c; Hervik 1999). Highlighting the generalizing tendency of ethnic theory, they suggest that popular assumptions about Maya

[142] The contents of these colonial texts will be discussed further in Section 5.9 *Mayan writing*.

identity falsely insinuate the uniform nature of language, culture, and patterns of descent associated with ethnic groups (Casteñeda 2004; Castillo Cocom 2004:179, 186; Eiss 2004; Gabbert 2004a:xii-xv; Glazer and Moynihan 1975:1-19; Hervik 1999; Hostettler 2004a; Restall 2004, 1997). The denial of Maya heritage by some and the use of the term as a means of social, political and global recognition by others – as in Guatemala or Chiapas – demonstrate the confusion surrounding the idea of Maya identity (Castañeda 2004:36-63; Castillo Cocom 2004:121-128; Hervik 1999; Hostettler 2004b:129-140; Little 2004; Nelson 1999; Warren 1998). Even though some Latin American indigenous people identify themselves as Maya to attain political and social recognition, in academic discourse the label Maya is sometimes rejected for its essentializing qualities (Casteñeda 2004; Castillo Cocom 2004; Gabbert 2004a; 2004b; Hervik 1999; Hostettler 2004a; 2004b; Little 2004; Nelson 1999:283-285; Reed 2001; Restall 2004).

Seeking to construct generalized representations of social experiences through identity labeling undermines the power of individuals to affect social reality on a continual basis. Understandings about ethnicity are based on categorizations of ourselves, of the world around us, and our place in it. As already discussed, ethnicity is not based on the natural existence of characteristics present prior to the intellectual constructions of observers (Banks 1996; Fenton 2003:2-3). By means of categorization we organize experience into models that are then communicated between group members.[143] Differences between external perceptions of belonging and self understandings imply that cultural categories are not always individually and socially congruent. This makes the idea of a unified Maya ethnicity unlikely. The national and international essentialization of Maya identity points to the tensions that emerge in response to the conspicuous consumption of otherness and authenticity in an increasingly transnational environment. Further, as individuals and peoples are being freed from the

[143] The use of prototypes, schema, and cultural models are useful for understanding cognitive experience but in practice, becoming involved with shared social experiences is essential for understanding the way people relate to the categories to which they are subject and themselves produce (D'Andrade 1995; Hervik 1999:91-93).

constraints of national and international depictions of local identities, we are not necessarily speaking of the consequences of trans*national* networks, but of something that might be described as trans-*human* (Niezen 2010:3). In line with these assertions, formulations of identity in my field site demonstrate the way individuals are negotiating the repertoires of identity available to them, thereby taking an active role in defining their experiences, and strategically positioning themselves within the world.

For anthropologists, tourists, journalists, politicians and scholars alike, the term Maya elicits images of a mysterious and exotic ancient civilization associated with cultural elements such as language, dance, food, clothing, religion, cosmology, and magnificent archaeological ruins. Archaeologists who study ancient Maya civilization by excavating ruined cities produce convincing theories about what it means to be Maya (Casteñeda 2004:36-51; Gabbert 2004a:xii; Hervik 1999). Correspondence between certain aspects of ancient lifestyles with contemporary indigenous practices, such as textile weaving, maize agriculture, and the use of the Yucatec Mayan language, leads to assumptions about being Maya that are not necessarily accurate today.[144] On the other hand, parallels between the living and the ancient Maya are cultivated within the tourism industry and the notion of "Mayaness" is glamorized. Cultivating international public perception advantageously, in the context of urban Yucatán, Mayan speaking peoples sometimes assert essentialized visions of Mayaness.[145] Along with white sandy beaches and outdoor *discotecas* Yucatán provides the opportunity to explore the mystical ancient Maya ruins. Tourist destinations along the Maya Riviera such as CanCun, Tulum, Playa del Carmen, Isla Mujeres and Cozumel attract flocks of visitors to the region each year. Vacation packages include day trips to well known archaeology sites such as Chichen Itza, Tulum, Uxmal, Labna, Sayil, Kabba, Loltun, and Dzibitchaltun, to name a few. Although

[144] As already mentioned, the idea that a unified Maya cosmology has always existed, and continues to orient Maya communities, is at issue among academics (Casteñeda and Fallaw 2004; Gabbert 2004a, 2004b; 2004c; Hervik 1999 1992a, 1992b; Medina 2003:209; Molesky-Poz 2006).
[145] In Chican, for example, residents are willing to modify typical weaving styles, including customary color combinations or clothing designs, for sale outside the community. However, these practices are not common because residents have limited access to the urban market economy of Yucatán.

the lifestyles and languages present in rural Yucatec communities resemble ancient Maya customs in some regards, residents do not necessarily express an understanding of their connection to the inhabitants of these impressive ancient civilizations. Tour guides at these sites are local residents who sometimes have only limited understanding of the significance of the monuments they describe, or of the ancient sites in general.

Despite the social transformations following from the arrival of the Spanish in Yucatán, the adaptive flexibility of Mayan speaking peoples made possible the continuance of indigenous ideologies in some regards. In the context of Chican there may be no stigma surrounding deafness, but local people (both deaf and hearing) have been subjected to negative assumptions about their identity as a result of the Spanish colonial projects carried out in this region.

# 5 SITUATING CHICAN HISTORICALLY

## 5.1 Colonialism in Yucatán

> *Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question: In reality, Who am I?" Frantz Fanon (1967)*

The story of colonialism in Yucatán illustrates that far from being crushed, colonized peoples found ways to navigate, and accommodate, derogatory categories of social belonging. Although distinct in nature, the ability of Mayan speaking peoples to operate within the framework of Spanish colonialism, or to operate within a community where there is a high occurance of deafness, demonstrates the adaptive potentials of the people of Chican.

## 5.2 Spanish arrival to the Yucatán peninsula

On his fourth and final voyage towards the American continent in 1502, Christopher Columbus encountered a trading canoe off the coast of Honduras (Clendinnen 1987:3). The indigenous captain of the long wooden boat was taken

hostage and the cargo was pillaged (Blom 1971 [1936]:1-11; Roys 1972 [1943]:13-16).[146] When a splintered Spanish ship washed up on the shores of Yucatán in 1511 two of the seventeen castaways survived, and were taken hostage (Jones 2000:366-358). These captives, Gerónimo Aguilar and Gonzalo Guerrero, acted as key players in subsequent colonial encounters; over time they effectively allied themselves with competing sides of the social disputes between indigenous and colonial representatives (Blom 1971 [1936]:5-11; Bricker 1981:13, 15-15; Dumond 1997:9; Hervik 1999:112-113; 123-125, 147-151). Between 1519 and 1523 the infamous Hernando Cortés led the final conquering mission into the capital of the Aztec empire, Tlateloco-Tenochtitlán, and succeeded in purchasing back *one* of the two captives taken hostage on the 1511 voyage – Gerónimo Aguilar. Having spent eight years living with the Maya, Aguilar had learned the Yucatec Mayan language and began facilitating Spanish interactions with local leaders, becoming a key player in Maya-Spanish relations (Clendinnen 1987:17-18, 134; Farriss 1981:13-16; Restall 1997:1-5). Unlike Aguilar, who remained loyal to the Spanish, the other hostage, Gonzalo Guerrero, became a Maya captain of war who eventually posed a threat to the Spanish; he married the daughter of a Maya lord, and the birth of their three children resulted in his fabled name as the father of the first Mexican *mestizos* (Clendinnen 1987:17-18, 20-22; Restall 1998:7).[147]

The events of colonialism mark the beginning of the European drive to monopolize the land, resources, and peoples of Mesoamerica (Gogol 2002:1; Restall 1998:6-14). This mission continues today, and the history of Latin America's underdevelopment is related to the development of world capitalism (Edelman and Haugerud 2006; Galeano 1973 in Gogol 2002:1-9,123-132; Patch 1993:1-5). Gradual socio-political and economic restructuring led to a Spanish monopoly over the export of natural resources in Mesoamerica ultimately causing

[146] Typical of the goods traded between Honduras and Mexico at that time, the seized cargo included colorful garments of woven cotton, cacao beans, pottery, obsidian, copper, axes, and heavy wooden clubs (Blom 1971 [1936]:1-4; Clendinnen 1987:3-6).
[147] As local populations became more heterogeneous over time, colonial ethnic classification took on new meanings; peoples who were considered *mestizo* during the colonial period are now considered as *yucateco* or *ladino*.

the subordination of Latin America within the world economy (Anderson 2005:203-204; Patch 1993:67-169, 70-201; Stein and Stein 1970:4-26). Latin American products now circulate the globe and have become capital in the United States economy, a process that unfortunately leaves many of the source nations impoverished (Gogol 2002:4-6, 123-195). Repeated and consistent exploitation of indigenous labor and natural resources places Latin America in a subordinate economic position within the transnational economy, and has given rise to the labeling of this region as the Other by European and North American communities (Edelman and Haugerud 2005:10-14; Gogol 2002:213-328; Leys 2005:109-120; Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 1994:1-5, 13-18, 97-165; Warren 1998).

Early sixteenth century encounters between Spanish conquistadors and the indigenous peoples of Yucatán were consistently violent, and it took at least nineteen years for the Spanish to gain any degree of control over the region (Restall 1997:14-60).[148] Even when occupation began with the founding of Mérida in Yucatán (1542), local Maya nobility remained in power (Bricker 1981:13-19; Restall 1998:4-6, 12-14; Roys 1972 [1943]:3, 13-16).[149] Cultivating partnerships between indigenous leaders and colonial powers was achieved through indigenous mastery of the Spanish language but up until the end of the seventeenth century only a handful of Maya elites spoke Spanish, and colonial domination was partial at best (Farriss 1984:96-97). As in ancient times, where class structure was upheld by means of reserving literacy to the elite classes, the Spanish conquistadores excluded indigenous peoples from education in Spanish thereby limiting indigenous social mobility.[150] Indigenous Mayan speaking peoples were relegated to the bottom of a hierarchical system whereby Spanish

[148] Spanish efforts to mobilize the indigenous population of Yucatán met with fierce resistance, and tactics of feigned submission solidified regional identities rendering the colonial battles in this region some of the lengthiest and most vicious in Mexico. The community of Chican is located in the heart of the area most difficult for the Spanish to infiltrate, becoming a territory of heightened resistence during the 19th century see Section 5.7, *Guerra de Las Castas* (Caste War) for details.
[149] The seventeenth century chronicler Diego Lopez de Cogolludo designated 1545 as the marker of the final date of conquest (Cogolludo 2007 [1688]; Restall 1998:2-14).
[150] In response to the indigenous revivalist movement in Mexico today, members of indigenous communities are learning Spanish to represent their interests within the larger society. Conversely, education in the Yucatec Mayan language is becoming more main stream (Hervik 1999:111-113).

authorities extracted tribute and labour from them, uprooting the agrarian based social structure that had been in place for several millennia (Farriss 1984:3).

During the colonial period, conflict between identity ascription by the Spanish and indigenous self understandings resulted in novel forms of social and cultural life (Farriss 1993:51-68; 1984; 1983:1-39; Jones 1977; MacLeod and Wasserstorm 1983; Warren 1978:3-29). The Spanish used identity classification to gain power over the peoples they encountered in Yucatán; the association of identity terms with particular social positions in colonial society upheld social order. The elaborate Mayan terminology for political structure prior to Spanish arrival suggests it was not only the Spanish who used ethnic classification, but that the Maya had customarily used class distinctions for social stratification, and later as a form of resistance.[151] The influence of context on the classification of peoples into distinct ethnicities has been noted in the social sciences, wherein ethnic identities are understood as social constructions related to descent and culture, at times giving rise to the convergence of peoples into distinct communities (Fenton 2010:3-4). In the case of Yucatán, as indigenous society became more heterogeneous over time, the social categories designated by the Spanish took on new meanings and new social groupings emerged. Colonial practices of social labeling acted in tandem with schemes of social restructuring to "pacify" indigenous populations, but the creative capacities of local peoples made colonizing the Maya area an extremely lengthy and arduous process.

## 5.3 The complexities of "conquering" Maya city states

At the time of the conquest, the Maya area was composed of between sixteen and eighteen independent provinces that, as in other regions of advanced civilization in Latin America, were ruled by hereditary lords (Farriss 1983:26; Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993; Schele and Mathews 1998). Their stratified social system was composed of a series of ranked elite nobility, a mass of subordinate commoners, and a group of serfs/slaves who served the nobility

[151] At the time of the Caste War during the mid nineteenth century a new identity designation was conceived by the indigenous population who distinguished themselves as *Cruzob* Maya (the people of the Cross) (Bricker 1981:343).

(Farriss 1983:26). Since the indigenous people of Yucatán subscribed to city state social organization, and did not operate under centralized imperial rule, penetration of this area was much more difficult; Spanish domination could not be achieved by a single show of military force to the heart of the administrative centre, as was the case with the Aztecs (Blom 1971 [1936]: 11-100; Chamberlain 1948:4; Farriss 1984:12; Gabbert 2004a:8-9; Restall 1998:3-50).[152]

In 1526 the elder Francisco de Montejo was named the *adelantado* (hereditary governor) of Yucatán although it remained an unconquered area (Dumond 1997:13; Gann and Thompson 1937 [1931]:92). Pursuing control over the region, the Spanish Crown issued Montejo a patent to conquer Yucatán in 1527, and he set out from Santo Domingo with an army of five hundred men to claim the coastal island of Cozumel (Jones 2000:358; Restall 1998:7-9). Widespread illness and warfare plagued the mission. The crew was confronted by Maya warriors at every turn, and retreated south to Chetumal almost immediately. In 1529 Montejo headed for the interior to join forces with Cortés in his efforts at "campaigns of pacification", as the Spanish referred to their missions (Bricker 1981:16; Restall 1998:8-9). After some success in central Mexico he headed back to Yucatán but his efforts at socio-economic reorganization incited revolts at Campeche, Calkini, Cochuah, Uaymil and Chetumal. By 1534 the Spanish were again forced to withdraw, leaving virtually no Spaniards on the peninsula (Clendinnen 1987:29; Restall 1998:10).

In the interim between 1534 and 1540 the local indigenous population was depleted by widespread smallpox and other diseases introduced by the Spanish. At the same time, a severe drought hit the peninsula and the land was left almost barren by repeated plagues of locusts (Gann and Thompson 1937 [1931]:94; Patch 2002:1-4; Reed 2001:5; Restall 1998:11).[153] From the perspective of the Spanish,

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[152] Owing in part to the complexity of the local socio-political structure, it was only after more than thirty years of arrivals and retreats back and forth between Yucatán and Spain that the conquistadores finally established a tenuous hold over the region of Yucatán (Blom 1971 [1936]:1-100; Clendinnen 1991:1-11; Coe 1992:208-210; Farriss 1984:12; Gabbert 2004a:8-10; Jones 1989; Restall 1997; Rugeley 1996).

[153] As already mentioned, Spanish invasion stimulated existing rivalries between ruling Maya lineages causing internal warfare which weakened indigenous resistance to Spanish invasion even further (Clendinnen 1987:30-31; Jones 2000; Restall 1998:77-81).

the successful conquest of Yucatán became official with the founding of Mérida by young Francisco de Montejo in 1542 atop the ancient Maya city of *T'Ho.*[154] The peninsula of Yucatán was divided into the states of Quintanaroo to the East, Campeche to the Southeast, and the state of Yucatán, covering the central and southern areas of the peninsula.[155] However, it is worth noting that historical accounts of the Spanish "conquering" of the Mayan speaking peoples of Yucatán are now being called into question; the recent United Nations Eleventh Session Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (2012) critically considers the "*Doctrine of Discovery: its enduring impact on indigenous peoples and the right to redress for past conquests*", including the naturalization of conquest and takeover of indigenous land, resources and territories, highlighting the rights of indigenous peoples to redress for past grievances (based on Articles 28 and 37 of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples).

## 5.4 Restructuring Maya society: social hierarchies

Known today as the White City, the colonial style architecture in Mérida was constructed using limestone materials from the ruined temples of *T'Ho.* The destruction of local buildings and their replacement with churches, cathedrals, and monasteries was a common strategy used by the Spanish to reconfigure Mesoamerican societies in their own image. This also happened in Oaxaca, where the parish church of *Milta* was built from the ruins of a *Mixtec* temple; in Mexico City at the Aztec centre of *Tenochtitlán* where the *zocalo* cathedral now stands over the *Templo Mayor*; and also in the city of Cholula where hundreds of chapels were erected over pilgrimage temples (Norget 2006:92). In Chican, as late as 1976 the ruins of an ancient city located on that site were partially dismantled and used to lay the foundation for the construction of paved roads

[154] Although more commonly referred to as Mérida, Mayan speaking peoples continue to refer to the capital city of Yucatán as *T'Ho.*

[155] The state of Yucatán covers an area of 15,425 square miles and has a population of approximately 1,900,000 inhabitants including approximately 600,000 speakers of the Yucatec Mayan language (Knopf 1995:197; http://www.google.ca/publicdata/explore?ds=z83fj27m8fa7gq_&met_y=population&idim=state:YU&dl=en&hl=en&q=yucatan+mexico+population+statistics. Access date: June 2012

(Smith 2009:10; fieldwork observations 2008-2009). The first of four episodes comprising the *Living Maya* film series includes footage of carved stone that local residents noticed as the landscape was disturbed to construct roads (Smith 1985).

If they were to gain any degree of control over southern Yucatán the Spanish realized they needed to incorporate themselves into the complex system of social organization already in place. Even in southern and eastern rural Yucatán today, in communities like Chican, people often refer to community leaders using their customary Mayan names, and the municipal system of governance in some respects mimics that in place at the time of the conquest. When the Spanish arrived in Yucatán, the Maya identified closely with their residential *cah*, a geopolitical group whose members were bound by patronymic ties (Restall 1997:15-17; Von Hagen 1973:44-47). Indigenous identity was based on membership within an extended familial group called a *solar*[156] located within each regional *cah* (Restall 1997:13-40). The Spaniards worked with the socially stratified system already in place, renaming Maya rulers called *batab'ob* as *caciques* but leaving them in positions of political power.[157] *Caciques* were exempt from providing forced labor and paying tribute since they were members of the hereditary Maya aristocracy called *almehen'ob* (nobles) (Clendinnen 1987:25,150; Restall 1997; Roys 1972 [1943]: 134-166).

Spanish settlement and social restructuring bred resentment between Maya nobility (*almehen*) and the larger community of peasants (*macehuales*) within each region.[158] Over the course of four centuries of colonial rule in Yucatán, hereditary leadership was gradually replaced by achieved status; people who occupied newly developed social categories such as *Indios Hidalgos*, *vecinos* and *Españoles* were gaining power (Farriss 1984:255). *Indios Hidalgos* were indigenous people who were at one point affiliated with Montejo's army in central Mexico, but had since migrated to Yucatán. They joined forces with indigenous

[156] Use of the the term *solar* to refer to family homesteads in Chican continues today.
[157] Because the Spanish were never able to eliminate the use of the Yucatec Mayan language, it is not uncommon to hear people living in rural areas referring to positions of governance using the original Mayan terms. This is the case in the municipality of Tixmehuac, where Chican is located.
[158] In the Aztec language (Nauatl), *macehual* means commoner; it later came to mean "Maya person".

*caciques* in Yucatán, and like them, they were exempt from taxation (Farriss 1984:109). *Indios Hidalgos* provided military aid to the Spanish in their efforts to force the larger class of *macehuales* into submission. And as Yucatec society became increasingly heterogeneous through Spanish settlement, the legal definition of indigenous *macehuales* became obscured. Regulations regarding clothing and jewelry that had once been explicit markers of social status became increasingly obsolete as these aspects now cut across both Spanish and indigenous segments of the population (Gabbert 2004a:18-22, 78). Spanish overlords and foreigners, known as *dzules* by the indigenous population, were considered as enemies, hypocrites, liars, or rich men (Sullivan 1989:4, 47, 118). In contemporary rural Yucatán, including in Chican, foreigners are still known as *dzules*.[159] Today, the term *gringo/a* is used across Yucatán to refer to visitors from the United States of America, but over time it has taken on broader significance and is used, by some, to refer to foreigners from any country.

## 5.5 Religious tactics

The movement to Christianize the Yucatec Maya began in 1545 with only four friars. By 1580 the number of friars had increased to thirty-eight, administering twenty-two *doctrinas* – mission territories with resident friars and secular parishes with curate assistants (Farriss 1984:93, 286-319). As in central Mexico, Franciscans carried out evangelical campaigns designed to dominate the bodies, minds, and souls of indigenous peoples, and even though only a small number of friars settled on the peninsula, Franciscans dominated colonial Yucatán (Clendinnen 1987:46; Norget 2006:90). Friars were impressed by the organized religious practices already in place, and they were optimistic about spiritual conquest. Believing they could mediate between the spiritual and mundane worlds, Friars saw baptism and catechism as tools for religious conversion (Clendinnen 1987:45-47). For the Maya, local shaman already provided links between a tripartite cosmos. Although indigenous beliefs and practices appear to

[159] As I walked the streets of Chican many children yelled "*gringa*" from inside their homes. But as my fieldwork progressed, I began hearing a chorus of children yelling "*Peich*" (Paige) floating out from inside homes or along the street side. Many found my name amusing as the term "*pech*" means "tick" in the Yucatec Mayan language.

have continued throughout the colonial period, analysis suggests that forced Christianization gave rise to ideological and practical dilemmas for indigenous peoples, with the doctrines of Christianity effectively cutting the "umbilical cord" that connects the Maya perception of the heavenly and earthly worlds (Farriss 1984:286-287).

Friars saw their evangelical mission as a means to "civilize" local populations, in this way assuaging their conscience of the violence perpetrated against indigenous communities (Patch 2002:128-129).[160] During the late sixteenth century a particularly brutal friar, Diego de Landa, took hold as bishop of Yucatán; his activities transformed our understanding of indigenous history. Friar Diego de Landa was bishop of Yucatán from 1571-1579. He was born in *Cifuentes* near Guadalajara, Mexico in the Spanish province of New Castile (Coe 1992:100). In 1558 he traveled the Yucatec countryside extensively, and by learning the Yucatec language he was endeared within many indigenous communities. But soon after cultivating these relationships he persecuted, tortured, and killed anyone who continued to practice traditional indigenous Maya religion (Clendinnen 1987).

In 1562 the discovery of a few idols in a local *milpa* field in Mani[161] so infuriated Landa that he began carrying out horrendous trials, known as the *Autos da Fe* (the Idolatry Trials). Under threat of torture and death, people confessed to using these idols during rituals carried out to ensure prosperity in harvest.[162] Landa also disapproved of hieroglyphic texts, and regarded them as 'works of the devil' threatening the success of Christian religious conversion. As such, he gathered all the Maya books he could find and set them ablaze in a huge bonfire (Clendinnen 1987:133-34; Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:44-45; Gates 1937:iii; Hervik 1999:78; Restall 1997:229). The loss was irreparable. Even today our

[160] However, missionaries believed that the suffering caused by torture and imprisonment as punishment for failure to pay taxes, impeded the evangelization project and the evangelization of the Maya was never completely realized (Bricker 1981:891; Norget 2006:92-93).
[161] Mani is located approximately 22 kilometers west of Chican.
[162] In contemporary Chican elder farmers, including deaf men, continue to carry out customary religious ceremonies ensuring prosperous harvest, appealing to the rain God *Chac* through ritual ceremonies (although I never myself witnessed a ceremony I was told on a number of occasions that they continue to take place).

understanding of pre-conquest writing traditions, ceremonial festivals, subsistence strategies, and ancient history remains tentative at best; four surviving codices are the only ancient Maya books known to exist today (Blom 1971 [1936]:109; Restall 1997:229; Sharer, Morely, and Brainerd 1983:513-520).[163]

During the *Autos da Fe* at least 158 people were killed, and more than 4,500 were brutally tortured, and at that time Landa did not even have authority from Spain to carry out inquisitions as he was not yet a bishop (Bricker 1981:129-154; Clendinnen 1987:75-79; Hervik 1999:59). Consequently, he was exiled from Yucatán in 1563 and spent almost a decade living in Spain, during which time he wrote *Relación de Las Cosas de Yucatán* (Blom 1971 [1936]:109-110; Coe 1992:100).[164] This work provides one of the first detailed accounts of the Maya people and their language. Even though Landa destroyed a wealth of cultural knowledge in the *Auto da Fe,* ironically, without the information he recorded in *Relación,* the decipherment of Mayan hieroglyphs would not be possible (Gates 1937:iii; Hervik 1999:79-82; Landa 1985 [1838]; Morely 1947:261; Pagden 1975; Tozzer 1941).[165]

## 5.6 Resource management: *encomiendas, repartimiento* and *haciendas*

Prior to the arrival of the Spanish, local people did not actually own land. Rather, *campesinos* (subsistence farmers) worked plots of land communally to provide for extended family members, ensuring the prosperity of the community as a whole (Hervik 1999:21; Steele 1996:97). This system still operates in Chican although the state regulates the assignment of land in the form of *ejidos* (land assigned for indigenous use) to particular families within each community. I became acquainted with the *comisario ejidal,* the person responsible for land distribution in Chican, during the preliminary stages of my fieldwork when I was setting up my living arrangements. With intentions to build a simple residence for

[163] Refer to Section 5.9, *Mayan writing*, for description of these codices.
[164] Landa returned to Yucatán and was appointed Bishop in 1571.
[165] Landa's intricate knowledge of the Yucatec Mayan language facilitated his recording of basic phonetic and iconographic elements (Section 5.9, *Mayan writing*).

use during my fieldwork, families began approaching me, asking me to do so on their property. To avoid favoring any particular family I accepted an unused portion of community land, where I could live during my fieldwork. In terms of agricultural land, families living in Chican today are assigned between 1-2 hectares of land, depending on the capacity of male family members to tend their crops. Aside from family assigned hectors of land located on the outskirts of the community where men grow their *milpa* (corn) fields, some men in Chican also work at the *parcela*, an area of land close to the community where crops such as radish, *chile habanero*, watermelon, squash, and cilantro are grown. As film maker Hubert Smith notes in his documentary, *The Living Maya* (carried out in Chican during the late 1970's) local residents remain resistant to state efforts at implementing collective labor strategies, especially citrus fruit farming, as they see the interdependent nature of family based agriculture as a more reliable subsistence strategy (Smith 1985).[166]

When the Spanish arrived in Mesoamerica they reorganized the indigenous population into centrally administered towns, forcing them to work on plots of land called *encomiendas* that were now under the control of Spanish settlers. All able bodied members of indigenous communities were subject to the *encomienda* system of taxation (Farriss 1984:39; Hervik 1999:4). The three main categories of required labor were: 1) *tequio,* a community labor tax requiring one day of work per week for construction and repair of churches, and for service to native leaders, 2) civic obligations involving public construction work, a postal service between towns, and courier of material items between ruling lineages/administrative centers, and 3) *servicio personal* which was technically wage labor, but the wages were hardly fair. Indigenous men and women were

[166] The video also captures the difficulties posed by communication barriers between state officials and the residents of Chican, who speak Spanish and Yucatec Mayan respectively. However, while I was carrying out fieldwork I noticed steadily improving knowledge of the Yucatec Mayan language within government organizations; INDEMAYA provides classes to residents of Mérida employed in the government, to facilitate their communications with Mayan speaking peoples.

both subject to *servicio personal,* which involved a week of work per year as a *semanero/a,* serving an elite family (Farriss 1984:47-49). [167]

The Spaniards and the indigenous nobility agreed to the benefits of the *encomienda* system for establishing land tenure, and without the support of local elites the *encomienda* system would never have worked (Restall 1998:49). Elite Maya who created alliances with the Spaniards effectively maintained their political and social position of authority (Patch 2002:7-12; Restall 1998:30-31, 38-38; Roys 1972 [1943]:29-133). But from the perspective of the *macehuales* (commoners) the persistence of class inequalities into the colonial period represented a continuance of social stratifications that were already in place; Maya society has always been highly stratified (especially during the Classic Period between 300-600AD).[168] However, lack of co-operation among indigenous community governors made it difficult to sustain the *encomienda* system of land management, and decreased literacy among the Maya nobility compromised their positions of authority.[169] To avoid the *encomienda* system many people refused to register their land altogether, ironically facilitating further Spanish possession of lands. Many indigenous groups fled inland to the interior of the peninsula, to the region where Chican is located, to escape the *encomienda* system of land management and taxation.[170]

*Repartimiento* involved the Spanish purchase of goods from *macehuales* at very low prices and then resold at higher prices (Farriss 1984:48; Restall 1997:82, 181, 187). Woollen textiles, raw cotton, wax, wheat, honey and cacao were the principle goods extracted from the indigenous population under the *repartimiento*

[167] The Spanish were not technically allowed to demand labor from the indigenous population hence the veil of wage payment for *servicio personal* intended to "help" the Maya pay their taxes (Farriss 1984:48).
[168] In parallel to the structure of the *encomienda* system, state level ancient Maya society was characterized by a highly centralized lineage-based elite government who ruled over the larger community of commoners (Coe 1993; 1992; Foster 2000:177-140; Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993; Schele and Mathews 1998; Sharer, Morely, and Brainerd 1983 [1946]:93-94).
[169] The operative socio-economic language had become Spanish, and as previously mentioned, the Spanish did not encourage literacy among the elite Maya class, effectively limiting their participation in the administrative and economic spheres.
[170] The *encomienda* system was abolished in 1785 (Farriss 1984:370; Jones 2000:365).

system.[171] When people had no raw materials to sell they were forced to provide Spanish overlords with free labor. This type of exploitation was technically illegal but church officials, colonial administrators, and their bureaucrats carried out *repartimiento* on a regular basis (Jones 2000:368-369). In the late eighteenth century the growth of privately owned estates called *haciendas* incorporated both agricultural cultivation and cattle ranching, eventually replacing the *encomienda* and the *repartimiento* systems altogether.

The *hacienda* system of land management began to flourish between 1769 and 1774, when a famine devastated the local population of Yucatán, reducing it to about 130 000.[172] The primary crop produced on *haciendas* was *henequen*, a fiber drawn from the *agave* cactus that is useful for making rope and cloth, and Yucatán became famous for the production and exportation of *henequen* in the nineteenth century (Roys 1972 [1943]:47). In the late eighteenth century the implementation of *comercio libre* (free trade) between Spain, the Caribbean islands, and America held the promise of prosperity for settlers in the region of Yucatán. Imported products received at the port of Progreso, located on the northwestern coast twenty-four miles from Mérida, were redistributed throughout the peninsula via market activities in Mérida (Redfield 1948 [1941]:19). Mérida and Campeche became the most affluent cities in the region during the early nineteenth century, owing to their strategic positions of ports along the Gulf coast at Campeche and Progreso, Sisal, and Bacalar (Farriss 1984:366-371). Yucatán promised to be a strong player in the European market; the region boasted the first steam powered cotton mill in Mexico. But Spanish aspirations for economic fortune via import-export were stunted by Mexican independence in 1821 (Bricker 1981:887-89; Gabbert 2004a:37-69; Reed 2001:3-108). At that time, the export of cattle and the import of sugar between Yucatán and Cuba stopped, and cattle ranches called *estancias* became obsolete. Inspired by the success of sugar plantations in Brazil, St. Dominique, Cuba and other Caribbean islands, more than

[171] The *repartimiento* system of taxation was abolished in 1783.
[172] By 1780 the population had risen again substantially reaching 245,000. This sharp increase caused major population pressure which put Spanish and indigenous peoples into direct competition for land and resources (Farriss 1884:370-373).

one million acres of indigenous, communally worked land on the Yucatán peninsula were legislated into the private sector for sugar crop plantations, and rural populations were forced to work on these *hacienda* estates. To facilitate international market activities *hacienda* plantation owners tried to replace *milpa* farming with cash crops of sugar cane, coffee, and tobacco; however, the southern and eastern regions of the peninsula remained largely untouched; two thirds of the indigenous population in these regions were still living as independent *milpa* farmers in the early nineteenth century (Farriss 1984:39, 370-72, 416; 1983:10-12).[173]

## 5.7 *Guerra de las Castas* (Caste War)

Efforts to shift from ranching to sugar production required the commercial takeover of private lands in the southeastern areas of the peninsula (Rugeley 1996:ix-xix, 91-116). However, Franciscan missionaries had not yet successfully penetrated this area and it remained occupied by indigenous *campesinos* who had resisted agrarian land management, tribute payment, forced labor, and religious conversion (Patch 2002:130; Reed 2001:52-53; Rugeley 1996:ix-xix, 91-116). Yucatán favored the Federalist approach towards governance involving the election of government officials in each region, versus a centralized Conservative model whereby states are little more than administrative departments, with appointed governors, operating under centralized rule (Bricker 1981:89).[174] Competition between Federalist and Conservative governments in Mexico gave rise to continued instances of rebellion in Yucatán.[175]

In 1847, Indian frustrations about unequal labor, high taxation, and Ladino controls over land use were primary factors in the onset of the *Guerra de las Castas* (Caste War) (Bricker 1981:87-118; Burns 1977:259-273; Dumond 1997:128- 131; Hernandez 1992:48-49, 52-55; Hervik 1999:43; Jones 1977:xi-xxiv; Patch 2002:131; Reed 2001:10-11, 41-56; Rugeley 1996:vi-xix; Rus

[173] The centrality of farming corn for indigenous peoples in Yucatán cannot be overstated; practices of *milpa* farming continue to the present day.
[174] Federalist and Conservative approaches towards government are reminiscent of the political systems active in ancient Maya city states or in the Aztec center of Tenochtitlan respectively.
[175] Ongoing battles led to the independence of Yucatán between 1840 and 1843, and again between 1845 until 1846 (Bricker 1981:87-94; Gabbert 2004c:46-47; Hamnett 2006 [1999]).

1983:127-168). However, the idea that the Caste War was a war between the "castes" implies that conquered Mayan speaking peoples constituted a coherent ethnic group, who rebelled against Spanish and Ladino forces.[176] Actually, the Caste War was not carried out solely along ethnic lines, if ethnic designations could even be understood as valid social classifications. Anthropological analyses indicate discrepancies in our understanding of the impetus for this civil uprising, and question its designation as a "caste" war altogether (Bricker 1977:252; Farriss 1983; Foster 2000:80-85; 2000; Gabbert 2004a:37; 2004c:92-97; Patch 1993:67-68, 200; Reed 2001; Restall 1998, 1997:18; Roys 1972 [1943]:129-158; Rugeley 1996; Rus 1983). In reality, the *dissolution* of class distinctions were more likely responsible for the onset of war (Gabbert 2004c:90-118; Jones 1977:xix; Reed 2001; Thompson 1970:xvi; Jones 1977; Thompson 1967 [1954]).

After Mexican Independence in 1821, the population of Yucatán was divided into Ladino settlers – also known as Whites, *Creoles, Mestizas/os, Vecinos* – or *Indios* (indigenous Mayan speaking peoples who occupied the area when the Spanish arrived). Each group had specific rights and duties, but *Indios* were forced to pay the highest taxes and church dues (Bricker 1981:94).[177] The Caste War uprising began deep in the heart of Yucatán, in the village of Tihosuco (Reed 2001:62-65; Rugeley 1996:iv). From there, rebels proceeded on a northwest course sacking communities without apparent regard for ethnic affiliation (both Spaniards and indigenous peoples were killed) (Gabbert 2004b:103-105).[178] Members of the rebel army came from the communities of Tixcacalcupul, Vamas, Ekpedz, Muchucux, Tituc, Polyuc, Chunhuhub, Tiholop, Tinum, Chichimila, Ebtun, and also from *haciendas* at Cat, Santa Maria, and X-

[176] As indicated, the Spanish exemption of priests and Maya nobility from property and church taxes had aggravated local social tensions, causing resentment between segments of the indigenous population who were variably allied with the Spanish (Burns 1977:259-273; Reed 2001:146-161, 197-278; Roys 1972 [1943]:129-133; Rus 1983:127-168).

[177] The transitional years between Mexican independence in 1821 and the rise of the dictator Porfirio Diaz in 1876 were an extremely turbulent period in Yucatec history (Hervik 1999; Rugeley 1996:xiii).

[178] In response to rumors that Mayan leader Manuel Antonio Ay was planning a large scale rebellion, Spanish Colonel Rosado had Ay executed. This Spanish act of aggression ignited indigenous desires to attack the conquistadores, and rebel leaders Jacinto Pat and Cecilio Chi consolidated an army of at least six hundred men and set out on a course of destruction across the peninsula (Bricker 1981:96-97; Reed 2001:59-65).

Canul (Bricker 1981:97). These sites are located in the southeastern regions of Valladolid, Tihusco, and Sotutaa – areas that had most effectively resisted the pressures of Spanish colonial reform and retained indigenous social, political, and economic structures.[179]

By the time rebels reached Mérida in 1848 they faced resistance from *indigenous* peoples who opposed the revolution as they had long been involved with the management of *haciendas* (Bricker 1981:102; Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:165-166). And because nineteenth century Yucatec society was relatively mixed, many leaders of this so-called Indian uprising were actually *mestizo*. The initial use of basic binary categories for social organization (*Españoles* versus *Indios*) became hazy over time as contact between segments of the population increased for economic, political, religious or personal reasons. In my review of colonialism, the Caste War is the first instance where I notice *mestizo* being used to refer to the indigenous population – possibly setting the stage for the contemporary replacement of the label *Maya* with the term *mestizo*. Just as popular representations of the Maya today do not necessarily reflect the experiences of local indigenous peoples, a similar discrepancy existed between Spanish representations and indigenous self understandings during the colonial period. And as we have seen, this divergence was expressed through repeated instances of rebellion to Spanish takeover.

To make matters worse, Ladino enemies were receiving help from Cuba, New Orleans, and Veracruz in the form of artillery, rifles, food, and money. This support from abroad strengthened the Ladino army and likely caused rebels to retreat southward without achieving control over Mérida. In another instance of rebellion (1869) the residents of nine Tzotzil townships in highland Chiapas murdered three Ladino priests, attacked several Ladino settlements, and besieged the Ladino city of *Cristobal las Casas*. Ladinos refer to this uprising as the Cuscat rebellion, whereas the Maya understand these events as part of a religious

[179] Chican is positioned in the center of this region of resistance, located equidistant between Tihusco and Sotuta (which are approximately 70 kilometers apart).

revitalization movement called the War of St. Rose which began in 1867 (Bricker 1981:119).

The exact reasons why rebel forces retreated from Merida in 1849 are not clear, but the death of charismatic leaders Jacinto Pat and Cecilio Chi meant that if the rebellion was to continue, if would have to be redefined; and so it was. In 1850 new headquarters were established in eastern Quintanaroo at Felipe Carrillo Puerto beside a small *cenote*[180] known as *Chan Santa Cruz* (Little Holy Cross) (Bricker 1981:103; Farriss 1984: Reed 2001:146-161). Rebels settled there and became members of a new syncretic religious movement they named after the *cenote*, *Chan Santa Cruz*. Followers of this religious cult are known as *Cruzob* Maya, a mixture of the Spanish word "cross" and the Mayan language indicator for plural "*o'ob*" (Anderson 2005:8-9; Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:165-166).[181] The movement began with the discovery of a small carving of a cross, found in a mahogany tree at the *cenote* in Felipe Carrillo Puerto. The symbol was then transformed into a wooden cross that began speaking to its followers, acting as a conduit for the word of God. Bringing together indigenous visions of the cross as a symbol of the World Tree, the axis of creation, with understandings about the divinity of the Christian cross, the *Cruzob* Maya worshiped the Talking Cross. The first Talking Cross spoke through the ventriloquist Manuel Nauat[182], but it is Juan de la Cruz who is best known as the interpreter of divine messages.[183] Talking Crosses were often dressed in Maya *hupiles*[184]; this representation of the cross clearly demonstrates the layering of symbolic

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[180] *Cenotes* are natural water sinkholes connected with subterranean cave systems. For the ancient Maya these cave systems provided passage to the Underworld, *Xibalba* (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:151).

[181] Because of their revolutionary agenda, the Cruzob Maya were also known as the *subelevados bravos* (wild rebels) (Gabbert 2004a:57).

[182] Nauatlo means interpreter in the Aztec language Nauatl; the term nauatlo was applied to Indian translators during the colonial period (Farriss 1984:106). The translators of Talking Crosses were also called Chilan (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:177).

[183] Juan de la Cruz may have been a pseudonym for Venacio Puc, the leader of the Cruzob religious movement between 1852 and 1863; or de la Cruz may have actually been Jose Maria Barrera, the mestizo who invented the Cruzob religion following the death of Jacinto Pat and Cecilio Chi (Bricker 1981:104-108; Reed 2001:197-219).

[184] Huipiles are customary white cotton dresses with colorful flowers embroidered along the neckline and at the baseline. Historically, Mayan speaking women wore this clothing daily (see Section 5.12, *Indigenous identity and clothing*, for further discussion).

meanings embodied by the Talking Cross (Figure 7) (Bricker 1981:108; Farriss 1984:315). The formulation of Talking Crosses by indigenous peoples being forced into Christianity represents ingenious religious syncretism, enabling the continuation of customary ideology in the guise of Christianity.

11. Cross with *huipil*. (Photo by Arthur G. Miller)

Figure 7: A *Cruzob* Talking Cross dressed in a *huipil* (Farriss 1984:31)

Although the Spanish assumed the Talking Cross was based on a Christian symbol, the cross has been central to Maya understandings of the cosmos since ancient times. The religious cult that emerged surrounding the Talking Cross preserved a collective memory of the Maya past while providing followers a legitimately articulated means for resisting the doctrines of Christianity imposed by Franciscan friars (Farriss 1984:389). Talking Crosses illustrate the persistence of ancient symbols into colonial Maya existence, demonstrating how practical re-enactments of historical knowledge and myths are used by the Maya to ensure the perpetual recreation of the cosmos.[185] Comparison of *Cruzob* religious symbols with those revered in Chican today suggests the people of Chican may be descendents of indigenous groups who relocated into this region when the Caste War officially ended in 1901 when Mexican General Ignacio Bravo attacked *Chan Santa Cruz* and renamed it *Felipe Carrillo Puerto*.[186] The community of Chican was founded at this time in 1902 (*Diario de Yucatán* 1994; Personal

[185] Also, the *Cruzob* religious movement suggests the endurance of the Maya cosmology despite the relative success of Spanish socio-political and economic reorganization (Farriss 1984:158).
[186] In 1893 the British government had signed a treaty with Mexico ceasing arms trade with the Indians of Yucatán, nevertheless, violent battles continued (Bricker 1981:117).

Communications with the *comisario* of Chican).[187] The continued reverence of images of Jesus crucified and dressed in a *huipil* in Chican are testimony to the enduring effects of *Cruzob* Maya resistance to Ladino invaders in southeastern Yucatán, and also to the capacity of indigenous Maya peoples to retain customary ideologies despite forced assimilation into Christianity (Figure 8).[188]


Figure 8: Image of the crucifixion of Jesus mounted on a wooden cross, adorned with customary woven clothing, displayed in the Catholic Church in Chican (2009). Refer to Figure 7 in Section 5.7, *The Guerra de las Castas*, for comparison to the *Cruzob Maya* cross.

In Chican, local residents no longer conceive of their *Cruzob* version of Catholicism as resistance per se; they understand their reverence as Catholicism itself, calling themselves "*catolicos*". When I mentioned a possible relationship between the *Cruzob* representation of *Chan Santa Cruz*, and the virtually identical symbol revered in Chican, local residents denied any relationship to the rebellion movement explaining that it is just "the way" the cross is represented in rural, Mayan speaking communities. A particularly staunch Catholic man explained, "*asi es, asi es el Cruz en las comunidades al sur de Yucatán; se le pone en huipil*" (that is how it is, the representations of the cross in southern Yucatán are just like that, the cross is put in a *huipil*). The presence of this syncretic version of the

[187] By 1921, Chican had joined the municipality of Tixmehuac, separating from the neighboring community of Teabo (Canton 1999:589). During the colonial period Tixmehuac was part of the province of Tutul Xiu.

[188] By 1915 *Cruzob* forces had again seized *Chan Santa Cruz*. Many *Cruzob* Maya died during an epidemic of small pox in 1935, and the remaining followers were split into two groups: one located at Chunpom, and the other at Yokdzonot-Guardia. The last leader of the *Cruzob* movement was Francisco May – he died in *1969* (Italics mine) (Bricker 1981:118).

Holy Cross demonstrates the creative capacities by which the Mayan speaking peoples of Chican are able to accommodate situations of change or difference, at times reconfiguring social practices to embody new forms.[189]

## 5.8 Appropriating Christianity

Distinguishing religious practices into neatly ordered categories such as Catholic, traditional Maya, or syncretic, overshadows analysis of the value that observance holds for local participants (Hervik 1999:131-151). This tendency to classify belief systems parallels the classification of people in ethnic terms in some regards. Both processes of identity labeling are significant from an outside perspective but are not necessarily congruent with the lived experiences of individuals. Frederik Barth puts forth that ethnic lines are upheld by boundaries of distinction between groups that are based on processes of incorporation and exclusion (Banks 1996:1-6; Barth 1969:10-11; Fenton 2003:106). Ethnic ascription and individual practice intersect to produce ethnic boundaries that are contextually defined and fluid rather than concrete. It is not cultural differences per se that uphold ethnic boundaries but the assignment and maintenance of shared social meanings and categories (Barth 1969:74, 84). From this perspective ethnicity does not refer to some objective reality that is "out there"; it is contextually dependent on social, ideological, political, economic and personal factors and is as much constructed *by* group members as it is constructed *for* groups by others (Fenton 2010:9, 60-67). In the region of colonized Yucatán, being subject to derogatory identity labels, or having to feign belief in Catholicism, led to the emergence of novel expressions of community identities, meant to appease the conquistadores while retaining traditions and practices beneath the surface.[190]

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[189] As already mentioned, the adoption of sign language to accommodate deaf persons, eventually incorporating sign language use into local communicative styles in general, is another example demonstrating the malleability of cultural forms characteristic of the community of Chican.

[190] The culture of the Deaf in the United States provides another example of the tendency for oppressed peoples to unify themselves into a coherent cultural group in response to discrimination (Christie 1987; Higgens 1980; Lane 1999 [1992]; Lane and Bahan 1996; Lucas 1996; Marschark and Spencer 2003; Moores 1996; Padden and Humphries 1988; Rée 1999; Sacks 1989; Schein 1993; Senghas and Monaghan 2002; Van Cleve 1993).

Anthropologist Evon Vogt demonstrated these processes among the Zinacanteco Maya of Chiapas who continue to structure rituals in accordance with local oppositional schemes in place before the conquest period (Vogt 1976:1-12, 43, 203-208). Fundamental culture patterns also continue to structure community life among Quichean Maya communities in Guatemala (Cook 2000:185-222). Mayan myths and ritual practices in highland Guatemala and in Yucatán are also congruent with those of communities in Chamula, Chenalho, and Zinacatan Chiapas. Although often exercised in the guise of Christianity, customary practices were reconfigured enabling for the continuance of local ideologies; local peoples retained core structures of meaning by adapting the principles of Christianity to fit in with local systems of worship (Vogt 1976). In Yucatán, the administration of local saint cults by the indigenous elite presents an example of the way the Maya retained their view of the cosmos through syncretism despite Spanish efforts to obliterate their religious system altogether (Farriss 1984:286).[191] Christian saints were regionally assigned and then traditional Maya idols were disguised as patron saints, enabling the Maya to practice the Catholic religion outwardly without abandoning their own beliefs and practices (Nelson 1999:129). Conveniently, the enormous importance placed on regionally assigned saints by the Spanish clergy resembled the Mesoamerican polytheistic reverence of local deities. Today, the Virgin Guadalupe is highly revered and honored vehemently in the state of Yucatán.

The distinction between Christian saints and crosses, or Maya idols and standing stones (or posts), made both systems of observance and worship intelligible to each other. A cross-shaped emblem had been at the heart of Maya religious thought for at least two millennia before the Spanish arrived; the Maya envision the access of creation at the centre of the cosmos as a personified symbol of a cross called *Wakah-Chan* (the World Tree) (Figure 9) (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:53, 254). The formation of this Cosmic Cross positioned at the

[191] Religious syncretism and continued indigenous administrative activities provide examples of the flexible capacities of Mayan speaking peoples to accommodate social instances of difference, as we see in Chican with the ability of local peoples to incorporate deaf persons into customary community life through processes of adaptation.

center of the Milky Way represents the World Tree, symbolized by the Mesoamerican *ceiba* tree, which acts as the conduit between the heavenly, earthly and underworlds (Figure 10) (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:9).[192]

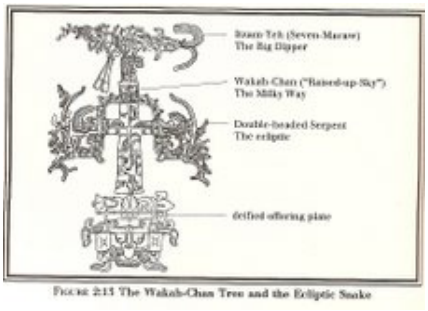


Figure 9: The ancient Maya World Tree (*Wakah-Chan*) (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:78)

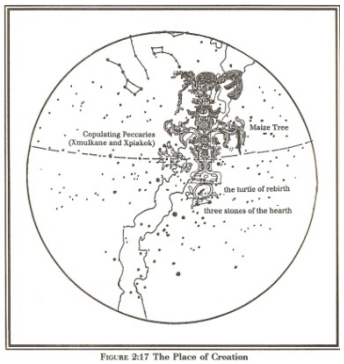


Figure 10: The World Tree situated astrologically at the place of creation (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:83).

Popularized predictions of apocalyptic events scheduled to occur on December 21, 2012 – based on Maya cosmology – mark the solar meridian crossing the galactic equator, and the earth aligning itself with the center of the Milky Way as it appears at the time of creation (Figure 10).[193] This galactic realignment, when the sun rises to conjunct the intersection of the Milky Way with the elliptic, may be understood as a time of renewal, and not an apocalypse per se. Interpretations of the Mayan calendar suggest that December 21, 2012 represents the transition from the 12th to the 13th B'aktun, a period of time

[192] During ritual processions, Classic Maya kings dressed themselves as the *Wakah-Chan* and acted as the human embodiment of the World Tree, enhancing their power by positioning themselves at the center of the world (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:394).
[193] Subsequent to the first Four Sun creation alignments, December 21, 2012 marks the beginning of the era of the Fifth Sun.

calculated in 5,200 year increments. During the eigth meeting of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (2007) Maya elder Nicholas Lucas Tirum describes this shift as a time of renewal characterized by the movement from bloodshed and human hatred to heightened respect for all beings within the universe.[194] He calls for recognizing the damaging effects that rationalist, utilitarian approaches toward science, politics, and economic development may have on the spiritual dimension of humanity, and suggests that fostering indigenous traditions may facilitate a harmonious transition into the new era of the 13th B'aktun (Niezen 2010:132-133). [195]

Devoting attention to the interpretation of written Mayan sources contributes significantly to transnational visions of Maya identity. Below I outline the influence that written Mayan sources have on understandings of the ancient Maya, of the indigenous peoples subject to Spanish colonialism, and of contemporary Mayan speaking peoples. I identify some of the key historical figures involved with the interpretation of colonial Mayan sources, and also with ancient hieroglyphic writings, inscriptions, and iconography. The interpretation of Mayan writing shapes understandings about Maya identity in an on-going process of essentialization.

## 5.9 Mayan writing

The deciphering of ancient Mayan hieroglyphic texts adds greatly to our understanding of ancient cosmology including lifestyles, beliefs, practices, and calendrical predictions (Coe 1992; Schele and Mathews 1998; Sharer, Morely, and Brainerd 1983 [1946]; Stephens 1843; Stuart 1992; Thompson 1972; 1967 [1954]). The 1864 translation of Friar Diego de Landa's *Relación de las Cosas de*

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[194] "*Mensaje de los Mayas de Ayer y de Hoy para el Futuro de la Humanidad: Un Compromiso Imperativo de los Estados y Gobiernos en el Marco del Trece B'aktun*" Unpublished presentation at the Permanent UN Forum on Indigenous Issues, New York, May 27, 2007 (as cited in Niezen 2010:132-133).

[195] Interpretations of a recent article published by archaeologists William A. Saturno, David Stuart, Anthony F. Aveni and Franco Rossi also cast doubt on apocalytpic theory surrounding the calendrical predictions about December 21, 2012; calendrical representations of dates discovered at the site of Xultun, in Guatemala, represent cycles of time extending as far as the 17th B'aktun (rather than "ending" with the transition to the 13th B'aktun scheduled to occur in December 2012) (Saturno et al. 2012: 714-717).

*Yucatán* by Abbé Charles Etienne Brasseaur de Bourboug changed Maya studies forever (Coe 1993:99-101; Morley 1956:259, 261-311; Land 1985). As mentioned earlier, Landa's documentation of the basic phonetic and iconographic elements of Mayan hieroglyphic writing has made the partial deciphering of Mayan hieroglyphic writing possible (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:44-45, 406-407; Hervik 1999:78-82; Von Hagen 1973:161-162). His recording of the Maya day names provides an indispensable clue enabling for the interpretation of Mayan hieroglyphic writing (Coe 1992:80, 113-115; Morley 1915:95; Pagden 1975).

Ancient Maya books are called codices. Very few of these accordion-like books survived the Spanish inquisition; as mentioned earlier, Bishop Diego de Landa burned entire libraries during the idolatry trials of 1562. The four known remaining codices are named after the European cities in which they were found. The Dresden, Madrid, Paris, and Grolier codices specify which gods and ritual acts were associated with particular day names in the calendar cycle and, coupled with early accounts written by the Spanish conquistadors and friars, the codices provide a picture of Maya practices and rituals at the time of the conquest (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:44-45; Stephens 1841; Stuart 1992). The importance of Mayan texts for the perpetuation of local traditions cannot be overstated. Mayan chronicles written during the colonial period, such as the *Popol Vuh* and the books of *Chilam Balam*, provide eloquent representations of Maya beliefs and life ways (Recinos 1978; Warren 1998:148-149). These texts are fundamental educational tools which bring together understandings about pre-conquest Maya experiences as they were envisioned during the colonial period (Warren 1998:150). The *Popol Vuh* was written in 1544 just after the arrival of the Spanish to Mesoamerica.[196] It explains the Quiche Maya creation story and is known today as the "Maya Bible".[197] Scholarly interest in this book began when

[196] The *Popul Vuh* are records of oral traditions in Quiche Maya, written after the Spanish conquest using European script (Thompson 1942:37).

[197] The *Popol Vuh* was first translated into Spanish by Fray Francisco Ximénez in the late seventeenth century. It remained at the University of Guatemala until the mid-nineteenth century and was brought to Vienna in 1857, and was published under the title *Las Histórias del origen de los indios de esta provincia de Guatemala* (Recinos 1978:13-14).

it was translated and published as the *Popol Vuh, le livre sacré et le mythes de l'antiquité americane* (1861) by Abbé Charles Etienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, in Paris (Recinos 1978:14-15).

The Books of *Chilam Balam* were written by indigenous scribes during the colonial period, using a European orthographic version of the Yucatec Mayan language (Schele and Mathews 1998).[198] In these books, the arrival of the Spanish was integrated into calendrical predictions; the inevitability of horrible repeated invasions was balanced out by the idea that the cosmic cycle would soon shift, and the Maya would regain power (Restall 1998:134-138). These documents recount valuable mythological, ritual, calendrical, historical, medicinal, and prophetic knowledge resembling information recorded in (now lost) pre-Columbian sources (Restall 1998:129; Sharer and Traxler 2006:123). Maya understandings about their position in the cosmic order are described, and these books help make sense of colonialism by explaining Spanish domination as part of a preordained cosmic cycle – one in which the Maya would eventually rise up to dominate their invaders (Farriss 1984:67; Patch 2002:10-14, 130). The books of *Chilam Balam* interpret the violence perpetuated by the Spanish as a continuance of social inequalities present in Maya society before colonialism (Restall 1998:37-38). Commonalities between ancient Maya beliefs in the cyclical nature of the cosmos (as illustrated in hieroglyphics and iconography) and colonial Maya beliefs in the cosmos, as evidenced in the *Popol Vuh* and the books of *Chilam Balam*, bridge ancient and colonial understandings of history and time.

## 5.10 Re-discovering the ancient Maya after colonialism

Accounts written by eighteenth and nineteenth century travelers directed archaeologists in their investigations of the impressive abandoned cities spread across the jungle-covered landscape blanketing the Maya area.[199] At that time, in the aftermath of European colonialism in Yucatán, it was difficult – for some – to

[198] The most well known Books of *Chilam Balam* come from towns located very close to Chican; leaders from the communities of Mani, Tizimin, Chumayel, Kaua, and Tusi embedded their own political motives within each text (Sharer and Traxler 2006:123).

[199] In some cases, early accounts written by explorers provided a basis for the deciphering of Mayan hieroglyphics (Bonor 1989; Coe 1992; Landa 1985 [1938]; Landa et al. 1941; Redfield 1948 [1941]; Roys 1972 [1943]; Stephens 1852; 1843; 1841; Thompson 1972).

believe these jungle-covered cities were linked to indigenous peoples, who had been so degraded by the conquistadores in evolutionary terms.[200]

Ancient Maya cities abandoned a millennium earlier were rediscovered during the Bourbon period in Spain, then under the reign of despotic King Charles III (1759 – 1788).[201] At that time Chiapas was considered part of Guatemala, and when rumors of a large ruined city near the village of Palenque began to circulate in 1784, the President of Guatemala's Royal Audencia (Joseph Estachería) commissioned an official report on the discovery. Accompanied by artist Ricardo del Almendaríz, the Spanish captain Antonio Del Rio set out to explore the ruins. By 1787, with the help of local *Chol* Maya, archaeologists had removed the dense jungle shrouding Palenque revealing the central Palace; drawings and an official report were compiled (Coe 1992:74). No further reference to the site of Palenque appears until 1822 when an English version of the report titled *Description of the Ruins of an Ancient City* was published in London (Del Rio 1822 *in* Coe 1992: 74-75).

In the early 1830s sporadic attempts were made to determine the origins of the Maya civilization. Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Latter Day Saints (the Mormons) hypothesized that these grandiose civilizations were built by ancient Israelite communities who had once flourished in the Americas (Smith 1920 [1830]; Tripp Evans 2004:4, 88-102). French artist and explorer Jean Frederic Waldeck suggested the Maya were descendants of the Chaldeans, Phoenicians and the "Hindoo" civilizations more generally (Coe 1992:77). Strangely, in his *Voyage pittoresque et archaelogique dans…Yucatán…1834-1836,* Waldeck includes elephants in his illustration of stone engravings at Palenque and in his reproductions of hieroglyphic inscriptions (Waldeck 1838 *in* Coe 1992:74-77). But despite Waldeck's initial misinterpretation of Maya

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[200] (Blom 1971 [1936]; Bonor 1989; Chamberlain 1948; Coe 1992:73-98; Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:44-45; Gann 1918:15; Gann and Thompson 1937 [1931]:204-226; Gates 1937:12-13, 59-81; Landa 1985 [1838]; Maudslay 1923; Morely 1947:22-36, 1915; Pagden 1975; Roys 1972 [1943]; Stephens1852, 1841; Thompson 1972; 1967 [1954]).

[201] Charles III was responsible for expelling the Jesuits from Spanish territory in 1776, and rendering the Inquisition ineffective. After his death in 1788, the policies of the Bourbon rulers who followed his reign were responsible for Spain losing virtually all of its Latin American colonies. Local movements for independence took place between 1810 and 1821 (Coe 1992:73).

civilization, Waldeck and Almendaríz del Río accurately recorded seventeen stone plates at Palenque which bore Mayan inscriptions; these are the first published Mayan hieroglyphic carvings in stone (Coe 1992:75).

After 1831 the governor of the Petén region of Guatemala (Juan Galindo) also carried out explorations at Palenque. Galindo theorized that the Indians of the area were in fact the direct descendants of the inhabitants of this magnificent city (Coe 1992:75). Galindo went on to explore the site of Copan in Honduras, and in 1836 he produced a report but, sadly, without illustrations.[202] The magnitude of ancient Maya civilization did not really become clear to historians and anthropologists until the explorations of American lawyer John Lloyd Stevens and British artist and architect Frederick Catherwood during the 1840s (Stephens 1852; Stuart 1992:1-64; Von Hagen 1973). Two landmark volumes in Maya studies were published by Stevens and Catherwood: *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatán* (1841) and *Incidents of Travel In Yucatán* (1843) (Coe 1992:92; Von Hagen 1973). Providing the most comprehensive treatment of the ruins at that time, these texts included survey and descriptions of architecture and monuments in the southern Maya lowlands at Copan (Honduras), Quirigua (Guatemala) and Palenque (Chiapas), and in the northern area of the Yucatán peninsula at Uxmal, Kabah, Sayil and Chichen Itza. Today these sites are valuable assets for local communities; the sale of "Maya culture" includes guided tours to local archaeology sites reconstructed (restored) by archaeologists. Many of the sites mentioned above are located alongside the eastern Caribbean coast of Yucatán, known today as the *Ruta Maya* (Maya Route). Taking into consideration the impact that archaeological representations have on transnational visions about what it means to be Maya, it is not surprising that identity assertions in the region of Yucatán are difficult to qualify, without essentializing Mayan speaking peoples based on their relationship to their anscestors known as the Ancient Maya.

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[202] Some of the first people to copy the stone-engraved hieroglyphic and iconographic inscriptions at ancient sites were Alfred P. Maudslay, Teobert Maler, Sylvanus Morley, and Franz Blom (Blom 1971 [1936]; Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:406-407; Gann 1918; Maudslay 1923; Morley 1956; 1915; Stuart 1992). Between 1881 and 1894 Alfred P. Maudslay traveled to Central America from England, and produced accurate reproductions of inscriptions at Quirigua, Copan, Chichen Itza, Palenque and Yaxchitlan (Coe 1992:109-111).

## 5.11 Identity in Yucatán today

As the preceding discussions explain, the Mayan speaking peoples living in Yucatán today valorize collective customary practices within the tourism industry, while at the same time local models for self definition are becoming increasingly individual, broadening in scope to include the repertoire of features available to all members of both rural and urban Yucatec society. In this way the people of Chican are active agents in the formulation of their identities, exhibiting capacities to draw on popularized visions of their identity whenever they perceive it beneficial to do so. In some cases strategic assertions of indigenous identity enable improved access to medical service and resources such as agricultural seeds, or *dispensas* (packages of rice, corn, oil, and beans etc. provided on a per household basis) during times of ecological crisis. At other times, adults consider themselves as *Yucatecos/as*, preferring *not* to be distinguished from residents living in urban areas of Yucatán. Many people deny being Maya, and do not consistently refer to themselves as indigenous except in cases where assuming that identity provides them with improved access to social benefits, such as medical insurrance.[203] In any case, as we have seen, historical analysis of the label Maya reveals that the roots of this term are unknown, and that local peoples today do not currently identify as being Maya amongst themselves, if they ever did. Discrepancies and similarities between self understandings and socially constructed ethnic labels imply that individuals negotiate their identities within contextually specific parameters of social definition (Romanucci-Ross, De Vos & Tsuda 2006:233-238; Verkuyten 2005:60-67). In this way individual self understandings are related to group definitions. It appears likely that social forces work in connection with individual agency to generate sometimes predictable, yet also creative, forms of social and personal identity (Bordieu 1990). If the practice of social agents were little more than an expression of the structural system that defines them, ethnic classifications would necessarily reflect local self understandings. This was clearly not the case in my field site where terms of self

[203] This situation contrasts with the valoration of indigenous heritage and identities taking place among indigenous peoples in accordance with the U.N. Declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).

definition are contextually variable and do not always represent the way peoples subjectively, or collectively, envision themselves. In many cases identity assertions in Chican reflect ascribed social labels which are meaningful within the nation state, rather than within the context of local social relationships. Acquiescence to state identity definitions may be considered through the emergence of a "false consciousness" as a non-elite mechanism for coping with elite domination, of both the physical and the symbolic means of production (Scott 1985:36-41).[204]

When I asked about terms of self identification in Chican, a group of elder men referred to themselves as "*Maya Hablantes"* (speakers of the Mayan language). Others referred to themselves as *Mayeros,* and related the term not only to being *Maya Hablante* but also to the fact of practicing *milpa* farming (the method of agriculture practiced by the ancient Maya). These assertions reinforce the importance custom and language hold in local self understandings. As I probed deeper I discovered the highly contextual nature of identity assertions in Chican, with individuals defining themselves based on their position within a social group, while also being subject to definition *by* that group. Althusser and Goodenough suggest that individuals are not independent totalities, but rather, that ideas of self are related to the ascription of identity by others (Verkuyten 2005:60).

Generally, the use of the Yucatec Mayan language is a relatively common form of self reference in Chican with many local residents referring to themselves as *maya hablante,* and members of urban Yucatán also use this term to refer to residents *de pueblo* (from rural areas, literally "from the village"). In opposition to academic discourse refuting the concept of being Maya, efforts by social and governmental institutions in Mérida aimed at improving the quality of life for indigenous peoples are now promoting education in the Mayan language as a means of recognizing the value of indigeneity in Yucatán. Increasingly, residents

[204] In his discussion of everyday froms of peasant resistance, James Scott suggests that symbolic hegemony enables the elite "to control the very standards by which their rule is evaluated", thereby preventing subordinate classes from "thinking themselves free" (1985:39).

of Mérida are enrolling in newly available courses so as to improve their understanding of the *Maaya T'aan,* enhancing their capacity to more efficiently direct state resources towards the marginalized and vulnerable Mayan speaking peoples of rural, and especially southern, regions of the peninsula.[205] The *Secretario de Educacion Publica* (the Secretary of Public Education) recently introduced the Mayan language into the elementary school curriculum across rural Yucatán, and in Chican, instruction in written Mayan complements the continued use of Yucatec Mayan at home before children are exposed to Spanish instruction in school. Inasmuch as language may be related to one's sense of identity within a collectivity, the centrality of the Mayan language has been recognized as being characteristic, and constitutive, of indigenous identity in Yucatán at the subjective level, and from an outside perspective as well.

In response to my inquiries about terms of identification, the gender-mixed group of adolescents in Chican laughed curiously and had difficulty reaching a consensus about who they are. "*Somos maya hablantes*" one boy asserted, standing proudly and peering into my eyes (We are Mayan speakers). "*Ma, ma*" (no, no) another boy contested, "*Mestizos; asi somos*" (*Mestizos*; that is who we are). There was agreement between a few boys and then someone else added, "*si, asi es, Mestizos, cuando estamos en T'Ho asi se dice* (Yes, that is it, *Mestizos,* when we are in Mérida that is what people call us). Assertions about the way they are labeled in Mérida, as opposed to their own self perception, support the idea that individual ideas of self are related to the ascription of identity by others (Rousseau 1995:290; Verkuyten 2005:60). As the conversation continued I encountered other terms of self reference to classify community identities. A particularly enthusiastic young man broke-in with, "*Aauhhh [accompanied by a subtle bouncing chin lift*], *Chicanos! En Tekax donde estudiamos la gente nos hablan Chicanos*" (Yes, *Chicanos*! In Tekax, where we study, that is what people call us). With this, the group of ten youth smiled and nodded in agreement,

[205] Global attention to issues surrounding indigeneity and post colonial suffering, including recognition of the importance of the continuance of local languages, stimulates the emergence of new educational programs in the Yucatec Mayan language – both inside rural communities and also among the state institutions of Mérida, whose mandates include serving rural, Mayan speaking peoples.

revealing an inter-community term of identity ascription they accept and assert. They began listing various neighboring communities, specifying that they are known as *Chicanos* in these areas as well. "*Tambien en Akil*" (also in Akil), a community located approximately 35 kilometers from Chican, "*asi somos alla – Chicanos"* (that is who we are there – Chicanos). Furthermore, they explained that the people of the nearby community of Akil are considered Akileños. There was a lot of chin raising indicating affirmation and everyone seemed pleased with the idea of being *Chicanos*, except for the girls who laughed shyly and shuffled their feet, saying, "*Ma' in wooli"*" (I do not know) indicating that they did not know how to define their identity. The idea of being *Chicano* comes from the people of Chican themselves, and is generated through processes of self definition related to other Mayan speaking communities who also use the name of their town to refer to their identity.[206] The idea of subjects as trans-individual agents, rather than individual totalities, suggests that identity is socially contingent and that individuals are assemblages of many social identities. In this way individuation can be seen as a process to which people are subjected in that it is the generalizing perceptions of others that make us individual persons (Rousseau 1995:290-95).

When I mentioned the term *Chicano* to people in Mérida, who reject the label *mestizo* and call themselves *Yucateco*, I did not encounter anyone who was aware of this identity label. But reactions to the term *Chicano* were largely positive and accompanied by the chin lift so typical of affirmation in Chican, the way the Maya speakers express "yes". Likely owing to experiences of subjugation under colonial rule, I sensed that people in Mérida understood the emergence of subjectively created identity labels as a means to replace derogatory ones. The generalized identity term *Yucateco/a* was likely developed as a means to avert the negative connotations associated with indigeneity (such as *Mestizo/a*, *Indio,* or *Maya*) that emerged during colonial times. Today, *Yucateco* effectively

[206] Although people from Canada may call themselves Canadian, thereby averting ethnic heritage specification, the languages and individual cultural affiliations Canadians assert are often distinct. For example, a Canadian person may speak either French or English and may not cite the corresponding European country in relation to their heritage. On the other hand, it is common to encounter indigenous peoples whose culture, language and identity are represented using the same term.

distinguishes people living in the state of Yucatán from those living elsewhere in Mexico.[207]

## 5.12 Indigenous identity and clothing

For indigenous Mayan speaking peoples, woven textiles and clothing patterns have always been used to distinguish lineage and community affiliation (Knopf 1995:100). The Spanish also used clothing to determine social status, although as a means to limit indigenous involvement in the economic sphere rather than to delineate lineage affiliation. An 1836 a government order explicitly stated that "no Indian may hold the office of *regidor, alcade, sindico,* nor any other parish position, without wearing shoes or boots, a shirt with collar, long trousers, a jacket or coat, and a hat that is not made from straw or palm leaf" (Carrillo Ramírez 1971:49 *in* Nelson 1999:138). At that time the use of indigenous style clothing meant fewer options for social mobility. Today, the redefinition of individual and group identities through the use of urban-style clothing in rural Yucatán suggests that indigenous peoples are contesting taken for granted assumptions about material representations of their cultural identity, and moving beyond static classifications limiting their sociocultural participation.

In the colonial period, non-indigenous women were distinguished by their clothing and known as *catrines*. In extension of this social labeling practice, speakers of the Yucatec Mayan language today still refer to women who do not wear customary clothing as *catrines.* While I was living in Chican people called my clothing-style "*catrin"*. However, since some local women now also wear *catrin* style clothing, the identity of outsiders as *dzules* (foreigners) takes precedence over reference to clothing style. In colonial Yucatán clothing was used as a marker of identity but as the significance of customary identity symbols becomes increasingly hybrid, items of material culture draw their significance from the fusion of local, national and transnational symbols (Hendrickson

[207] There are currently thirty-two states in the Republic of Mexico. Residents of each state identify closely with particular customs such as dietary preferences, linguistic jargon, dance styles, etc.

1996:106-124).[208] Likewise, during the colonial period the Spanish used clothing as a marker of social status, but as a means to limit indigenous involvement in the economic sphere, rather than to delineate lineage affiliation. The use of *catrin* style clothing in indigenous communities today represents a movement away from adherence to Spanish sumptuary laws regarding dress that were used to demarcate indigenous versus European identity during the colonial period. National and international dialogue surrounding the protection of the human rights of indigenous peoples now emphasizes the malleability of sociocultural forms, and the transmutability of individual expression involving the appropriation of new elements into customary forms of life (Merry 2006; Niezen 2010:4-6).

When the people of Chican have access to urban market activities they appear to be flexible in terms of which woven items would sell best; although they continue to make *huipiles*, some women showed me small napkins they produce for sale, embroidered with flowers. Some middle-aged women in Chican wear modern *catrin* style clothing rather than the customary *huipil* while some *catrin* style younger mothers continue to dress their daughters in *huipiles* (Figure 11). This type of crossover suggests the ongoing interplay between individual and collective forms of identity expression that characterize the local *habitus* as a distinct socially shared entity with emergent qualities.[209] Men in Chican usually wear jeans and t-shirts, or dress shirts with a preference for *guayaberas* on more formal occasions.[210] The only items of customary indigenous male clothing available in Chican today are sandals made of light brown leather that can be

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[208] The use of snow goggles by soccer players in 45 degree Celsius heat, as a means to protect their eyes from dripping eyebrow sweat, is an example of the way transnational products are being appropriated and incorporated into the local *habitus*. For more on cross cultural consumption see Appadurai 1986; Bocock 1993; Classen and Howes1996; Douglas 1970; Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Howes 1996; MacDougall 2003; Tobin 1992.

[209] Pierre Bordieu describes habitus as, "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively "regulated" and "regular" without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without predisposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor." (1977:72)

[210] *Guayaberas* are men's dress shirts with embroidered seams and pockets located on the chest and base of the shirt. They are thin cotton, comfortable in the humid climate of Yucatán. Mérida is famous regionally for their production, however they are also a popular dress item in Cuba.

purchased locally. Elder men in the community boast about the durability of these shoes.

Figure 11: Over the course of my fieldwork I saw only a handful of girls under the age of ten dressed in *huipiles*, and virtually no adolescents, except on special occasions. As illustrated by the above photograph, young children wearing customary clothing are usually singular instances within groups of children (notice the girl on the left).

At midday and in the evenings, both men and women in Chican weave hammocks for sale at marketplaces in Tekax, Oxcutzcab or in Mérida (*T'Ho*).[211] Customs of weaving traditional clothing are a female activity, and middle-aged women often embroider colorful flowers onto the base and necklines of white cotton dresses (*huipiles*) for their own use, or for sale outside the community. Women over the age of about forty in Chican almost consistently wear *huipiles* and speak the Yucatec Mayan language exclusively. In contrast, younger women and girls today more frequently wear urban style clothing, some of which is purchased from a covered pick-up truck that drives through Chican periodically selling clothing using a credit system whereby people pay gradually, in installments. The generational divide between clothing styles was especially apparent at the annual *corrida* (bull fight) where women wearing *huipiles* sat in chairs encircling a dance floor filled with youth wearing urban style clothing, such as miniskirts and tight jeans, while dancing to local pop music (Figure 12).

[211] Colorful nylon string is supplied by the merchants of Chumayel, a community approximately thirty kilometers north of Chican. Merchants pay approximately four dollars Canadian for the production of a hammock, which involves three to four hours of labor.

Figure 12: Elder woman wearing a *huipil* with a young girl dressed in urban style clothing at the annual *corrida* (bullfight) in Chican (March 2009). Both women are deaf. Note the woman's golden earrings, a symbol of wealth in Chican which provides the basis for borrowing money from a wealthy citizen who takes possession of people's gold in exchange for cash; residents then repurchase their jewelry gradually.

Women who wear indigenous style clothing in Mérida today, on special occasions, consider themselves *Yucateca*, not *Mestiza*, and Mayan speaking residents in Chican who choose *catrin* style clothing do not consider themselves immigrants, as the term signified during colonial times. Language itself fluctuates over time and provides a window into the way representations reaffirm customary aspects of cultural life while generating newly shared symbols. The use of customary indigenous or *catrin* style clothing in Chican suggests broad identity categories enabling social actors to emulate multifaceted identities. The two women appearing in Figure 13 are middle-aged sisters from Chican who are both deaf, only one of whom wears customary clothing. Although deaf, the same choices for identity definition are available to these sisters, with the choice to wear *catrin* style clothing, effectively deviating from state-wide (and also transnational) perceptions about indigenous Maya identity associated with the use of customary clothing. Innovative social expressions may not often originate in the more vulnerable segments of a subordinated population; the use of *catrin* style clothing by this deaf woman implies that deaf persons in Chican may not experience discrimination, and enjoy equivalent experiences of self confidence as members of the hearing population.[212] The use of sign language in mainstream

[212] The sign for *catrin* involves placing both hands on the waistline, forefinger and thumb hugged around each side of the waist with fingers fanning outward, bouncing slightly. The customary *huipil* conceals the waistline so drawing attention to the waistline is an understandable sign for clothing worn by non-indigenous women.

society provides deaf people access to the same sources for self definition as their peers, and they are reassured in their expressions of identity via the social feedback they receive from others in sign language.

Figure 13: Deaf sisters; one of whom uses *catrin* style clothing and the other, customary clothing.

Over time I realized that middle-aged women living in Chican could represent the final generation of local people who choose customary dress over urban (*catrin*) style clothing in this region. When I asked women and girls about their choice to wear customary clothing, or not, they consistently asserted that even if they no longer wear *huipiles sansaamal* (every day) they always own at least one *huipil* for use on special occasions. This situation parallels the use of *huipiles* in Mérida where many Yucatec women wear the *terno* – an ornate version of the *huipil* associated with the Yucatec regional dance called *jarana* – for formal events.

Figure 14: a young girl in Chican wearing a *terno* for her kindergarten graduation ceremony.

## 5.13 Jarana

In Mérida, women wear *ternos* while performing *jarana* at outdoor dance exhibitions held weekly in *el centro* (the downtown centre of town), eliciting

pride in customary indigenous dress. Local residents enjoy attending these performances and many guests wear their *huipiles* or *ternos* when they attend these exhibitions. *Jarana* is taught at folklore dance schools in Yucatán, and classes are as popular for local children as are ballet classes for children in Canada, the United States or Europe. Children of middle-class Yucatec families often attend *jarana* classes. *Jarana* dance involves the fusion of Maya dress with the Spanish *iota* folkdance and its cousins from Spain (MacDougall 2003:269-271). In the case of *jarana* dance, traditional dress is a source of prestige, whereas in other contexts Maya dress is a marker of indigenous identity, and is frowned upon.[213] Differences in the value placed on traditional clothing for *jarana* dance, versus the negative connotations customary clothing holds for indigenous women, is another example of the contextually sensitive uses and meanings of symbols of indigeneity in the Maya area.

In Chican, a middle-aged deaf man is well known in the community for his ability to perform *jarana*. The performance of *jarana* originally honored a patron saint at fiestas, but today the dance is performed at many different festive occasions. Even though the origins of this dance can be traced back to Europe, today people suggest that *jarana* has indigenous origins as well. An elderly Yucatec woman in Mérida explained her understanding of *jarana* dance suggesting that upper body movements (the arms) represent Spanish dance techniques while the complex leg movements (performed with white tap shoes) are derived from traditional Maya dance (MacDougall 2003:270). Participants raise their hands above their heads (elbows bent) while performing intricate tap routines keeping their feet close to the ground. Every so often dancers hop slightly, kicking one leg up and out in front of their bodies. Men twirl the women around the floor and the couple separate periodically to perform detailed footwork individually (Ryan *et al* 1970:206).

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[213] Exams at the dance schools involve practical performances wearing (homemade) regional outfits, and also the submission of Barbie and Ken dolls wearing miniature versions of the student's regional costume (MacDougall 2003). American products are highly valued in Yucatán and the prestige associated with regional dance costume is accented through association with the American Barbie doll (MacDougall 2003:270-271).

Although less frequently than in Mérida, I also witnessed a *jarana* dance competition in Chican that was attended by at least one hundred and fifty visitors from other communities across Yucatán. The best dancers from each community had been selected to represent their community in the yearly competition, the way that sports teams compete for regional titles. In Chican, *jarana* is also known as "*baile tradicional*" (traditional dance), and the event was widely attended by enthusiastic families who seemed thrilled that the competition was being held in Chican while I was living there.[214]

Figure 15: Regional *jarana* dance competition held in Chican (March 2009).

Standing alongside the basketball court which had been transformed into a dance floor for the occasion, I conversed with people about their impressions of the dance. At least ten people enthusiastically pointed out to me that that a local deaf man was an award winning *jarana* dancer when he was young. When I saw this man at the event he spun around with one arm raised above his head and told me so himself. Deaf people feel the vibrations of music and although this may seem surprising, as we associate music with hearing, many deaf people enjoy dancing.[215] Indicative of state misconceptions surrounding deafness, an article appeared in the *Diario de Yucatán* (2007) suggesting that this deaf man dancing in

[214] People in Chican often asked that I use my video camera to record events, or photograph specific events and situations.

[215] When I presented my doctoral research at the 8th Latin American Congress on Bilingual Education for Deaf People, held in Havana, Cuba (2005) I met many deaf people who dance regularly, and extremely well.

Chican is undoubtedly a unique case, "*un caso singular, sin duda*", contrasting with recorded affinities towards dance among deaf persons.

Over the course of my fieldwork I became increasingly aware of differences between state (and external) impressions about the community of Chican, such as the misconceptions of deafness cited above, compared with experienced realities in the community at large. Although well intentioned, some efforts to improve the quality of life for the residents in Chican conflict with local initiatives for community improvement. In the next chapter, I provide examples of the way outside influences are received in Chican, bringing to light the continuance of colonial approaches toward indigenous communities in this region, in some regards.

# 6 EXTERNAL APPROACHES/LOCAL REALITIES

In this Chapter I contrast external efforts at assisting the community of Chican with local experiences of *bien estar* (wellbeing). I take note of instances where well intentioned efforts to improve community wellbeing compromised linguistic and ideological customs active in the community. As was often the case in Chican, I noticed vast differences between the way individuals and groups of people expressed their experiences in my presence – either addressing me directly or discussing issues amongst themselves – compared to the self and collective expressions taking place when they were communicating with outsiders, especially state organizations. Anecdotes involving travel across southern Yucatán provide insight into the realities of being from Chican which contrast with state impressions of the situation in some regards. I recount the external assistance efforts I witnessed while living in Chican, and then describe the lived experiences of local residents; this chapter presents a combination of ethnographic observance and participation, respectively. Approaches toward education, including misguided assumptions that may devalue the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language – resembling colonial efforts to replace Yucatec Mayan with Spanish – are brought to light.

## 6.1 State developmentalism and humanitarian aid

Although well intentioned, state approaches for assisting the people of Chican often involve temporary solutions – such as donations of food or clothing following from instances of drought or hurricane damage – rather than providing educational tools, agricultural resources, or medical supplies, which would enhance local capacities of self reliance.[216] In the year 2007 the state began providing deaf persons with a monthly allowance of 400 pesos, with a maximum of three per family. Demonstrating an absence of community assessment prior to devising this program, one family includes four deaf individuals, one of whom is therefore not eligible for this assistance. Another example of state assistance I witnessed during my fieldwork was carried out in response to Hurricane Dean (2007), where the branch of the state government called *el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia* (Essential Development of the Family) provided 163 persons in the community with one "*dispensa*" (a resource allowance) every two months between 2007-2009. These resources included beans, crackers, rice, oil, sugar, and flour. And because many customary homes had been severely damaged by Hurricane Dean, the government allocated funds for local peoples to clean debris from the streets, at a payment of 800 pesos per week (approximately $60.00 Canadian).[217] Religious humanitarian efforts also reach the community periodically, but like state efforts at assisting deaf persons though the use of hearing aids, programs are not always locally appropriate. For example, during the latter half of 2008 Jehovah's Witnesses began visiting deaf persons in Chican on a monthly basis, providing them with written materials (in Spanish) and information videos (in Mexican Sign Language).[218] On one occasion, when I had the chance to speak with a group of Jehovah's Witnesses, they explained their

[216] The emphasis placed on economic stimulation in many state programs of development may have negative consequences if carried out without preparatory evaluation of local life ways and understandings.

[217] As mentioned in Chapter 7., *Making a Difference*, YUCAN was also able to assist with hurricane repairs, in communication with INDEMAYA, by donating 200 sheets of roofing materials (called *lámina*) to the most severely damaged houses.

[218] By the year 2011 the Jehovah's Witnesses had effectively inserted themselves into the community; since 2010 they have been visiting every eight days, spending time with five deaf men, providing them with biblical instruction in the Mexican Sign Language.

view that it was extremely important that deaf persons be taught MSL as they believed that the sign language used locally would limit their ability to express themselves.[219] Although deaf people always appeared friendly when communicating with Jehovah's Witnesses, some explained to me afterwards that they did not enjoy their visits, and had no intention of converting from Catholicism (only one deaf person in Chican is not Catholic – a young boy from a Presbyterian family). When I asked about the overwhelming Catholicism among the deaf, people explained that perhaps the strong visual component of worship in the Catholic faith made religious messages more accessible to people who cannot hear.[220] I was told that approximately one third of the families living in Chican are Catholic, another third are Presbyterian, and the remaining third do not actively practice any formalized religion.

Whereas development concentrates primarily on improving economic conditions, and human rights discourse frames human livelihood within the context of past suffering (such as experienced by indigenous peoples as a result of colonialism), humanitarianism emphasizes the physical and increasingly psychological conditions of suffering (Redfield and Bornstein 2010:3-6). [221] In line with humanitarian aid efforts to alleviate physical and psychological conditions of suffering, the Presbyterian response to food and clothing shortages in Chican during 2008 led this group to carry out what they called a "*Buen Samaritano*" (Good Samaritan) project in the community. This program involved a group of Presbyterians from Mérida arriving in Chican during the month of December, to distribute clothing and food in front of the *Templo* where the *Hermanos* practice worship on Monday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday

[219] The assumptions by visitors to Chican that the widely used sign language in the community was somehow lacking in nuance, preventing deaf social expression and participation, never appeared to be based on in-depth evaluation of the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language, or on evaluations of deaf experiences within the community.
[220] This explanation fits in well with widespread community understandings about the deaf having heightened observational capacities.
[221] Critically acknowledging the historically and politically constituted position of anthropology within colonial, postcolonial, and development discourses Arturo Escobar suggests that development represents a continuation of the politics of modernity, and simply another "chapter in the history of reason" (Escobar 1991:678).

evenings at 6PM. Presbyterians, locally called *Hermanos*, did not arrive in Chican until 1980 and people explained that prior to that time all community residents practiced Catholicism. Unlike the clean aesthetic of the cinderblock temple where *Hermanos* worship, before the limestone/plaster Catholic Church was built in 1990, Catholics worshiped in *a casa de paja* (a simple thatched structure).

## 6.2 Fear of the state

In anticipation of the *Bandera Blanca* (White Flag) ceremony held annually in Chican, a group of at least forty women wearing *huipiles* whisked straw brooms across the red earth surrounding the medical clinic. Machetes flew through the air, chopping overgrown brush to be combined with small piles of garbage and set ablaze, leaving the plot of land silky smooth. Women laughed as I approached, taunting my filthy legs and arms, my white skin stained from the short walk from my residence to the clinic. On this day, the streets of Chican were heavily soaked with smoke as people cleared their household properties, seeking to impress the Secretary of Health at the *Bandera Blanca* ceremony. A few local women explained that the ceremony promotes cleanliness and encourages people to clean their land and homes, thereby reducing the risk of common illnesses such as dengue fever or cholera. The ceremony is sponsored by the *Secretaría de Salud de Yucatán* (Secretary of Health of Yucatán) (SSY) and attended by nurses, doctors, and administrators from the *Unidad Movil* (mobile health services) which travels through rural Yucatán providing periodic access to health services. The *Unidad Movil* is a portable type of medical clinic which, operating out of a small van, visits rural communities where there is limited access to medical services, on a rotating basis. Technically, a doctor is meant to visit each community twice weekly but at the time the *Bandera Blanca* ceremony was held, I learned that it had been over four months since a doctor had visited the community. Prior to this day I had never seen any medical personnel in Chican; the ceremony commemorating the state's effort to assist the

community was couched in a false sense of pride on behalf of medical and state officials.[222]

The medical clinic is a small cement structure located on impressive grounds, home to the sole *ceiba* tree in Chican.[223] When I arrived, the clinic was surrounded by women sweeping vigorously, engaged in animated discussions, lamenting the complete lack of medical resources available at the clinic and also the absence of a doctor. My arrival on the scene further inspired this dialogue and I was whisked inside the clinic almost immediately. It is difficult to forget standing in the middle of the bare room beside an aging medical examination table, with the nurse, a middle-aged woman speaking through her severely laryngitic voice. "*Mina'an corriente, mina'an, yeteel mina'an ja*" (there is no electricity, none, and there is no water). A small fold-up reception table with a faded image of Mickey Mouse on it sits at the entrance of the clinic beside a wooden bench, made by a local deaf man, where people wait for appointments to see the doctor.[224] Taken aback by the complete absence of sanitary treatment facilities I began to understand why people were showing up at my residence whenever they had a medical issue – bleeding, with skin rashes[225], or throat infections and so forth. The emergency first aid kit I had with me was superior to the medical resources available at the clinic, which as far as I could tell, were none. I had expected aspirin at the very least, or band aids, or antiseptic, but I was told that the doctor brings these items for use during the visit but leaves no additional supplies in the clinic. The local nurse has a basic first aid kit but she was one of the most discouraged people I ever met in Chican – she pleaded

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[222] When I spoke with doctors and nurses I learned that many actually felt a sense of guilt, rather than pride, about the situation. But although they confessed this fact to me, I sensed that they may not have promised plans for improved services in the community, with as much enthusiasm, had I not been present.

[223] According to Ancient Maya cosmology the *ceiba* is the tree of life providing a conduit between the Celestial (*Oxlahuntik'uh*), the Corporeal and the Underworld (*Xibalba*) (Sharer and Traxler 2006:730-732).

[224] Even when a doctor does visit the community, residents complain that he or she limits the amount of appointments and stays for only a few hours. There are always people seeking far more medical assistance than is provided.

[225] I was alarmed when my neighbor showed me the "*crema*" she claimed to use as treatment for just about any wound or ailment, including an infection in her daughter's mouth, which was a product called *crema vaginal* (vaginal cream).

desperately that I speak with "Ivonne" so that she could receive some basic salary, and medical resources, for her work. Her asking that I discuss the situation with the Governor of Yucatán, Ivonne Ortega Pacheco, made me realize that local perceptions of the power I had to influence social policy were unrealistic in some cases.[226]

The bare ground where the cement medical clinic is located is under the jurisdiction of the *Secretaría de Salud de Yucatán* (SSY), but apparently decisions regarding its use are made in dialogue with the community leaders. However, when I was finally able to arrange for someone from the SSY to visit Chican, individuals and even community leaders had difficulty criticizing the lack of services they receive. The official white and green SSY van seemed to cause dilemma in local people who to my horror, when asked about their situation, expressed gratitude for the services they receive rather than furiously recounting the utter dismay they had described during our previous conversations. The ominous white van plowed through dusty streets – a blatant symbol of state wealth – as everyone backed into their *solares* (family properties). Having arranged for the SSY to visit the community in an effort to assess, and hopefully resolve local issues related to health care, I was taken aback by their somewhat alienating, intimidating entrance. Surely the objective of communicating with local residents would have been achieved more easily by walking the streets rather than driving, especially since many homes are located along unpaved back roads winding into the brush.

The nurse was clearly intimidated by the visitors with their official badges, white shirts and notepads. Faced with male representatives from the SSY, the local nurse indicated that everything was fine and that the community was grateful for the existing medical clinic – a bare structure with no running water or electricity – irrespective of the presence of a doctor and with no basic medical supplies. At some point I intervened supportively, as the people of Chican were not expressing local health care issues with any urgency at all. I felt shocked and

[226] Although state officials were interested in my presence in the community, I never communicated directly with the Governor of Yucatán.

dismayed as I witnessed the local nurse's intimidation, and also the techniques used by the SSY effectively perpetuating local feelings of submissiveness or powerlessness within the state. Interrupting the SSY dominated dialogue I broke in with,

> *Espera, me doy cuenta que un médico se supone visitar Chican semanal y que estás agradecido por ello, pero ningún médico ha visitado la comunidad de más de cuatro meses! Por favor, dejar de decir que todo está bien y decirles lo que usted necesita, lo que me contaste, por favor! Están aquí para ayudar así que por favor no te preocupes*.
> (Wait, I realize that a doctor is supposed to visit Chican weekly and that you are appreciative of that fact, but no doctor has visited the community in over four month! Please, stop saying that everything is fine and tell them what you need, what you explained to me, please! They are here to help you in this regard, please do not worry.)

Moments later, as we sat discussing these issues in the home of the community treasurer, someone from the SSY began questioning the fact that there were rotten oranges on the ground, and even empty plastic bottles, indicating that if the community were in as dire need as they claimed, they would use *all* of their resources rather than wasting them.[227] The dialogue effectively reinforced local perceptions about the futility of requesting assistance from state officials – in effect, it is common for authorities to make comments which leave colonized peoples feeling as if *they* are somehow to blame for their marginalized position within the state. When *Agropecuaria* (the State Department of Agriculture and Fishery) visited the community we explored options as to how they might assist in providing assistance with transportation of local produce to markets outside of Chican, a clear obstacle for local peoples to take advantage of naturally growing citrus fruit. But in the end, without a formal written proposal, formatted according to state guidelines, the community is not eligible for assistance.

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[227] There is no official garbage management plan in Chican. There is one garbage can in the community and plastic waste such as potato chip bags, candy wrappers and garbage of all kinds are strewn along the streets and on family properties. Residents sweep up garbage and burn it on a regular basis though, and the community remains quite clean although the smell of burning plastic is unpleasant and unhealthy.

After assisting in arranging for a doctor to visit Chican weekly, and in dialogue with locals and with the Secretary of Health of Yucatán, the SSY offered to provide YUCAN with access to the medical clinic ground to build a community center where a traditional Maya medicine clinic could be located. The state offered to equip the garden with whichever plants are required for the local production of traditional herbal medicines, and we discussed making courses available to youth at the center where elders and the local shaman could share their understandings, ensuring that customary local knowledge will be passed on to future generations.[228] Speaking with my interlocutors in Chican I was directed to consult with two women known as the *meen* (shaman) who practice herbal medicine in the community. They were interested and willing to participate with such a project, as is the *partera* (the local midwife), but unfortunately the project has been delayed owing to local difficulties with producing a formal proposal, as with the agricultural project mentioned above.

The above mentioned projects, involving improved access to agricultural or natural medicinal resources are instances where collaborative ethnographic writing may be valuable, enabling the residents of Chican the opportunity to participate in generating textual productions in collaboration with ethnographers thereby facilitating communications with the state (in this case, with the Department of Agriculture and with the Secretary of Health) (Lassiter 2005:13-14, 20-24). The idea of approaching *Agropecuaria* for assistance came directly from the residents of Chican who work in the agricultural fields of the *parcela*; a senior farmer approached me and requested that I bring the communities lack of resources to the attention of the Secretary of Health, and the Department of Agriculture. On the other hand, it was the Secretary of Health who suggested the idea of setting up a Maya medicine clinic in Chican, requesting that I carry out preliminary investigations in the community to evaluate the presence of local practitioners who were willing to participate. In this way, wherever possible I sought to synchronize the needs expressed by the people of Chican with the

[228] Local residents explained that currently, understanding of herbal medicine is extremely limited in the community, and that purchasing traditional medicine locally is more expensive than purchasing synthetic medicine, available at state hospitals and pharmacies.

initiatives of state institutions, with the hope of assistance reaching the community. Non-governmental organizations in Mexico are now taking on the responsibility of ensuring the wellbeing of indigenous peoples which are meant to fall under the auspices of the state (Martín 2001:181).

Local difficulties seeking social assistance were directly related to state insistence on having a formal, written proposal, reiterating colonial models wherein literacy was reserved to the elite Spanish ruling class thereby limiting social mobility, or in this case, access to resources. These hierarchically defined circumstances of communication may be leveled through collaborative ethnographic approaches, enabling the residents of Chican to participate in the formulation of research agendas, or social programs, designed to serve their needs.[229] The production of locally co-conceived texts[230] may help local peoples present their interests to state officials, diminishing current community experiences of intimidation derived from hierarchically conceived state models of social organization which continue to disadvantage colonized indigenous peoples. Working collaboratively with our interlocutors in this way may enable local peoples to become familiar with required formats, eventually developing skills to produce written proposals on their own, if they so desire.

## 6.3 Communicating effectively in southern Yucatán

I arrived in Tekax, a forty-five minute drive south of Chican, in search of plumbing supplies to install a faucet on the outside of my residence. Accompanied by the deaf man who I had hired to do this work, employees spoke to me rather than to my associate, until they realized it was he who knew what we needed to purchase. Without prompting, a fellow customer in the store intervened, using sign language to communicate with my friend, and then translated our needs to the female employee. Soon afterwards, she began signing as well, and speech ceased altogether as everyone used sign language to communicate. The small store was rich with hand movement and facial

[229] The introduction of hearing aids in this context presents a good example of costly state assistance which local peoples may have suggested be invested elsewhere, if they had been consulted.
[230] Lassiter 2006:16, 21.

expressions as the items we sought to purchase piled up on the counter. The customer, who had spontaneously broken into sign language, was clearly enthusiastic about signing and reasonably fluent in the language. When I inquired he explained his perception of deafness, "*ellos saben explicarse muy bien, son muy inteligente*s", (they (the deaf) know how to explain themselves very well, they are very intelligent). He also suggested that hearing people need only pay attention to understand sign language, and that with experience anyone could learn to sign. The cashier and another male customer man nodded in agreement as he went on to discuss his first experiences with sign language. Apparently at one time there was a deaf man circulating rural communities, selling a variety of goods. He said, "*Por años y años el sordo fue a vender sus cosas a distintas comunidades. Y fue así que muchos de ellos empezaron a conocer el lenguaje de las señas* (For years and years, the deaf man went to many communities selling his things. That is how many people began to learn the sign language). The cashier, a woman about fifty years old, added that she believed deaf people are "*muy despierta*" (very aware) suggesting that deaf people can teach us (hearing people) things. "*Ellos te dan a entender, se explican* (They make you understand, they explain themselves). She went on to specify that deaf people have the same skills as hearing people – sewing, working in a beauty salon, or doing construction.

As we left the store with our bags full of screens, water pipes, a garden hose, plumbing paste, etc. a group of local security guards stood chatting across the street in the hot sun. Noticing my deaf friend, one of the men in uniform raised his arms and began signing enthusiastically from across the street. The conversation continued as we approached, and I asked how he knew my friend and why he knows sign language. *"Conocí la mímica hace muchos años gracias a que jugamos beisbol juntos"* (For many years I have known sign language because we played baseball together). The other guards watched intently as they signed together for a few minutes, laughing and reminiscing about their baseball days, and about drinking alcohol afterwards. After some emotional goodbyes,

with all of the three guards bidding us farewell in sign language, we headed for the car to return to Chican.

Once we had separated from the guards, a teenage boy approached and began addressing us in sign language. I was not completely following the conversation but I did understand that for some reason this young man wanted to jump into my car. Before allowing him entry, my friend explained that this boy lives in a nearby community, called Kinil[231], which we would pass through on our way back to Chican, and that he hoped he could pay me for a ride rather than taking a *combi*. *Combi's* are old Volkswagen vans seating up to 15 people without seat belts. In Mérida they are an economic alternative to monstrously huge city busses; in rural Yucatán *combis* are used for transportation between communities up to three hours distance apart. Given the lack of seat belts, highway driving in *combis* is obviously quite dangerous, and feeling assured about this boy's identity, I welcomed him into my vehicle without charge.[232]

While driving, I peeked into the rearview mirror from time to time, observing the fluidity with which this adolescent boy signed with my deaf friend. They laughed, startling me now and again as I drove along the winding roads into the sunset colored sky, sometimes forgetting that conversation was taking place in the back seat as it was not directly within my field of vision. Getting out in Kinil, the young man commented on how much he had enjoyed the ride having heard a slew of baseball stories from the past.

On another occasion, when I accompanied two deaf sisters to the market place in Oxcutzcab to purchase yarn for sewing a *huipil*, vendors lit up as we weaved our way through stalls filled with everything from fruits and vegetables to pots and pans, to Barbie dolls, CD's, purses, sunglasses, hammocks, and customary clothing.[233] Female vendors signed with my two friends, asking where

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[231] Pronounced as *K'inil*, with a glottal click; K's appearing in Maya place names are always glottalized when spoken aloud.

[232] While I was living in Chican I drove people from community to community whenever it was safe and appropriate, and the task did not interfere with my daily research activities.

[233] After being in the field for some time many people decided I should wear customary clothing, if I desired. Open to the idea, I used the opportunity to spend time with local women learning to weave and sew. As well, I had been seeking a reason to take some deaf women outside of Chican to the huge marketplace in Oxcutzcab, to observe their experiences of communication. Aware of a

they were from and trying to accommodate their needs. In the end they referred us to a store around the corner, dedicated to the sale of sewing materials. A woman dressed in a *huipil*, working in the market, was interested in employing my deaf friend to teach her daughter sewing skills so that she could sell handmade dresses at her stall in the marketplace.[234] As we left the marketplace, a shoe store caught my eye. We went in and looked around as the timid teenage vendor watched us. Finding nothing, we were leaving when the young girl ran up to me asking why I was with these deaf women and how I knew sign language. She explained her fascination with sign language claiming that she was learning the language. "*Me facina"*, she said "*estoy aprendiendo*" (It fascinates me, I am learning).

My experiences bringing deaf people outside of Chican suggest that knowledge of the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language is present in varying degrees elsewhere in rural Yucatán, and that many hearing people are intrigued by the use of sign language for communication.[235] Residents living in the nearby communities of Kinil, Teabo, Chumayel, Tekax and Oxcutzcab often described the intelligence of deaf people owing to a generalized fascination with the fact that despite being deaf, they are able to communicate their needs, wants, desires and knowledge. Spending time with deaf people from Chican in other indigenous communities sensitized me to the relatively non-discriminatory attitude toward deafness and sign language use among Mayan speaking peoples in this region. I encountered hearing people of all ages and genders who expressed a desire to communicate using sign language, if they didn't already know how to do so.[236] Reiterating the perspectives expressed in Chican, I encountered widespread

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deaf woman who makes and sells *huipiles*, I selected her and her deaf sister, and their hearing friend, to carry out my (informal) sewing classes.

[234] Although this would have been excellent income for the women from Chican, we determined the plan was not feasible because of difficulties with transportation.

[235] Further comparative studies in various communities are needed to assess the extent of the knowledge of the sign language used in Chican in other communities.

[236] This is not to say that all hearing people I met expressed interest in sign language; I did not question everyone I met in Yucatan. When I was travelling with deaf residents from Chican I was more interested in witnessing peoples' reaction to the use of sign language, especially if they began signing themselves, without prompting. What was striking were hearing people who

ideas about the intelligence of deaf people *owing* to their use of sign language rather than discriminating against them *because* of their use of sign language.

Respecting deaf people for their communication skills, rather than seeing them as lacking in some regard, calls for a reassessment of the idea that sign language cuts deaf people off from the hearing world; perhaps prioritizing spoken over signed language is what cuts hearing people off from the experiences of the deaf. Oral educational models emphasize the importance of speech training with the goal of assimilating the deaf child into hearing society. On the other hand, in Chican, hearing people assimilate themselves into the experiences of deafness by learning sign language thereby generating inclusive experiences for both deaf and hearing persons alike. The parameters of locally acceptable social experience involve linguistic expression in Yucatec Mayan, Spanish, and the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language. Inverting colonial ideas about the superiority of European languages, of the three languages used in Chican Spanish appears to occupy the most marginal and/or marginalized status in community life. Negative attitudes toward Spanish are undoubtedly related to the forced imposition of Spanish in schools after the colonial encounter, locally referred to as *Castillanizacion*.[237] Racism toward the indigenous population in Yucatán stemming from the colonial encounter involved denigration of local systems of beliefs and lifestyles, including efforts to replace the use of Yucatec Mayan with Spanish.

## 6.4 Education, identity, and the Yucatec Mayan language

For the people of Chican identity is tightly bound to the Yucatec Mayan language and also to the use of the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language. Today colonial and state assimilationist policies involving the imposition of Spanish in schools are being re-conceptualized by the school board; acknowledging the importance of local languages to the wellbeing of indigenous people, there is a movement for bilingual education in local schools. A teacher in Chican explained,

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spontaneously expressed interest in my signing with my deaf friends, and even approached us using sign language themselves.

[237] In Spain, the Spanish language is known as *Castillano*.

> *En la actualidad el Gobierno está cambiando y quiere que todos hablemos Maya para conservar nuestra cultura y costumbre. Ahora en todas las escuelas de los pueblos yucatecos se enseña la Maya, son bilingües*
> (Things are changing now and the government wants everyone to speak and write Mayan as a means to conserve our customs and culture. All the elementary and high schools now teach Mayan – they are bilingual.[238]

Another informant agreed with the cultural conservation approaches put forth by the Indigenous Board of Education (a branch of the *Secretaría de Educacion Publica*), however he pointed out that regardless of state initiatives all children in Chican still speak Mayan with their families. I asked, "*ma'alob wa tukli'ik ku xooko'ob le maya t'aan le pala'alo'ob te tu naajil xook*" (are you pleased that the children will be studying Mayan here?), and he responded, "*jaa, ba'ale ma jach k'aabet le maya t'aan te tu naajil xooko' te chicamo maatik tu laakal le pala'alo'ob ku t'aano'ob maya tu yoocho'ob* (Yes, but it is not very important in Chican; all children speak Mayan with their families). But as the conversation progressed, the importance of teaching *literacy* in the Yucatec Mayan language became a central theme. We basically agreed that even if people consistently speak Mayan in the community, only *alfebetizacion* (literacy) will ensure the continuance of the local language and that local knowledge will be passed down through generations.

The community leader suggests that of the approximately six hundred residents in Chican thirty percent read well, forty percent are able to read basic Spanish such as street signs, food labels, and basic documents, and the remaining thirty percent, who are primarily elders, cannot read at all. Children and adolescents compose the largest percentage group, understood as having only basic reading skills.[239] But during my experiences with youth I noticed great variation in literacy skills among them, especially those less than ten years of age.

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[238] The integration of the Yucatec Mayan language into the elementary curriculum in communities across rural Yucatán began in the year 2000.

[239] Half of the population, of approximately 612 people, are under the age of eighteen. The community list I was provided with does not include babies less than one year of age. Newborn babies are not customarily named until they reach three months of age.

Once they reach adolescence, only those children pursuing post secondary education outside of Chican, most often in Tekax, are able to read and write in Spanish. But since the initiative of teaching the Yucatec Mayan language in schools only began ten years ago, it is uncommon to encounter residents about twenty years of age (those studying outside the community) with written skills in the Yucatec Mayan language. As for those students under ten years of age, only about one third can read or write at all (whether in Spanish or in Yucatec Mayan). Detailed analysis of literacy levels in Chican is necessary to design more effective educational curriculums, and social programs aimed at educating parents about the importance of ensuring that children attend school, and complete homework assignments, are extremely important. In this context, where knowledge has customarily been transmitted orally, many residents do not value education. Nevertheless, independent of elder attitudes some adolescents today are eager to pursue careers outside the community. Having visited larger communities with access to cellular telephone and internet service, adolescent boys, reaching about twenty years of age, were particularly enthusiastic about the prospect of higher education. Unfortunately very few families have the resources to support their child's education outside of the community.

## 6.5 Special education

Assessing the integration of deaf children into the education system in Chican was another means by which I was able to explore attitudes surrounding deafness and sign language. Locally, primary and secondary level deaf children attend regular classroom education, and they appear to operate using a "buddy system" so that they can understand lessons given in spoken language. This model mimics the model of interpretation I saw active among both deaf children and adults when they came into contact with hearing people from outside Chican who could not communicate using sign language. As mentioned already, extended networks of friends and family explain the messages, transmitted via spoken language, to deaf residents. Although this technique appears to be quite effective during government workshops or community gatherings, deaf students relying on their "companion" for translation of lessons means that that deaf

children do not always completely follow the lessons. Some deaf students simply "copy" their neighbors work, submitting homework which they have not actually themselves completed, and I also saw a deaf child of six years old bring a calculator to school, to assist with basic mathematical equations. On one occasion I saw a hearing girl allow a deaf boy to copy answers directly from her workbook, as the teacher stood at the front of the classroom, seemingly ignoring the situation. Teachers who have been working in Chican for longer periods of time are able to accommodate deaf children in their classrooms more efficiently; being familiar with the sign language enables them to provide deaf students with some additional guidance.

To complement local educational opportunities, deaf children attend a rehabilitation center located in Tekax. The school serves seventy-eight children with disabilities, nineteen of whom are deaf (thirteen boys and six girls).[240] They offer primary education on a bi-weekly basis to those students enrolled in regular classes in their native communities, and fulltime classes for students who are not able to attend their local schools. The institution is called *Centro de Attention Multiple #18* and serves populations in the municipalities of Tekax and Tixmeuac. In Tekax, students come from the communities of Kancab, Cepeda Peraza, Becanchen, Xaya and Alfonso Caso. In Tixmehuac, students travel from the communities of Chican, Teabo, and Mayapan. The school is funded by the branch of Special Education at the *Secretaría de Education Publica* (SEP). Apparently those parents who can, offer ten pesos ($1.00 CAN) per month to purchase supplies, such as purified water, for students. When I visited the school there was no toilet paper in the bathroom.

The three deaf children from Chican – aged six, seven, and twelve – are transported to the Tekax school twice weekly in a minivan so that they can they receive instruction in speech therapy, using their hearing aids.[241] But when I visited the school to speak with directors and teachers, they suggested that things

[240] Nine deaf students are from Tekax, four are from Mayapan, three are from Chican, and the remaining three students are from Kancab, Becanche, and Teabo.
[241] Unfortunately, community tensions within the municipality of Tixmehuac sometimes mean that the minivan does not show up to transport local children to the school in Tekax.

were not progressing quickly with hearing aid training, and that they usually use sign language to communicate with the children. One teacher explained that with the children of Chican, lessons do not concentrate heavily on teaching speech since they can communicate well using sign language. The deaf children seem to enjoy attending the school in Tekax but unfortunately there is no correspondence between local teachers in Chican and administrators/teachers in Tekax, so neither school is aware of the curriculum being followed by the other. When I brought this issue to the attention of educators everyone agreed wholeheartedly that it makes sense to communicate the curriculums being followed at each school, bringing homework assignments, etc. back and forth so that teachers would be aware of the students' progress, and the difficulties they encounter with particular materials. Clearly, missing two full days weekly of school in Chican does not facilitate deaf children keeping up with the local curriculum either. Aside from school administrators, I spoke with the parents of deaf children who were willing to help ensure their child brings homework, workbooks, texts, etc. back and forth between the two schools. The driver of the van was eager to participate as well, and the directors of both schools agreed about the possible benefits of this plan. However, prior to my leaving the field some type of dilemma occurred between local families in Chican and the van driver, which apparently halted the planned communication of lessons (the van driver was going to assist by ensuring that children brought homework materials from the Tekax school back to Chican).[242]

A father of deaf children from Chican, himself deaf, explained that his two children were going to Tekax to receive training for the use of their hearing aids, or to have them adjusted, or for something to do with their hearing aids which he was unclear about. He indicated that presently the aids were not doing much for the children; they were reacting very little to auditory stimulation. At one point he reached up to my ear, gently swept back my hair, and cupped his hand around my ear indicating the way a hearing aids is placed. He also jabbed his index finger inside my ear indicating the invasive part of the hearing aid. When the

[242]At the time I carried out fieldwork in Chican the transportation service to the special education school in Tekax was unreliable.

topic of hearing aids arose during my communications with deaf people, they often winced as they described their experiences wearing them (Figure 16).

Figure 16: A deaf man describing his experiences with the use of hearing aids.

## 6.6 Hearing aids

Owing to government interest in assisting people with disabilities in Yucatán, deaf people in Chican were given hearing aids in 2007, and as previously mentioned, since that time deaf residents have been receiving "pensions" of about fifty dollars per month, with a maximum of three per family (despite the presence of an all deaf family with four members). It is interesting to see deaf people wear their hearing aids when government officials visit the community but never on other occasions. Blue and pink canvas bags containing hearing aids hang idly from hammock hooks along the walls, removed only when state sponsored workshops are held in Chican.[243] The hearing aids were provided by a governmental foundation called *Fundacion Televista*, without adequate instruction or training. The foundation brought deaf people from Chican to *Hospital Oran* in Mérida where they performed medical and auditory examinations to determine if hearing aids would be of any use. Of the eighteen deaf people in Chican, eleven were given hearing aids.

[243] Whenever State sponsored activities are held in Chican, food and/or gifts such as baseball caps, t-shirts, cloth shopping bags, etc. are provided, to encourage attendance. Tacos are most often served on thin paper plates taken out from large cardboard boxes used to transport them into the community. These savory treats are prepared with corn tortillas, red onion, and stringy turkey with a slice of avocado on top.

Although deaf people appear to understand that hearing aids are meant to amplify noises around them, aside from the children who receive special education in the nearby larger community of Tekax, adults receive no guidance to assist them with becoming accustomed to using these devices. When I inquired about their hearing aids, which I avoided doing in many cases to sustain the level of trust I had developed with deaf residents, I was usually handed an instruction booklet written in Spanish. Detailed instruction booklets were provided with the devices but for those who cannot read, let alone speak Spanish, these operational and maintenance guides are of little value.

On one occasion a hearing woman defended the choice (of deaf residents) to refrain from using their hearing aids, explaining to me that the necessity to communicate means that most people learn to communicate through movement, "*La necesidad de comunicarse hace que uno aprenda a hablar así. Si observas, la mayoría de la gente habla con sus movimientos*". It seemed illogical, to this mother of three hearing children, to insist that deaf people use hearing aids to facilitate communication when they already communicate using sign language. At no point while living in Chican did I ever hear a deaf person use spoken language to communicate.

## 6.7 Shouting out loud for Mexican Sign Language

The relationship between language and identity is complicated when considering colonized peoples; the power dynamics between state assimilation models and local educational initiatives are conflicted (Martín 2001:185-185).[244] In the case of Chican, efforts to dissuade the use of the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language recapitulate colonial models that sought to replace local languages with Spanish. The same way that Spanish was imposed onto the indigenous peoples of Mexico, today, users of Mexican Sign Language are seeking to impose Mexican

[244] The forced assimilation of aboriginal peoples into Canadian Indian residential schools is a pronounced example, demonstrating the deleterious effects that disconnecting children from their communities and families has on personal experiences of wellbeing, and on one's sense of cultural identity (Niezen 2010:192-216). Similarly, beginning in the 1860's when deaf residential schools adopted oral methods of education, and especially after the 1880 Congress in Milan, residential schools for the deaf sought to assimilate deaf children into hearing society (Lane, Hoffmeister and Bahan 1996: 240-244).

Sign Language, or Signed Spanish, onto Chican irrespective of the existence of the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language. The suggestion that indigenous languages are more *natural*, not as sophisticated or potentially useful as European languages, characterized a workshop I witnessed in Chican; deaf users of Mexican Sign Language, from Mérida, provided instruction in Mexican Sign Language to the residents of Chican. They concentrated on teaching basic signs such as *familia, hola, papa, mama*, etc. (family, hello, father, mother, etc.), literally screaming vocabulary items, expecting local repetition of these terms in both signed and spoken language. The community was separated into two groups, comprised of children and adults respectively, and adults were given printed handouts with a drawing explaining what constitutes a "*familia*" (family). The orchestrator asked the group, somewhat patronizingly in my view "*hay familias aqui*? (are there any families here?). A younger man stood beside her translating her Spanish presentation into Yucatec Mayan. I noticed that as she spoke, explaining basic vocabulary in *Lenguage de Senias Mexicana* (*LSM*), at times she mixed gesture with signed vocabulary. The gestures accompanying spoken languages are different from the standardized hand shapes and movements used in signed languages, and this combination would have been confusing for deaf individuals observing the lessons without *listening* to her qualify which hand movements were signs, and which were gestures. Hearing members of the audience were able to make this distinction based on her vocal explanation but deaf spectators would not have been able to distinguish the gestural components, compared to her instruction in *LSM* with as much ease (the sign for "family" was followed by a gestural translation of her saying "*ya*" which means "finished" in Yucatán). During these language workshops, one deaf man appeared to be extremely enthusiastic about learning the Mexican Sign Language. He tried helping his deaf friends understand the lessons by translating what he understood of the MSL instruction sheets they were given, into the Yucatec Mayan Sign language. As the instructor spoke he signed to his deaf friends seated across the circle of at least fifty adults seated in metal fold-up chairs.[245]

[245] One interesting aspect of this program was that they sought to teach the *entire* population to

Lots of balloons were provided during the workshop. Afterwards, as people were gradually dispersing home for lunch, I conversed with a few local men and women who explained that the organizers believe the sign language used in Chican is too "*natural*" and therefore it would be helpful for them to learn standardized Mexican Sign Language, assuming that residents of Chican wish to enhance their involvement with the market economy in Mérida. A young woman who has a deaf uncle proudly interjected, claiming that her four-year old *nieta* (niece) could produce the signs for *grandfather*, for *brother* and for *more* in Mexican Sign Language, and does so when communicating with her elderly deaf uncle. Puzzled, I mentioned that her uncle appears to be fluent in the sign language used in Chican, as do many other community members. "*Aahhh* (yes) she said, straightening her posture with agitation and proceeding to explain that deaf people who come from Mérida do not, in her view, have a very developed sign language at all. The sign language used in Chican is much better than the one used in Mérida, she said, "*Jatch jats uts le senias waye [las senias son muy bonitas aqui]. Es mas major que las senias ti T'ho*" (It is very beautiful the sign language used here. It is much better than the one used in Mérida (LSM). In her view, the sign language used in Chican is more efficient for communication. Defending her position, she criticized Mexican Sign Language explaining that there is no sign for "*respeto*" (respect) (palm facing outward tapping at eyebrow) or for the word devil (*kiisin*) (index fingers pointing out from top of head over ears) ("*mina'an senia respeto o kiisin"*). In her opinion, the Mexican Sign Language is not as complete, "*ma' completo*" (not complete), as the sign language used locally. She clearly believed that the sign language "courses" brought to Chican are frustrating for deaf people who are already capable of communicating using the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language. The idea of teaching language to a group of indigenous people who already have a language (although it may not yet be formally recorded) mimics what happened during the colonial encounter where

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communicate using the Mexican Sign Language, rather than concentrating exclusively on providing instruction for deaf residents.

the Spanish language was imposed onto the indigenous populations they encountered upon arrival in the Americas.

To receive the benefits associated with government assistance programs for persons with disabilities, deaf indigenous peoples in Chican face a double identity fabrication.[246] Deaf people in Chican not only comply with social development initiatives aimed at improving the quality of life for indigenous peoples (which do not always take into account local customs in their program design), they also have to feign interest in using hearing aids, acting as if they seek to overcome their deafness.[247] As is likely obvious to readers at this point, the actions and viewpoints expressed by the residents of Chican suggest that they do not conceive of deafness as problematic, or in need of a "cure".

# 7 MAKING A DIFFERENCE

While I was deeply engaged in ethnographic fieldwork, the qualitative aspects of experience blended together and operated in a continuum, making it challenging to assess my findings without acknowledging my position in the fabric of local social life. Accepting this reality rather than quantifying experience digitally – creating unnatural venues for conversation – enabled me to share in the interests of local people.[248] In practical terms, I embodied the teacher identity I was assigned. Using this role operatively I designed an educational case study to observe the social inclusion possibilities for deaf children. The Maya Development Institute in Mérida (INDEMAYA) provided me with the didactic materials necessary for teaching language in the community.[249] Language workshops concentrated on practicing literacy in the Yucatec Mayan language,

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[246] Along with hearing aids, deaf people in Chican received health insurance cards so that they could receive medical attention free of charge in Mérida, at Hospital Oran.

[247] The documentary film *Sound and Fury* (2000), and its sequel, *Sound and Fury: six years later* (2006) reviews current debates surrounding the use of artificial hearing instruments. Also see Branson and Miller 1993, and Lane 1999 [1992].
For more information see http://www.pbs.org/wnet/soundandfury/ . Access date: June 2012.

[248] As already indicated, formal and semi-formal interviews were not a particularly effective means for gaining insight into questions surrounding identity since direct questioning seemed to incite self interested objectifications of otherwise freely experienced realities.

[249] I completed my certification to teach English as a second language in 2001 (TESL). Between 2003 and 2004 I worked as an English teacher in Mérida at the *Centro de Ingles Surreste* (CIS).

reiterating knowledge of the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language, and teaching some English.[250] Initially, ten eager children, ranging in age from five to ten, attended these workshops and were encouraged to play with a set of toys I collected in Mérida, via donation. I used books, coloring books, board games, crayons, paint, dolls, toy cars, Frisbees, soccer balls, and skipping ropes to familiarize children with the concept of borrowing, and depending on the game, to practice language skills and observe gender conceptualizations. At the same time, these educational workshops acted as a case study for observing the facility with which deaf people can be integrated into social programs introduced in this context. The group of children involved with these language learning workshops was restricted to ten individuals, but various playtime activities and sports were attended by up to twenty children at times.

During language learning activities, children appeared to have the least difficulty internalizing vocabulary items in sign language, as opposed to producing vocabulary in written English or Yucatec Maya. One of the most useful teaching strategies I designed involved the use of "memory cards" with drawings of written vocabulary items in the Yucatec Mayan language. By means of blanking out the written element, and then translating words into English on half of the cards, students sought to uncover matching pairs of cards while practicing reading. As children became more familiar with vocabulary items I inserted blank cards as well, requesting that they produce vocabulary items in Yucatec Mayan, English, and the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language (Figure 17). Each time a card was uncovered children produced the vocabulary item in all three languages. To successfully "win" a pair of cards, having identical drawings with vocabulary items written in different languages, when cards were uncovered simultaneously, children were expected to produce trilingual understandings of the terms.

[250] Walking through the streets of Chican, adolescents often requested I teach them English. They explained their desire to learn English so that they could communicate with passing tourists.

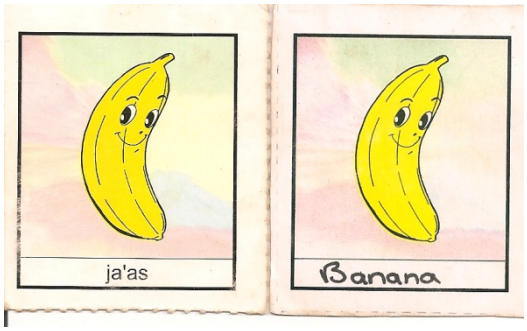


Figure 17: example of memory cards used during educational workshops with youth in Chican.

Local interest in interactive learning was astounding, and demand to participate in my courses grew quickly. Realizing that I could only host a limited number of children during any particular workshop, I became aware of the need to make local educational and recreational resources available on a community-wide basis. One day, when a group of twenty-five children showed up at my home, I decided to take them to the *campo* (the sports field located just outside the community). I selected a couple of older children to assist with making sure that no one strayed from the group as we played soccer, and used Frisbees, and skipping ropes. There was a deaf child present and I observed her interactions with a close friend, and within the group, using sign language. Language workshops were useful for observing sign language use among deaf and hearing children and also for gaining insight into gender role conceptualizations. Boys unanimously chose to play with toy cars, while girls preferred to play with miniature dolls and skipping ropes. Both boys and girls adored drawing with colored pencils and paper, and everyone seemed eager to play Frisbee.

Having let the community define my social role it became my responsibility to fulfill the hope that my presence seemed to incite in residents. Discussions about pressing issues ensued regularly in a fascinating mixture of local languages. Participation in these conversations facilitated my positioning in the community and provided a template for ethnographic study of the central facets of local identity. The study of systems of communication entails learning about *how* people choose to communicate and also about *what* they communicate. These aspects of communication illustrate different facets of local identity in that

communication style provides insight into local propensities to use sign language, and also into shared values and concerns.

Local confidence in my being a facilitator for the community drove me to make it real, and actually I felt pressured at times, being given more power than I had bargained for. The way people constructed my role and envisioned my identity elicited a dimension of the way they organize phenomena in relation to themselves and the world around them. Aside from the enthusiasm people expressed to spend time with me – involving me with their daily activities thereby enabling me insight into communication and life ways – attention to my presence from state organizations in Mérida encouraged the people of Chican to request my assistance in presenting their needs to the government.

These dialogues led to my founding a non-profit organization called *YUCAN Make a Difference A.C.* [251] I was effectively able to find support for my non-profit activities from the Department of Human Rights of Yucatán, The Indigenous Board of Education (SEP), *Instituto para la Equidad de Género en Yucatán (IEGY)* (the Institute for Gender Equality of Yucatán), the Institute for the Development of Maya Culture in Yucatán, the Secretary of Health of Yucatán, and in dialogue with a Diplomat named Gaspar Armando Quintal *Parra (Presidente de la comisión de Puntos Constitucionales, Gobernacion y Asuntos Electorales*).[252]


Figure 18: The symbol for YUCAN, integrating images from the Canadian and Mexican flags.

[251] The *Asociacíon Civil* is registered nationally in Mexico City.
[252] At the onset of my research, and during preliminary fieldwork, I had no idea I would eventually occupy this role and actually, interlocutors did not express any collective grievances to me until they were comfortable with my presence. As already discussed, attitudes in Mérida about my presence in the community, and my ability to improve the quality of life there, also contributed to the development of my persona in Chican.

My ideas for founding YUCAN emerged as a logical step in the development of my field personae and provided me with insight into the implications of sign language use in this context. In this way I approached my research questions without highlighting the phenomenon of deaf social integration, enabling me to observe sign language use without prompting of any kind. Deaf involvement with social programs facilitated by YUCAN paralleled deaf social inclusion more generally, exemplifying the utility of this passive approach for investigating research questions surrounding deafness. At the same time, I was able to actively assess community initiatives for social improvement. During workshops facilitated by YUCAN it was interesting to see the way local people accommodated deaf people without formal systems of interpretation.[253] Family members and friends used sign language to explain presentations, and subsequent conversations were carried out in a mixture of spoken and signed language.

Although my fieldwork setting may sound idyllic for deaf residents, the people of Chican live in extreme poverty and are in desperate need of social assistance. State ideas about my power to incite social change in Chican shaped my experiences there, especially during the second half of my fieldwork (2008-2009), and it was impossible for me to ignore the comparatively vulnerable position of the people of Chican within the broader context of Yucatán. I emphasized my engagement with the people of Chican as a type of cultural and educational exchange. I allowed residents to define my position in community life, and the average person – especially children and adolescents – decided I was a teacher. Community leaders and directors of development institutions in Mérida decided I was there to help whenever the community faced challenges such as hurricanes, alcoholism, disability, illness, access to medical services, education, violence against women, and so forth. Likewise, government associations responsible for this type of assistance envisioned my presence there as potentially transformative, bringing international perspectives to assist with devising socially

[253] While I was living in Chican I was able to arrange two workshops through the *Instituto de Equidad de Genero de Yucatán* (IGEY) (the Institute of Gender Equality in Yucatán).

responsible, effective, and sustainable social programs. I embraced this position inasmuch as it was useful for embodying my field persona, and also, as a means to give something back to the community in exchange for my presence, living among them as a researcher.

For example, at the onset of my fieldwork there was need for relief from Hurricane Dean (2007), and residents from Chican reached out to me, asking me to seek assistance for the community from Mérida.[254] To exacerbate the urgency with which the people of Chican approached me, a young child had recently passed away and the family was disappointed that they had been unable to reach me in Mérida to assist them in finding medical service for the child. Setting out for Chican, before leaving Mérida I circled the colonial *glorietas* trying to buy a potted flower for this family who had lost their child of five months, owing to an inability to process sugars, they believed. When I arrived in Chican, I went directly to the home of this family who had recently lost their baby. Inside, the mother looked solemn and did not say a word. She peered up shyly from time to time as if disgraced by the loss of her child, and I tried to comfort her without success. Quickly becoming aware that I was unfamiliar with cultural norms surrounding death, I stood holding the pretty plant I had brought as a symbol of sympathy, paralyzed. The floors of the family home were tightly packed red earth. In lieu of furniture, clothing and weapons and supplies of all kind hung from wooden beams crisscrossing the inside of the wattle and daub home. My explanation that a gift of flowers was common in Canada to express sympathy met with blank stares. We discussed the cost of finding medical service for their child, and the frustrations they had faced, as I offered gifts of towels and food that I had collected from people in Mérida seeking to donate resources to families left destitute by Hurricane Dean. The donations I brought were warmly received. An elderly woman nestled into one of the towels, wrapping it around her shoulders, using it as a shawl. A young girl of about four years old circled her father as he held the flowering plant, enchanted by the brilliant pink buds. A deaf man who

[254] When I arrived in Yucatán in 2007 I rented a small apartment in Mérida for use when I visited the city to purchase supplies, to seek medical care, or to do archival and ethnographic research contextualizing my study.

was visiting the family smiled at me, clearly pleased with the distribution of resources I had been able to bring to this family. As I spoke, a young girl translated my words into sign language so that everyone in the room could follow the conversation, which took place in a mixture of Yucatec Mayan and the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language, complemented by some Spanish spoken with a Mayan accent. Between these three languages we managed to communicate our emotions appropriately despite the humid tension saturating the room.

Having been placed in the position of bringing assistance into Chican – people from Mérida had assumingly presented me with donations, and state authorities concerned about southern indigenous communities immediately carved out my role as a facilitator – I consulted with the *Instituto para el Desarrollo de la Cultura Maya del Estado de Yucatán* (INDEMAYA). I was acquainted with this institution as I had studied the Mayan language there during my fieldwork preparation. The Director, Lic. Abigail Uc Canche, was encouraged by my activities in the community and we visited Chican together to evaluate the need for new roofs. After this evaluation two hundred *lámina* roofs were delivered to families whose palm thatched roofs were damaged by Hurricane Dean (2007). In December of 2008 YUCAN received a donation of two hundred warm blankets for the people of Chican. I distributed blankets to children, the elderly and disabled, and people who were ill. Distributing donations without causing tension in the community was challenging, and people requested blankets from me for a long time afterwards. I received counsel as to how to proceed with this activity from INDEMAYA. Ultimately, my decision to distribute blankets to children, the elderly, and disabled persons appeared to be well received by local residents.

Figure 19: Blanket distribution to children in Chican (2008).

A profound consequence of my passive engagement with community life was to assess, and present, local issues to state officials. As my fieldwork progressed, discussion about community needs became central conversational themes in my presence, involving local access to medical services, agricultural resources, community debate surrounding a newly opened *cerveceria* (beer stand), domestic violence, solutions to hurricane damages in the community and a number of other themes involving potentially useful social programs.[255] The reaction of local residents towards the ease with which I seemed able to effectively bring community needs to the attention of government officials caused me to contemplate ways I could integrate these activities into my research approach, using social programs as a venue for investigating relationships between communication and local identities. Questioning people about their viewpoints toward deafness and sign language was useful for understanding the impression they decided to put forth, but observing multi-modal communication in action, in contextually diverse circumstances, allowed me access to deeper motivations underlying communication modality choice.

As mentioned earlier, my inquiries into the use of sign language by both deaf and hearing people did not involve analyzing the sign language itself, rather, I explored the way individual and social dispositions facilitate the unproblematic

[255] Issues surrounding the opening of a beer stand in the community were described in an article appearing in the local newspaper, *Por Eso* titled *"Alcalde promueve alcoholosmo"* (Municipal leader promotes alcoholism) (*Por Eso 31 Dic 2007 P. 31-32).*

use of sign language in this context. Although I concentrated on understanding the modality selected to communicate, I also took note of the content of conversations. Researching tacit understandings of communication, as well as attitudes toward difference and disability, I found myself learning from people in open, flexible dialogues, intrigued by the diversity of activities I became involved with. Sensitive to the reciprocal effects of communication modality, I approached the field with an open mind and body, shifting between signed and spoken language whenever the need arose. As my fieldwork progressed I no longer felt oriented by my previous understandings of my place in the world. Below I offer insight into the acculturation processes I went through to gain an understanding of the life world active in my field site.

At times I had difficulty with the living circumstances in Chican and I felt as if I were relating to the environment in unusual, sometimes uncomfortable ways. Being in Chican involves being cut off from communications, having no toilet facilities, sleeping in a hammock, and dealing with dangerous spiders, insects, and snakes on a regular basis. While I was involved in activities, or during communications, my interactions with the world seemed to make sense; I embodied my reactions toward unfamiliar circumstances to fit in with local perceptual styles. But upon reflection, when I had the chance to write or to meditate, or during periods of transit, I felt disembodied in that I had difficulty relating to the way I was experiencing the world on a daily basis. In my efforts to observe, participate, and communicate with local peoples I sought to open up a space inside myself, abandoning the neurotypical model for experiencing and relating to the world I usually embody, to share in their life ways. Participating with communication in signed and spoken language was particularly fruitful in this regard as my engagement involved learning from local peoples via participation on a regular basis. I let go of my language, and my usual means of making sense of the world, allowing for a repositioning of myself into daily life experiences in my field site.

## 7.1 Disembodied fieldwork: allowing experience to unfold

I madly stomped tiny black grasshoppers that may have been responsible for the huge welts on my torso. The community was unsure about the cause of these furiously itchy, red, swollen bites that lasted for over a month. My neighbor believed that all seven of them, along my torso reaching up my chest and down my side, were small insects which had inserted themselves into my skin. "*No son garapaas"*, she said (they are not ticks) but the "little brothers" of ticks, "*sus hermanitos*". She indicated their size using her forefinger and middle finger in a miniscule, barely visible formation. She explained that the neon-red center of my bites were actually tiny insects not insert wounds, and she approached me with a crusty piece of grass, similar to a twig, with the intent of digging them out. Refusing vehemently, I doused them with alcohol hoping they were from the small grasshoppers I had been bitten by previously while sleeping in my hammock.[256]

Apparently these tiny red burrowing insects are found where *wakax* (bulls) are kept, and I had recently visited a deaf family who had bulls on their property. One of the deaf residents, a middle-aged man, often stopped by my house to see if I needed assistance with anything. I often paid him to buy a twenty liter bottle of purified water at the store as he owns a *tricículo* (adult sized tricycle useful for transport). One day when he stopped by my residence I decided to accompany him though town to buy the water, and I asked if we could visit his sisters as well.

We stopped to chat with at least fifteen residents along the way. Everyone was quite curious about our walking through town together, offering that I visit

[256] I was actually more troubled, or rather puzzled, by what was happening to me cognitively at this point than by having to deal with these strange insect bites. The evening prior I had cooked corn with slugs in it for supper, assuming the maggots would die once they were cooked. I had been generously been given this piece of *maize* by an elder deaf man earlier that day when I visited his agricultural fields, and I felt it wasteful not to eat the corn. I no longer felt oriented by what I was accustomed to; however, I understood this process (letting go of my ways of relating within the world) as enabling for my participation with local peoples. Friends and associates always appeared to enjoy hearing stories about the aspects of life I found challenging, different, in their community and they seemed to feel proud of their ability to maneuver themselves so effectively within their environment, and to teach me how to do so more efficiently.

their homes later on, to socialize with their families.[257] Arriving at his home, his two deaf sisters invited me to tour their property. I was impressed by two huge bulls tied up on their land, slightly below the main residence, and everyone burst into laughter as I naively approached them only to have them grunt and stomp angrily, frightening me so much that I reeled backwards and nearly pushed over one of the sisters. We had great fun looking at their plants as I practiced the signs for various plants and vegetables.[258] At one point, one of the women, wearing a thin cotton *huipil* soiled from gardening, knelt down to the ground and began lamenting a purple flower that had been broken by a *china* (a huge orange) falling from an overhanging tree. I picked it up and asked if I could have the broken stem to plant at my house. For some time I had been trying to indicate, using sign language to no avail, that I wanted trimmings of their plants. Once they realized my interest in gardening they began chopping away, filling my arms with cuttings. I accepted their offer to accompany me back home, to assist with planting.

We conversed with everyone in sign language as we strolled along the streets together, each of us pleased with our small gardening mission underway, trimmings perched under our arms to free our hands for communication. When we stopped at the store, and ran into the *comisario*, I realized how fluent he was in the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language. Obviously sensing my interest in the eloquence with which he signed, he explained that his wife has a deaf uncle. By the time we arrived at my house we had conversed with many residents about our plans to beautify my property. Within an hour, ten other women had shown up to join us, each bringing an item to plant. Deaf and hearing women exchanged gardening tips and we debated the appropriate placement of various plants, which would apparently grow to be quite large within a short period of time. A young mother, who is deaf, showed up with her own (hearing) mother, offering me an

[257]Only one person we spoke with was deaf, however, no one seemed to have any difficulty communicating with my friend in sign language.

[258] For example, banana (*ja'as*) is indicated with the fingers of the left hand placed in a cylindrical formation as if wrapped around a banana while the right hand mimics the action of removing the peel, in downward strokes. Chile is indicated by breathing inward with a whisping sound while bringing the right hand finger tips to the lips; eyes squinting indicating the hot spicy *chile* taste.

especially generous gift of three banana tree saplings.[259] By the end of the day I had orange hibiscus flowers, four colors of geraniums, a tall tree with long deep red leaves, a yellow and green striped leafy tree, fuchsia bougainvillea, light green rubbery plants, peach colored tubular flowers, an *achiote* tree, and a mandarin tree discovered growing wildly beside my terrace. I learned the art of digging, planting, watering and supporting the saplings with stones. It was so much fun and so interesting to be involved with residents combining their resources and understandings, bringing a plan into action, to achieve something.

Upon realizing my desire to plant a garden I was impressed by the spontaneous cooperation between residents that took place. This sharing of resources parallels the interdependent nature of social awareness in Chican in many ways. Local residents are aware of each other's needs, and although there is competition within the community, and tensions exist between particular families – usually related to personal frictions or to distinct social customs associated with Catholicism and Presbyterianism – most often I felt an overwhelming sensitivity among residents towards the needs of *vecinos* (neighbors). Concern for sustaining the community as a whole, and especially accepting one's position within family life, seems to override the pursuit of individual goals which may involve leaving the community in some cases.[260] When I spoke with adult men and women, as well as many adolescents, about their leaving Chican extremely few expressed interest in doing so. Despite the fact that the community lives in relative poverty within the nation state, residents regularly told me that they prefer living in Chican to Mérida, or anywhere else, as it is *muy tranquilo* (very calm).

[259] Impressively, by the time I had completed my fieldwork these three inch saplings were almost full grown; today they yield bananas.

[260] Robert Desjarlais describes a similar phenomenon of interrelatedness, characterizing life among the Yolmo Buddhist communitiesof Nepal, as a fabric within which "different threads are woven together in forming a texture of interlacing strands", wherein "everyone is connected to everyone else." (2003:133).

## 7.2 Adolescents

At the onset of my doctoral research teenage girls laughed when they saw me, and adolescent boys rarely spoke to me directly. The exception was a deaf boy I knew during my initial research (1998). By the time I returned in 2007 he was in his early twenties, and my friendship with him facilitated my acceptance into the lives of youth whereby I learned about their dispositions and aspirations. This social group was made up of boys between the age of fifteen to twenty-one with funky *DF* (Mexico City) hairdos and oversized jeans.

20: A group of friends socializing in the center of town. The boy riding the bicycle, carrying someone on the back, is deaf.

Witnessing this deaf boy socialize with hearing peers made explicit attitudes towards deafness among youth, who consistently raised their eyebrows, and shrugged their shoulders, when I approached the topic of deafness directly. Although adults expressed clear consensus as to the lack of importance they attribute to the condition of being deaf within the community, adolescents did not even appear to have a developed viewpoint about deafness whatsoever. Inasmuch as marginalized peoples may assert their identities through processes of self determination – often formulated in response to experiences of social differentiation or stigmatization – in Chican, the incorporation of deafness into the shared template for social experience means that deafness is not singled out as a defining characteristic of individuals. The reactive identity assertions elicited by peoples seeking social justice, such as persons asserting Deaf identity or

indigenous identities, are absent in Chican. Sign language use is an accepted feature of linguistic communication, and deafness is not highlighted as a negative aspect of identity.

When I inquired as to the experiences of adolescents with deaf friends, or their knowledge of sign language, many youth denied being able to sign altogether. "*Ma ma*…" (No no…) they said, with shy bodily movements, "*no se usar la mimica*" (I do not know how to use sign language). This may parallel the denial of *Maaya T'aan* required by the Spanish who used linguistic degradation as a means to uphold imposed schemes of social design (Eiss 2004; Farriss 1984; Jones 2000; Macleod and Wasserstorm 1983; Patch 1993). Otherwise, this denial may also illustrate a lack of linguistic differentiation based on modality whereby sign language is used regularly and deafness does not stand out as a defining characteristic of identity that requires special accommodation, or even attention. There are two deaf teenagers, one male and one female, who are well integrated within their respective social circles *because* their friends use sign language; I witnessed hearing people who denied knowing sign language using signs whenever the need arose. Gradually I came to realize that people do not necessarily distinguish signed from spoken language in that they understand communication as a process whereby cognitive experiences are communicated via sensory actions, not restricted to speech and sound, but also involving movement and vision. For them, sign language can be used independently for communication or, it can be used to complement speech when deaf people are not even present. It appears that in Chican people do not qualify languages based on modality. Adolescents and children do not, in my opinion, understand sign language as being distinct from spoken language, rather they see communication in a continuum of self-expression in whichever way works given the context and content of the conversation. Over the course of my inquiries into the use of sign language in Chican, people often directed me to observe children who sign with such ease it seems as if they were "born" knowing how to do so. One young father explained that many children are born knowing how to communicate with the deaf. He said,

> *Algunos nacen sabiendo cómo comunicarse con los sordos y es natural para ellos usar señas, por ejemplo mi hijo. En cambio mi papá no, porque él no nació en Chican y a la mayoría de las personas que no nacen aquí se les dificulta aprender el lenguaje de las señas. Con el tiempo mi papa ha aprendido a comunicarse con señas pero siempre le cuesta trabajo. Aunque la costumbre es que la mujer deje su pueblo para irse con el hombre con quien se casa el se casó con mi mamá, que es de aquí, y se mudó al pueblo con ella* (Some people are born knowing how to communicate with the deaf, it is natural for them to use sign language, like my son for example, that is how he is. But my father, who was not born in Chican, has more difficulty learning the sign language. Over time he has learned how to communicate using sign language but it always remains difficult for him. Although it is the custom for women to move to their husbands' village, he married my mother who is from here, and moved into the community with her).

When I travelled outside of Chican to other rural communities I noticed positive attitudes toward the use of sign language. However the people of Chican demonstrate a sense of pride in their ability to use the sign language, as explained by this father of three hearing children, who in his view, because they are from Chican, sign naturally. Others explained the use of sign language as a natural alternative to spoken language. For example, when I questioned a young mother about her attitude toward the birth of a deaf child she said, "*no hay problema – rapidamente aprende hablar con las señas*" (there is no problem – they will quickly learn to communicate using sign language).[261] On another occasion a young mother explained her view that children sign intuitively with the deaf, "*Hasta los niños, creo que es el intuición de los niños hacer movimientos para expresarles asi, no?* (I believe children intuitively communicate like that, using movement and sign language, no?). Perhaps sensing my awareness that this may

[261] This young woman has two hearing children. Exploring this theme further I found there was no difference between the attitudes of men and women, and also no difference between parents of different ages. I did, however, speak with one young mother, twenty years of age, who felt that deafness could make employment opportunities outside of the community more challenging for a deaf person.

not be the case elsewhere in the world, she went on to specify "*Si observas la mayoría de los niños hablan con ellos y hacen sus movimientos* (If you observe, the majority of the children talk to them (deaf people), using their movements).

## 7.3 Movement as communication in Yucatán

Devoting attention to the way people prioritize sensation, especially related to communication, in Chican I experienced a communicative model wherein both the visual and the auditory mode are valued, rather than restricting linguistic communication to speech and audition. In designing strategies for investigating questions surrounding the social and communicative experiences of deaf people I researched the field of sensory anthropology prior to engaging in long-term fieldwork in the community.[262] Ethnographic studies of sensation demonstrate cross-cultural variety in the relative importance of sensory experience in different settings which may influence socio-cultural understandings of communication, social interaction, and local attitudes towards physical conditions such as deafness. I now briefly review historical approaches towards sensation, outlining the influence that particular socially shared models of sensation have for subjective and collective experiences of communication.

In Yucatán, people use physical movement to communicate regularly, whereas in other urban settings taboos surrounding bodily movement pervade communication styles. In cases where local peoples were Christianized as a consequence of colonization, the Cartesian reverence of the mind as the source of reasoned thought and behavior led to the belief that "uncontrolled" bodily expressions, sensations, and movements posed a threat to the cultivation of civilization. In line with these ideas, Europeans attempted to "civilize" the indigenous peoples of the Americas by placing restraints on their dress, hairstyles, forms of dance, body painting, and ritual expressions wherein movement rather than speech acted as the medium of communication (Farnell 1995:32; Hodgen 1964:425). Comparing the use of sign language by indigenous peoples in my

[262] Basso 1996; Classen 1998; Feld 1984, 1991; Feld and Basso 1996; Feuerbach 1966; Fourier 1968 [1851]; Hannerez 1992; Howes 2005, 2002, 1991; Ingold 2000; Jackson 1995, 1989; Marks 1978; Sacks 1989; Sahlins 1976; Saisselin 1984; Seramatakis 1994; Synnott 1991).

field site to the experiences of deaf peoples elsewhere demonstrates the shortcomings of Cartesian approaches toward language which suggest that linguistic communication is a cognitive process, and that movement is not. Ignoring the communicative potential of movement provides a limited template for understanding communicative experience (Farnell 1995:15; Williams 1982:164).[263] In considering both hearing and vision as the organs of language, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) states,

> the invention of the art of communicating our ideas depends less upon the organs we use in such communication than it does upon a power proper to man, according to which he uses his organs in the way, and which, if he lacked these, would lead him to use other to the same end (Rousseau and Herder 1966:10).

In Chican, groups of people communicate using variable language modalities and the decision to switch into the appropriate mode – a sensory perceptual evaluation operating prior to linguistic expression – seems to take place automatically. Trying to build an understanding of this decision-making level – prior to linguistic expression wherein modality of expression is assessed and chosen – required I move beyond cognitive models that analyze perception and behavior in textual and binary terms. Rather, I concentrated on the means by which cognitive and visceral experiences are played out during the course of everyday life, paying attention to contexts of modality shifting in linguistic expression.[264] In my experience, exploring local experiences of sensation, involved with communication in both signed and spoken Yucatec Mayan, provided more insight into the dispositions underlying community norms than linguistic (semantic) analysis of these languages. A number of residents, both middle-aged men and women as well as adolescent boys, explained that sign language is actually preferable to spoken language for expressing directions,

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[263] In reality, both speech and sign language involve movement as well as higher order cognitive processes; speech involves articulation of the vocal apparatus, and sign language involves movement of the hands, face, and body.

[264] Anthropologist Tim Ingold points out that recording semantic categories provides little insight into behavioral motivations or the significance of practice in social life (Ingold 2000:161).

numbers, or for identifying particular persons by using sign names, or to indicate where a person lives.

After spending a good deal of time with deaf people I learned to communicate using basic Yucatec Mayan Sign Language. As with any sign language, the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language incorporates highly symbolic elements impossible to understand without a high degree of fluency. In Chican, there are clearly varying levels of fluency, largely related to family and friendship networks involving deaf community members. Those who have immediate or extended relatives who are deaf, or who have grown up with deaf people surrounding them, sign fluently whereas people slightly removed from deafness may not sign with as much facility. Nevertheless, most everyone appears to communicate in sign language when the need arises.

The social context of language is critical for understanding the way communications take shape, drawing more or less on each sensory channel of expression. Devoting attention to communication modality may provide insight into less qualified aspects of experience linked to the variety of receptive and expressive channels available, across modalities. The communication of perceptual experience – not only through language but through physical interaction within the environment – suggests that sensory experience and interpretation give rise to shared froms of thought and behaviour giving rise to shared social structures of commonsense (Dirks, Eley, and Ortner 1994). The cyclical movement between structure and agency involved with the *habitus* means that language operates hermeneutically, with subjective perception forming the motivational basis for the collective systems of communication that emerge. In this sense, the use of sign language in conjunction with spoken language, or independent of it, cannot be accounted for using models that separate analyses according to medium (Basso 1970; Farnell 1995:5).[265] Drawing attention to the role that mimesis plays in the reproduction of social realities, Pierre Bordieu

[265] Earlier analyses of spoken language were exclusively called linguistics and paralinguistics, and were distinguished from the analysis of gesture, movement and signs which were considered kinesics and proxemics (Birdwhistell 1970, Hall 1966).

suggests that "through the acts and symbols that are intended to contribute to the reproduction of nature and of the group by the analogical reproduction of natural processes, mimetic representation helps to produce in the agents temporary reactions…helps, in other words, to make the world conform to the myth" (Bordieu 1994:163). His analysis draws attention to the short comings of analyzing behavior purely as a symbolic representation of the structural dynamics of society, overlooking the enmeshment of individuals within representational pattern systems generated via communication across modalities.[266]

On the whole, language studies began locked in a Cartesian model separating the mind from the body thereby ignoring the embodied aspects of cognition. In the process of analyzing languages structurally, as if they provide a map of collectively shared perceptions of the world, diverse peoples have been systematically devalued for their differences. In reality, no matter how languages are analyzed or classified, all experiences of communication are both personally meaningful and socially generative.

## 7.4 Neighbors and sign language

Walking along in the reasonable heat and humidity of December, I contemplated the abundant fruit hanging from orange and lime trees along the roadside. There was often a small group of children prancing about my feet as I *xi'imbal* (walked around) the community; I was rarely alone. My name, *ix-Peige*, *ix-Peige*, floats from wattle and daub homes nestled into family *solares*, family plots of land separated by low stone walls, called *koot* in the Yucatec Mayan language. Deaf people "call out" to me with enthusiastic waves catching my attention, ushering me to communicate with them. As I walked along this time, a young deaf boy called out to me, rode up on his bicycle, stopped, and stared up at me smiling. I asked if he was doing well, and he told me that he was, using sign language to explain that he was on his way to the *campo* (a cleared field where baseball and other sports are played on the outskirts of the community).

[266] In this regard, engaging with lived experience may provide richer accounts than approaches concentrating on analyses of the structural dynamics of society (Taylor 1999:40; Geertz 1983).

Continuing on my way, I was approached by three young children, asking that I visit their home. I agreed and crawled up the sloping side of their family's *solar*, an un-groomed piece of land with many large stones and plants to be maneuvered around. As soon as we reached the entrance a young boy grabbed my hand enthusiastically describing a bird his father had caught in the *milpa* fields earlier that day, a very pretty *loro* (parrot), he insisted. The children summoned me further up the undulating rock pathway to see this bird; I followed carefully as small fire ants began stinging my toes. Three women dressed in *huipiles* emerged from their darkened homes – which stay relatively cool during the day as there are no windows – smiling, and giving their children instructions to fetch the bird for me to see. A small boy of about six years of age went inside and then reappeared carrying a large lard bucket covered with chicken-coup wire. He dropped the bucket straight in front of me and the bright green head of a Macaw Parrot pried itself out through one of the holes in the wire covering. I stood with the mother and her four children marveling at the beauty of the bird, and watching it desperately stuff his head through holes in the wire covering, using his powerful beak to do impressive acrobatics in the bucket. The family assured me that he would later become a friendly family pet, once he became adjusted to his new life in captivity, and there would no longer be a risk that he would bite.[267]

On my way out, feeling comfortable with the welcoming family, I asked if they had any deaf relatives. *Mina'an* (none) said the mother, but she assured me that she and her children, in fact her whole family, knew sign language. *Aaa'ah*, (yes, agreement, with chin lift) she said affirmatively as she shrugged her shoulders; yes, they all know sign language because the neighbors living down the road are deaf. Her mannerism was so casual; not everyone in Chican admits to using sign language, and even if they do, I found her absolute acceptance of the

[267] Owing to national and international demand for the export of domesticated parrots, it is likely this family was planning to sell the Macaw parrot outside of Chican. Despite laws prohibiting their capture and sale, the export and trade of exotic animals is difficult to regulate. The Convention of International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES) is a treaty that came into effect in 1975, monitoring the sustainability of wildlife trade.
(http://library.fws.gov/IA_Pubs/CITES03.pdf ;
http://www.internationalparrotletsociety.org/smuggle.html).

situation interesting. She lives close to three deaf siblings, she explained, so her children have always known how to sign.

This type of comfort with the presence of deafness in the community has created an environment where sign language use is perceived as an expected aspect of community participation. For example, I did not witness anyone of any age or gender reacting to the presence of a deaf person by staring at their use of sign language, a practice so common in urban society (potentially causing feelings of self-consciousness among deaf persons). Encounters between deaf and hearing individuals are an expected feature of local experience, and rationalized in public perception. Expectations about the presence of deafness are shared by community members, and individuals expect to encounter deafness and the use of sign language during their daily activities. The breadth of the knowledge of sign language in Chican is sufficient for each deaf person to develop a social world with similar parameters to that of any community member. In some cases a few deaf women do spend a significant amount of time together, especially when workshops are held (hosted by outsiders) at the onset of local *fiestas*, or during religious ceremonies held at the Catholic Church or at the Presbyterian Temple. Elder and middle-aged deaf men also appear to enjoy each other's company regularly; however, in the instances mentioned above, socialization for deaf persons is not restrictive in that hearing people are present as well. If we can assume Deaf culture is asserted in response to social discrimination surrounding deafness and sign language within societies that favor hearing and speech for communication, acceptance of sign language use in Chican means that this defining factor for social identification among deaf persons is absent. Experiences of social bonding for those living in Chican appear to be formulated based on local affiliations between particular families which, although generating distinct social grouping present in any society, are unified in comparison to the position and identity of this community within the state. Deafness crosscuts diverse social groupings delineated by religion, or family and friendship affinities, and I could not help but be aware of the effects of ongoing homogenizing external

perspectives about the position of Chican within state society as a disadvantaged indigenous community.

## 7.5 Equality and accommodation

Local communication styles in Chican provided me with insight into the way language shapes understandings of difference and disability. In this context widespread use of sign language means that formal procedures of accommodation have not been implemented to facilitate deaf participation within daily life activities. This is not the case elsewhere in urban contexts, where issues of accommodation and non-discrimination are central concerns for the integration of disabled or deaf persons into mainstream society. Theories of formal and material equality distinguish between equality as abstaining from unequal treatment, or of removing structural barriers which limit social participation for persons with disabilities (Hendricks 1999:113-125). Examples of formal equality include the installation of ramps, automatic doors, and elevators for persons with mobility issues; the translation of signs into brail for the visually impaired or blind; or the written "closed captioning" used to accommodate deaf and/or hearing-impaired individuals. The principle of formal equality prohibits the *less favorable* treatment of individuals who operate differently within like circumstances. This idea finds its roots in Aristotle's suggestion that, "things that are alike should be treated alike, and things that are unalike should be treated unalike in proportion to their unalikeness" (Aristotle 1980 *in* Hendricks 1999:116-117; Ross 1980). But approaches of classical liberalism based on this theory ignore the effects that social disparity may have on assertions of individual and civil liberties, resulting in a model of equality which overlooks access issues in economic terms. Going further in recognizing that equal access to social and economic participation may be overshadowed by structural inequalities, Research Associate Aart Hendricks suggests that theorists such as Marx, Rousseau and Hegel contribute to ideas of *material equality* by taking into account social, physical, religious, national, structural, intangible, attitudinal, and legal barriers faced by vulnerable peoples in their efforts to achieve equality (Bayefsky and Edberts 1985; Hendricks 1999:127; Lepofsky and Bickenbach 1985:326; Tucker 1978; Rousseau 2006

[1968]).[268] Indirect discrimination results from circumstances where people who require accommodation are excluded from participation because, although they are *entitled* to services, they cannot take advantage of them without special accommodations. While living in Chican I witnessed state violations of the principle of formal equality in which special accommodations would be required to provide residents access to state sponsored programs, which are technically available to indigenous communities in Yucatán.

In 2008 the State Department of Agriculture and Fishery (*Agropecuaria*) offered to assist the people of Chican in their agricultural activities. I arranged for this organization to visit Chican and meet with a group of farmers to evaluate their crop and greenhouse activities and to assess which crops would be most prosperous for donation to the community. Before these government officials arrived I worked with local men compiling lists of their concerns including which crops could most effectively be tended on a seasonal basis, how many families would directly benefit from having improved access to agricultural resources, and which fertilizers or pesticides would be most useful to them. By basing this proposal on initiatives outlined by my interlocutors, these farmers used local knowledge as the basis for designing their request for state resources. In this way I recognized the abilities of interlocutors not only to produce local knowledge but also to generate social theory which would be useful for representation of their interests to the government. Harry Englund points out the centrality of dialogue to the practice of collaborative ethnography, but also, he suggests that engaging ethnographically, bringing together elite and non-elite peoples through processes of *argument*, may be more productive at times than the democratization of knowledge collaborative anthropology seeks to generate (Englund 2010:79-82, 90-93).[269]

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[268] Aart Hendriks is a Professor of Health Law at Leiden University/Leiden University Medical Centre (LUMC) and Legal Advisor of the Royal Dutch Medical Association (KNMG) (http://www.cpdpconferences.org/A-H/hendriks.html). Access date: June 2012.

[269] Englund explains the useful role argument can play in collaborative ethnography and points out that this process requires not ony the ethnographers ability to disseminate viewpoints in a productive dialogue, but the capacity to "detatch oneself from one's own viewpoint, in effect, oneself from oneself" (Englund 2010:82).

During their visit *Agropecuaria* assured the *campesinos* (farmers) that they would provide a variety of seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, and even educational training for their effective use. They also promised to repair the green house (the roof had fallen in) and arrange for the transportation of local produce to larger markets in rural Yucatán. They explained that assisting communities like Chican was a high priority for them, and that the situation fit in perfectly with the initiatives of their organization.[270] However, within two weeks of their visit to Chican, *Agropecuaria* commented on the urgent need for infrastructure in the community but indicated that there was noone employed in their organization available to assist with writing a proposal in the format they required. Youth pursuing post-secondary education outside Chican are interested in becoming involved with the process of seeking social assistance for their community, but education and training are required before they can effectively assume administrative positions. In other words, the community needs to be educated in ways that enable them to seek assistance before they can be considered eligible. In the end, without a formal proposal outlining community needs, *Agropecuaria* was unwilling to pursue these plans further. So, although the agricultural assistance programs are technically available to the people of Chican, the community requires accommodation in terms of educational training in order to make state programs accessible. Harry Englunds discussion of translation issues surrounding the interpretation of human rights principles in Malawi, Africa – involving the *mis*interpretation of rights as freedoms – draws attention to the fact that "rights and responsibilities are interdependent" (Englund 2006:68). He points out the ways potentially empowering rights can be manipulated through elite control over linguistic translations, and serve as tools, in Malawi and Zambia, to construe rights as freedoms. In a similar manner, the right of the people of Chican to access agricultural assistance programs was undermined by the state's inability

[270] When *Agropecuaria* visited the community and met with local farmers, they showed up almost four hours late. We sat roasting in the midday sun awaiting their arrival while most men dedicated their energy to setting up the arena of thatched palm walls for the *Fiesta Tradicional – la corrida –* an eight-day bull fight held annually in March. The representatives of *Agropecuaria*, and someone from the Secretary of Health of Yucatán, had apparently gotten lost while driving off the beaten track in Southern Yucatán.

to assume the responsibility of providing local peoples with the necessary education programs which would enable them to apply for state services. In this way, elite controls over linguistic translations serve "elite privileges rather than the democratic expectations of rights" (Englund 2006:49).

The principle of material equality directly addresses the access issues described above, specifying that society must actively assist vulnerable peoples not only by offering social assistance, but by providing the accommodations required to access available services. In this case, as members of an indigenous community with poor access to education, currently, state assistance programs aimed at improving the quality of life for indigenous peoples via agricultural resources are actually unavailable to local peoples.

On the other hand, the situation within Chican is one of inherent material equality for deaf persons who rely on sign language for communication; attitudinal (discriminatory) barriers are absent, enabling them access to the same opportunities for participation as the majority hearing population enjoys across the spheres of social, physical, religious, economic, educational, and familial life. In an inverse relationship of accommodation, the majority hearing population sometimes modifies their modality of communication to access locally available resources. For example, a deaf man is one of the most successful entrepreneurs in the community. His mobile snack service is the first of its kind in Chican. The exclusive use of sign language by this vendor, and the success of his business, implies that deafness does not necessarily pose constrictions for economic participation in this context. Local desire to purchase snack foods from this vendor, as he circulates the streets on his adult sized tricycle, makes knowledge of sign language a valuable asset for people of all ages. In this case, models of accommodation are inverted in Chican, with the majority population of hearing people using sign language to achieve equal access to locally available resources.

## 7.6 Cash and communal communication

Sitting on the concrete stoop in front of the popular *tienda* in the *palacio principal* (centre of town) a group of five deaf men conversed while drinking ice-

cold *refrescos* (soft drinks).[271] A deaf vendor, who is also a successful contractor both inside and outside the community, approached slowly on his adult sized tricycle with a wooden tray set across the handlebars covered with snacks of deep fried *manteca* (pork fat) to be topped with cream, ham, mayonnaise, salsa, and *chile a gusto* (combined to suit each person's taste). As people of all ages flocked to solicit his tasty treats, the vendor happily prepared each snack according to the preferences described by customers, selling them for three pesos apiece (approximately 25 cents Canadian). Sign language was everywhere.

Seeing me approach, the eldest deaf man in the community began conversing with me and I quickly became integrated into the group of four elder deaf men and an adolescent deaf boy, all standing outside the store. We discussed my land, the need for men to travel to find employment, and the difficulty of selling handmade customary clothing (*huipiles*) outside of the community. We also reviewed the differences between men and women in terms of their daily lives and activities. One of the deaf men said (signed) that men customarily spend their days farming in *milpa* cornfields, or hunting, while women raise children, cook, and tend house gardens. But with the gradual movement to cash economy, both men and women are more regularly weaving hammocks to be sold at regional market places (Oxcutzcab). As the conversation proceeded, I learned some standardized sign names[272] for particular people in the community and also became familiar with the signs for "man" and "woman" in the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language.[273]

As I conversed with my deaf friends, people of all ages continually approached the deaf vendor. At some point I became aware that my signed

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[271] By the time I was nearing the end of my fieldwork in 2009, disturbingly, I noticed that a VLT (Video Lottery Terminal) had been added to the few video game machines available for entertainment in the community. I was told that the VTL is most often used by women in the community whose families have extremely limited resources, and in some cases, they are subject to abuse by their husbands.

[272] Users of sign language often develop sign names to refer easily to others (avoiding finger spelling). Sign names are usually based on some aspect of physical appearance or behavior.

[273] Male is indicated by placing the forefinger and middle finger in a V formation at the base of the hairline with a chopping motion indicating short hair. Women are identified by indicating breasts (index fingers pointing out in front of chest at nipple level), or by indicating a bun of long hair at the top back of the head (palm facing downward cupped atop the back of head) as this is the classic hairstyle for indigenous women in Yucatán.

conversation was accessible to everyone within close range. I am accustomed to gauging other people's capacity to understand my conversations depending on their proximity and ability to hear my words, adjusting my tone of voice appropriately so as to retain a sense of privacy in my communications. In this situation, people approaching to purchase snacks noticed my signing from afar, and to my surprise, began laughing at aspects of my conversation. It wasn't long before a group of at least twenty people had converged outside the store, concentrating on the dialogue transpiring between the deaf men and myself, while enjoying snacks they had purchased from the vendor. How intriguing it was to be communicating with my deaf friends in sign language with the ongoing flow of people approaching the store catching on to our conversation. At first I felt as if people were eavesdropping, feeling astonished that our communications were so readily accessible to onlookers. Re-conceptualizing, I embraced the experience, feeling a sense of participation with people as they laughed and joined in, empathizing with the situations we discussed. My conversation with my deaf associates quickly became a group conversation involving both deaf and hearing people.

Children were especially interested in our communications and burst out laughing when I described having fallen out of my hammock that morning, which was relatively embarrassing.[274] Everyone reeled with laughter and one of my deaf friends identified with my story, explaining his own hammock mishaps. As more people joined in I realized that everyone sympathized with my story and that sign language was especially useful for highlighting the amusing aspect of hammock mishaps. Communication in the visual kinesthetic modality was perfect for capturing individual hammock stories with people clarifying their own falling-out incidents, specifying particular injuries, etc. The facial expression accompanying sign language effectively conjured up the particular emotion experienced in each

[274] There are no flat beds in Chican; people prefer to sleep in hammocks, and cite avoidance of back problems and coping with high heat and humidity as an explanation. Owing to the presence of scorpions, tarantulas, biting grasshoppers, large hairy spiders which "jump", among many other venomous creatures, I felt hammocks were a sensible idea to avoid insects climbing up the bedposts onto my mattress, or, potentially finding their way inside the mattress to lay their eggs. Also, the high humidity in Yucatán tends to leave any furniture smelling musty.

hammock mishap story; although potentially painful, falling out of a hammock happens instantaneously – if the strings have not been tied properly your body drops to the ground within seconds, leaving you shocked and disoriented. As is often the case in comical situations, the deaf people involved in this conversation took center stage; their facility in sign language often enables them to take leadership roles in social circumstances where humorous expression and storytelling are central themes.[275] In a context where most people understand sign language, this form of communication is especially *social*, creating an inclusive atmosphere inverse to typical models of inclusion that seek to integrate the deaf person into mainstream society using spoken language. In this sense the use of sign language in Chican creates a social environment that holds greater potential for group communication than social situations involving spoken language, where sound amplification would be necessary to reach larger audiences.[276]

When I left the store with an invitation to a Catholic Christmas ritual called a *posada*, I ran into a few teenage boys who asked what I had been doing at the store. The three young men approached me in step, embraced shoulder to shoulder. I picked up their rhythm and strolled along side them. They asked, "*yaan a xookik?*" (are you learning?). Without them having to explain, I understood that they were referring to my learning the sign language or learning how to communicate with the deaf, and in Chican more generally. "*Ja'ah*" (yes) I indicated, raising my chin in affirmation – the customary gesture accompanying affirmation in the Yucatec Mayan language. They seemed pleased with this, and one of the boys proudly announced that his sign language skills were improving because one of his close friends, a twenty one year old boy, is deaf. Although

[275] Although local hammock stories were funny, ultimately people were interested in my inexperience with sleeping in a hammock, as that is a taken for granted knowledge within the local life world of Chican, and my unfamiliarity with this custom was infinitely amusing to local residents. They unanimously encouraged me to string my hammock low to the ground to avoid back injury.

[276] Dr. Rod Michalo of the University of Toronto made explicit the marginalization of disabled persons in society, including the controversies surrounding accommodation. Himself blind, he points out that there would be no need to accommodate sighted people with elaborate systems of electricity, providing light, if everyone were blind. According to Michalo, disabled people are consistently blamed for requesting accommodations when in fact it is the structure of society that requires they do so (Michalo, McGill University November 4th, 2010).

they had not specified exactly what they were asking me, I felt reassured by this young man's comment about his own improved signing skills that they were indeed interested in the way my local communication skills were developing. Aware that *I* was also learning, they went on to speak to me using a mixture of Yucatec Mayan, Spanish and the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language. We strode along slowly, rhythmically, to the Christmas *posada* being held at a family residence close to the center of town. I felt a sense of pride at having received positive reinforcement for developing effective local communication skills in Yucatec Mayan and in YMSL, which from the local point of view, meant that I was gaining insight into what it feels like to be, and to live communicatively, in Chican.

## 7.7 Interdependent understandings: family life

The idea of family is more fluid in Chican than it is elsewhere; personal experiences of affiliation cannot effectively be transposed onto objective maps of kinship relationships. Although it may be worth considering who is related to whom and how, this does little to illuminate the way that people actually interact and feel about one another, or about themselves for that matter. For example, my neighbor cares for the youngest of her three children, who is four years old, and for her eldest daughter's child, who is three years old. The girls are akin to siblings, rather than to being an aunt and a niece, but this distinction is not relevant for anyone in the family.[277] This was not the only case of this kind I noticed in the community. When I inquired as to the reason why mothers may parent their grandchildren, I was told that each family member is involved with daily chores in the way they are best suited, and that child care responsibilities have always been quite flexible between women. In Yucatán more generally, people use family relation terms to refer to their friends, as a symbol of acceptance. The most commonly used family terms in Mérida are *tio* (uncle) or *prima/primo* (cousin) to refer to friends, which basically indicates being accepted not only by a person but being welcomed into a new family as a member.

[277] Since I completed my fieldwork in 2009 my neighbour had another child, meaning that a newborn baby is now aunt to a (now) four year old child.

The residents of Chican operate interdependently, assuming their position within an extended family network of responsibilities, generating a self-sustaining unit which is then situated within the community as a whole. In some cases up to ten people live in a set of homes called a *solar*, with one shared structure for cooking; family members participate in maintaining the land and providing food, shelter, etc. Although the people of Chican have few resources, people seem to share unabashedly when they perceive someone else is in need. In my case, I had no means of making fresh daily *tortilla*, the staple of the diet in Chican, so my neighbor had her daughter bring me homemade *tortillas* twice daily. On the surface it may appear there is little room for individuality if one is expected to participate in the workings of the family to ensure survival; however, each member of the family assumes a position based on their particular skills and capabilities. And unlike in other cases where Mayan speaking peoples embrace indigenous identity within the framework of the transnational movement of indigenous peoples, at the time I carried out fieldwork in the community of Chican, local identity assertions were flexible with individuals continually renegotiating their identity depending on the context. The negative connotations associated with indigeneity that emerged during Spanish colonialism continue to shape social understandings in Yucatec society today; the disadvantaged position of indigenous peoples in terms of access to services, adequate housing, and a lack of educational and economic opportunities are experienced daily by colonized peoples living in rural Yucatán (Martín 2001:170). Although my interlocutors did suggest they were *indigena* at times, this happened during conversations where they were lamenting the states efficiency to provide them with services of various kinds, suggesting that they feel their indigenous status disadvantages them within state society. Also, when faced with state officials, residents of Chican may be hesitant to express local grievances of any kind (see Section 6.2, *Fear of the state*, for further discussion). This contrasts with the contemporary international movement of indigenous peoples, recognizing the "right" of indigenous peoples to self determination explicitly stated in Article 2 of the United Nations General

Assembly's Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (1990) (Niezen 2003:40-41).

Given the state emphasis on addressing the "problem" of deafness in Chican, indigenous opportunities for self determination – which may draw attention to the marginalized position of the community within the state via local identifications with national and international movements of indigenous peoples – do not form a constitutive aspect of identity in Chican. Inasmuch as indigenism is associated with claims of distinctiveness related to cultural heritage involving processes of self determination, at the time I was living in Chican local people were relatively disengaged with transnational indigenous movements. Self identifying as *Yucateco/a, meztiso/a* or as *Chicanos,* individuals appeared to be formulating their identity in strategic ways, assimilating within whichever social context they were operating. Moreover, as much as local peoples lamented their poverty at times, residents also seemed to value the relatively disengaged position of their community within the state. As mentioned earlier, whenever I inquired about the possibility of leaving the community, people almost uniformly told me they preferred to remain in Chican, describing daily life as "*muy tranquilo*"(very peaceful), compared to the pace of life elsewhere in rural or urban Yucatán.[278] It is noteworthy that local experiences with state programs aimed at community betterment are not always appropriate; medical attention to the presence of deafness may disable the community's eligibility for more pressing resources, and also influence external perceptions about the community in negative ways.[279]

In Chican there appears to be little stigma associated with disabilities, and relative experiences of poverty are not frowned upon either. Exhibiting fear of retribution for making value judgments based on physical or cognitive capacities,

[278] A handful of young men in their twenties expressed interest in pursuing post-secondary education outside of Chican. Those who are able to do so return to the community on the weekend.

[279] As already mentioned, some residents of Mérida asserted that the deafness in Chican is related to the ignorance of *meztisos,* most often qualifying this assertion by lamenting the fact that Mayan speaking communities of rural Yucatán have poor access to education, which might help prevent intermarriage between siblings – the factor they assume is responsible for the occurrence of deafness in Chican. As indicated, I did not encounter any marriages between direct family members in the community.

people in Chican suggest the importance of accepting difference in oneself and in others. My observation of the way residents react towards deafness, cerebral palsy, or epilepsy suggest that they understand differences in our abilities as inevitable, and constitutive of our role in the family and in society as a whole.[280] However, in the case of disabilities such as epilepsy or cerebral palsy, family members actively seek assistance from Mérida – at hospitals, via rehabilitation centers, or through INDEMAYA – whereas in the case of deafness no assistance is sought.

Ironically, state programs directed toward Chican often *concentrate* on the presence of deafness in the community, emulating medical models that seek to accommodate deaf individuals by providing them with hearing aids, and sending children outside of the community for speech training, or trying to determine the causes of deafness in order to prevent the condition in the future. On the other hand, the people of Chican accept, if not expect, the occurrence of deafness within families. During my fieldwork, when a young deaf woman had a child, friends and family expressed curiosity and interest as to whether the baby was deaf, but no one suggested a preference in terms of hearing status, as long as the child was healthy. In contrast, medical approaches see deafness as a disability, and understand the condition as a deficit in need of a cure, detracting from the overall health of an individual. Disconnecting individuals from bodily experiences of illness, Michel Foucault points out that classificatory medicine disconnects individuals from that which they are suffering from, conceiving of individual experiences as secondary to the manifestation of diseases or ailments (Foucault 1994 [1973]:8, 16). Biomedical approaches towards deafness parallel these perspectives in that they overlook the role that sign language plays in connecting deaf individuals by virtue of their deafness, embodying hearing loss within individuals rather than classifying deafness as a trait requiring medical treatment.

[280] Since the time I carried out fieldwork a new community leader has been elected. The new *comisario* is father to a young girl with quite severe cerebral palsy (she cannot walk independently or speak). The fact that the community reached a consensus about their preference for having the father of this disabled child assume the three year community leadership position implies that disability is not frowned upon locally, and that social fears or misunderstandings surrounding disability are not significant factors in assessing the capabilities of a person.

## 7.8 "Filling-in" for survival

When I explored the roots of the inclusive atmosphere in Chican, adults shrugged their shoulders saying that everyone faces difficulty in some way or another, often qualifying their view by referring to the fact that God does not selectively privilege people based on ability. One young woman explained this, saying, "*Dios se hace las cosas iguales, la vida es igual, todos tenemos problemas"* (God makes things equal – life is equal. We all have problems). Common understandings suggest that capacities are an intrinsic part of our being, determined by God, and that our physical presence in the world should not be judged by others. For example, a woman in her mid forties motioned her right hand upwards towards the sky with a subtle wave, explaining that we must accept what God gave us; that is how it is. She said, "*Hay que aceptamos lo que dios nos da, asi es*". Without prompting, she pursued this theme further emphasizing the importance of assisting others in need, specifying that this tendency characterized social understandings in Chican whereas it may not in other contexts. She compared the experience she had visiting the nearby city of Tekax, fifty kilometers south of Chican, to local attitudes towards visitors who arrive in Chican. She explained that she felt hungry after her early morning journey to Tekax but that with no cash, she was not able to find any food when she arrived there; no one offered her any food. With pride, she compared this experience to the way people in Chican offer assistance to visitors, or to one another in general.[281] Summarizing, she said, "*Cuando vees a una persona quien falta algo, que no tiene, lo ayudas"* (when you see someone who needs something, who is missing something, you help them). Experiencing local sensitivities toward the wellbeing of neighbors, friends, and extended family members firsthand, when I returned to the community after a two day absence,[282] I was immediately invited to eat lunch with a local family. News of visitors to Chican spreads quickly, and

[281] Although there are limted resources available in Chican, people are consistently generous with one another and with visitors to the community. In my experiences living there I saw networks of families exchange food as the need arose.

[282] I had left the community in search of treatment for a severe eye infection. Eye infections are commonplace in the community and sadly, since the time I carried out fieldwork, I have been told that a twenty-eight year old man died owing to complications associated with an eye infection.

within an hour I was invited to someone else's home for lunch. Regretfully, I declined, explaining that I had already made lunch plans. The second family explained that they were aware of this first invitation but that actually, that family currently had little more to eat than *waa* (*tortilla*). The families had communicated, and the second family provided me with a bowl of *escabeche* (savory turkey broth with red onion, turkey, cilantro, and *chile*), so that I would not be too hungry when I arrived for my original lunch engagement. It turns out that the first family did not have much to offer but this was not discussed as we sipped sugary *refrescos*, rather than eating. So not only are the people of Chican sensitive to the needs of visitors, but they also share food within the community, at times, to assist each other in making ends meet.

I metaphorically extend the concept of "filling-in", whereby residents ensure that community members are able to survive comfortably, to the processes by which language modality shifting is used to ensure that residents have access to social messages circulating the community, regardless of being able to hear spoken language. The same way someone may bring you warm *tortill*as if that aspect of your meal is lacking, they will use sign language to communicate if they feel you do not understand the social messages being conveyed. When a link is missing in understanding, people express themselves in whichever channel fills the gap so that communication is complete.

The *comisario* (community leader) and I sat together for hours, swinging in our hammocks strung low to the ground, his hands and arms rich with movement as he spoke. His use of sign language prompted me to question the use of signs by hearing people in general, who seem to interject signs into their speech regularly, even when deaf people are not present. "*Claro,* a*si es(!)"* (yes exactly, that's it!), he said enthusiastically as he described the use of sign language as an aspect of communication in Chican. We agreed, laughing at the obviousness of the point that when discussing other people in the community, or when explaining directions, the use of sign language is almost essential for complete

communication. He suggested that numbers are another instance where sign language is used regardless of the presence of deaf people.[283]

My realization that in some cases hearing people use sign language irrespective of the presence of a deaf person seemed to incite enthusiasm in residents, especially those with deaf relatives who are particularly fluent in the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language. A hearing man of about thirty years of age explained, "*somos acustombrados a hablar con los sordo mudos; incluso con aquellos que no lo son (sordo). Si la persona no te entiende, esik' jun p'eet senias ka beyak u na'atik ma'alob"* (we are accustomed to speaking with the deaf; even when you are speaking to a hearing person, if they find it difficult to understand you, people use sign language to clarify the meaning so that they understand completely). Continuing, he said that sign language forms part of the local communicative "*costumbre*" (custom). He said, "*La persona que está acostumbrada a usar señas se queda con ese hábito y se comunica así con todos sean o no sordos*" (people become accustomed to using sign language, and in keeping with this tradition they use sign language with anyone, whether they are deaf or not). Some hearing people articulate Mayan vocally while they use sign language, and others do not. I asked if this may be related to the presence of other hearing people and was told, with a curious pensive head movement, "*No creo, porque aunque estén otras personas presentes todos entienden las señas perfectamente; tulak'a'al ku na'atik'.* (No I do not think so, because even when others (who are not deaf) are present everyone understands sign language perfectly; everyone understands).[284]

Both deaf and hearing people use sign language regularly, and in this way, perhaps unconsciously, they ensure that communication modality does not limit social involvement for deaf people. The unproblematic decision to use speech or sign language in particular circumstances facilitates communication, but the

[283] The number ten is illustrated by holding up ten fingers and twenty is illustrated by slapping both knees with open hands illustrating the combination of the ten fingers and ten toes.
[284] As already indicated there are varying degrees of fluency in sign language among local residents owing to social and family networks. The assertion that everyone understands sign language perfectly by this informant may be related to this phenomenon.

selection of sensory channel is surprising in some cases. With people switching between speech and sign with such facility, at first I did not realize that hearing people were signing together irrespective of the presence of a deaf person. Perhaps this aspect of local communication wasn't apparent to me at first since my own background and template for understanding communication suggests that sign language is useful only as a means to communicate with deaf persons, and not in general. For the people of Chican, speech and sign language operate together providing an environment wherein differences such as deafness are not understood problematically, rather, deafness is considered a constituent of the local life world. The fluidity with which people shift between spoken Mayan and sign language makes communication seem less individual; people fill in for one another using a combination of sign language and speech, ensuring that everyone is following the conversation.

The fact that hearing people use sign language even when deaf people are not present implies that there has been little or no conscious effort to adopt sign language as a means to accommodate the deaf; people see the use of sign language as a logical alternative to spoken language. An integrated approach toward communication seems to underlie this socially inclusive atmosphere, wherein people actively engage with each other, expressing themselves using both speech and bodily action relative to specific social and environmental circumstance. No one ever described a collective effort to accommodate deaf community members. In response to my inquiries about attitudes towards having a deaf child, people consistently explained the obvious need to learn sign language well, and in a few instances, mentioned that this would also be the case if they had deaf neighbors or friends.

## 7.9 Community communication

By about 11AM the streets are filled with people walking to and from small *tiendas* (stores) seeking refreshments of Coca-Cola and other sugary, brightly

colored fizzy-drinks to complement the daily harvest of corn.[285] Pausing to chat with *vecinos* (neighbors) and extended family along the way forms a central facet of daily social experience in which people make plans and exchange social knowledge. Everyone engages in casual conversation on the street, and discussions take place in Yucatec Mayan, and in the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language. The extent of sign language use along the streets of Chican is astonishing since this phenomenon is rarely seen in other settings. In urban contexts it is relatively uncommon to witness deaf people signing together in public, but in Chican, there may be various groups of people signing together simultaneously, within close range. The *comisario* (community leader) explained that everyone uses sign language because deaf individuals operate in the community the same way as hearing people do. He said, "*Cuando los ves en la calle te hablan, te dicen a dónde van qué es lo que hacen y te preguntan cómo estás entonces comunicas con ellos* (when you see them (deaf people) in the street they speak to you; they tell you where they are going, what they are doing, and they ask how you are so you just communicate with them).

Street chat groups begin small, and as more people join it is not uncommon to see clusters of between six to ten people – all signing in communication. Impromptu street gatherings form an essential aspect of social life where people inquire about the wellbeing of extended family members, the times when church gatherings or government workshops are being held, and arrange meals with friends and family. Conversations often involve discussions about access to resources since successful family life is related to variable climate, agricultural produce, insect infestations, water supply, animal activities, etc. Deaf people appear to be dynamic participants in these daily gatherings because so much sign language is visible along the streets. Actually their participation mirrors that of any community member; it would be equally viable to suggest that men, women, or children are central participants depending on their presence one day or another.

[285] Lunch is served between one and two in the afternoon when men return home from the *milpa* fields or from hunting. *Almuerzo* (lunch) is the heaviest meal of the day and afterwards people take a *siesta*, resting in hammocks until the daytime heat subsides in the evenings. Dinner is eaten after dark, eight-thirty or so.

Sign language is used so frequently in the streets that it may be difficult for outsiders to determine if people are deaf or hearing.

Figure 21: a spontaneous street conversation transpiring in sign language, between a deaf and a hearing woman.

Residents understand themselves in relation to one another and to their extended family, and ultimately, based on the position they occupy within the community as a whole. The social nature of self understanding means that during casual street conversation people express their situation and evaluate the needs of others in relative terms; food is sometimes exchanged later on in the day to ensure that gaps in the wellbeing of the community are accommodated. And as already mentioned, individuals operate within networks of social affiliation whereby families help one another, sharing natural resources in many cases to ensure that everyone's needs are met. This "filling-in" of resources reminds me of the way people use sign language to communicate with the deaf, filling-in for gaps of understanding related to modality and expression ensuring that everyone has equal access to social expression and understanding. Sharing of resources is necessarily the case for ritual events such as Christmas, Easter, or the annual bullfight, where people combine food and money to arrange festive meals available for everyone in the community.

# 8 DISCUSSION

While I was living in Chican I often witnessed local acceptance of difference without prejudice. Despite their sensory and perceptual differences, deaf people are incorporated into community life. In a similar manner, as a

Canadian student, despite my differences local people constructed an appropriate role in the community for me given my character and skills. Allowing my interlocutors to direct my path, as new venues of interaction opened up I experienced the way deaf people operate in diverse settings, taking note of variation associated with gender, age, religion, education, as well as economic opportunity. Thankfully I was regularly invited to participate in myriads of social events. My involvement with women in domestic life, socializing with extended families in their homes, accompanying men in their farming routines, and attending both Catholic and Presbyterian services – everywhere – I experienced deafness differently than I have elsewhere in urban settings. Rather than noticing the presence of deafness as a difference or variation, deafness acts as a constitutive feature of the social atmosphere in Chican. The expectation that deaf persons will be involved in social circumstances means that it is the absence of a deaf person, rather than their presence, which stands out as different.

## 8.1 Attitudes toward deafness

When I asked about attitudes toward having a deaf child, or the position of deafness within locally relevant fields of experience, residents often shrugged their shoulders saying things like, "*es igual, no hay diferencia, no pasa nada porque los niños aprenden rápidamente a usar el lenguaje de las señas*." (It is the same, there is no difference because children learn to sign quickly) or simply "*bey xan*", in Mayan (it is the same). Similarly, when I mentioned deafness during group settings of communication I encountered consistency in responses, and was repeatedly led into discussions about the intelligence of the deaf. On many occasions I heard, **"***Son muy intelegentes – ellos observan todo*" (they are very intelligent - they observe everything).[286] A number of people continued, indicating that when you explain something to deaf people using sign language they understand very quickly *("Si no les entienden, sólo lo explican con señas o la mímica y así se dan a entender rápidamente").*

[286] As hearing people discussed the observational capacities of deaf people they usually accompanied their explanation with the sign for "observe" in the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language (right index finger held up to eye and then pointing outward away from the body as if indicating particular things in the environment).

Communication using sign language in Chican gives hearing people access to the experiences of deaf family members, friends, and associates; deafness does not appear to present a salient factor for the embodiment of particular social personas within the community. Deaf individuals in Chican are not confined to living in a world of silence or isolation, cut off from other human beings as medical/pathological constructions of deafness suggest. Psychological, sociological and anthropological approaches towards deafness as a socio-cultural phenomenon, rather than a disability, suggest that, "what hearing society tends to overlook is that disability is not static. When a community makes a commitment to remove barriers, the disability is redefined" (Andrews, Leigh, and Weiner 2004:225). The situation in Chican is demonstrative of the impact that diverse, shared models of communication can have in removing the social, structural barriers faced by deaf individuals in society, effectively disabling them.

Irrespective of hearing status or language modality, many deaf individuals in Chican are exceptionally productive members of community life, possessing highly valued skills such as weaving, hunting, farming, cooking, gardening or parenting. The fact that deaf people in Chican are intelligent is not surprising; likewise, what is interesting about the viewpoints I encountered in Chican were assumptions that experiencing the world through vision, and not sound, may have positive impacts on the intellectual development of individuals. Since communication transpires in whichever way works for individuals, intelligence is recognized in both hearing and deaf individuals who have full access to self-expression, however, assertions about the accentuated intelligence of deaf individuals is striking.

An elderly man explained that deaf and hearing people have things to learn from each other, saying, "*Los sordos aprenden cosas de nosotros y nosotros aprendemos cosas de ellos"* (Deaf people learn things from us and we learn things from them). Reiterating this theory, an elderly woman joined in the conversation suggesting that deaf people know even *more* than hearing people because of their acute observational skills, "*Saben mâs que nosotros porque lo ven todo"* (they know more than us because they observe everything). The elder man with whom

I began the conversation continued, clarifying that it is through the use of sign language that deaf people are able to teach hearing people, *"A nosotros nos enseñan con señas y mímica"* (They teach us using sign language). The idea of deafness as an enabling characteristic that gives rise to heightened skills of observation contrasts with the conceptualization of deafness as a disabling condition (Bauman 2008; Lane 2008:227-291; 1989 [1984]; 1999 [1992]; Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan 1996; Padden and Humphries 2005; 1988). The positive view of deafness in Chican could be seen as a form of positive stereotyping as it involves making generalizations based on the observation of shared characteristics. This process is paralleled by the way that colonized, indigenous, or *meztiso*[287] peoples may invert dominant paradigms of identity to which they have been subjected, leading to the emergence of new, oppositional identity categories (Amselle 1998:4).

Although it seems impressive that persons in Chican realize the intellectual capacities of deaf people, actually it is simply the use of sign language by hearing people that provides deaf members of the community with equal opportunity for self-expression, making their intelligence accessible. The situation implies that it may not be the inability of the deaf to hear or speak that causes integrative problems, but the inability of the hearing to embrace movement as language that alienates them from the world of the deaf. This concept was reinforced when I encountered attitudes towards deafness and sign language use across southern rural Yucatán, where hearing people were enthusiastic about communication in sign language.

## 8.2 Concealed identities

As we have seen, participants in my study assert their self conceptions variably, related to deafness and also related to being Maya. The tendency to conceal positive attitudes toward deafness when faced with medical and state

[287] As a result of colonialism, the term *indigena* continues to hold negative connotations in Yucatán, and when residents of Chican mentioned their classification as such, they often qualified this assertion using the term *Meztiso*. Theories of *Meztiso logics* among colonized indigenous peoples suggest the tendency for indigenous peoples to highlight a lack of distinctiveness rather than embodying static labels of ethnicity (this assertion is based on my reading of *Meztiso Logics, Anthropology of Identity in Africa and Elsewhere* by Jean-Loup Amselle) (1998).

officials may be similar to the way that Mayan-speaking people concealed local beliefs to avoid persecution under Spanish colonial rule. I also witnessed the people of Chican modify their attitudes toward deafness in response to humanitarian efforts aimed at curing deafness by providing hearing aids, as a means to "help" improve community wellbeing (see Section 2.5, *Research approach*, for details). The people of Chican accommodate state efforts that see deafness as pathology by inverting the realities associated with being deaf in the community to fit in with medical perspectives which understand deafness as a deficit to be remedied. When faced with state medical representatives, or oral deaf educational approaches, the residents of Chican comply with the idea that there is a problem with being deaf. However within daily life experiences and social interactions in Chican deafness is accepted as a natural variety of community experience. Because of their inappropriate design, it appears that although well intentioned, state models approaching deafness in Chican undermine local systems for relating to deaf persons using the Yucatec Mayan Sign Language.

My experiences carrying out fieldwork in Chican reveal several aspects of the locally shared social ideology that generate an environment wherein deafness is not stigmatized. Commonly held perspectives and approaches toward deafness in the community include: 1) attitudes about deaf intelligence based on ideas about deaf persons having a heightened sense of observation, 2) an absence of fear about having a deaf child, 3) conceptions about children being born with the ability to use and develop skills in sign language, 4) ideas that being deaf is not problematic, 5) the use of sign language among hearing people, 6) the interpretation of spoken language into signed language for deaf persons when necessary, 7) deaf abilities to participate in local agricultural activities, customs of weaving, and domestic activities , 8) acceptance of deafness as a natural variation of human experience, and also 9) generalized positive conceptions about the important role deaf persons play in social settings owing to their acute sense of humor. These local attitudes create an inclusive society where no Deaf identity has emerged in response to social discrimination, and where distinguishing

oneself as being deaf is not a source of empowerment (as is the case for members of Deaf culture elsewhere). Likewise, in Chican, collective assertions of indigenous Maya identity are not harnessed as a means for achieving social justice as is the case for the Maya peoples of Chiapas or Guatemala. I did not sense that residents of Chican understand that their classification as Maya may act as a source of collective empowerment. Rather, people assume that self identification as indigenous peoples may heighten their marginalized position within state society.

For deaf and Mayan speaking peoples, experiences of inequality find common ground in historical experiences of oppression and degradation resulting from, 1) social stigma associated with disability as defined through biomedical approaches and, 2) social stigma associated with being indigenous as originally defined through European colonialism which led to the subordination of Mayan speaking peoples within state society. Unfortunately, at the time I carried out fieldwork in Chican, attention to deafness as a condition to be remedied through the use of hearing aids appeared to be *overshadowing* more pressing community needs such as access to agricultural and medical resources, improved education, clean water, waste management, bathroom facilities, etc. In this sense it is possible that the presence of deafness in Chican has contributed to the marginal position of the community within the state. However, this is only the case because of external misunderstandings about deafness and sign language use, leading to the assumption that the medical treatment of deafness would necessarily improve the wellbeing of the entire community. Although deaf persons are not stigmatized in the community, etic understandings about the presence of deafness in Chican frame social perceptions of the community in negative terms. Assistance programs treating deafness as a disability also influence public perceptions about Chican in negative ways, reinforcing misrepresentations about intermarriage between kin taking place in the community.[288] As described earlier, in practical terms, resources that could be

[288] The majority of people I spoke with in Yucatán, about Mayan speaking communities, expressed deep sympathy for the situations of poverty in rural Yucatán which they believed to be a result of

usefully implemented, based on assessments of local needs carried out in dialogue with community residents, are being funneled into hearing aids which residents do not appear to use except in the presence of state officials. From the Chican perspective, improved access to medical services, education, agricultural resources, transportation, internet, recreation, and social programs in general would be far more beneficial to both deaf *and* hearing community members than having access to hearing aids. Ironically, the historical *absence* of biomedical models operating in Chican may be partially responsible for the *absence* of social stigma surrounding deafness; poor access to state medical services approaching deafness as a disability may have averted the emergence of disabling attitudes towards deafness in the community.

The significance of the labels Maya and Deaf are not relevant for the people of Chican in that internally, these terms do not embody the same connotations as they do from an outside perspective. If they are not Deaf, and they are not Maya, who are the people of Chican? My experience living in the community leads me to believe that conceptualizations of identity in this context are defined contextually, and are based primarily on the fact of being a member of the community itself. Individuals living in Chican appear to experience a shared sense of identity associated with being *Chicano*, or as *milperos* who practice *milpa* farming, or as *mestizos/as* (as they are positioned within state society), or also, as *Maya hablantes* (speakers of the Mayan language). Inverting current trends of self determination among indigenous peoples, the residents of Chican appear to feel that asserting a generalized Yucatec identity, as *yucateco/a*, holds more promise for economic prosperity, in terms of accessing employment outside the community, than do assertions of indigeniety or cultural distinctiveness. The essential quality of identity in Chican appears to be a refusal to collectively essentialize local identity. Rather, individuals negotiate identity options

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state neglect. However, medical approaches toward deafness create the impression that experiences of poverty in Chican are somehow related to the presence of deafness in the community. Over the course of a decade of involvement with the peoples of Chican I sensed growing sympathy in Mérida for the situation of poverty characterizing the Mayan speaking communities of Yucatán. At the time I founded YUCAN in 2008, the government officials I met with were extremely interested in designing programs to improve the wellbeing of the Mayan speaking peoples of rural Yucatán.

strategically, and value membership within the network of extended families, constituting the community as a whole, as a shared point of reference for self definition.

Finding their place in the world, the people of Chican negotiate collective experiences of discrimination passively; the empowering potentials associated with assertions of Maya or Deaf identity as cultural capital were not active features of identity at the time I carried out my fieldwork. Regardless of the way they are classified by outsiders the people of Chican appear to value, above all, their membership within the community.

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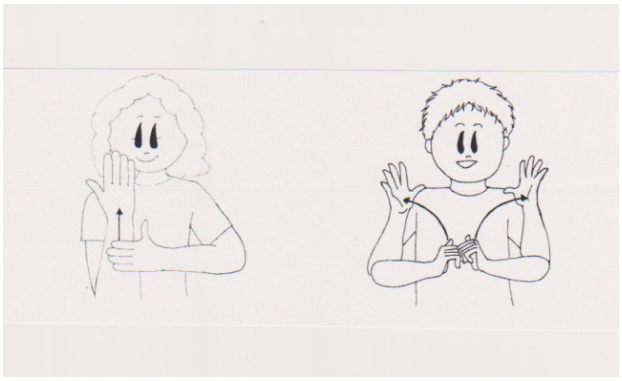
# APPENDICES

Appendix 1

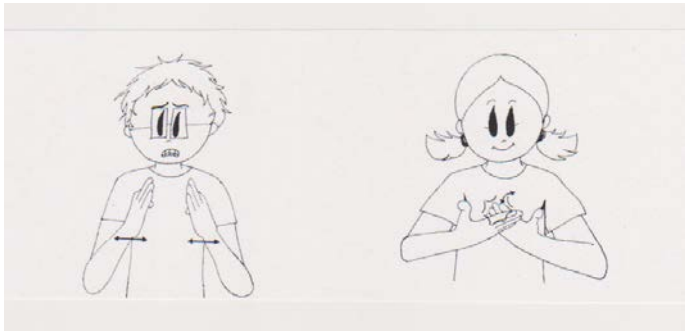
Mexican Sign Language/ *Español*

Yucatec Mayan Sign Language/ *El Maya Yucateco Maya*

*Agua* (water) *Ja'*



*Mañana* (morning) *Ja'atskab*



*Frio* (cold) *ke'el*

Appendix 2


Example of a *Loteria Yucateca* "bingo style" sheet. This game is played with an accompanying card deck of 54 cards, 27 of which are presented in the Yucatec Mayan language vocabulary.