

RECOVERING VOICES

Seminar Series in Endangered Languages and Indigenous Knowledge (NMNH)

Thursday 8, November 2012

Rast béh. Gue'tz ché'n d'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 Miahuatéc 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 rationale 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 lú loó xkwáw dáak kék' fals ménláa mazii 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 bdáa ró lá'láa dáak mazii gak goxlaá gakdáa tiyalóláa xtzi'nláa”
- “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'láa za walaá dáak tal dá'chdáa lú yá'láa kék' thí mpxúub ché'nláa”
- “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

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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 an 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' guiíz 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 thí mza' dá' chdáá guetz na' or zii mbroxyu' xa': mazií gap xa' xi'n xa' ró' bé'b yéek mdigué”

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- “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.

- “Tal thí mdiguébi x dá’ chdáá yá’ na’ páar wa xa’: Leh’ xa’ kéh’ mpxúub ché’ n na’”
- “If a child does not wash their hands, s/he will be stung by a scorpion”

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.

- “Tal thí mén nzóo léh mkwé’tz: Nkéeh bke’x la ñá mkwé’tz loó mén”
- “If you crave hive wasps, your face will become discolored”

As such, if a child developed any type of facial discoloration, especially whitish spots, it was do 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.

- “Tal thí mza’ gú loó guetz ga’l roni: Mazií gap xa’ xi’n xa’ leh’ xi’n xa’ gal ga’l roni”
- “If a girl grinds with her grinding stone turned in the wrong direction, her children will be born feet first.”
- “Guth mén thí mbil: Lya Nhwidi’ mén”
- “If we kill a xumbil (a type of harmless reptile) we will be struck by lightning”
- “Léh seb xíz ngon: Ndxéeh ró xíz mén”
- “If you crave the fat from a cow’s udder, your nipples will fall apart”
- “Páar wadáá mbéhd yáa doxkwa’ mén yó: Ndabló chó’ ménáá mbeh’ ngóol”
- “Wood meant for construction must be cut under a full moon to prevent it from getting eaten and damaged (by insects)”

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- “Bó’loz mén loó tá mén: Mazii ndabidéeh mén thí neéd yazehl mén thí mbeh’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 dyakguízdáá mén: Ndabló wa mén guéethmbyoól”
- “You can avoid certain ailments by eating tortilla that has been burned on a griddle”
- “Páar kib mén yalxen loó thí mdiguébx naxen: Ndabló mazií ndyaá xúud mdigué ngwá xa’ dzi’n ndabló kéh’ xa’ tzon yá’ xalguíd xa’ díitz 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 thí xód yáa loó mén: Thí yaldii zyéh’l mén”
- “If a tree branch breaks near someone who is walking about, tragedy will befall on that person”
- “Tal thí mbyódudx doxkwa’ mguíd kon yá’n nóo ndxáabáá: Mazii gak gox xa’ líidáá xa’ gaán doxkwa’ xa’ líiz xa”
- “If a child builds a tower out of corncocks 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 overtime 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.