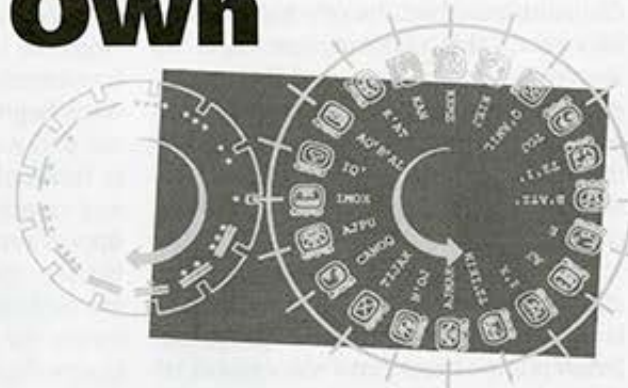




Photo: Yax Te' Press

# In Our Own Words



## A Conversation with Gaspar Pedro González

*Gaspar Pedro González is the author of A Mayan Life (La otra cara), first published in 1992. It is considered the first novel by a Mayan author. A Mayan Life traces the rich life of Lwin, a Q'anjob'al Maya, whose eyes reveal to the reader the bitter realities of Mayan existence in contemporary Guatemala. Gaspar Pedro González was born in 1945 in San Pedro Soloma, and attended the University of Mariano Gálvez, majoring in Educational Planning. He is a member of the Academy of Mayan Languages of Guatemala. He has written on Mayan languages, Mayan literature, and educational policy in Guatemala. In continuation, we present excerpts from two separate interviews. The majority of the material comes from an interview conducted on May 5, 1995, by Bob Sitler, from the Department of Foreign Languages at Stetson University, Florida. The other was conducted by SAIC on July 5, 1996.*

“**M**any people, when they read my novel, take it to be autobiographical. In some ways, there are indeed parts of my own life that relate closely to this work. For example, the initial setting, that initial education that I absorbed in the heart of the home.

I was born in 1945 in San Pedro Soloma, in the department of Huehuetenango. I was born on a very special day when the Mayan people hold a ritual celebrating the first ripening fruits of the Earth. That day is called Ox Tz'ikin in the Mayan calendar, and signifies “Three Birds.” The expert priests who study this say that this “tz'ikin” is in other contexts the spirit, creativity, initiative, all that is intangi-

ble, that is immaterial. They also say that all those who are born on this day hold these qualities. This is like the horoscopes of Western culture, you see.

I lived a good portion of my infant life in the community. So most of what I write is real, not imaginary. I lived it.

I had the novel sort of simmering in my head for several years. I was always aching to write. I would jot down notes, and then I came up against a period of stagnation, in which I wasn't moving forward because, first, I had no idea how to go about publishing my work. Second, there was a stage in the political life of Guatemala at which no writer, let alone a Mayan, had the certainty of living freely and safely.

Yes. It was 1978 when there was an attempt to publish it. But someone told me, ‘Why don't we wait a little.’ The

national political conflicts had begun. When the tide of violence hit in the 1980s, anyone with paper or pen in his house was risking his life. So I took the drafts and stuffed them into a cardboard box, and saved them from the 80s, for the 90s.

The 90s brought the movement of cultural revival and the fast-approaching commemoration of the 500 years of Columbus. It then seemed to me to be an opportune time to publish this thing.

In the end I reached my goal. It was a struggle for someone with few resources, with little influence in society, to achieve publishing. I think it was a key experience that strengthened my spirit of resistance in the sense that I never threw in the towel. This is so important. I reach out to my fellow



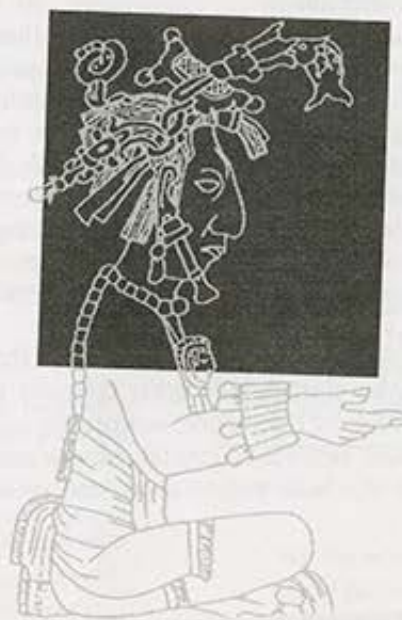
Mayan friends and I tell you that you have to persevere. If you accept defeat, you'll never reach your objective.



“I thought the novel in Maya, and when the time came to bridge everything, I had to work it out theoretically and avoid being too materialistic in Spanish. For example, concepts as love, God, and metaphysical manifestations are difficult to write with Mayan words. In our culture these experiences are felt. In the Mayan languages, these things are refereed to through material experience. ‘Love,’ for example, has no translation in Q’anjob’al. It’s not that these experiences don’t exist. They are lived. They are not for analyzing or conceptualizing critically. No, they are lived situations.

When I wrote the part of the novel where Lwin and Malin fall in love, I realized what love signified for a more complex, perhaps more sophisticated society. But for Mayas it’s feeling, experimenting, and living. Words are not spoken. One lives, dances, is lured to a spiritual realm internally to the sounds of the marimbas. That night when they dance for the first time, they don’t say a word. There are no discourses, no sweet words.

When I had to turn all this into Spanish, I took refuge in poetry, and lyrical and rhetorical speech in Castilian. For that reason, as I was writing the novel, sometimes I would get a little ahead of myself in Spanish so as not to lose emergent ideas. There are nevertheless ways to say these things through the Mayan parallelism that exists in our oral literature. There are literary resources in Maya such as repetition. There are literary figures that I had to study to adapt these ideas to Maya. It’s a bit ironic because poetic speeches are uncommon in Q’anjob’al. The culture offers us another type of rhetoric, known by the elders, who in turn use it for ceremonies and special occasions.



“Writings abound on Mayans by non-Mayans. But a novel of this nature, written in the Mayan language, is, to the extent of my knowledge, the first. There is a novel, for example, *Juan Pérez Jolote*, that presumably deals with the Tzotzil Maya, written by Ricardo Pozas, a Ladino author. There’s *El destino del Indio*, by Oliver La Farge, a novel on the Maya in Chiapas and Guatemala.

Miguel Angel Asturias obtained the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1967 precisely due to his writings on the Maya.

He is respected as one of the foremost Latin American authors. But our worlds are so completely different. The day more Mayan authors emerge, we will expand our different interpretations of Asturias.

He is a man of the literary medium whose raw material is the Maya, much like contemporary painters, sculptors, and other Ladino artists. Though, his identification with the Mayan people is a whole different story. Asturias’ thesis is a scientific endeavor where Asturias the artist and Asturias the impassioned novelist are not present. If you get a chance to read this thesis, you won’t see his later opinions on the Maya. In this work, he comes off as full of stereotypes and prejudices, as when he says that Mayas are indolent, filthy... He sees the plight of the “Indian” as the perfect opportunity to better himself, but in no way does he value that human being. When Miguel Angel Asturias travels to Europe, especially France, he begins to mature and learns to appreciate the Mayan civilization when faced with his hosts. His vision of the Maya is that of a Ladino.

There is a certain tendency to engage in ‘positivism,’ to portray the Maya as stoic, battle-hardened. This in turn serves to construct a nationalist identity based on certain values. You have, for example, the case of Tecum Umán [the leader of a Mayan rebellion]. The military adopts this Mayan symbol, shrouds it in myth, and shines it back on the Maya to entice them into the military. He becomes a warrior that defends the nation. But, whose nation is it? It is a nation of the few, of Ladinos and for their benefit, not of the Mayan people.

More concretely, I think that in Asturias’ *Men of Corn* (*Hombres de Matz*), this phenomenon occurs. He seeks to depict our society abroad, a society he recreates based on personal criteria, and he puts on display for the world after applying some literary cosmetics. But the Maya fail to appreciate it because it is like a bad portrait. In *A Mayan Life*, I try to distort these stereotypes, and present the Maya with their values, their anguish, their view of the world, and of mankind in that part of the world.





“A part from the necessity for artistic and esthetic expression, [*A Mayan Life*] is in a certain sense a staunch critique of the social conditions and, particularly, an attempt to make the Q'anjob'al culture known. *A Mayan Life* falls into the genre of testimonial novel because it is a testimony to the exploitation and marginalization that is rampant across Mayan society.

I think that thanks to a Mayan presence in different circles, in different stages of national life, it is becoming accepted that the Mayan people speak, that they express their thoughts, and that the laws be more closely heeded. In *A Mayan Life*, there is no invention, nor is anything that we describe surreal. We are simply transferring a sort of radiography of a society that is living, that is dynamic, that is aware of a book published by a Mayan. Many non-Mayan friends have congratulated me for the work. It has been an international success. I think that it is beginning to be seen as a key part of the culture of this diverse society.

Of course there are sectors of the population that still spurn this voice. There are sectors that oppose the strengthening of the Mayan languages, or that Mayan identity be reinforced. They want to standardize the country, or “ladinize” it, much as in past periods.

Mayan society today is being bom-

barded in a series of cultural invasions. Progressively, people are less and less responsive to manifestations of spirituality. The media is a key factor in these invasions. The majority of Mayan houses have a radio. That radio says nothing about the Maya. It plays no Mayan music, nor do we hear Mayan languages.

On the same side of the coin, the present religions, the religious sects, have divided the Mayan people. One village is fractured into 4 or 5 churches. Social cohesion is wanting. Society is disjoined. Each faction tries to pull the other to its side. We are becoming complacent because our collective identity has dwindled.

Nevertheless, I perceive that there exists a favorable environment to publish, for example, the results of scientific investigations in Guatemala, or the works of people who write novels or poetry. You can't conceal the truth indefinitely. Eventually these things must be told, and the political atmosphere must give in, and begin to develop a conscience of these things.

Still, it remains the reality that Mayan authors have great difficulty in publishing their work, because the economic factor is so crucial. I know people who have written documents or lit-



erature, and there they are locked up in a box because they don't have the resources to publish it.

“The reality is that education policies, or simply, education, is constructed on philosophical bases. If in a national education plan, the policies are not well defined, or even the philosophies, it is hard to imagine what the goals of an education system are.

This is the topic of another work of mine. In *Mayan Languages and Education (Los idiomas mayas y la educación escolar)*, I try to present some ideas as an educational planner, to suggest mechanisms, policies, and educational philosophies for this country with multilingual, multicultural, and multiethnic characteristics. I also proposed to write what turned out to be my other book. Because, the first step in the construction of nationality is precisely that of education. But if we fail to construct our education from and within a culture, we are probably distorting, or we're destroying the identity of an entire portion of the population which in this case is primarily Indigenous and—in this country—above all Maya.

Various institutes in the interior of the country are using *A Mayan Life* in courses like literature or anthropology.

On the same token we are striving to coordinate with education authorities, to present to them these suggestions to implicate them in curricula—because we have known first hand the effects of an education based on destruction.

Chi waltoq skawilal he k'ul ayex he masanil yul hin q'anej, yin masan k'ulal jetoq ko masanil. (“From here I greet you all in my language, may peace reign in the hearts of all.”) 🐦

To obtain a copy of *A Mayan Life*, write to: Yax Te' Press, 3520 Coolheights Drive, Rancho Palos Verdes, CA 90275-6231; Tel/Fax: (310) 377-8763