

**Project Title:**

Intercultural Translation in Education: the case of *Ikna!* at the Maya Intercultural University of Quintana Roo, México.

In July of 2000, Vicente Fox Quezada of the National Action Party won Mexico's federal elections overthrowing the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party. The process of transition brought the advancement of constitutional reforms, public policies, and legal frameworks, which depicted a conceptual and institutional transformation of the Mexican state position towards ethnicity and indigeneity in the turn of the century. One of such policies was the promotion and creation of the Intercultural University System. In 2001, the Ministry of Education's General Coordination for Intercultural and Bilingual Education (CGEIB) launched the intercultural universities in Mexico, whereas the National Program of Education 2001-2006 stated their objectives.

According to Silvia Schmelkes, who was the first national coordinator, intercultural universities responded primarily to two needs. On the one hand, they were intended to increase the enrollment of indigenous populations in higher education. By the time of their conception, only 1% of 10 million people that spoke one of 68 native languages attended higher education programs. On the other hand, the federal government pronounced these universities as a post-*indigenismo* initiative that aspired to finish the homogenizing model of bilingual education that assimilated indigenous populations to the dominant *mestizo* way.

The Maya Intercultural University of Quintana Roo (UIMQROO) was founded in 2007. Two years later, professors and staff revised and interpreted the Mexican intercultural education model. Their document titled *Modelo Educativo Intercultural* presented the institutional arrangement of the university. This exercise allowed them not only to interiorize the model but also to clarify some of the Western monolingual Spanish concepts and expectations. Notably, they revised the notion of *acompañamiento* (Spanish), which is implicit in the concept of *tutoría* (Spanish) from the National Association for Intuitions of Higher Education (ANUIES), and they re-conceptualized it through the Yucatec Maya word *ikna!*. Within this context, *ikna!* refers to an educational construct of participation among teachers, students, and Mayan communities in the co-production of knowledge.

*Image 1. Maya ceremony around the sacred Maya tree at the central plaza of the university campus.*

ANUIES designed and promoted the tutoring program for higher education in the early 2000's, and readily incorporated it into institutional development plans. This set of institutionalized procedures took tutoring away from spontaneous acts to an ensemble of actions directed towards the individualized attention of the student. According to ANUIES, *tutor* was defined as the person in charge of orienting students in the course of their education, and *tutoría* as the teaching method by which a student or a group of students received personalized and individualized education from a professor.

Although, UIMQROO's document *Modelo Educativo Intercultural* references the notion of *acompañamiento*, it also states that it poses implicitly and explicitly a paternalist character, sometimes authoritarian and logocentric. They define *acompañamiento* as "to be or to go in the company of another", and criticize it for being paternalist and authoritarian. They argue that even when it might be related to the teacher-student interaction, the term surreptitiously hides in its practice a connotation of supervision, where the supervisor not only observes and directs the interchange of ideas, experiences, and wisdom ('*saberes*'), but also 'orients' the student to a development that

might not represent his or her educational objectives, or even more importantly, it does not take into account the student's language, culture, and ways of constructing knowledge.

My research looks at the processes of translation in intercultural education as a method of selective appropriation of concepts, language referents, and sociocultural practices across various backgrounds and how it serves as a way to critically think about dominant educational propositions. My investigation understands intercultural translation as the complex double movement guiding the articulation processes whereby two incommensurable discourses in education are juxtaposed to underlie the assumptions between the two and conceptualize a new hybrid form. In exercising this method, the university discursively transformed the concepts of *tutoría* and *acompañamiento* used by the central Mexican government to the Yucatec Maya concept of *iknal*. This epistemological exercise not only fostered an intercultural exchange of ideas about tutoring but also encouraged indigenous ways of learning and participation promoting a different set of relationships between students and elders of their communities.

During my summer research at UIMQROO, I was able to interview professors and students to understand how was it that the university decided to modify the tutoring program developed by ANUIES. According to the former President and founder of the University, Dr. Francisco J. Rosado May, the motivation was to arrive at a conceptualization that was not solely Western or indigenous but a mixture of both, and that at the same time, allowed the incorporation of community processes of learning and the production and transmission of knowledge. And thus they arrived at the institutionalized variant of *iknal*, which entails tutoring but also implies the fact that students may approach other professors, students, and elders in their communities.

In 2009 one of the professors at the University, Dr. Juan A. Castillo Cocom, was appointed by the University President to revise the concept of tutoring and incorporate a Maya understanding. During his interview, Dr. Juan A. Castillo Cocom argued that he took the concept of *iknal* based on the philosophy of Yucatec Maya speakers that is reflected in the Maya language. He contended that *iknal* is hard to translate into a Western frame of reference that includes an understanding of a before, during, and after. He argued that in Mayan philosophy space and time are conceptualized differently, and posited *iknal* as a product of the social relations that generate collaborative spaces and of knowledge production based on closeness (*cercanía* in Spanish).

To foster these relationships the university has developed an extensive network of relations with community elders and an outreach program between the students and their communities. For Professor Mario Baltazar Collí Collí maintaining a relationship between the university and the Mayan communities is paramount to the fulfillment of its mission. Back when they were planning how to implement the *iknal* as part of the tutoring system, he came up with the idea of having the figure of "*abuelos tutores*" or community elders for students to seek advice in general and specifically about the acquisition of the Yucatec Maya language. Maya language classes include activities with community elders during the semester. Moreover, elders notions of competence and personal evaluations are part of the comprehensive assessment system. UIMQROO outreach program includes a long-term system of interaction between the student and its community of origin. The outreach program is linked to the completion of the students' degree through the evaluation, design, and implementation of a dissertation project related to a community problem or need.

Another way in which the university is linked to community members is through the inclusion of courses in the curricula of each of program taught by community experts that might not have a college degree but that are recognized by their communities as

knowledge bearers. During my visit at the University, professor Lidia Seralta Peraza invited me to observe the class of Manuela Dzul Batún a herbalist expert of the community where the school is based. Doña Manuela, as members of the community name her, teaches her university class inside her home kitchen and close to her garden. Her class is part of the curricula requirement of herbal medicine in the degree in community health. During her first class, students had to recognize and name ten plants commonly used in herbal medicine, as well as naming the remedies in which they are used. As I sat inside her kitchen, I was taken by the ways in which Doña Manuela talked about her plants, her patients, and the ways in which she uses her body and writes about it in her notebook to improve her own medicine. Recently the university and the ministry of education of the state published in Yucatec Maya and Spanish a book called “*Maaya Xíiwil Tsáak / Herbolaria Maya*” co-authored by Doña Manuela.

*Image 2. Herbal Medicine lecture at Doña Manuela's kitchen.*

But what makes the system of *iknal* unique within higher education practice? As I mentioned before, *iknal* is a central concept for Yucatec Maya speakers' understanding of closeness in space and time. Although we might think this understanding is related to one of the senses of *acompañamiento*, the idea of being in the company of someone, it does not. *Ikmal* goes beyond this knowledge to include the corporeal field of action and the habitual ways in place. In this manner, *ikmal* includes an understanding of the body space as emergent and related to a social process or built up space. Noteworthy of this understanding is that body space is seen both as a fluctuating process related to others and as a previously constructed space. Therefore, the knowledge of the body is adapted in the course of practice. This sociocentrism notion of *ikmal* contrasts the notion of *tutoría* provided by ANUIES where the tutor is portrayed as the competent one in relation to the student, directing his or her actuality and potentiality. Through the introduction of *ikmal* UIMQROO opened the university learning space to include Mayan communities and its members. *Ikmal* as part of its tutoring system involves the relation of students and members of their communities. *Ikmal* goes beyond *tutoría* and its dependency to a student-professor relationship to include a network of relationships of closeness.