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**El Hilo Que Nos Une A Nuestros Ancestros**  
*The Thread That Unites Us To Our Ancestors*

**Introduction:**

After my arrival in Guatemala, I began my journey to San Juan Atitán, one of my research sites. During the eight-hour drive, we encountered blocked roads due to a *Protesta del Magisterio* (Teachers' Strike). This was completely unexpected, and to my surprise, I soon learned that a nationwide strike had begun on May 19, closing all public schools across the country. Organized by the *Sindicato de Trabajadoras y Trabajadores de la Educación* (STEG) and the *Asamblea Nacional del Magisterio* (ANM), hundreds of teachers were demanding salary increases and improvements in education (Bercián, 2025). Since my original plan involved classroom observations and interviews, this forced me to pause my research. All of the teachers in the communities where I had planned to conduct my study: San Juan Atitán, Todos Santos, Santiago Chimaltenango, and San Sebastián Huehuetenango were on strike, making it impossible to carry out classroom observations as there were no students in school.

**Context of the strike**

In Guatemala, the *Magisterio* was on strike in opposition to the *Pacto Colectivo*, a collective bargaining agreement negotiated between unions and government authorities to regulate working conditions, benefits, and wages in the public sector (Ministerio de Trabajo y Previsión Social, 2025). Union leader Joviel Acevedo criticized recent reforms, stating that they aimed to “turn everything into big business with NGOs, removing parents from control over their children’s food programs... just as they removed school health insurance” (López, 2025). Within this context, I maintained a neutral stance, adjusting my research to examine how the strike affected education in San Juan Atitán, San Sebastián, Todos Santos Cuchumatanes, and Santiago Chimaltenango, while still focusing on Indigenous Maya Mam pedagogies and community collaborations.

Despite these challenges, I was able to build relationships with teachers in my target communities. However, due to the strike and road blockages, I was only able to establish contact with two schools in San Juan Atitán and Todos Santos Cuchumatán, even though no classes were taking place.

**Note on Privacy and Confidentiality:** all participant names in this report have been changed, and pseudonyms are used for teachers to protect their identities. No student names

appear in the report. All photographs are used with participant consent, and no names are attached to the images, except to credit the photographer.

### **San Juan Atitán:**

In San Juan Atitán, Guatemala, focusing on the Instituto Nacional de Educación Básica Jornada Vespertina (INEB). My intent was to explore the pedagogical practices of teachers and the ways in which students continue to embrace language, learning, and hope in the face of challenges.

At the beginning of my visit, I reached out to the school principal, Professor **Max Salinas**. Initially, he hesitated to speak with me, uncertain if I was part of the media or a government agency. After I clarified my purpose and showed documentation of my research intent, he agreed to collaborate, on the condition that no recordings were made. This reflected the community's caution but also their willingness to engage once trust was built.

Despite the ongoing teachers' strike, which threatened the jobs of those who continued teaching, Mr. Salinas and his colleagues expressed a deep commitment to their students. While official classes were suspended, the teachers ensured that students received assignments weekly. As Profe. Salinas said, "*Podrían despedirnos por impartir clases informales, pero la presión recae sobre nosotros. No queremos que nuestros alumnos se queden en casa sin aprender nada.*" ("We might get fired for holding informal classes, but the pressure is on us. We don't want our students to stay at home and learn nothing.") His words revealed both the difficulty of their situation and their unwavering dedication to the children's education.

### **Observation**

Once teachers were permitted to return on August 5th, Mr. Salinas allowed me to observe his Mam language class as students picked up and dropped off assignments. They were not holding regular classes that day and instead gathered outside the classroom. That day, he introduced the adverbs of time in Mam, including:

- Yesterday: *ew (kab' sqit)*
- Today: *ja'l*
- Tomorrow: *nchi'j*
- Later: *nej / nejxa*
- Right now: *ja'l wen*
- Until tomorrow: *Max nchi'j*

The students were fully engaged, often laughing as they debated which expressions were most accurate. This playful languaging created an atmosphere of joy and collaboration. Mr. Salinas asked them to use the adverbs to construct sentences based on their daily routines. This reminded me of Zahir (2018) on *language nesting*, where students build learning from shared

everyday experiences. One student wrote the sentence: *Ew xi aj qini q'alq'al kjon* (Yesterday, I went to steal corn). The students erupted in laughter, and for a moment, even amid the uncertainty caused by the strike, the group filled with joy. I could see the relief and pride in Profe. Salinas's face as his students played with their language and cultural humor.

### **Students' voices**

While students came to pick up their homework, I introduced myself and spoke with several of them. Three young girls approached me and shared something profound: “ *Aj huelga me'n we' qiy qxnaq'tzibil ex a qiy qchwinlal ex qxe'chl ntzaj q'amant tu'n thaw qin qib'i ex tu'n tb'aj qon qib'i*” (“The strike won't stop us from learning because our culture teaches us to strive and to heal our people.”) They wanted me to carry their message forward: that love wins over everything.

They asked me to photograph them making a heart with their hands. In the picture below, three girls form a heart shape with their hands, symbolizing their support, unity, and love for their community amidst the ongoing national teachers' strike. Their gesture reflects the hope and resilience of the younger generation during a time of social and educational disruption.

It was a powerful reminder that despite the challenges, the spirit of San Juan Atitán's youth is one of hope, resilience, and belief in a future grounded in love.



For privacy and safety reasons, none of the students wished to be identified. (Photo courtesy of Henry Sales)

### **Todos Santos Cuchumatanes**

On August 6th, I visited the Instituto Nacional de Educación Básica (INEB) in Todos Santos, where I met with a teacher I will refer to as Professor Rosa Ramírez (a pseudonym, to protect her identity). On this day, teachers and students organized a celebratory festival marking their return to school after a period of disruption. The event was more than just a school activity and it was a collective expression of resilience, showing that despite challenges, culture endures and unites the school.

Profe. Rosa appeared visibly exhausted and expressed feelings of sadness and discouragement. She explained that the repeated strikes had taken a toll, requiring not only financial sacrifice but also considerable time and energy. Due to fear of possible repercussions from the government or media, Rosa declined to be recorded. However, she permitted me to write down a phrase she shared:

*“Queremos que la festividad nos alivie de todo el estrés y las protestas. Al final no ganamos nada, sino la derrota.”*

(“We want the festivity to relieve us from all the stress and protests. In the end, we gain nothing, only defeat.”)

Rosa’s words reveal the depth of fatigue among educators, yet the celebration itself carried a powerful counter-message: “culture heals its people.”

Students, in particular, demonstrated a strong commitment to preserving and uplifting their heritage. Through their traditional clothing, weavings, performances, gastronomy, and use of their language, they wanted to ensure that their culture and identity “win over” the injustices and difficulties facing Guatemala and their communities. This festival was not only a celebration of returning to school but also an affirmation that cultural continuity is an act of resistance and hope.



### Context for Photo

In this photo, the students chose to highlight their culture by wearing traditional clothing and presenting a weaving in front of us. Their intention was to affirm that their heritage continues to endure despite ongoing challenges. For privacy and safety reasons, none of the students wished to be identified. The only individual who consented to being identified is Henry Sales, the researcher. (Photo courtesy of a teacher)

## **El Dia Internacional De Los Indigenas (International Day of Indigenous Peoples)**

Despite all of the battle, the teachers held class during the El Dia Internacional De Los Indigenas (International Day of Indigenous Peoples) which usually take place on August 9th, but since this date is a Saturday, the teacher and students celebrated on August 7th of 2025. I was invited by (INEB) to celebrate the Dia Internacional De Los Indigenas. The school started at 1pm until 5pm.



At INEB, only three teachers, including the principal, lead classes. This photo captures a mix of emotions, sadness, and desperation from the long strike, yet happiness and relief to finally be reunited with their students. (Photo courtesy of Henry Sales)



#### Context

In this photo, students watch as teachers deliver a speech of motivation, vowing not to be defeated. The scene embodies resistance and pride, the vibrant colors of the *guipiles* and shirts radiate hope, symbolizing resilience and renewal upon their return

During this day, teachers not only protested labor-related policies but also reminded students of the deeper responsibilities tied to Indigenous worldviews. In their speeches, they stressed the importance of caring for the lives and health of children, the elderly, families, and the community; guiding and educating children, youth, families, and the community; and defending their autonomy and self-organization as Indigenous Authorities without compromising their dignity or territories. They emphasized that their forms of organization are nourished by cultural practices and community life and highlighted the need to understand the realities of injustice, inequality, and violations of the rights of Indigenous peoples, women, youth, and the natural resources within their territories.

#### **Findings: Indigenous Maya Mam Pedagogies and Community Resilience**

My research in San Juan Atitán and Todos Santos Cuchumatanes revealed that education within Indigenous Maya Mam communities is deeply intertwined with culture, community, and resilience. Although my original research plan focused on classroom observation and pedagogical practices, the nationwide teachers' strike required a shift in focus toward understanding how education and cultural transmission persisted under conditions of disruption.

At INEB in San Juan Atitán, teachers adapted to the strike by distributing assignments and maintaining language instruction despite restrictions on classroom gatherings. Students engaged in culturally grounded activities, such as constructing sentences in Mam that reflected their daily lives. These assignments demonstrated how Indigenous pedagogies integrate language, culture, and lived experience, even outside formal classroom settings. Laughter, peer debates, and collaborative discussions highlighted the social and emotional dimensions of

learning, showing that joy, humor, and interaction are central components of the pedagogical process.

Community collaboration emerged as another key finding. Teachers, students, and parents worked together to sustain learning and cultural continuity during the strike. Festivals and events, including the International Day of Indigenous Peoples, showcased traditional clothing, weaving, and language performances, emphasizing that education is a communal practice. Students' gestures of solidarity, such as forming hearts with their hands, symbolized love, cultural pride, and commitment to sustaining their community despite societal and political challenges.

Another finding is the parental involvement in learning. During my fieldwork, I observed that parents played an active role in supporting their children's learning, particularly amid the disruptions caused by the teachers' strike. Their involvement went beyond traditional support at home, they collaborated with teachers and provided emotional encouragement to maintain their children's educational progress.

Finally, cultural expression during and after the strike functioned as both resistance and healing. By centering traditional practices and language, students and teachers demonstrated that education extends beyond academics; it is a means of sustaining identity, fostering resilience, and ensuring that love, culture, and hope for the future persist. Even during difficult times, the Mam students demonstrated that learning, cultural pride, and community cohesion can thrive, reinforcing the essential role of Indigenous pedagogies in nurturing both knowledge and identity.

### **Limitation**

The nationwide teachers' strike posed major challenges to my research. I arrived in Guatemala on July 5, planning to finalize my work by August 7, but with classes suspended, I was limited to speaking with teachers outside the classroom. Teachers rotated in groups, with some traveling ten hours to the capital for protests while others stayed behind, leaving them exhausted and weary. This constant cycle of travel and protest made it challenging to carry out classroom observations and fully engage in my planned research activities.

### **Timeline of Teachers' Protests**

- May 19: STEG (teachers' union) declares permanent assembly, suspending work and closing 16% of schools.
- May 26: Teachers set up a protest camp in Plaza de la Constitución to pressure the government.
- July 10–14: Approximately 18 roadblocks are set up on major highways nationwide.
- July 15: Police evict teachers camped near the National Palace of Culture, citing property damage.

- July 16: Constitutional Court definitively rejects a request to declassify the collective labor agreement.
- July 21: Teachers from across the country gather in Plaza de la Constitución; after 57 days, the union ends the first phase of the strike and removes the camp.
- July 23: Government fails to attend a second meeting in Congress; Ministry of Education reports four active dialogue tables.
- July 30: Constitutional Court orders local education offices to resume disciplinary actions against striking teachers.
- August 4: Ministry of Education reports only 3% of schools remain closed.

(Source: Newsweek Guatemala, 2025)

## **Conclusion**

My time in San Juan Atitán and Todos Santos revealed that education is more than assignments or classroom routines; it is a communal practice rooted in culture, humor, resilience, and love. Despite strikes and uncertainty, students and teachers demonstrated that learning endures through dedication and care. As cultural and language keepers, teachers reaffirmed the importance of teaching Mam even in difficult times, linking education to identity, dignity, and community strength.

While they tirelessly defend their students and the wider community, they now face a new threat from the government. As reported, “The Ministry of Education has already issued more than seven thousand records against striking teachers and plans to hire between three and five thousand tutors to recover learning; it also announced that on August 18 a program to recover content will begin” (Ola, 2025). Many of the teachers are uncertain about the security of their positions and fear that they may lose their jobs due to the strike and government actions. The leaders stated that, although they attempted to engage in dialogue with the government, they received no response. They thanked parents and students for their “patience and support.” The teachers’ strike revealed Indigenous educators’ resilience, as they see their fight for better education, salaries, and conditions as a continuation of their ancestors’ struggles, drawing strength from their lineage to confront today’s challenges.

### Additional images captured during my visit

Henry Sales, the researcher, was invited during the International Indigenous Day to introduce himself to the students.



The empty classrooms at INEB during the teachers' strike, showing the disruption in regular schooling.



Three students asked to be photographed while standing in front of the INEB school sign, symbolizing their engagement with education and pride in their community.



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