Rast béh. Gue’tz ché’n dí’z nzóo yéek mén.
Cloud traces. Texts from the codices of our memories.

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1. Location
San Bartolomé Loxicha is a Zapotec-speaking town located in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. The language spoken in San Bartolomé Loxicha is a variety of Miahuatec Zapotec (one of four Southern Zapotec subgroups). According to the national census (Censo de Población y Vivienda 2010) San Bartolomé Loxicha has 2,422 inhabitants of which 1,663 people over the age of 3 speak an indigenous language.

2. Objective
This presentation focuses on a compendium of advice, prohibitions, omens and home remedies, which I consider to constitute a system of beliefs. These beliefs, often labeled as superstitions, are the focus of a pioneering language and culture documentation effort in San Bartolomé Loxicha. In this presentation, I will focus on my experience as a language and culture activist in my own community, and the rational behind my efforts to maintain this system of beliefs.

3. The system of beliefs
As a child, I was often given advice, especially by my mother, of the type:

- “Dyobdáá tí ló xo’xwáá dáak kéh’ fals mén láá mazií gak goxlaá”
- “Do not sit there where there is no light, while having dinner, otherwise when you grow up you will be accused of something you did not do”
- “Bteyaló baá lá’láá dáak mazií gak goxlaá gakdáá tyialóláá xtzi’nláá”
- “Finish up the tortilla you are eating, otherwise, when you grow up and start a job you won’t be able to finish it”
- “Wáda’ch yá’láá za walaá dáak tal dá’ch dáá lá’láá kéh’ thí mp xuub ché’nláá”
- “Go wash your hands so that you can have breakfast otherwise a scorpion will come and sting you”

This type of advice was frequent, and was sometimes offered several times a day. This was part of my daily life as a child. I became a part of the belief system and thought of these beliefs as truths I should abide by. As time went by, my older siblings and peers taught me that one can actually disobey the advice and even joke about it.

In my book Jwá’n ngwan-keéh reéh xa’gox (“Our Ancestors’ Beliefs”) I document how the people from San Bartolomé Loxicha’s explain phenomena, acts or events by recurring to local knowledge and cultural practices rather than by resorting to scientific correlations.

Much of what I document in my book comes from the teachings I received from my parents during my childhood. I have complemented this through documentation by means of interviews with elders and other community members. The beliefs I have documented have played an important role in the life of my community yet they are now considered
by the local youth as simple sayings with no logic behind them.

The principles behind the belief system of the people of San Bartolomé Loxicha include the need to explain natural phenomena, to instill respect and values in the members of the community, to maintain the community’s well-being, to fight for survival, as well as local cultural traits, knowledge about omens and the ability to prepare for impending events, especially harmful ones.

I became interested in documenting these beliefs during a bus ride to my town with another linguist colleague to do fieldwork. At the time I had just finished my first semester in the linguistics undergraduate program. I began by documenting my own knowledge about the beliefs system and then verified it by consulting with other community members. I was quite surprised to find out that people had significant knowledge about our local beliefs, their meaning, and the fact that they did not consider them to constitute and inescapable truth. The elders remembered learning these beliefs from their parents and also teaching them to their children. The current generation of children, however, are growing up with a different outlook, and one that appears to be part of a progressive change: our ancestors did consider these beliefs to be factual truths, the current generation of grandparents and parents actively apply the belief system to their lives, but as mentioned before, do not consider these beliefs to be inescapable truths, and the current generation of children who have become dismissive of the belief system to varying degrees.

4. The role of the local belief system and its maintenance

When I initiated this documentation project, I was interested in producing bilingual texts in my language and in Spanish. San Bartolomé Loxicha Zapotec lacks written materials. As the documentation process progressed, I began to understand the correlations related to the belief system, and I began to understand the rationale for its existence. I realized that these beliefs played an important role in my society and continue to do so, although in a modified way. I understand that societies around the world

Let us look at some of these beliefs. The thunder was a deity of great significance in the past. As such, there is much advice intended to avoid upsetting the thunder and receiving punishment as a result.

- “Loó mén tá mén ró guéehl ye’n: Nhdi’ bó’ guiiz dyak xi’n mén”
- “Having intercourse on the corn patch (or near it) is offensive to the thunder. The thunder could punish the offenders by causing illness to their children.”

One could interpret this advice as a means to show respect not only to the thunder but also to corn itself, which constitutes a primary source of sustenance.

- “Tal thi mza’ dá’chdáá guetz na’ or zií mbroxyu’ xa’: mazií gap xa’ xi’n xa’ ró’ bé’b yeek mdigué”
"If a girl does not wash her grinding stone after making tortillas, her children will have dandruff"

Perhaps at some point the children of some girl who did not wash her grinding stone regularly, happened to have dandruff. The purpose of this advice is, however, is to instill discipline and cleanliness in girls: it is important that they clean their food preparation utensils after use.

Scorpions are common in my town and reference to them is used to instill fear in children and make them obey without hesitation.

Certain beliefs are intended to provide an explanation about the cause of an illness as in the case of léh “cravings”. Léh is an illness that comes about when a person craves a food item but is unable to procure him or herself that item. The body then reacts through illness, which can only be cured if the person eats what s/he craved in the first place.

As such, if a child developed any type of facial discoloration, especially whitish spots, it was due to an unfulfilled craving for a certain type of edible wasp. The only cure was for the child to eat such wasps. Nowadays, most people in the town know that this type of facial discoloration is indicative of child malnutrition and the lack of a particular vitamin, and therefore make dietary adjustments for the child that go beyond feeding wasps to the child. A correlation between facial discoloration and wasps helped in the past to explain a particular phenomenon through local cultural and environmental elements.

I could go on and on explaining each of the 589 beliefs that are documented in this book but I will focus I will provide you only a few more examples that will help me articulate my closing statements.

"If a girl grinds with her grinding stone turned in the wrong direction, her children will be born feet first."

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• “Bó’loz mén loó tá mén: Mazii
ndabidéeh mén thi neéd yazehl mén thi
mbéh’l bó’loz loó mén”

• “If a person sticks their tongue out at
someone, they will encounter a snake on
the road that will stick its own tongue out
at them (thereby paying for the offense
caus‌ed to others)”

• “Páar dyakguizdaá mén: Ndabló wa mén
guéethmbyóól”

• “You can avoid certain ailments by
eating tortilla that has been burned on a
griddle”

• “Páar kib mén yalxen loó thi mdiguébix
naxen: Ndabló mazií ndyaá xúud mdigué
ngwá xa’ dzí’n ndabló kéh’ xa’ tzon yá’
xalguid xa’ diitz mdigué”

• “In order to stop a child’s tantrum, the
child’s father, upon arrival from work,
must take off his sandal and hit the child
in the back three times, that will take care
of the tantrum”

• “Tal ndabidéeh mén neéd noó ngotz thi
xód yáa loó mén: Thí yaldií zyeh’l mén”

• “If a tree branch breaks near someone
who is walking about, tragedy will befall
on that person”

• “Tal thi mbyódudx doxkwa’ mguid kon
yá’n nóo ndxáábáá: Mazii gak gox xa’
liidáá xa’ gaán doxkwa’ xa’ liiz xa’”

• “If a child builds a tower out of corncobs
and the tower collapses, when the child
grows up, they will not be able to build a
house (perhaps because of a lack of
money)”

5. Some closing thoughts
The community of San Bartolomé Loxicha
developed its own cosmology, which matured
over the centuries. It is necessary for the well
being of the community that rules be observed,
that local environment be well understood, that
the unknown be given an explanation, and that the
resulting knowledge be taught to the younger
generations. At the same time, all communities
change over time and their beliefs change
alongside.

The change we are seeing among the youth is, to
me, not necessarily a dramatic, negative social
change; rather, it is a reflection of changes that the
community is undergoing. Just as our ancestors
used the beliefs that I have presented here as a
means to establish rules and offer explanations,
we, the current members of the San Bartolomé
community will find our own way to establish our
own rules and explain the world. Perhaps even I
will have to come up with some kind of belief that
I will need to teach my children to prevent them
from getting sucked in by the Internet at too
young an age.

My effort to document the current belief system of
my community is not intended as a means to
return to practices of the past. Rather, it is
intended to make it known as a means to bear
witness to the changes in our lives and in our way
of conceiving of the world over time.