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In Chimaltenango, near Guatemala City, eight-year-old Pablo Sumuc is no longer embarrassed when people from his grandparents' generation talk to him in their ancient language — cakchiquel. Through the help of bilingual teachers — and Article 66 of a amendments to the constitution, which states, in part, that “the State recognizes the right to the identities of the Maya populations” — Pablo and his classmates, left, are full of their new-found voice and are reclaiming their language and their birthright, Hadani Ditmars reports.



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Pablo works with other children in a bilingual school in Chimaltenango, near Guatemala City. The end of his country's civil war has meant a chance to reclaim his heritage.

Ancient justice beats punishment

By CARL NEUSIEDLER

SALQUIL GRANDE, GUATEMALA — The corn seller, wearing the embroidered blouse and red skirt of the local Mayas, bursts into the mayor's office from the clamour of the marketplace and sobs.

She's been robbed. Witnesses come in and mill around the mayor's wooden table, excitedly giving their versions of what happened.

This is justice. Maya-style. The village in Guatemala's highlands has never had a police station, a court house, or a lawyer. Instead, villagers administer justice through discussion and consensus, as they have for centuries in a native tradition being recognized across Latin America.

The mayor sends an aide to find the suspect. Within an hour, the thief returns the money. The two of them each leave the mayor 25¢ for administrative costs.

Traditions like Salquil Grande's are being seen in various places as what most state legal systems are not: Accessible, prompt, inexpensive, and culturally and linguistically sensitive — focusing on reparation for damages and rehabilitation, rather than punishment.

Panama, Chile, Ecuador, Colombia, and Bolivia have all recognized indigenous rights to some degree in the past decade.

"After centuries of considering native justice primitive, barbaric, and pagan, it must now be viewed as a credible and workable alter-

Learning the past to save the future

CHIMALTENANGO, GUATEMALA • Eight-year-old Pablo Sunuc sits in his single-room school in Chimaltenango, a satellite town of Guatemala City, and talks of his joy at learning the language of his grandparents.

"I'm learning words like mother, father, friend... Before, when old people spoke to me in cakchiquel, I didn't know what they were saying, I was embarrassed. Now I'm starting to understand."

With a beaming smile, he recounts his journey toward reclaiming cakchiquel, his ancestral language.

For all intents and purposes, Pablo is an Indian boy. But, like numerous other indigenous Guatemalans, he has lost much of his language and culture to assimilation and hispanization. Chimaltenango's proximity to the capital, where many of its residents work at menial jobs, has only reinforced this process.

Pablo's name is Spanish; he dresses in jeans and neatly ironed shirts. His musical references are more latino pop than traditionally native. And, in an unconscious salute to globalization, he confides his favorite television show is *Scooby Doo* — dubbed in Spanish.

But learning cakchiquel is "a way for me to learn more about my heritage."

Indeed, his cultural pride is fresh with the excitement of a relatively new addition to the curriculum.

The bilingual primary education program began in Chimaltenango last year, after the signing of a peace accord that ended more than 30 years of civil war. And it was only last month constitutional change was enacted recognizing that Guatemala has more than one official language.

Article 66 of amendments to the constitution reads: "The State recognizes, respects, and protects the right to the identities of the Maya... populations: Their ways of life, social organizations, customs, and traditions: The use of indigenous dress by the men and women, and the distinct forms of spirituality, language, and dialect, and the ability to pass these traditions down to their descendants."

In fact, there are 27 Indian languages spoken by the approximately 70% of the populace who are indigenous.

The issue of bilingual education has been historically so controversial that, even a decade ago, some bilingual teachers were

"disappeared" by the military. As recently as 1993, Frank Fairchild, a U.S. aid administrator who had been a pioneer of bilingual education in Guatemala in the 1980s, was killed by unknown assailants during a return visit to this country.

Now, a mere five years later, bilingual programmes have become part of the official curriculum of the Ministry of Education. But, says educational specialist Julio Diaz, who has created a pedagogical program designed for bilingual classrooms, the struggle is far from over.

The biggest issue in terms of education of indigenous children, he affirms, is poverty.

"In administering our pro-

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grams," he explains, "we are dealing with a segment of society who experience an extreme economic disadvantage."

In Guatemala, only 68% of school-age children are actually in school, and only 0.5% of the population goes on to university. According to Diaz, among the indigenous Guatemalans, the percentage of university-goers is perhaps 0.05%.

About 30% of the schools are private; public education is largely for children of the underclass. Furthermore, low government salaries mean public school teachers are often absent from the classroom, working at other jobs to support themselves.

Guatemalan society remains almost feudal in its hierarchies, with an apartheid-like segregation: White, Europeanized children attend private schools, complete with computer and English classes, while Indian kids get stuck in one-room schools, often without enough textbooks and teachers — or indoor plumbing.

Indeed, in Pablo's little school, despite the children's enthusiasm, it's hard not to notice the nearby toilets are overflowing and the dusty entrance road is

guarded by a pack of emaciated dogs.

So, while some indigenous activists look to bilingual education as a kind of cultural manifesto, Mr. Diaz sees it in more pragmatic terms — as a means to an end — which is "breaking the cycle of poverty."

"Bilingual education programmes, which use native cultural models rather than hispanic ones, help encourage indigenous children to stay in school," he says. Dramatic decreases in the dropout rates of native children who have access to bilingual education would seem to support this thesis.

But after the sixth grade, children should be "streamlined" in-



to Spanish-only programs. Otherwise, he says, "they will be at a disadvantage when it comes to the world of work and post-secondary education."

But in some cases, as in Chimaltenango, learning an Indian language such as cakchiquel has a practical use.

"Many young people in our community look for work in nearby rural areas," says Pablo's teacher, Margarita. "In many of these places, the farm workers and even the bosses communicate in cakchiquel." In this situation, learning cakchiquel also means young people aren't obliged to look for work in Guatemala City, therefore avoiding the expense and hassle of transport or even relocation.

Two hours away, in rural Alta Vera Paz, bilingual education takes on a slightly different meaning.

Outside Coban, a town known for its coffee plantations as well as its former role as a guerrilla stronghold, quiche is the dominant language. Today, a group of 20-something native primary teachers are involved in an intensive training program at the convent of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Their students are native kids

who attend schools, often accessible only by foot or grinding dirt roads, up in the hills where the coffee grows.

During a group discussion, Marta, a young teacher who does not want her name used for fear of "reprisal," speaks of her experience as a native educator.

"The children I'm teaching every day are still traumatized from the war," she explains. "One nine year-old student I have, Maria, her mother was a guerrilla, her father a *militario*. She was literally right in the middle of the conflict."

"Now," continues Marta, "she's very difficult to handle. Since she's experienced so much violence — both at home and during the war — she acts out in class aggressively. I have to give children like her extra love and understanding so they can heal from their experience of war."

The experience of being educated in their native language is integral to the healing process for children like Maria. "Quiche is part of who they are," Marta adds quietly.

When a power outage leaves the room in darkness, she leads me down the hall to her small cell-like room. The candle she holds leaves shadows on her face and the light bounces off her shiny black braids.

In the darkness, she tells me, almost whispering: "There were many massacres in this area. Members of my own family were 'disappeared.' They weren't guerrillas, they were just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"The reason I became a teacher," she adds, "is that I wanted to help my people. I felt that education was a way I could reach this new generation. Maybe they will have opportunities that I didn't."

Marta herself did not finish university, nor does she know anyone who did.

"If you want to study law or medicine or journalism, you really have to go to the universities in Guatemala City. This is too much of an expense for us. It's not only a question of the money to relocate and to rent an apartment, but also for course fees, textbooks, supplies... it's not really open for us."

But she is proud of her chosen profession. "I'm happy to be teaching children not only practical skills, but also things about their language and culture."

Nearby, a meeting of former guerrillas and native activists is taking place in a gymnasium.

Hundreds of people, men, women, children, young and old, have gathered to discuss issues pertaining to enactment of certain key parts of the peace treaty. Two years after its signing, many of these — including those dealing with language rights — remain unresolved.

On a makeshift stage, a woman with African features from the Caribbean coast speaks passionately of the importance of maintaining ties to language and culture.

"Things are not changing fast enough," she tells the assembled crowd. "Our children's future needs to be assured. They are losing the very culture and language that the government tried to destroy during the war."

Her speech, full of fiery rhetoric, is followed by a musical performance. A group of four young people sing, to the accompaniment of an old man on a guitar.

"We have survived so much. The conquest. The war. Our crops and homes were destroyed... but we are strong, and our language and traditions live on."

People in the crowd sway and clap and cheer. Some are weeping.

Outside the gym, a man with a weathered face approaches me. Beside him is his young son. In broken Spanish he says: "Look, for us, language is a matter of survival. Just think, if those *militarios* who burned my village, if they had taken the trouble to learn our language, maybe there would not have been a war. At the very least they would have stopped to ask us if we were guerrillas before they shot at us."

Meanwhile, back in Chimaltenango, the question of cultural survival may have more to do with globalization and MTV — the *nueva conquista* of Americanized culture — than *militarios*.

Pablo and his friends are discussing Def Leppard and the Spice Girls, while a couple of girls in native dress giggle nearby. Pablo wants to be a doctor when he grows up, but he and his friends dream of Burger King and escaping to L.A.

Perhaps in the not so distant future, the whole question of bilingual education here will be more about English as a second language. But, in the meantime, Pablo and his classmates are slowly recovering from cultural amnesia by learning the language of their ancestors.

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ing things — different but not inferior," says Ian Chambers of the United Nations International Labor Organization, which created an international convention on rights of indigenous peoples.

In Guatemala, where the majority of the population is indigenous, recognition of native traditions is seen as a necessity. Despite the use of Mayan law, however, it is not officially recognized in Guatemala. That would change later this year if voters approve proposed constitutional changes.

But recognition is only a first step. Native communities face enormous challenges in repairing traditions damaged by colonization and, more recently, war. Some of the more than 150 mob lynchings in Guatemala in the past two years have occurred in native villages where former leaders of army-controlled civil patrols have supplanted traditional elders.

Some Guatemalans have equated Mayan law to lynching — erroneously, native leaders and legal experts say — to add fuel to their opposition of official recognition of Mayan law. The legal and business elites are suspicious of a system that puts collective rights ahead of individual rights.

"If you legalize it, people could be tried under a system with norms they aren't familiar with, in a language they don't understand, without access to professional advice," warns Roberto Ardon, director of the powerful Guatemalan business lobby group, CACIF.

Ironically, this is what indigenous people say they face in the state system.

The state legal system "doesn't attempt to resolve conflicts. It makes them worse," says Juan Leon, director of Defensoria Maya, a group trying to rebuild damaged traditions by transplanting knowledge from healthy communities to those that have lost their elders.

While both sides defend their traditions, legal observers say neither will stay unchanged. Many countries have created systems with multiple jurisdictions.

Indeed, as Guatemala moves to recognize its Mayan majority, European and indigenous traditions are already beginning to blur into a new and unique reality.

In nearby Nebaj, a new legal clinic has settled more than 500 land disputes in the past year using a similar strategy.

At the end of the process, the parties have a legal document valid in the state system that gives them legal title to their land, says Nicolas Rivera, the clinic's director.

"In front of a judge, you either win everything or lose everything," adds the indigenous lawyer who speaks the local language. "Here, we reach compromise."

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