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► To cite this version:

Valentina Vapnarsky, Cédric Yvinec, Cédric Becquey. "Culture:" Say it with grammar! The Expression of Notions Related to "Culture" in Amerindian Languages. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 2022, 95 (3), pp.587-620. 10.1353/anq.2022.0033 . hal-03897944

HAL Id: hal-03897944

<https://hal.science/hal-03897944>

Submitted on 6 Dec 2023

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“Culture”: say it with grammar!

The Expression of Notions Related to “Culture” in Amerindian Languages

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(*Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 95, No.3, p. 587-620, special collection “The Terms of Culture: Idioms of reflexivity among Indigenous Peoples in Latin America”)

ABSTRACT

Amerindian languages have often borrowed the lexical terms of colonial languages that refer to “culture”, “tradition” or “heritage”, or else created neologisms for them. Amerindian languages, however, express related notions through grammatical forms, rather than with lexical terms. In contrast to lexical terms, grammatical elements are normally more constrained, less open to reflexivity for the speaker but nonetheless manipulable and also the product of recurrent verbal and interactional practices. This article focuses on three grammatical domains: temporal configurations; expressions of person and agency; and epistemicity. For each of these, we study the contextual use of relevant linguistic constructions, especially in situations in which speakers can resort to different expressions to refer to “cultural” practices, each of which implies different attitudes towards “culture”. The study is based on three languages—two Mayan languages from Mexico (Yucatec and Chol), and one Tupian from Brazil (Suruí of Rondônia)—whose speakers experience very different situations regarding the definition of their “culture”, by themselves and by others. [Keywords: Yucatec Maya; Chol Maya; Suruí; culture; grammar.]

Introduction

During a discussion with her Yucatec Maya interlocutors on the meaning of *miaatsil*, a word used in certain institutional translations and Maya activist social networks as equivalent to *cultura*, Valentina Vapnarsky received a disappointing, though firm and unequivocal response: *ma’ jach uya’ala waye’* “we don’t really say that here”, meaning: “I’ve never heard it, I don’t know that word”. In contrast, the same individuals had heard the term *cultura* from one of their fellow villagers working for a “cultural promotion program”. They also identified *tradisyon* and *kostumbre*, Spanish loanwords used, albeit rarely in their area, to designate, in the local context, those Catholic practices particular to them (as opposed to those of other Catholics, or Evangelicals).

The notions of “custom”, “tradition”, “culture”, or “heritage” have all been appropriated to various extents by Amerindian societies, for the former two since at least the nineteenth century; for the latter two as part of the patrimonialization movement that impacted many of these societies around the turn of the 21st century. Discourse in local vernaculars resorted to loanwords from the colonial languages for these notions, or else complex lexical neologisms, often limited to political or intellectual registers (Chosson; Ariel de Vidas and Hirtzel, this volume). Hence, the Yucatec term *miaatsil*, recently coined to translate the Spanish word *cultura*, referring to the “ways of acting and thinking shared by a group”, derives in fact from the old forms *ah miats* “knowledgeable, learned man” and *miatsil* “learned, specialized knowledge”. Thus, *miaatsil* rests on the “learned” sense of *cultura*.

Does the use of loanwords for “culture”, “tradition”, or “heritage” therefore imply the absence of related notions in these languages? Over the last half-century, anthropological research has underlined that the concept of “culture”, albeit so pervasive in anthropological works, was probably not conceived in a similar way by many populations of the world, especially in the indigenous Americas: what anthropologists label as “culture” (language, techniques, rites, etc.) may not be understood by them as something historically instituted or differentiating humanity from animality or human groups between them (Viveiros de Castro 1998; Descola 2013; see also Wagner 1981). The absence, in most of the languages these populations speak, of lexical terms referring to these activities as a distinctive whole obviously resonates with the considerations on the way they categorize the beings that people their worlds (humans and nonhumans, fellowmen and strangers, etc.). Our question is therefore: can the absence of lexical reflexes of “culture” be described in a purely negative way? Would there be no other means in these languages to refer to some of the senses encompassed by our use of “culture”, that might reveal a native way of conceiving some of their practices as distinctive of the locutor’s ethnic or social group, in one way or another?

An analysis of some Amerindian languages shows that speakers tend to resort to grammatical constructions far more than to lexical terms to refer to concepts akin in some sense with culture. In contrast to lexical terms, grammatical elements are normally more constrained, harder for a speaker to identify in their own discourse, thus less open to reflexivity. Nonetheless, the semantic traits expressed by the grammar when referring to things that we would call “cultural” or “traditional” appear broader and more varied than those expressed by lexemes, and thus more amenable to the nuances of speech. Furthermore, a precise analysis of the different semantic areas engaged in this type of grammatical expression in Amerindian languages highlights the complexity and wealth of linguistic expressions available to their speakers to designate those practices that outside parties—ranging from state representatives to anthropologists—bundle together under various Spanish or Portuguese lexical terms, attached to Western categorizations and their historical recompositions in Latin America. This article presents a study of the ways in which Amerindian groups evoke or discuss certain aspects of their own practices, which contributes to the wider question, within linguistic anthropology, of how sociocultural representations may crystalize into specific linguistic, even grammatical, forms.

We take an onomasiological approach (from ideas to words), moving from the Western concept of “culture”—defined as “a set of common practices to singularize a given population”—to semantically close expressions in Amerindian languages when speakers discuss among themselves or with outsiders what is particular or habitual to them.¹ However, in line with the above-mentioned anthropological relativizations of the concept of “culture”, we balance this perspective with a semasiological approach (from words to ideas), tracing these expressions back to the concepts that they refer to in each language, to show that they are neither semantic calques nor direct equivalents for “culture”. In both approaches, we consider in which speech contexts the forms studied are implemented, so demonstrating the nuances that these conceal. The analysis is based on various kinds of formal and informal discourses, with data taken from verbal interactions between native speakers or between them and the linguistic anthropologist. Within the large corpus recorded by each author over their years of fieldwork, the data comes from situations which, for contextual reasons, involved descriptions of “cultural” practices, such as explanations about mundane or ritual practices, comments about foreigner’s habits, promotion of local handicraft, political claims for ethnic recognition, and so

¹ We deliberately do not refer to a specific definition of “culture” as proposed by scholars in anthropology or social sciences, not only because these are countless, but also because Amerindian people are mainly confronted with a wide variety of interlocutors (State representatives, missionaries, teachers, journalists, etc.) who use this concept in a non-technical way.

on. The data does not result from guided interviews (with question such as “How do you translate *cultura* in your language?”) and the distortions these questions often introduce.² Nevertheless, the analysis of the natural occurrences was completed with some elicitation sessions to further the comprehension of the linguistic forms and corpus in play.

Our review covers several grammatical areas in three Amerindian languages: one from the Brazilian Amazon (Suruí of the Tupi-Mondé family) and two Mayan languages of Mesoamerica from different branches (Yucatec and Chol). These languages were chosen for the complementary linguistic devices they show and for the authors’ respective skillsets—had it fitted within an article, a wider sample would certainly have shown more diverse structures. The fact that they are associated with contrasting situations from the point of view of their speakers in relation to contemporary processes of “culture” reification and patrimonialization also makes their comparison of special interest.³

Like many other Amazonian populations who experienced their first peaceful contact with the national societies of the tropical lowland countries during the second half of the 20th century (1969 in this case), the Suruí of Rondônia, Brazil, soon found themselves asked to showcase their “culture”: namely those practices that might link them to wider generic Amazonian “Indianness” (featherwork, shamanism, etc.), while also demonstrating a distinctive singularity from other neighboring indigenous groups. The borrowed expression *cultura suruí* is frequently used among their leaders, while broadly understood by the younger generations. The meaning this expression has acquired in Suruí results from the interaction with a variety of non-native interlocutors: employees of Brazilian agencies in charge of indigenous affairs, teachers and school administrations, agricultural settlers (many of whom define themselves as “Germans”), European Protestant missionaries and, above all, representatives of local and international NGOs supporting environmentalist projects and indigenous rights. These various interlocutors handle contradictory definitions of *cultura suruí*. For instance, many environmentalists consider that *cultura suruí* is valuable knowledge to be preserved and find its best expression in shamanism. On the contrary, for Protestant missionaries in their crusade against idolatry, represented by shamanism, *cultura suruí* appears as an excuse for some minor sins like polygyny. And although shamanism, as pure work of Satan, is never considered as a part of *cultura suruí* by Protestants, in this religious context, the notion of *cultura suruí* retains a negative connotation. Nevertheless, among Suruí a general consensus has emerged regarding *cultura suruí* as mainly referring to practices that either affect communication or cohabitation with their White or Indian neighbors (language, diet, matrimonial rules) or that can be spectacularly displayed (drinking feast, ritual songs) in a patrimonial way (Nahum-Claudel, Pétesch and Yvinec 2017).⁴ Today, many of these practices

² We do not presuppose that such explicit questions would necessarily have led to uninteresting answers—as we mentioned at the beginning, even negative answers may be illuminating. Besides the fact that the translation of the concepts of “culture” was not the main focus of our respective fieldwork research, using unelicited mentions has a clear advantage, as it avoids issues that usually interfere on such themes when interlocutors are openly questioned: they may not want to give the impression of being ignorant in case they would not find a translation, or that their native language appear to have “fewer words” than Spanish or Portuguese, or they may answer by a locution that is hardly ever used, etc.

³ There are no historical or contact relationships between Mayan and Tupian linguistic families; thus, the common features between Mayan languages and Suruí that we show cannot be interpreted as stemming from a common origin. Nevertheless, some grammatical properties correspond to areal features commonly found in Amerindian languages.

⁴ Local Brazilians rarely conceptualize the distinctiveness of the Suruí (or other Indians) as a whole by the word *cultura*, but rather they stress a series of differences between the Whites’ unmarked mode of being and the “complicated” way of indigenous people, which they refer to by generic expressions, without any ethnonym, such as *na lingua*, “in the [indigenous] language,” i.e. incomprehensibly, *da aldeia*, “from the [indigenous] village”, i.e. from a foreign social space, *na família*, “in the [indigenous] family”, i.e. in a classificatory kinship. Thus, by

have been largely abandoned or have become rare, and their medium-term survival, much like the Suruí language (around 1,000 speakers), is objectively under threat. Despite the efforts of some to “show our *cultura* to the Whites”, both in Brazil and internationally, “Suruí culture” is far from achieving the same level of recognition as that of other, more mediatic Amazonian groups.

Mayan languages, counting more than six million speakers, present many socio-historical contrasts with Suruí and Amazonian languages in general. With a five-century legacy of confrontation with colonial societies, Maya people now live with the national and international renown of their ancestors’ pre-Colombian “culture” of (without necessarily identifying with it themselves). At the same time, they have suffered until now from policies of invisibilization of their language and cultural practices, which ideologically widen the gap between them and the magnified Prehispanic culture. Contemporary efforts here toward the patrimonialization of indigenous “culture” involve a much smaller part of the population, proportionally speaking, than in Amazonia, although differences exist between countries, regions and Maya groups.⁵

Furthermore, the two Mayan groups in Mexico from which our examples are taken have an altogether different history. The Yucatec are one of the most numerous Mayan groups, with almost 800,000 Yucatec speakers, and a rapidly increasing number of auto-identified Maya who are monolingual Spanish speakers, living on the Yucatan Peninsula, not to mention many thousands of people of Maya origin in the United-States. Our study focuses on a subgroup, known as Cruzo’ob Maya, that emerged from a major 19th century rebellion—the so-called Caste War—after which they established a territory at the heart of the modern-day state of Quintana Roo, where they continued to live until the mid-20th century in a more or less active state of war, and with relative autonomy from the Mexican State (Sullivan 1991). Today, however, the younger generations maintain closer ties with the national society, particularly due to sharp and recent increase of tourism in the region.⁶ New Maya intellectuals, scholars and artists, especially rappers, promoting Maya culture and language are increasingly active, in particular on social networks, although their voices still only have a rather marginal influence among the general Maya population. The data used in this article primarily comes from fieldwork held in small villages since 1994 with mainly monolingual Maya who have lived until recently at distance from the national society, while also taking into account changes emerging in Maya intellectual and activist recent discourses, from those found in educational publications up to more informal Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups.

Chol has around 140,000 speakers in the state of Chiapas.⁷ Those from the village of La Cascada, near Palenque, where the data for this article has been gathered since 2008, only arrived recently (during the 1960s) in this region from the municipality of Tila, and find themselves far less numerous than where they came from. This community’s identity is built

adding to this series of differences a few spectacular practices, the expression *cultura suruí*, borrowed from discourses heard from more respected individuals (NGO representatives, foreigners, scholars, etc.), allows the Suruí to conceptualize their distinctiveness from neighboring populations in a positive way, rather than as a mere lack of comprehension.

⁵ After the Guatemalan Civil War and the genocide against the Maya population, pan-Maya movements and cultural heritage revindications have had, on the whole, greater impact in Maya political action and self-identification in Guatemala than in Mexico. In Mexico, the Zapatista movement of Chiapas has brought cultural discourses to the forefront of the political revindications of some Maya and other indigenous groups. However, as visible as these may have been at the national and international levels, these discourses have only very marginally reached the Maya groups studied in this article.

⁶ Because of this local history, the data presented here should not be over-generalized to the whole Yucatan peninsula. Some regions have had a much longer and more locally influential interaction with Cultural Heritage programs, such as the area around Chichen Itza’ (Armstrong-Fumero 2014, Vapnarsky 2022).

⁷ We use Chol to refer to the Tila linguistic variant (and Ch’ol for the Tumbalá variant, not treated here).

around a collection of historical accounts demonstrating their cultural resistance in the face of past events, including the last period of forced labor in the late-19th century, famines, or migrations.

We begin in Section 1 with a study of processual and agentive configurations (that is, the encoding of who acts and how). Indeed, this part of grammar usually includes the encoding of values related to habitualness, continuity and typicality—all aspects related to the qualification of practices as “cultural” or “traditional”. This encoding may be more or less specialized depending on the language, and may cover other semantic values relevant to the notion of *habitus* in these societies. Section 2 focuses further on the subjects or agents of an action. Here we examine a central linguistic mechanism in the construction of cultural identity or otherness, namely the choice of person markers, and/or the agent/patient demotion by use of voice (passive or active). We show how these structures offer the speakers strategical means to designate the legitimate keepers of “cultural” knowledge, and exclude others. Section 3 deals with the area of shared knowledge. In Amerindian discourses, the expression of shared knowledge, associated with forms of transmission and particular orders of truth, frequently resorts to evidentials, or specific epistemic modalities (that is, the encoding of sources, types of knowledge and degrees of certainty). Finally, Section 4 examines a Suruí word (*same*), which reveals the evolution of a grammatical morpheme into a lexicalized term referring to a set of values that broadly define what this community considers as “culture” and “tradition”.

1. Processual and Agentive Configurations: Habit, Repetition, Typicality

Most Amerindian languages are predominantly aspectual in nature (Suárez 1983; Epps and Salanova 2013): they place more grammatical emphasis, often highly nuanced, on the processual configuration of actions or states (as ongoing, starting, repeating, ending, completed, etc. processes), rather than on chronological tense (past, present or future relatively to the moment of speaking). Within aspectual systems, there are often forms denoting habit, even the process of habituation itself (as in Yucatec). Sometimes, the grammar simply encodes the repetition or recurrence of an action’s performance (as in Suruí). These different forms are typically used to refer to traditional practices corresponding to “what we do habitually.” They are thus frequently called upon to express what we might call cultural behaviors based on scenarios that are familiar and expected for being repeated (in everyday life, or in historical or prescriptive discourse). In this sense, the use of habitual forms in Amerindian languages for the description of practices that mark their differences from other social or ethnic groups is reminiscent not only of first definitions of culture in anthropology, be it cultural (Boas 1930: 179) or social anthropology (Malinowsky 1931: 621), but also of Bourdieu’s definition of *habitus* as regular patterns of action, embodied in bodily affects, stemming from repeated experiences (1977:87-88), and shared collectively by members of specific groups. Furthermore, it dovetails with Peircean views of habit-formation as part of semiosis and human agency, not just of instinctive and conditioned behaviors (West and Anderson 2016, Danesi 2018). Noticeably, Amerindian expressions also stress the fact that the *habitus* is an acquired one, the result of previous generation’s practices. Additionally, certain syntactic constructions (with object incorporation) are reserved for activities considered routine or institutionalized within the society’s behaviors and actions.

1.1 Habituation in Yucatec

Mayan languages feature a basic opposition between perfective and imperfective (that is, between actions described as completed whole vs. those described as ongoing), the latter often being associated with a habitual interpretation (Vinogradov 2014) and a generic value. In

addition to the imperfective form, Yucatec also possesses a root, *suuk*, “to be accustomed to,” implemented in various syntactic guises, when speakers refer to certain practices, and to why they need to carry them out.

Suuk behaves like an adjectival root with the meaning “accustomed to”, “tame” (see Example 1). It is often used when speaking about animal’s habits, such as their habits of eating from crops in gardens and fields. Farmers tend to tolerate such forays in their plots because it attracts game animals in the vicinity, allowing them to find easy prey when needed. This practice known as “garden hunting” precisely consists in accustoming the animal to a place.⁸

Example 1: [Yucatec, conversation including the anthropologist]

suuk kéeh suuk jaale’ suuk kitam yikn e kool
 accustom deer accustom paca accustom peccary next to DET swidden garden
beey-o’ máan-ts’on-ik
 AS-TD₂ NEG.2A-hunt-IPF.TR
 the deer **is accustomed**, the paca **is accustomed**, the peccary **is accustomed** [to entering] the swidden, then, you don’t shoot them.

Suuk is also of common use for human habits, sometimes individual (such as the habit of walking barefoot vs. with shoes), often collective. It is also a typical form used to refer to ritual practices. In this case, *suuk* is regularly used in causative passive or passive-like forms, literally “it is/was accustomed to so and so”. It is expressed as a causative act of habituation of someone to an inclusive “we” and presented in the passive which conveys values of non-agency and genericity to the patient of the habituation process (see also section 2.2 of this article). This can be seen in Example 2, where a man in his forties (S2) answers the anthropologist’s questions (S1) regarding the performance of a ritual and in Example 3, where another man comments about religion:

Example 2: [Yucatec, conversation (involving the anthropologist) about a ritual]

S1: *Ba’axten de nooche?*
 Why (is it done) at night?

S2: *Chéen bey suuk-bes-a’an-il to’on,*
 only as **accustom-CAUS-PART-MFS** 1PL.ID
chéen bey suuk-bes-a’an-il to’on ten in=’aabwelo’
 only as **accustom-CAUS-PART-MFS** 1PL.PR by 1A=grandfather

⁸ Abbreviations for the glosses used in our examples: 1: first person; 2: second person; 3: third person; A: Set A personal marker (ergative, subject of transitive verbs, possessor of nouns); ABL: ablative; B: set B personal marker (absolutive, subject of intransitive verbs, non-verbal predicates, object of transitive verbs); BEN: benefactive; DAT: dative; DET: determiner; CAUS: causative; CONJ: conjunction; CP: completive; DEM: demonstrative; DET: determiner; DUR: durative; EXCL: exclusive; EXIST: existential; FUT: future; GNO: gnomic; HAB: habitual; HYP: hypothetical; ICP: incomplete; ID: initial deictic; IMP: imperative; INCL: inclusive; INDF: indefinite; INF.C: inferential (collective-general knowledge); INTR: intransitive; IPF: imperfective; ITER: iterative; LOC: locative; MFS: manner focus suffix; MOD: mode; NEG: negation; NMLZ: nominalizer; NOM: nominal; NWIT: non-witnessed; OST: ostensive; PART: participial; PAS: passive; PL: plural; POSS: possessive; PR: independent pronoun; PRF: perfect; PREP: preposition; PROG: progressive; PST: past; REFL: reflexive; REL: relative; RS: reported speech; SBJ: subject; SBJV: subjunctive; SFM: sentence final marker; SIMUL: simultaneous; SG: singular; TD₁: terminal deictic (proximal/new information); TD₂: terminal deictic (distal/shared knowledge); TD₃: terminal deictic (locative/negation); TD₄: terminal deictic (topic); TERM: terminative; TR: transitive; TRZER: transitivizer; WIT: witnessed.

Simply because we have been accustomed (lit. “**it has been accustomed to us**”), we have been accustomed to it (lit. “**it has been accustomed to us**”) by my grandfather.

S2: *De diya' ma' tubeeli' (...) ma' jach umeeta'al de diya (...) le saanto uk'ul je'elo', (...) ma' awuk'ik tech.*
By day, it's not good, we don't really do it (lit. “**it isn't done**”) by day (...) this sacred drink, (...) you don't drink it.

S1: *Ba'axten?*
Why?

S2: *Chen bey suuk-il, men ts'-u-p'aat-al*
only as **accustom**-MFS because TERM-3A-remain-ICP.INTR
Simply because it's a custom, because it has stayed.

Example 3: [Yucatec, conversation (involving the anthropologist) about religion]

Tuláaka máak yan waay kaaje' leti'e' katoolikos múun béeyt awa'ak ula' ba'a.
All people here in the village are “Catholics”, you can't say otherwise.

Pus le ma' katoolikoe' je' ba'axe' j u'ya'ake'.
Well those who aren't catholics, whatever they say they are,

tal bes áanta'an meen usaanto je'en bix ka' utukl u'ádoraartke'
maybe they're helped by their saints/crosses however they think to worship them,

pero teeche-e' je'ex aw-oojl-e' je'ex suuk-e'
but you-TD₄ as 2A=know-TD₄ as accustom-TD₄
but you [generic collective], as you know it, **as is habitual**,

deporsi ma' k'a'n-a'an u-tukl-ik máak-i' bey yaan-ik-o',
EMPH NEG necessary-PART 3A-think-ICP.TR person-TD₃ like EXIST-MFS- TD₄
really, people shouldn't think about it, that's how it is,

men to'on-e' deporsi bey xan suuk-bes-a'b-o'on
CAUSE us-TD₄ EMPH like also accustom-CAUS-PAS.CP-1PLB

k-il-(i)k-o'

1PL.A-see-IPF.TR-TD₂

because us, that's really how we've been accustomed to see it.

In Example 3, being *katooliko* ‘Catholic’ must be understood in local terms—against the sociohistorical background of the intensive indigenization process of catholic missionary functions and liturgy which characterized the Cruzo'ob Maya, who assume that this religion defines their present-day humanity. In this context, “being accustomed to” (being Catholic), expressed with the causative passive form, clearly does not refer to a recent conversion but points to the set of dense ritual activities and beliefs attached to being *katooliko* and also to the fact that it has been transmitted through generations. In Example 2, the grandfather figure is also invoked as a generic reference for intergenerational transmission.

Abstract nouns derived from the root *suuk*—as in the last line of Example 2—were proposed by Mayan intellectuals to designate a set of customary (or daily) practices, and sometimes to translate the Spanish term *costumbre*. Dictionaries and official or literary

translations tend to use the short form *suuk-il* (*-il* forms abstract nouns from adjectives). For example, *ichil u suukil u tukul maayáaj kaaje'* “in the habitual/daily way of thinking of Maya people,” *ichil u suukil u t'aan* “in their habitual/daily speech.”⁹ But *suuk-be'en-il*, with the suffix *-be'en*, is also found: *u suukbe'enil kaaj* “that which is habitual to the village/people,” *u suukbe'enil to'on* “that which is habitual to us,” and in its absolute form *suukbe'entsil* “the habitual” (habit, custom). The suffix *-be('e)n*, a formerly productive adjectivizer with potential value (Bricker 2019:256), seems to have been reanalyzed here as including the *-b* found in the causative marker *-bes*, which again emphasizes the fact that the habit results from a process of habituation set by others. In contrast with the recent resemanticization of *miaatsil* for “culture”, mentioned in the introduction of this paper, abstract nouns based on *suuk* are more straightforwardly understood by all Maya. However, their use is much less frequent than the adjectival and verbal forms of the root *suuk* exemplified previously in Example 2 and 3, and also less frequent than a grammatical variant of *suuk* to which we turn now.

Indeed, *suuk* has also long been grammaticalized into an aspect-modal marker, as shown in Example 4. In this function, it keeps the same meanings as discussed above, but these appear more backgrounded due to the grammatical status of *suuk* in this use. Notice also that in Example 4, the practice of a ritual is attributed to the spirits' habit of feeding on the offerings made to them, rather than to the habit of people performing the ritual.

Example 4: [Yucatec, explanation to the anthropologist]

<i>Pos</i>	<i>wa</i>	<i>suuk</i>	<i>u-tséen-t-a'al-óo'</i>		<i>ichi</i>	<i>le</i>	<i>sak'a'-ju'che'</i>
CONJ	HYP	HAB	3A-feed-TRZER-PAS.IPF-3PL.B		in	DET	2 nd year_field-
			young_forest				
<i>bey-o'</i> ,	<i>ti'</i>	<i>yaan-óo'</i>	<i>xan-i'</i> ,	<i>wa</i>	<i>ma'</i>	<i>xan-e'</i> ,	
as-TD ₂	LOC	exist-3PL.B	also-TD ₃	HYP	NEG	also-TD ₄ ,	
<i>k-u-jóo'-l</i>			<i>te'</i>	<i>nukuch</i>	<i>k'aax-o'</i>		
ICP-3A-go_out-IPF.INTR	LOC	big		forest-TD ₄			

Well, **if they're accustomed** to being fed in the fallow fields,
that is where they find themselves, otherwise,
they go out to the big forest.

As illustrated by the examples above, the habitative *suuk* transcends the realm of the Western notion of “culture” or “custom” in that it may be applied without distinction to the individual as much as the collective; to humans as much as to spirits and animals. This differs from other aspect markers that tend to be used for collective experiences, but are expressed in individual terms. Such is the case of the perfect marker in Yucatec (*-m-aj*), typically employed for seminal moments in the group's collective history (for example, the defining experience of the Caste War) that are nonetheless presented as having been lived by (named) individuals. Also, the uses of *suuk*, in particular with causative and passive derivations, show that the habit or custom referred to is most often overtly expressed as a process of habituation initiated by previous generations. The causative also conveys that this process is open to changes. At the level of practices, this is expressed by the common afflictions suffered by Maya people when their ritual offerings differ from the ones to which the guardian spirits or saints have been accustomed by previous generations who have been interacting with them.

⁹ The examples with *suukil* come from Briceñol Chel et al. (2014:86, 143). In their Spanish translation of expressions with *suukil* (ibid: 250, 306) the authors tend to use *cotidiano*.

1.2 Iteration in Suruí

The Suruí language has another type of grammatical marker to signify habituality. It is a prefix, *pere-*, that attaches to nominal, verbal, or adjectival roots to lend a habitual meaning (either a permanent or recurrent state, or the repetition of an action). Thus, adding *pere-* to the adjective *amakap* “other, second, assistant” forms the word *pere-amakap*, meaning “the one who is always with [so-and-so]”, namely “friend”, “mate”, even “spouse”. *Pere-* frequently appears in references to practices described as characteristic of a condition within the current interethnic system (see Example 5), or of a particular ethnic group (Example 6).

Example 5: [Suruí, political speech]

Pa-waba *lahd-pere-ma* *pa-we-itxa* *ma*
1PL.INCL-EXHORTATIVE Indian-ITER-do 1PL.INCL-REFL-with IMP
Let's live in the Indian **way of life**!

Example 6: [Suruí, explanations to the anthropologist]

Ana *suruí-pere-de-na* *waled-aã* *mater* *ma* *e*
like.this suruí-ITER-SBJ.WIT-thus woman-take long.ago PRF SFM.WIT
This is the way the Suruí **used to** get married long ago.

Example 5 comes from a political speech describing a cultural revitalization project, while Example 6 lays out the rules and rituals governing marriage before first contact as told to an anthropologist. The use of *pere-* most likely attributes an intentional character to this practice, as it implies for certain actions. For example, when the prefix is attached to the verb *epi* “to hear”, it derives *perepi* (*pere-epi*) “to listen”.

1.3 From Habitus to Typicality and Institutionalization

Besides these aspectual forms dedicated to habituality, an action presented as habitual or typical in nature within a given society may prompt other morphosyntactic constructions related to object marking.

1.3.1 Noun Incorporation

A number of Amerindian languages, among which Mayan (but not Suruí), have noun incorporation constructions. Noun incorporation is a word-formation process by which a compound is created by affixing a noun to a verb. The compound refers to an activity, within which the action referred to by the verb only applies to a certain type of entity, referred to by the incorporated noun. Cross-linguistically, there is a very common constraint on incorporated nouns, which need to be generics; the same occurs in Yucatec.

Example 7: [Yucatec]

(a) *tun-xíix-t-ik* *le* *bu'ul-o'*
PROG.3A-select-TRZER-IPF.TR DET bean-TD₂
s/he selects the beans

(b) *tun-xíix+bu'ul*
PROG.3A-select-bean
s/he's beans-selecting

Noun incorporation (marked with + between the verb and the noun) is not possible, or at least not used, with object+action pairings that are not considered as typical activities. Compare, for instance, the following examples from Yucatec: Example 8 lists a series of commonly used expressions with noun incorporation, whereas Example 9 lists tentative noun incorporations that have not been attested in real life speech, and sound very awkward to Maya speakers when proposed to them. The full transitive form (with *-ik*) must be used instead.

Example 8: [Yucatec, informal conversations (a, b) and historical narratives (c)]

- | | |
|----------------------------|--|
| (a) <i>tun-ch'ak+ya'</i> | he's sapodilla-cutting => he collects the sapodilla's sap (chicle) |
| (b) <i>tun-júuy+k'óol</i> | s/he's sauce-stirring => s/he prepares the ritual dish (involving a thick maize sauce) |
| (c) <i>tun-ts'on+waach</i> | he's Mexican soldiers-shooting/hunting |

Example 9: [Yucatec, linguistic elicitation]

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| (a) ?? <i>tun-xíix+báaxal</i> | ?? s/he's toy-selecting |
| vs. <i>tun-xíix-t-ik le báaxal-o'</i> | s/he's selecting the toys |
| (b) ?? <i>tun-ts'on+ts'uul</i> | ?? he's Ladinos/rich people-shooting/hunting |
| vs. <i>tun-ts'on-ik ts'uul</i> | he's shooting the Ladinos/rich people |

The awkwardness of Example 9(a) is related to the fact that selecting toys is not a common activity in Mayan practices, unlike cutting the specific chicozapote tree (*Manikara zapota*) to collect chicle, or selecting the good beans from the spoiled ones. Examples 8(c) and 9(b) relate to the history of the Maya people of the Cruzo'ob region, who fought against Mexican soldiers during the Caste War and its aftermath. These events are often remembered with vivid depictions of how men "Mexican-soldiers-hunted". Although this war also involved a number of Ladino people being slaughtered, these events were sporadic, and are not considered as an activity that characterized their fight and their stance against the Mexicans, which explains why noun incorporation is not used in this case.

Similarly, in Chontal Maya, closely-related to Chol, while an incorporated object can be used for an action like "wood-cutting" in Example 10(a), the same construction is rejected for "letting the animals out", in Example 10(b).

Example 10: [Chontal, linguistic questionnaire]

- | | |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| (a) <i>mu' u-xot'.si'</i> | s/he's wood-cutting |
| (b) ? <i>mu' u-pa'sa.äläk'i</i> | s/he's domestic animals-make_go_out |

According to the consultant, this is because "no specialist exists for such an activity." This again implies that object incorporation is linked to activities associated with a certain degree of cultural institutionalization. As a morphosyntactic structure, it allows languages (and speakers) to distinguish routinized and institutionalized activities (Mithun 1984), features which are central to what anthropologists refer as "traditional or cultural practices."

1.3.2 Antipassive

A similar pattern applies in Yucatec Maya with the use of the antipassive voice. The antipassive can be easily understood in relation to the more familiar passive voice. Whereas passive forms involve the demotion of the subject, antipassive involves the demotion of the object. The object of the action is not explicitly mentioned, it is implied. In some languages, such as English, the demotion of the object does not trigger a specific construction; compare

I'm singing his song with *I'm singing*. However, in some other languages, it results in significant formal changes. Compare the equivalent sentences in Yucatec: *tink'ayik uk'aayil* vs. *tink'aay*, where the change from active to antipassive involves phonological (vowel lengthening of the root vowel of *k'ay* “sing”) and morphological (presence vs. absence of the suffix *-ik*) changes. Now, as with noun incorporation, while the antipassive construction is in theory applicable to all verbs, in actual fact, the habituality and institutionalization of the activity is a determining factor in its use. The following set of examples illustrates this point. Braiding baskets is a traditional activity whose practice—by women, men and youth—has greatly increased in the last decades in connection with the craft trade. The object, *xaak* ‘basket’, is so typically involved in the action of braiding something that when referring linguistically to this action, it becomes not only generically but often implicitly attached to the verb. As a consequence, the object *xaak* ‘basket’ ‘may be expressed as a compound in the incorporating construction, such as Example 11(b), but is more often inferentially implied in the antipassive form, as in Example 11(c). By contrast, Example 11(a) gives the full transitive form, which is available to a variety of objects, be they habitually or traditionally braided or not.

Example 11: [Yucatec, informal conversations]

- | | |
|--|--|
| (a) <i>tun-jit' -ik u-jool/k'uuch/xaak</i> | s/he's braiding her hair/threads/basket |
| (b) <i>tun-jit' +xaak</i> | s/he's basket-braiding |
| (c) <i>tun-jiit'</i> | s/he's braiding (= making basketwork with vines) |

Similarly with object incorporation, a number of antipassive uses are linked to the typical and routinized association of a given object to a certain action, which occurs for practices that are part of daily activities (for example, *juuch'* ‘grind [maize]’, *ts'oon* ‘shoot [game]’ (= hunt’), or considered as traditional (repeated and necessary in specific occasions, for example, *maatan* ‘receiving offerings, offerings’). Noun incorporation and antipassive forms involve a process of generification of the object and the action, which goes with the production and reproduction of social stereotypes as for meanings and conducts (Mannheim 2021). As we will see, other forms of generification occur in the personal and modal domains when people speak about practices that characterize them.

2. Person Reference and Depersonalization

As expected, person markers are used to attribute or deny the practices and objects mentioned to the speaker's group of inclusion. In combination with aspect markers, they may therefore be used to indicate the traditional nature of a behavior or practice.

Many Amerindian languages distinguish between an “inclusive” and “exclusive we” (Crevells Milly and Muysken 2005, Suárez 1983). This distinction is often used tactically to position the speaker in relation to other groups of inclusion. Such type of positioning may also be achieved by more indirect means, such as the passive voice.

2.1 Inclusive and Exclusive We

Suruí distinguishes between two forms of the first-person plural: “exclusive we” (*toyh-*), referring to the speaker and third parties while excluding the addressee; and “inclusive we” (*pa-*), referring to the speaker and the addressee (and potentially third parties, too). The latter form provides part of the etymological root of their ethnic self-denomination *pa-iter* (1PL.INCL-very), “we ourselves”, namely the collective of Suruí speakers, and indeed, by extension, all

humans collectively.¹⁰ Conversely, “inclusive we” is also used in the formation of an indefinite pronoun *palo-* (< *pa-so*, 1PL.INCL-INDF, literally “a something like us”), referring to one or multiple human individuals in a generic context. The contrast between “exclusive we” (*toyh-*) and “inclusive we” (*pa-*) is systematically used in discursive strategies when defining Suruí “culture”. Thus, to describe a cultural activity abstractly, as a set of logically connected actions, the generic form (*palo-*) (Example 12), or the “inclusive we” (Example 13) is preferred. The choice of perspective seems to depend on the scope of participation: Example 12 is part of an explanation to an anthropologist (difficult to include within “we”), whereas Example 13 quotes (as direct reported speech) a discussion between Suruí people that was relayed to the anthropologist.

Example 12: [Suruí, explanations to the anthropologist]

Eebo palo-de meek-de a-pin eka aor [...]
 then INDF-SBJ.WIT corn-SBJ.WIT 3.REFL-grow when 3.REFL-come
 Then, when corn grew, **people** came back.

Eebo palo-sade malohba-etar ena eebo lab-aã ani
 then INDF-SBJ.PROG.SIMUL sweet.beer-cook thus then house-make GNO
 Then **people** cooked sweet beer and built new houses.

Example 13: [Suruí, explanations to the anthropologist]

“Lahd-pere-ma pa-we-itxa pa-saba e [...]”
 Indian-ITER-do 1PL.INCL-REFL-with 1PL.INCL-SBJ.PROG.PST SFM.WIT
de-ena-e.”

SBJ.WIT-thus-SFM.WIT

“**We (incl.)** were all living like Indians [...],” he said.

When, conversely, a practice considered to embody Suruí culture is intended for an external audience, particularly when presenting traditional technical and economic activities (to government representatives, NGOs, or journalists), the “exclusive we” comes into play. In such cases, the exclusion of the addressee alludes to other exclusions, loaded with political tensions, as shown below. The following examples are taken from explanations made to the anthropologist, one (Example 14) relating to cultural revitalization activities within certain ecological programs; the other (Example 15) to political structures before first contact.

Example 14: [Suruí, explanations to the anthropologist]

Eebo toyh-sade-na ena so-ey-mağa-be-ekar ena ani
 then 1PL.EXCL-SBJ.PROG.SIMUL-thus thus INDF-PL-do-NMLZ-try thus GNO
eebo toyh-pug-ey-de-na ġara-tiğom-amitor toyh-de
 then 1PL.EXCL-child-PL-SBJ.WIT-thus forest-clean-whole 1PL.EXCL-SBJ.WIT
xi-atĩh a-kabi eka-ena aye.
 3SG-sympathize 3.REFL-BEN because-thus FUT

¹⁰ *Paiter* (plural: *paiterey*) is used as an ethnic self-denomination in two contexts: in historical narratives, to contrast Suruí with other Amerindians (*lahd*, “enemy”) and Whites (*yara*); and in political discourse performed in support of indigenous rights. In the latter context, claiming the use of the vernacular self-denomination instead of an unchosen meaningless name is a way of denouncing the lack of consideration by the Brazilian State. Nevertheless, in daily conversations, *suruí* and its plural form *surui* are the common terms used by the Suruí to contrast themselves with other indigenous people.

We (excl.) are trying to do this: we want **our (excl.)** children to take care of the forest because **we (excl.)** feel sympathy for it.

Example 15: [Suruí, explanations to the anthropologist]

Ana toyh-ẽ-pere-de-na toyh-we-itxa
 like.this 1PL.EXCL-INTENSIVE-ITER-SBJ.WIT-thus 1PL.EXCL-REFL-with
labiway-na ma-pere-de toyh-pi.
 chief-thus INDF-ITER-SBJ.WIT 1PL.EXCL-ABL
We (excl.) used to live this way: the chief was always one of **ours (excl.)**.

The use of “exclusive we” in the examples above—rather than a generic person as in Example 12, or a reported “we” as in Example 13—seems to have other excluding effects, not limited to the anthropologist being addressed. Implicitly, this choice of the “exclusive we” also excludes other Suruí groups: in Example 14, those that prefer logging over ecological and neo-traditionalist programs; in Example 15, the narrator’s rival clans.

In Chol, the system of opposition created by plural markers *la* and *lohoñ* (usually shortened to *loñ*), both attached to the first person, is the core device for expressing notions of difference and similarity, particularly on a local or inter-ethnic level. The *la* marker, which works as an “inclusive we”, has a more general value, since it also frequently refers to the speaker and all the persons who share a collective identity with him¹¹. This collectivity often matches with the linguistic Chol community (i.e. the speakers of *la=k-ty’añ* “our (inclusive) language”, the vernacular name for the Chol language), although most of our Chol collaborators define their identity more specifically, based on their Tila origins and the socio-cultural and dialectal features attached to it (as opposed to the dialect and people from Tumbalá). This type of reference, which may be defined as corresponding to a value of “communal we”, is particularly striking in Example 16, where a Chol speaker choses *la* to explain traditional practices to the researcher, rather than an “exclusive we” as in the Suruí case.

Example 16: [Chol, explanation to the anthropologist about a traditional remedy]

mi la=k-äk'e-ñ hihĩñle i-paty ts'islum i ya' tyäl-el ñaxañ, mi ka la=k-äk'e-ñ i-yo'pol ts'ima, hiñ i-yo'pol ts'ima ya' mi ke la=k-äk'e-ñ la, tyi pam hihĩñ i-paty ts'islum-i y-ik'oty aceite de palo ...

We (incl.) lay down this piece of termite mound, that comes first, then **we (incl.)** are going to put a calabash leaf, **we (incl.)** put this calabash leaf here, above this piece of termite mound with some wood oil...

The *la* “inclusive-communal we” also features prominently in terminology referring to collective entities, properties or practices that define the Chol as a social group. For example, it occurs in the phrase *la=k-tyaty la=k-ñā*’ lit. “our fathers, our mothers”, which refers not to specific relatives, but rather to the ancestors, that is, the generic group constituting the deceased forebears of the community, protectors of Chol tradition. This pronoun also precedes most terms that the Chol suggest as equivalents to the notions of “culture” or “tradition” (for example, *la=k-ñā’tyib’al* “our knowledge”), and “heritage” (for example, *la-k=mel-b’al* “our done things”).

¹¹ This general inclusive value corresponds to 89.5% of the 163 occurrences identified within 17 texts of our corpus, including various discourse genres, from ritual discourse to informal conversations.

2.2 Genericity and Depersonalization: The Passive Voice

Yucatec Maya also features an opposition between “inclusive/exclusive we”, but either the second-person singular, as in Example 3 (see Section 1.1), or passive forms, as in Example 17 below, are more commonly used in reference to practices deemed typical/habitual/characteristic of the group of inclusion (Vapnarsky, Monod-Becquelin, Becquey 2012). These uses can be included in the more general usage of these forms to refer to a generic person.

Example 17: [Yucatec, explanation to the anthropologist]

Le k-u-kīim-i(l) to'on máak way baanda-a'
DET ICP-3A-die-IPF.INTR PR1PL people here region-TD₁
The people who die among us here in this region,

k-u-chéen-mee(n)-t-a('a)l u-maatan
ICP-3A-simply-do-TRZER-PAS.IPF 3A-offerings
offerings are made to them

In contrast with Suruí and Chol, in Yucatec the use of the first-person plural in these contexts, and the emphasis this choice places on “we”, is often indicative of a Hispanicized form of expressing (and arguably conceiving of) a cultural phenomenon. This usage is typical of Maya people who find themselves “between two worlds”, having more contact with Spanish and a variety of external discourses, in particular linked to academic and activist spheres. For example, alongside the canonic Mayan phrasing to describe a habitual behavior (“this is how **it's done**”, see Example 18[a])), today, there is a tendency to use the active form with a first-person plural subject (“this is how **we do it**” see Example 18[b])).

Example 18: [Yucatec]

- (a) *bey u-beet-a('al)-a'*
as **3A-do-PAS.IPF-TD₁**
this is how **it's done**
- (b) *bey k-beet-ik-o'on-a'*
as **1PL.A-do-IPF.TR-1PL-TD₁**
this is how **we do it**

This shift from the passive to the active first-person plural is more than just a grammatical calque from Spanish. It also introduces agency and personalization to the speakers' relation to culture, in the sense here of those behaviors specific to their social group, mirroring the reification of culture fomented by external patrimonial discourses. Indeed, the more “traditional” use of the passive form directs focus onto the process itself and the object it modifies. The agent is not overtly presented as the active force and may correspond to any individual of the group in question. Thus, a practice exists independently of any singular agent to perform it, simply because it is a “way of doing” that is familiar and so repeated within the group. Conversely, in more modern expressions, the combination of a plural first person subject with an active form creates an obligatory reference to the specific agent of the action. The referred action is now distinguished from the implicit progression of the experience (made up of typical cultural events) and associated with a declared “we”. Although it may seem paradoxical at first sight, it actually comes as no surprise that these new more agentive forms appear in the speech of Maya people who are involved in language revitalization, advocating an assumed and intentional use of the Maya language.

Like Yucatec, Chol also resorts to the passive voice when the subject is generic.¹² Nevertheless, Chol introduces a nuance in the degree of genericity, or the extension of the social group referred to. Chol does not use the passive if the generic “we” involves only members of the social group of the speaker—referring in its maximal extension to the Chol speakers community (of Tila origin), and also commonly used to refer to smaller in-groups such as extended families or villages—, this case calls for the use of the “communal we”, *la=k-* introduced in 2.1 above. The passive voice only appears when the speaker considers that the action being described may also be performed by agents outside of the “inclusive-communal we”, commonly when there is a convergence of practices among groups within the Chiapas multicultural area they live in. This occurs, for instance, regarding certain ritual practices that the speaker knows the Chol share with the neighboring Mayan Tseltal communities, as exemplified in Example 19.¹³

Example 19: [Chol, explanations to the linguist, verbs are all in the passive voice]

hiñmeku cha'añ mi ipehkäñtyel, mi yotsäbeñtyel ñichim, cha'ts'ihity ñichim yik'oty hump'e media lembal, mi imahlel... mi ipehkäñtyel, mi ty'uhbeñtyel cha'añ tyihikña mi iyu'biñ iyum hihñ lum

This is why **one** speaks [lit. ‘it is spoken’] to him [the master of the earth], **one** offers candles [lit. ‘candles are offered’], two candles with a half-measure of eau-de-vie, **one** goes to speak to him [lit. ‘it goes to be spoken’], **one** pours him a little [lit. a little is poured] so that this master of the earth may feel good

Person-markers, as well as depersonalized expressions, thus provide Amerindian languages with subtle ways of characterizing the relationship between the practices and the social group of whom there are said to be typical or emblematic. Indeed, these expressions also allow to qualify the relationship between interlocutors and to negotiate the boundaries of the social groups at stake, in a more fluid way than a lexical reference would do it.

3. Source and Type of Knowledge

Finally, let us consider the broad area relating to the expression of evidentiality (source of knowledge), and epistemic (degree of certainty) and deontic (requirement, wish, expectation, etc.) modalities, which in Amerindian languages are commonly grammaticalized. Customary practices are often expressed as **general** (gnomic) **truths**. Furthermore, they are usually linguistically indexed as **non-testimonial** (knowledge gained outside direct observation), or as speech reported from a generic source, or from a supreme authority (the ancestors). Some languages have deictic markers for symmetrical/asymmetrical (namely, shared/non-shared) access to the referent, and in such cases, within the social group, traditional practices typically fall under *symmetrical* access, recognized as shared knowledge. These languages may have also developed oppositions in relation to (inter)subjectivity, with forms that refer to shared, most often traditional knowledge (mythical, historical...), which is supposed to have been learned prior to and independently from the speech interaction.

¹² Other factors trigger the use of passive in this language, similar to those described in Vapnarsky, Monod Becquelin, Becquety (2012) but there are not relevant in the type of uses analyzed here.

¹³ In order to ensure an intelligible translation, we use here the indefinite pronoun ‘one’ to refer to the demoted agent. In Chol the demoted agent is nevertheless maintained as the subject of intransitive verbs, in which case it is co-referenced by a quasi-impersonal 3rd person.

3.1 Non-testimonial

Suruí frequently resorts to non-testimonial evidentiality, using the *-ya* suffix and/or the sentence-ending marker *ã*, to describe those practices deemed evidence of “Suruí culture”. In such usage, the non-testimonial should not be seen to imply a lack of direct observation by the narrator of the practices in question. Indeed, the non-testimonial suffix may be used by speakers of advanced age to describe traditional activities that they may well have experienced first-hand. Rather, the non-testimonial is used to link those activities that the Suruí typically present to outsiders as a manifestation of their “culture” to a shared knowledge (not specifically or exclusively possessed by anyone in particular). This speech strategy may be combined with those mentioned in the previous sections, even in seemingly contradictory cases, like the use of “exclusive we”, so highlighting the exclusivity of certain “cultural” practices for certain groups.

Example 20: [Suruí, explanations to the anthropologist]

Yena palo-sa ġakora ani ã i-sade-na
 like.that INDF-SBJ.PROG hunt GNO SFM.NWIT 3SG-SBJ.PROG-thus
a-pug-mato ani
 3.REFL-child-invite GNO
 He urged his son this way: “That’s how **people** should hunt.”

ewe-nekoy toyh-sade-na toyh-pug-ey-akobah
 REL-because 1PL.EXCL-SBJ.PROG-thus 1PL.EXCL-child-PL-teach
ana lahd-sa a-we-itxa ana ã ena e
 like.this indian-SBJ.PROG 3.REFL-REFL-with like.this SFM.NWIT thus SFM.WIT
 That’s why **we (excl.)** teach this to **our (excl.)** children: “This is the way Indians live, **they say.**”

In Example 20, the speaker presents which aspect of culture should be revitalized as part of an ecological program. The non-testimonial mood (*ã*) and generic pronoun (*palo-*) in the reported speech (aimed at younger generations) indicate that the matter relates to knowledge that is not his alone, but could potentially be shared by all. At the same time, he presents the act of revitalization as deriving from an attitude particular to a specific social group, namely his own patrilineal clan.

3.2 Reference to the Ancestors as an Evidential Locution.

In Chol, as in Suruí, all speech is marked by a certain evidential value. The absence of any such marker implies that the speakers assume responsibility for their assertions, and/or witnessed it directly; otherwise, a non-testimonial marker (*=b’i*) is required. The source of the information must then be mentioned to characterize the type of speech: hearsay, secondary account of a historical event, story, etc. One of the most common sources in Chol oral tradition are the “ancestors” themselves, invoked in the context of traditional practices or beliefs, or events concerning the community as a whole. Example 21 features the introduction to an account of a famine that struck the Chol community during the 20th century.

Example 21: [Chol, historical narration]

tyi wahali, ta’=b’i ñum-i-Ø ka’bäl wi’ñal, i’ik’ wi’ñal,
 PREP formerly CP= NWIT pass-CP-3B many famine, black famine

i-k'ab'a'-Ø i'ik' wi'ñal che' mi i-yäl la=k-tyaty
 3A-name-3B black famine as IPF 3A-say INCL=1A-father
la=k-ñä'-o' tsa'=b'ä i-k'el-ey-Ø-o'.
 INCL=1A-mother-PL CP=REL 3A-see-CP-3B-PL

Before, many famines occurred, black famines, that's their name, black famines, as our ancestors said who witnessed them.

The reference to the ancestors, as a source of information or as protagonists, confers a context of tradition and community on this statement, but also a value of gnomic truth (that is, both irrefutable and timeless), emphasized by the imperfective aspect (*mi*) used in the expression “as our ancestors said”. The ancestors’ words are not confined to the past; rather they are intended to endure through time, their teachings to become moral and behavioral standards for the community.

Speakers may exploit the evidential properties associated with the ancestors’ words in a number of ways. Indeed, it is not uncommon for these references to occur as interpolated clauses in various speech contexts, to the extent that a story’s protagonists may even be replaced by the ancestors. Example 22 demonstrates just this in a story of an encounter with malevolent entities, the *ihk'al*. It begins as a story involving the speaker’s grandparents (marked by “exclusive we” *loñ kyum*, *loñ hko'* “our father, our mother”) as both the source of the information and the protagonists.¹⁴ During the course of the narration, however, they are gradually replaced by the more generic group of ancestors (marked by “communal we”).

Example 22: [Chol, historical narration]

tyi wahali, che'ñak hiñi de alo'bo'tyo loñ kyum, loñ hko', tyi icha'leyo' pehtyel
ch'uhaña' ya' tyi Tila che' hiñi ta'bi iweñ k'eleyo' bahche' añ, weñ bābāk'eñ,
 [...]

che' hiñi che' bahche' hiñi mi'bä'ñaño' laktyaty lakña', mi'tyaho' tyi ha', mi'tyaho' tyi
bih, mi'tyaho' ya' tyi krus, ya' tyi buhtyäl, ya'bi mi'ñolch'iñtyelo' ili laktyaty lakña'
mi'ch'uh k'elo', mu'bi itsäñsäñtyelo' mi'ch'äm'eñtyelo'...

Before, when **our grandparents** were still little, they held all the cargos, there, in Tilá. So they were able to see (**non-testimonial**) how it was, it was very dangerous,
 [...]

So this is how **our ancestors** were scared by them [the *ihk'al*], they encountered them in the water, on the roads, there, near the crosses, in the hills. There, **our ancestors** were attacked, they were watched and killed...

3.3 Collective Knowledge

In addition to reported speech particles and deictic markers indexing values relative to symmetric or asymmetric access to knowledge (Hanks 2007), Yucatec Maya also has an inferential epistemic particle, *ma'ak*, which conveys that the evidence on which the supposition is based is non-subjective, mainly falling into the category of collective-general knowledge, transmitted by hearsay or shared experience, outside the speech event. This form is in direct contrast with another evidential marker, *mün*, which indexes directness of access and subjectivity of epistemic judgment (Vapnarsky 2018). Thus, *ma'ak* is usually employed in reference to old times, well-known prophesied future times, or folktales, matters all shared through oral transmission. It is also used by the layman for the details and intricacies of the

¹⁴ In this case, the exclusive rather than inclusive “we” is not used by the speaker to mark a distinction between Chol and non-Chol but to distinguish the grand-parents’ generation from others within the same community.

non-visible supernatural world, to signal indirect and mediated access since culturally, except for the ritual specialist in some contexts, experiential communication or interaction with the spirits should be referred to in a distanced and most often impersonal way (Vapnarsky 2013).

In Example 23, after relating a well-known episode from a mythical story about how, in ancient times, people would carry their firewood simply by whistling, the speaker speculates on how this might have worked. He suggests that the whistle probably had special powers, framing his statement with three evidential-epistemic particles: *ma'ak*, the reportative *bin*, and the epistemic *wale'* conveying possibility “perhaps”. *Ma'ak* introduces the hypothetical statement as an inference based on collective knowledge, which is epitomized by the reference to the godmother (the godparents normally being the grandparents in this Mayan society).

Example 23: [Yucatec, comment on mythical narrative]

Ma'ak espesyal u-xúu'xu' bin wal-e'.
 INF.C special 3A-whistle RS POSS-TD₄
 Their whistling **may** have been special maybe they say.

Bey u'istoorya bey utsikbatik 'aanima inmaadrinai.
 That's the story as my godmother used to tell me.

The next example involves another touchstone of properties considered as culturally distinctive. When asked if Maya had been their language since old times, the addressee, a woman in her forties, exclaimed:

Example 24: [Yucatec, conversation with the anthropologist]

Ma'ak bey-o!
 INF.C MOD-TD₂
Probably yes, it has!

She immediately supported her assertion by mentioning that her grandfather used to speak Maya. She had known her grandfather well, and clearly remembered interacting with him until his death. The evidence she invokes is thus based on personal memory access, and for this reason, the subjective *mún* would be the expected inferential. However, as also shown by the Examples 2 (see Section 1.1) and 23, the reference to the grandparent serves as a typified source of collective traditional knowledge, which in this case triggered the use of the alternative inferential *ma'ak* for collective-general knowledge.

3.4 General Truth

Finally, in Suruí, the adverbial particle *ani* can be used to indicate that the statement relates not to an event but to a general truth (like a species ethogram or a logical connection), possibly fixed in time (like a practice characteristic of an historical period). This particle frequently appears when depicting activities intended to be seen as characterizing a unique ethnic trait, as in Example 25, which describes the Suruí diet prior to contact, as opposed to that adopted since the group's integration within the regional economy.

Example 25: [Suruí, explanations to the anthropologist]

Eebo soah-si-wa mame-wa meek-kay-e-yoa-wa paiter sade-na
 so yam-beer-eat corn.cake-eat corn-dry-NMLZ-meal-eat suruí PROG-thus

ena ani.
thus GNO

The Suruí **used to** eat yam beer, corn cake, and dry corn meal.

This statement is taken from the same discussion as in Example 6 (see Section 1.2). When describing the “Suruí culture” to be revitalized, the speaker uses the gnomic marker *ani* in almost every sentence, describing these practices as if they were/had been as stable as the ethogram of an animal species.

4. From a Case and Durative Morpheme to a Lexeme for “Culture”

We started this article with a process of grammaticalization related to the notion of “habit” in the Yucatec language, we will end by showing the inverse phenomenon: the probable lexicalization of grammatical morphemes into a lexeme akin to “culture”. In Suruí, this arguably resulted in a form that more or less covers the entire semantic spectrum of “culture” in Western languages, at least insofar as the Suruí encounter it through their usual Portuguese-speaking interlocutors (indigenist NGOs, FUNAI¹⁵ representatives, journalists, anthropologists).

To translate the concept of *cultura suruí* from Portuguese, Suruí people use, among others, the term *toyhxame* (*toyh-same*, 1PL.EXCL-way.of.being), “our (excl.) culture”.¹⁶ In etymological terms, *same*, present in *toyhxame*, can be analyzed as a lexicalized compound made up of two suffixes, *-sa* and *-be* (allomorphs: *-me*, *-e*, *-we*). The latter is a nominalizing suffix used to form action nouns. Therefore, the form *same* would literally mean “the action of *-sa*”. This construction is rather unique, since the *-be* suffix normally only derives nouns from verbal bases (see Example 14 in Section 2.1).¹⁷ Now, *-sa* is not a verb, and its semantic values are complex. This morpheme, added to noun and pronoun forms, has a clear syntactic function as a case marker: it assigns the syntactic role of the verb’s subject to the word it is appended to (Examples 26[a], 27[a1], 28[a]). If there is no verb, the argument with *-sa* becomes the agent of an implicit verb meaning “to say”, as in Example 27(a2), or “to do”. The morpheme *-sa* also encodes other, less easily defined semantic values, lacking a direct equivalent in European languages, thereby making it difficult to translate. Thus, the *-sa* suffix often encodes a durative aspect, such as in Examples 26[a], 27[a1] and 28[a]. The following (a) examples are statements featuring the *-sa* suffix, while the (b) examples are comparable statements wherein *-sa* is replaced with the evidential suffix *-de* which has no aspectual value. The *-sa* suffix can also convey an intentionality value, such as in Examples 26(a) and 27(a2). In some cases, it is used to express by inference a deontic modality (“can” and—in negative constructions|—“must” or “not be able to not”; see Example 28).

Example 26: [Suruí, historical narration]

(a) *awurusena atār*

¹⁵ Fundação Nacional do Índio, Brazilian State agency in charge of indigenous people.

¹⁶ Given the lack of historical data available, we are unable to gauge if the evolution of the meaning of *same* is linked to the Suruí’s exposure to external patrimonial policies.

¹⁷ Apart from the semantic proximity between *same* and *sa* illustrated below, we do not have any irrefutable evidence that *same* is not just a lexical root that happens to be homophonic with the composition of *-sa* with *-be*. However, there is an indirect and statistical indication in favor of our etymological hypothesis: if *same* was an ordinary noun, it would be expected to accept modification (that, is followed) by an adjective (like “old custom”, **same-kāy*, “new custom”, **same-pamne*, etc.). But no construction with *same* modified by an adjective appears in our corpus. Besides, the particle *-sa* acts as a verb in at least one other lexicalized expression, *a-ma-sobag-xa* (3REFL-INDEF-animal-SBJ.DUR), “to transform oneself into an animal”.

awuru-sa-ena a-tār
 dog-SBJ.DUR-thus 3.REFL-aggressive
 the dog **kept on being** aggressive

- (b) *awurudena atār*
awuru-de-ena a-tār
 dog-SBJ.WIT-thus 3.REFL-aggressive
 the dog was aggressive

Example 27: [Suruí, myth narration]

- (a) 1. “*Kaně xiter toyhxi yã!*”
kaně ter toyh-sa ã
 love very 1PL.EXCL-SBJ.DUR SFM.NWIT
 “We **still** love you very much!”
2. *tasa eğay ã.*
ta-sa e-ka ã
 3PL-SBJ.DUR 2SG-DAT SFM.NWIT
 that is something they **let you know**.
- (b) 1. “*Kaně xiter toyhje e!*”
kaně ter toyh-de e
 love very 1PL.EXCL-SBJ.WIT SFM.WIT
 “We love you very much,”
2. *taje eğay e.*
ta-de e-ka e
 3PL-SBJ.WIT 2SG-DAT SFM.WIT
 that is something they have told you.

Example 28: [Suruí, explanations to the anthropologist]

- (a) *ğarbaiwaytxersena mamğihrkata*
ğarbaiway-ter-sa-ena mam-kihr-kata
 chief-only-SBJ.DUR-thus Brazil.nut-green-fell
 only the chief **always** [hence: **can**] fell without fear [of reprisal from the spirits]
 Brazil nut trees [still bearing...] green [...nuts]
- (b) *ğarbaiwaytxerdena mamğihrkata*
ğarbaiway-ter-de-ena mam-kihr-kata
 chief-only-SBJ.WIT-thus Brazil.nut-green-fell
 only the chief has felled a Brazil nut [tree still bearing] green [nuts]

The complex noun *same* appears to involve the different values of the *-sa* suffix illustrated above: durative, intentional, and deontic. Indeed, this noun is used to designate a way of being, a habitual behavior, a set of knowledge and practices that characterize a human group over time, thus retaining the durative aspect of *-sa*. When people speak of *same* shared by the Suruí group as a whole (*paitere-same* “the habitual way of being of the Suruí”), or particular to subgroups within the collective (*ğammebeye-same* “the habitual way of being of those within the Black Wasp clan”), they always refer to enduring practices. In the first example, *paitere-same* designates that which once distinguished—and still does—the Suruí

from the Whites, even though both groups often coexist, interacting daily, and even intermarrying; for the Suruí, it refers mainly to language, technological skills, diet, marriage rules, body decoration—in other words, those practices and customs that have endured, some of which are deemed inherent. In the latter example, the attribution of *same* to a patrilineal clan marks the faculties, tastes, and temperament considered specific to this subgroup. A *same* may also indicate behaviors that are acquired and transmitted, as in the description below of combat skills attributed to a Suruí clan taken from a legend:

Example 29: [Suruí, myth narration]

Ee a-kāripug-ey-ka xi-aka-be-same-itxa-ena-e.
 ENDOPHORIC 3.REFL-younger.brother-PL-DAT 3SG-kill-NMLZ-**way**-with-thus-SFM.WIT
 This one mastered the technique for killing his younger brothers [=the trick of underhanded murder].

The notion of *same* does not only designate modes of being and action; it is also applied to their results, or their attribution to certain objects, thus acquiring a meaning resembling the notion of an identity willingly assigned, arguably linked to the intentional value of *-sa*; or a distinctive, lasting character, linked to the durative value of the same particle. Hence, a “beer endowed with a *same*” (*ihatir-same-itxa*, beer-*same*-with) designates a beer endowed with a ritual name: since this does not apply to all ritual beers, the attribution of a *same* implies both recognition of the importance of the ritual relationship between the beer’s producer and its drinker, one that is unique in the performance of the ritual cycle; and its future insertion in historical memory as defined by the list of beer names that have come before (Yvinec 2020). An analogous meaning exists in the negative lexicalized expression *ğarasameõm* (*ğara-same-om*, forest-way.of.being-NEG), “a forest without *same*”, designating a forested area lacking any sign of human appropriation, past or present (temporary dwellings or shelters, clearings, secondary forests, hunting trails). By extension, *same* may therefore also designate the human appropriation of an environment. From this perspective, *same* corresponds both to the intentionality present in *-sa*, and to the inference of an idea of distinctiveness from the notion of regularity specific to an actor. This aspect of distinctiveness occurs in many uses of *same* regarding living beings, and particularly human collectives, in order to distinguish groups by the respective *same* that differentiate them.

Finally, like the notions of “culture” and “tradition” in European languages, *same* forms may have a prescriptive sense, particularly in reference to social interactions, thus extending the deontic usages of *-sa*. In this case, they designate the “ethical rules” or “professed values” of a certain group and its members, as demonstrated in the examples below:

Example 30: [Suruí, historical narration]

Eetiga ewe-iway iwe-same de-na one xiener maxiter
 because REL-responsible DEM-**way** SBJ.WIT-thus NEG respectable more
 Because they had committed this [a murder], **the rule was** that they were not respectable anymore

Example 31: [Suruí, historical narration]

ana o-tağ-ey a-we-itxa iwe-same-tor-aã
 like.this 1SG-ancestor-PL 3.REFL-REFL-with DEM-**way**-carry-take
 These are **the rules** that my ancestors carried [try to observe].

The above uses of *same* with a normative value refer generally to the Suruí as a whole (Example 30), or to one of their patrilineal clans (Example 29). In such contexts, the Suruí tend to translate *same* into Portuguese as *lei* (“law”), although this term never designates any explicit written code, which does not exist in the Suruí cultural context, nor any Brazilian legal codes either.

Therefore, *same* matches many senses of the term “culture” in Western languages. Yet we should not overstate these correspondences: *same* may also carry a much broader meaning. Indeed, *same* does not necessarily refer to a collective; it can be applied to the distinctive, regular behavior of a single individual. In such cases, it refers mainly to the individual’s attitude toward their friends and relatives, the steadfastness of their endeavors, or their resolute decision-making, a sense which would be more aptly rendered by “her or his personality” in English, and certainly not by “her or his culture”. *Same* does not necessarily apply to humans either: it can be attributed to certain animal species of regular and predictable behaviour (like the white-lipped peccary), or some individual animals (especially pets, thus indicating their degree of familiarization). Incidentally, to translate *same* in Portuguese, the Suruí often use a much broader term than *cultura*: *jeito*, “manner, character, skill”. What we should retain from this case, in addition to the semantic versatility of the term that the Suruí have devised as an approximate and partial equivalent to notions of “culture” or “tradition” as used by their foreign interlocutors, is the close link and origin of this lexical expression with grammatical forms, by which its semantic values—durative, intentional, and deontic—are primarily expressed.

Conclusion

A discourse-focused analysis of different Amerindian languages reveals that, despite an absence of non-loanwords approximating notions of culture (as in “practices that characterize us”), these practices are in fact subject to linguistic qualifications that distinguish them from others. This qualification occurs primarily through grammatical forms however, to which anthropologists may be less sensitive, despite these forms being essential tools by which meaning and speech strategies are created. In the languages studied, we see the grammatical marking of values commonly invoked to distinguish a set of practices and knowledge: habitual, repeated, typified, inclusive/exclusive, object of transmitted knowledge, non-subjective, collective, and shared. These diverse grammatical senses dovetail features that have been considered as central in the definition of culture in anthropology, such as habit and transmission. They also often involve, in the aspectual, personal and modal domains, the generification of actions and entities, a semantic and pragmatic process which entails typified and normative views on practices, not only addressed to ethnographers (Mannheim 2021: 611), but more widely shared in different in- and out-groups. However, the grammatical forms and senses that were revealed also underpin conceptions of “these shared, characteristic behaviors” that exceed the Western sense of “culture”, thus making it possible to use them in reference to beings to which this concept would not otherwise be applied.

In spite of the absence of relation between Tupian and Mayan, and the contrasting situations in relation to patrimonialization that characterize the three languages illustrated here, the grammatical means involved show striking similarities. The paper also highlights that grammatical categorizations are not immune to the dynamics of language change, particularly where lexical elements become grammaticalized through a process of typification and abstraction; or conversely the lexicalization of grammatical particles, often leading to reification and new polysemies. These two processes were illustrated by the habitative in Yucatec (*suuk*), and the durative (*-sa*) in Suruí, each having led to the creation of a term close to “culture”. We observed other dynamics, too, including a fixed form of reference to the ancestors in Chol, creating an evidential and socio-ethical locution; or recent transformations

in the usage of voice and person markers, from passive to active (Yucatec), or generic to exclusive (Suruí). These changes, ostensibly purely formal, nevertheless imply important changes in how speakers position themselves within the “cultural” field, and, by extension, how Amerindian societies exploit said field. Ultimately, placing “culture” in quotation marks (Carneiro da Cunha 2009) often represents the conceptual requalification—rather than a radical reversal—of these practices, and a redefining of the agentive properties of their actors mediated through shifts in grammatical constructions. These grammatical shifts both reflect and drive forward the recent semantic and pragmatic transformations of the cultural field within Amerindian societies.

Acknowledgements:

This research was first developed and presented within the ANR project *The making of “heritages”: memory, knowledge and politics in Indian America nowadays* (ANR-12-CULT-005; 2013-2016). Our thanks to Vincent Hirtzel, Anath Ariel de Vidas and Philippe Erikson, as well as three anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

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Foreign Language Translations:

"Culture": Say it with Grammar! The Expression of Notions Related to "Culture" in Amerindian Languages

[**Keywords:** Yucatec Maya, Chol Maya, Suruí, culture, grammar]

"Cultura": ¡Gramática más que léxico! La expresión de nociones relacionadas con la "cultura" en lenguas amerindias

[**Palabras claves:** maya yucateco, maya chol, suruí, cultura, gramática]

“Cultura”: Menos léxico, mais gramática! A expressão de noções relacionadas à “cultura” em línguas ameríndias

[**Palavras-chave:** maia iucateque, maia chol, suruí, cultura, gramática]

“Kultuura/Miatsil”: ¡a‘al yéetel u wíinklal t’aan! Bix u ya‘ala‘al u tuukulil “kultuura” ich u jach sijnaal t’aanilo‘ob Ameerika¹⁸

[**E’esaj t’aano’ob:** maaya t’aan, chol t’aan, surui t’aan, miatsil, u wíinklal t’aan]

“Kultúra”: ¡Alä yik‘oty ña‘alty‘añ! B‘ajche‘ mi‘yäjlel cha‘añ “Kultúra” tyi ity‘añ lakpi‘äl tyi Amérika¹⁹

[**Ñoj ty‘añ:** ity‘añ lakpi‘äl tyi Yukatan, lakty‘añ, ity‘añ Suruí, lakña‘tyib‘al lakmelb‘al, ña‘alty‘añ]

“Cultura”: iwema toyh-koe-same-ĩ! Cultura-e-ixoey lahdey-koe-ĩ²⁰

[**ewe-sed-saga:** Maiaey koe Iucatequeeyna, Maiaey koe Choleyna, paiter koe, palo-ya aweitxa-e-same, palo-koe-e-same]

¹⁸ The retro-translation of the title in Yucatec Maya is: “Culture: Say it with the body/structure of language! How the ideas related to “culture” are expressed in the languages actually born in America”. Although the expression *utsoolol ts’iib* ‘the ordering of writing’ may be used to translate “grammar”, we prefer the lexical combination *u wíinklal t’aan* that refers to the structure of spoken language. *T’aan* means “word, speech, language” and *u wíinklal* comes from *wíinik* ‘human’; when possessed with the relational suffix *-al*, it is used to refer to the body or the structure of any being or object (*u-* indexes 3rd person). For this title, we use the alphabetic norm published by the INALI/SEP in 2014. We thank Hilario Chi Canul for his reflection on the title translation. To translate “culture”, we use the loan-word *kultuura* and the neologism *miatsil*, the latter being adopted nowadays in Maya academic productions. As explained in the article, none are of common use in ordinary speech.

¹⁹ The retro-translation of the title in Chol is: ‘Culture’, Say it with the essence of language! How culture is spoken about in the languages of people like us in America. The word *ña’alty’añ* ‘the essence of language’ is a neologism commonly used to translate « grammar » by governmental institutions such as INALI (National Indigenous Languages Institute) and in the academic sphere. The expression that we use to translate “culture” in the keywords, *lakña’tyib’al lakmelb’al*, literally means “our knowledge, our productions”. It is not of common use in the language as explained in the article.

²⁰ This title was tentatively translated by Cédric Yvinec on his own, it could not be checked by a Suruí native speaker. A retro-translation of it would be: “*Cultura*: make it known with the specific way of our language! Images of *cultura* in the language(s) of the enemies”. The lexicalized locution *same* that is commented at length in the paper, as one of the translations of the word “culture” (see also *palo-ya aweitxa-e-same* lit. “someone’s way of living” in the keywords), is used here to render the idea of rules or structures characteristic of a language (*koe*). This word, *koe*, being obligatorily possessed, it is assumed that here its possessor is a Suruí speaker addressing non-Suruí readers (since he or she writes in English afterwards); so this language is *toyh-koe*, “our (exclusive of addressee) language”. The term *ixo* (pl. *ixoey*), “image, double, copy, reflection, spirit, analogy” is used to convey the idea of “expressions of notions”. The word *lahd* (pl. *lahdey*) means “enemy” and implicitly “non-White enemy”; since pacification, it is used to refer to Amerindians by contrast with Whites. The word *koe*, “language”, was left in the singular, because the author never met it in the plural. Finally, the verbal locution *iwema*, “to make this known” was used rather than *iwewá*, “to say this”, since in a Suruí context, the latter usually implies “to say this singing”. The suffix *-ĩ* has a locative, temporal or instrumental meaning.