

Racism against the Mayan population in Yucatan, Mexico: How
current education contradicts the law

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Abstract

The discriminatory situation suffered by the Maya population in the Mexican state of Yucatan is discussed using the concept of neo-racism. Statistical evidence about the school system is presented, along with testimonies of Mayan speakers which uncover a phenomena frequently denied or obliterated by politically correct speeches that actually serve to disguise the racism practiced against the original population of Yucatan. The paper also shows how this phenomenon contradicts the Mexican laws.

Key words: Neo-racism, racism, discrimination, bilingual education, Mayan people.

Discussion about racism and discrimination against the Mayan indigenous populations in Yucatan can seem excessive, since it is a Mexican state where the public declarations and the politically correct language praise and acknowledge the original inhabitants of the land, the Mayans. Nevertheless, I can prove with numbers, testimonies and arguments that what it is happening in Yucatan against the Mayan people, particularly in education, is discrimination of a class that could well be called racism.

According to Perez-Ruiz (2000: 73), racism is expressed when the dominant groups try to maintain the discriminatory and material spaces that guarantee the reproduction of the differences by means of practices and symbolic speeches that

cross the social life as a whole. Nevertheless, these discriminatory speeches are not necessarily expressed as political speeches openly attributing the condition of inferiority to the discriminated group: rather, it is a rationalization process, by which racism is disguised with acceptable expressions and politically correct language. (Gillborn, 2001)

Nowadays in Yucatan, politicians, and with less care common citizens, avoid pronouncing themselves racist. Despite this, the dominant culture allows and causes phenomena similar to what some authors conceptualize as neo-racism (Knapp, 2005, Gallagher, 2005). Today, as in colonial times (Cali, 2007: 48), the rights of the indigenous peoples are recognized by law but denied by facts. In Mexico we have a Law of Linguistic Rights of the Indigenous Peoples (*Ley de derechos lingüísticos de los pueblos indígenas*, 2004) that declares in its article 11:

The federal educative authorities in Mexico and in the states of the country will guarantee that the indigenous population has access to obligatory, bilingual and intercultural education, and will adopt the necessary measures to ensure that the educative system respects the dignity and identity of the people, independent of their language. Also, in higher education, they will foment the linguistic intercultural education, multilingualism and respect to the diversity and rights.

Law says that it is a duty of the Mexican State to guarantee —guarantee, not just try, not just attempt— that the indigenous population has access to the obligatory education, bilingual and intercultural in their methods and contents. But, in Yucatan there is no bilingual and intercultural educational system beyond elementary school, although according to the article third of the Political Constitution of the Mexican United States (*Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos*, 2007), kinder

garden, primary and secondary school are obligatory basic education. In fact, that law is not fulfilled for the Mayans.

In Yucatan only 8.9 % of the Mayans have achieved junior high and solely the 6.6% have studied beyond that point. The 83.4% of the Mayans 15 years old and older dropped out of school before finishing junior high (National Institute of Statistical Geography and Computer science [INEGI], 2005).

In Mexico, a regular primary education professor can count on around 29 books and materials of didactic support, in Spanish, to carry out their work. However, an indigenous primary education professor who works in Mayan schools receive, additionally, three books which are not bilingual, are only in Spanish. Rather than providing bilingual content, those books offer orientation solely about the organization of the scholastic work in intercultural and bilingual conditions (SEP, 2003; SEP-DGEI, 2003; SEP-DGEI, 2000). In addition to this scant resource material, teachers are also provided with a pair of books of readings in Mayan language for the children in elementary school (SEP, 2004; SEP, 2004a; SEP, 2003a; SEP, 2000 and SEP, 1998). According to the data of the Global System of Information of Indigenous Education (SIGEI, 2007) only 57% of teachers of indigenous primary education in the state of Yucatan reached higher education, and of these only 32.7 % have received bachelors degrees.

The organization of the school system that serves the Mayan-speaking population is another concrete manifestation of discrimination. The system of indigenous education of Yucatan included 734 schools during the 2006-2007 school year: 256 (35%) elementary, 330 (45%) indigenous kinder gardens, 98 (13%) pre-schools and 50 (7%) indigenous boarding schools. Of the 256 indigenous primary schools in this year 85 (33%) were closed, 162 (63%) remained active, 7 (3%) were

reactivated and 2 (1%) were permanently deactivated. Yes, they closed 87 schools, even though the population between 5 to 14 years old comprises 15.8% of the Mayan population in Yucatan, and the schools of the Subsystem of Indigenous Education are only adequate for serving one third of the Mayan children in need of bilingual education.

Of 330 indigenous kinder gardens, 51 (15%) had been temporary closed, 266 (81%) remained active, 12 (4%) had been reactivated and 1 (0.3%) had been closed definitively. Yes, 52 kinder gardens were shut down, although kinder garden has been legally mandatory since 2006. A still more dramatic example, if that can be possible, is in the district of Maxcanú. In that district there are 69 indigenous kinder gardens with 3325 students, and just 10 indigenous primary schools, which can receive 287 students only. The 3038 children who did not obtain a place in the bilingual primary schools were sent to schools where education is not in their maternal language.

Few Mayan children complete primary school knowing how to read and write in Maya, and an undetermined number finish elementary school without knowing how to read and write in any language. The causes of this substandard education, at least in elementary school, have been already discussed in a previous work (Mijangos and Romero, 2008) also presented in AERA.

My team and I interviewed 287 Mayan speakers who reached higher education. With their testimonies we could make a long catalogue of examples of discrimination that resulted in Mayans dropping out of school. The men and women we interviewed were the survivors. Here is one person's testimony:

The reason many students do not finish secondary education is hunger, the economic situation. Besides the teachers, I believe that (the problem is) the

language. In many occasions teachers who do not speak the language manage schools in very small Mayan villages. Therefore, the Mayan child is forced to learn the new language (Spanish), which is an obstacle, and as they are advancing through the classes the boy feels he cannot learn, there are many things that he does not know, also he thinks he was not born for school. Then all that is absorbed by the students. Perhaps the form to express it is not the best, but discrimination absorbs, stealing from the child his faith in his capacities, and it sinks him in the marshes of daily failure: the disapproved homework, the prohibition to speak Maya, the lack of enthusiasm due to hunger, to the cold, to the poor sanitary conditions that foster the growth of bacteria more easily than the joy of learning (Personal communication).

But, also, there is another type of discrimination expressed in open and declared scorn, confirmed by testimonies such as the following testimony:

When you are from a village and come to the school in the city the classmates discriminate against you: "Ah, look, he speaks Maya". Thus really, they say to you: "Get out of here" and they do not get along with you. Yes, there were times in which because I spoke Mayan language, they discriminated very much against to me. So what do the teachers do? Instead of helping, they keep you aside. Now what happens? That boy, who grows speaking Mayan language, feels despised, feels discriminated against, and feels he is less valued. He feels thus because he is treated as an outsider.

Those elements help to explain the official statistics related to the primary education directed to Mayan children: the national average of desertion in the primary school is of 1.3%, but among the Mayan indigenous population the index reaches the

3.6%. The national average for failure in elementary education is 5%, but among the Mayan children it is 9.7%. In Mexican primary schools 89% of the students complete elementary school, but just 87.9% of the Mayan children do the same. (Board of Indigenous Education [Dirección General de Educación Indígena], 2005)

Racism still affects the Mayan people, even those who succeed in obtaining higher education. However, by the time that happens the educated Maya already has learned to hide, to keep silent, to pretend that he/she does not know the language in which he/she learned to name the world. When we started our investigation about the dropout of Mayan people from school, we underestimated the severity of the discrimination that is exerted against the Mayans. We launched a two-month radio campaign inviting them to participate: only two people called us. We went to the schools asking if anybody knew Mayan speakers, and the answer was always the same: no. After that unfruitful effort, we switched to the “snowball” strategy suggested by some scholars as an effective method for finding populations that for some reason hide themselves (Brown, 2005). We found 1115 Mayan speakers.

In Yucatan, Mexico the Mayans suffer a kind of racism, neo-racism to be precise. It is neo-racism because despite the public statements of politicians, despite the law and despite the good will in some offices of the government, the Mayan people still receiving substandard education: lack of teachers, schools, books, pedagogical procedures and many more things that would be helpful to achieve a good quality education. Instead of concluding with these pessimistic observations, we, Mayan people and scholars, are working to build the fundamentals of an education capable of bringing opportunities to fight against discrimination. These are our hopes and we will be glad to share with you our plans for enhancing education in the Mayan communities.

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