

THE *DICCIONARIO MAYA CORDEMEX*: A Cooperative Project in Mayan Linguistics

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In May 1975, Alfredo Barrera Vásquez, noted scholar of the Mayan language and culture, was meeting with a group of graduate students; suddenly he looked at his watch and said: "In a few minutes I must go to the dictionary."

Only then did I become aware of a project that, after six years of intensive work, would result in one of the most valuable contributions to the field of Mayan linguistics in the twentieth century. Each weekday at four p.m., a group of highly talented specialists met in a small building in Mérida to labor on the dictionary. The team worked with a sense of dedication and purpose, and those of us fortunate enough to visit the project became filled with a feeling of excitement. The resulting publication, issued in January 1980, was the *Diccionario Maya Cordemex: Maya-Español, Español-Maya* (Mérida, Yucatán: Ediciones Cordemex, 1980). It is not the first dictionary of the Mayan language, but is in many ways the culmination of all previous studies relating to the subject.¹

Linguistic specialists have theorized that individuals speaking a proto-Mayan language settled in the Sierra de Cuchumatanes of present-day Guatemala around 2600 B.C. This base tongue eventually evolved into some twenty-eight separate dialects grouped into ten broad segments, including such languages as *quicheano* and *kekchiano* of highland Guatemala. Around 1600 B.C., some of the Maya groups speaking a dialect known as *mayano* or *yucateco* migrated north into the Yucatán Peninsula.² Despite the Spanish conquest and the dominance of the Roman Catholic Church, the Mayan language persisted, and today is still the lingua franca in the countryside of Yucatán, Campeche, Quintana Roo, Chiapas, and northern Guatemala. Furthermore, it may hold the key to understanding the hieroglyphic writings of the ancient Maya.

The most famous single individual involved in the initial analysis of the language of the Yucatecan Mayan was Diego de Landa, Franciscan missionary and bishop of the region. In his fervor to root out idolatry, Landa destroyed numerous manuscripts and records. But in the long run, he helped to provide a key by recording his impressions and vast knowledge of the Maya in his famous *Relación de las cosas de Yuca-*

tán.³ Throughout the colonial period, various friars continued to study the Mayan language and culture. In the late sixteenth century, an anonymous author (possibly Fray Antonio de Ciudad Real) compiled a work that came to be called the *Diccionario de Motul* because it seems to have been produced in the town northeast of Mérida of that name. Consisting of some 930 pages, this work is the most complete and best source for the sixteenth century.⁴ A second compilation, thought to have been done in the same place, is called *Motul II*.⁵ In the middle or late seventeenth century, another work was completed that is attributed either to Diego Rejón Arias or Fray Luis de Vidales. Today it is preserved in the national library of Austria in Vienna.⁶

Two separate seventeenth-century studies of Mayan were discovered in the convent of San Francisco in Mérida by Juan Pío Pérez, an untiring scholar. They seem to have been composed by friars of the convent, although no specific author has been identified. Around 1855 Pío Pérez produced a compilation based upon those materials, the *Diccionario de San Francisco*. The nineteenth-century edition is of special value because the original materials have been lost or destroyed. Another collection, also dating from the 1600s, was discovered in the southern city of Ticul in 1836 by Fray Estanislao Carrillo. It was presented to Pío Pérez, who developed and organized another work that came to be called the *Diccionario de Ticul*.⁷

In the first half of the eighteenth century, Padre Beltrán de Santa Rosa worked out a revised alphabet for the Mayan language. Santa Rosa is considered to be the first Yucatecan grammarian and lexicographer. Almost a century elapsed after his work before attention was given to the systematic study of the language. In 1844, however, Fray Joaquín Ruz published his *Gramática Yucateca*. About the same time, Juan Pío Pérez initiated his valuable activities: not only did he compose the vocabularies from the San Francisco and Ticul dictionaries mentioned above, but he also made available various copies of the *Chilam Balam*, sacred book of the Maya.⁸ The most outstanding legacy of Pío Pérez, however, was the monumental *Diccionario de la lengua Maya* that was not completed until 1878, nineteen years after his death. It remained the most complete source on the subject until 1980.

Ralph L. Roys worked in Yucatán and Belize under the sponsorship of Tulane University and the Carnegie Institution of Washington. His *Ethno-Botany of the Maya* (Middle American Research Institute of Tulane, 1930) and other studies were important contributions to linguistic knowledge. In 1949 Ermilo Solís Alcalá published *El Diccionario Español-Maya*, and Guatemalan linguist Otto Shumann G. produced a dictionary relating to Itzá and Spanish about the same time. Between 1963 and 1970, Mauricio Swadesh compiled various materials on colonial Mayan, assisted by several individuals, including Juan Ramón Basta-

rachea. All of the studies mentioned above were utilized in Alfredo Barrera's monumental undertaking.

The genesis of the *Diccionario Maya Cordemex* took place in 1937, with the formation of the Academia de la Lengua Maya, an organization dedicated to the study, preservation, and continuation of that vital language of Mesoamerica. Gradually, members of this society conceived of a systematic and comprehensive study of the evolution of the language through its historic processes. Steps were taken to gather diverse information scattered throughout the world. Many members of the academy were especially prepared for this task because most had learned Mayan as children; thus equipped, they could properly utilize the accumulated archival and printed materials.

The most difficult aspect of the entire undertaking was funding. The project envisioned by the members of the academy required modern organization and cooperative activities by highly skilled individuals. Fortunately, Federico Riosco Gutiérrez, Director General of Cordemex, the national henequen industry, agreed to support the efforts in 1973, and the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) authorized the activity.⁹ By December 1974, the "Oficina del Diccionario," better known as simply "El Diccionario," was established in a modest house on the corner of two unpaved streets in a quiet neighborhood of Mérida.

Alfredo Barrera Vásquez, director of the undertaking, was one of the most respected Mayan scholars in Yucatán. Born in 1900, he exhibited the energy of a trained athlete, despite failing health and numerous other duties and avocations. Two individuals were designated as editors: William Brito Sansores, an investigator in the Departamento de Filología y Lingüística of the Centro Regional del Sureste, with a long, distinguished career and extensive experience in both written and spoken Mayan; and Juan Ramón Bastarrachea Manzano, well-trained in anthropology and widely experienced in social investigation. Refugio Vermont Salas, David Dzul Góngora, and Domingo Dzul Poot collaborated in the project, each contributing a variety of talents. Guadalupe Ramírez Tero acted as special assistant to the director. All these collaborators speak Mayan fluently. In addition to these principal investigators, a staff of assistants typed and filed.

Strategy was mapped out as if for a military campaign; the basic organization was designed by Barrera, who literally drove himself and the entire staff with dedication and devotion to precision and exactness. At first the investigators worked only twenty-six hours weekly because everyone in the project had other duties. By August 1977, however, a change in policy gave approval for the team to work thirty-five hours weekly. Because many items under examination were in manuscript form, orthography became a matter of major attention. Each of the sources was assigned a code number, with the oldest items having the

lower numbers.¹⁰ The investigators searched through the sources, placing words on little slips of paper, white for Mayan and blue for Spanish. Each slip included definitions and examples of usage. This information was then transferred to the typists who prepared the final card. Each card was then carefully checked, revised, and reviewed. When problems arose, there were conferences among the various participants and with the director.¹¹ At first the office was equipped with an electric fan, but eventually air-conditioning was installed, not so much for comfort, but to keep the ever-mounting slips from blowing away. Before the project was completed, some three hundred thousand of these slips were accumulated, while the process of checking continued.

After several years, there was a growing concern that the work would not be completed if Cordemex withdrew its support because of mounting financial problems. Because his health was especially bad, Director Barrera at times despaired of ever seeing the work finished during his lifetime; but he insisted that the integrity of the work not be compromised.¹² Finally, an agreement was reached balancing fiscal demands with scholarly imperatives. Rather than publish the two volumes as originally projected, a decision was reached to publish as planned the Mayan-Spanish portion, comprising 984 pages with extensive definitions and cross-references relating to the historic progress of words and expressions. The Spanish-Mayan section, only 360 pages in length, is a part of the single volume and is designated as a "vocabulary." In reality, the section is complete because it has references back to the first section, although this arrangement makes it a bit less convenient for the reader to study a given expression. The great size of the single volume (1,413 pages) makes it cumbersome to use, but a very handsome and imposing tome nonetheless.

Published in January 1980, the *Diccionario Maya Cordemex: Maya-Español, Español-Maya* is a major accomplishment in the field of linguistic studies. President José López Portillo states in the introduction: "El mundo Maya adquiere en este Diccionario, nueva voz. . . ." Even the individual who will never seriously study the Mayan language will find a wealth of information regarding the complex elements within Mesoamerican society. The dictionary is truly a magnificent monument to the intellectual dedication and cooperation of its creators, particularly Alfredo Barrera, who lived to see it published before his death in December of 1980.

NOTES

1. Information set forth in this review is taken primarily from the introduction to the work, the source utilized unless otherwise indicated.
2. There are four separate dialects in this group: Mayan of Yucatán, Lacandón of Chiapas, Itzá of Petén, Guatemala, and Mopán of Belize. See the work of Grant D.

- Jones, ed., *Anthropology and History of Yucatán* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977).
3. Fray Diego de Landa, *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, Introduction and notes by Héctor Pérez Martínez, 7th ed. (México, D. F.: Editorial Pedro Robredo, 1938).
 4. This work was found in Mexico City and bought for three pesos in the middle of the nineteenth century by Abate Carlos Esteban Brasseur de Bourbourg; it was sold for \$150.00 to John Carter Brown of Providence, Rhode Island. In 1929 an edition was published in Mérida.
 5. Also in the John Carter Brown Library.
 6. This work has been dated from 1608 to 1670 and was first brought to Yucatán in 1937, where it was examined by the noted historian Antonio Canto López.
 7. The original has been lost, but a copy dating from 1898 is still available.
 8. Following the Spanish conquest, Mayan priests transcribed religious and historical texts from hieroglyphic sources into Mayan text, utilizing an alphabet that had been developed by Franciscan friars. A number of the *Libros de Chilam Balam* came to be identified with specific towns throughout Yucatán. See Alfredo Barrera Vásquez and Silvia Rendón, *El libro de los Libros de Chilam Balam*, Colección Popular, No. 42 (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1969).
 9. This decision came about the time that Cordemex entered one of its few profitable periods, largely due to the increased price of synthetic fibers following OPEC's increase in petroleum prices. Arq. Norbeto González Crespo was the INAH official who authorized the dictionary project.
 10. The numbering system for the sources is carefully explained in the introduction.
 11. Alfredo Barrera Vásquez, "Memorandum sobre el diccionario Maya-Español, Español-Maya Cordemex, en proceso de elaboración," (Mérida, Yucatán, 17 de mayo de 1975).
 12. Personal letters of Barrera to the author.