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Scott Atran, Ximena Lois and Valentina Vapnarsky



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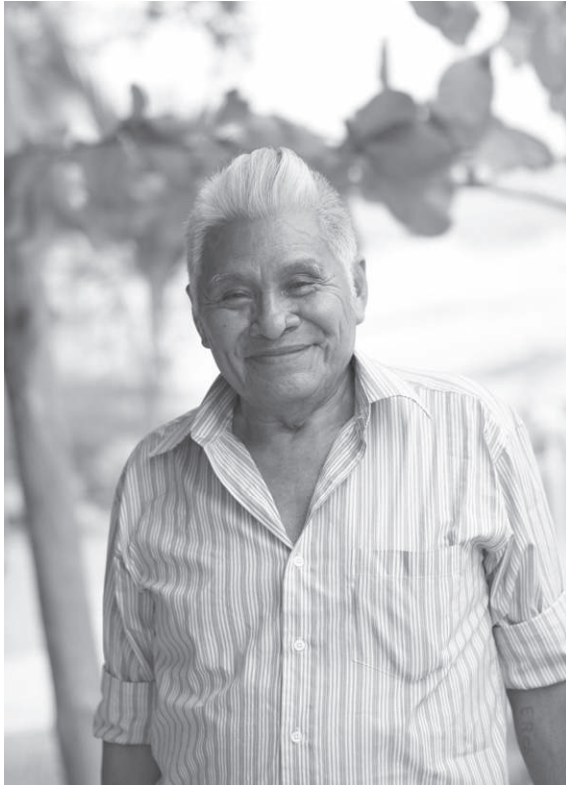


Fig. 1 – Reginaldo Chayax Huex
(photo David Tiago Ribeiro, San José, Petén, Guatemala, 2015)

* S. ATRAN : Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion, University of Oxford [scott.atran@pmb.ox.ac.uk] ; X. LOIS : Artis International [xlois@artisinternational.org] ; V. VAPNARSKY : Centre EREA du LESC, Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) [valentina.vapnarsky@cnrs.fr].

Yun Reginaldo Chayax Wex, a leader of the Itza' people of San José Petén, Guatemala, and founder of the Bio-Itzá Forest Reserve and Language School, died from Covid-19 at the age of 81 on October 1, 2020. Married to Na'ix María Espectación Tesucún Chan, he had 10 children, 28 grandchildren, and 17 great-grandchildren. Added to the pain of his departure is the passing of his son Orlando Chayax Tesucún two weeks later, as well as that of many Maya victims of the pandemic and the large increase in cancer during recent years owing to rising ecological contamination in Northern Guatemala.¹ With Yun Reginaldo's death, gone also is one of the last Itza' Maya speakers. From the generation who fluently spoke the language, the only one left is Na'ix Petrona Vitsil Tesucún, who, at 93 years old, in the last four months has lost three sons from the pandemic and a daughter from cancer.

The Itza', a lowland forest people, were the last Maya to be conquered by the Spanish. Despite harsh persecutions into the late twentieth century by governments to eradicate their language and exploit their rainforest for cash, they continued to communicate clandestinely among themselves in what authorities called their "ugly words" (*palabras feas*) and to conserve the legacy given to them by their forest spirits, "who existed even before God" came to them. It is a legacy that Reginaldo's grandmother, Na'ix Justa Mex, told her grandson was his sacred honor to protect. Yun Reginaldo passed a considerable part of his life observing the forest, ever since he was a child attending the *milpa* field and hunting with his father, then as a *chiclero* as a young adult (extracting the latex of the sapodilla tree, used in the gum-industry). Most of his later adult life he spent taking care of the forest. In a gathering between Lowland Maya in the Najá forest, Chun K'in Viejo, a centenarian spiritual leader of the Lacandon Maya in Southeastern Mexico, once remarked of Reginaldo, "in knowledge of the forest, I am his student."

Throughout his life, Yun Reginaldo was also a fount of knowledge and expertise for the Itza' people, as well as for immigrants from the overpopulated highlands, essentially Spanish-speaking Ladinos and Q'eqchi' Maya speakers who, decade after decade, settled in the Petén lowlands and went to him for advice about agriculture and indigenous practices. Together with his uncle, Yun Domingo Chayax Suntecún, they were tireless storytellers of animal behaviors, of the physical properties of plants and the secrets of their *óol* "heart and spirit," and of the wild ecosystem. Their detailed and in-depth knowledge garnered deep admiration from the zoologists and botanists who consulted and collaborated with them.

1. Liza Grandia, "Toxic Tropics: purity and danger in everywhere in everyday life," *Journal of Ecological Anthropology*, 21 (1), 2019, p. 1-10. Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jea/vol21/iss1/1>, accessed 01/12/2020.

Yun Reginaldo was the master of generations of researchers. He was the first source of inspiration for the project “Petén-Itza: Historia Natural de los Mayas de las tierras bajas de Guatemala” (ministère de la Recherche and Centre national de la recherche scientifique of France [CNRS], University of Michigan, and Northwestern University). This led to a long and intense series of collaborative projects in ethnoscience, anthropology, cognitive and cultural psychology, zoology, and botany, with institutions such as the French CNRS, University of Michigan, Northwestern University, Augustana University, and Artis International. Nowadays, Yun Reginaldo would undoubtedly qualify as co-author in many of the resultant publications, such as *Plants of the Petén Itza’ Maya* (Atran, Lois, and Ucan Ek 2004). In addition to being an inexhaustible source of knowledge and wisdom, he had great creative and persuasive power to mobilize others, aided by his easy laugh and wonderful sense of humor.

Beginning 30 years ago, when disdain and low esteem for the indigenous language predominated, Reginaldo Chayax Huex, in collaboration with an ever-dwindling group of elder Itza’ speakers, actively advanced efforts to revitalize the Itza’ language. As Yun Reginaldo recalled in the documentary *Naachtun* (Begoïn 2016), “In 1991 our objective was to rescue the Itza’ language and see it be taught at school. But we realized that we also had to rescue our culture, not only our language. And our culture is in the forest, not [only] in the community.” It was in 1991 that he created the Bio-Itzá² with assistance from the University of Michigan and in cooperation with the US Agency for International Development (USAID). The goal was to provide the Itza’ people with a structure that would allow them to develop long-term projects for self-sustaining agroforestry, to recover knowledge of the forest flora and fauna, and tradition-tested practices for sustainable management (Chayax Huex et al. 1998). In this endeavor, Yun Reginaldo defended and clarified the millennial link between ancient Maya subsistence techniques and the forest ecology as a legacy for future generations. In his own words:

Tan kib’eeetik tulakal umuk’il kisa’altik yok’la b’aylo’ kimejen ch’ib’alo’ej patal ucha’antiko’ b’a’ax tan kimentik...

We are putting all our strength to save it [the forest] so that our coming descendants can see what we do ... (in his text “*Tulakal umuk’il kisa’altik k’aax*” ‘All our strength to save the forest’, Lois and Vapnarsky 2010, p. 119).

Yankikänantik a’k’aaxe, a’k’aax yanukänäntiko’on, men to’one kiwet’ok b’alum, uyumil k’aax, kiwet’ok mo’, uyutzilil maaya, kiwet’ok tziminche’, ub’a’alche’yan tulakal ub’äk’el b’a’alche’oo’, kiwet’ok chäkälte’, uche’il kich’em, kiwet’ok oox, kijanal, kiwet’ok ub’utz’il uyitz pom, upixan kinukuch taatoo.

2. <http://www.bioitza.com/>, accessed 01/12/2020.

Much'a'ano'on, tankimentik kiwotoch tuxet'el k'aax, ulu'umil Itza'-Maya, tujaal noj ja' Itza', tu'ux käjlajij Kanek', utz'ok unojochil maaya.

We must care for the forest and the forest must care for us, for we are companions of the jaguar, guardian of the forest, companions of the scarlet macaw, ornament of the Maya, companions of the tapir, animal of the seven meats, companions of the mahogany, tree of our canoes, companions of the ramón tree, our food, companions of the smoke of the copal incense, the spirit of our great fathers.

Together, we are making our home in a piece of forest, land of the Maya-Itzá', on the bank of the Great Water Itza' where lived Kanek, last of the Maya kings. (Chayax and Whitacre 1997, p. 1457)

Yun Reginaldo transmitted this effort to his sons, with whom he worked hand-in-hand in the last decade, particularly Aderito Chayax Tesucún, his youngest and present acting head of the Bio-Itzá, and recently departed brother Orlando Chayax Tesucún. In 1998, the Bio-Itzá obtained the usufruct property of an area of 36 square kilometers, the indigenous community Bio-Itzá Reserve, the first of its kind to be established in Guatemala and officially sanctioned by the country's National Assembly. In the years since, the Bio-Itzá has had fruitful cooperation with several national entities (Pro-Petén, Conap, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala) as well as international organizations (Conservation International, World Wildlife, The Peregrine Fund).

Yun Reginaldo inspired by example, "do as I do" rather than "do as I say," willing to listen to what others thought without condescension or rush to judgment, expressing his belief in people's abilities, and learning and teaching along the way. Of uncommon physical strength, whose hands could clear kilometers of forest break in a single day and relieve the bone and muscle pains of many who came to him for care, he was loved and admired even beyond his own people, and respected by most everyone who met him. He was "*Nojoch Winik*," a Great person, who will always be in our thoughts.

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Fig. 2 – Reginaldo Chayax Huex
(photo Valentina Vapnarsky, Bio-Itzá, San José, Petén, Guatemala, 2018)

