

# Pilot Workshop with Itzá Maya Youth

9 – 16 December 2015

National Park and Archaeological Site of Yaxha, Petén, Guatemala

## 1. Context

The Itzá Maya people have influenced the history of Mesoamerica in important ways, particularly during the Post-Classic Period, around the end of the first millennium. Originating from the area around Lake Petén Itzá in Guatemala, they migrated to the northern Yucatán lowlands as a consequence of the decline that brought an end to the Classic Period. There they established a vast trade empire centered at their capital Chichén Itzá, a dominion that extended as far as Honduras. Vanquished in the XIII century, the Itzá returned to the Petén region where they built the island city of Nojpetén or Tayasal (today Flores) which became the capital of the last independent Maya kingdom to fall under colonial rule, capitulating only in 1697. Their approximately 2,500 descendants live today mostly concentrated in the town of San José (formerly Ixtutz) on the northern shore of Lake Petén Itzá.

The Itzá people are struggling to maintain alive their culture as well as to effectively defend and conserve their communal land. Strict prohibition to speak the Itzá language during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has left only a few elderly adults capable of speaking it fluently today. Most youth are growing increasingly disconnected from their traditional knowledge and history and are leaving the community in search for education and working opportunities. Although an outpour of attention and financial aid by international institutions and NGOs flowed into Guatemala in the 1990s at the end of a civil war that lasted over 30 years, in the case of the Itzá, the uneven sharing of the new resources contributed to create deep divisions in the community, particularly around the governance of the Bio-Itzá Forest Reserve. These divisions have prevented the emergence of a shared vision and a concerted strategy to protect the community's threatened cultural and natural heritage.

When OrigiNations visited San José in late 2014, members of local civil society organizations pointed to the urgent need to help the Itzá youth to reconnect to their roots and to prepare them to eventually take into their own hands the protection of their culture and territory. But the emergence of a new generation of leaders could only be possible if all local organizations joined together to support them. After a series of informal meetings the main organizations agreed to turn the page and unite in this effort. OrigiNations was asked to support them in organizing a pilot workshop with local youth as a first step in promoting a broad movement for the protection of the cultural and natural heritage of the Itzá people. This workshop, briefly described below, took place from the 9<sup>th</sup> until the 16<sup>th</sup> of December, 2015. The five local organizations involved in this effort were: Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala (ALMG), responsible for the documentation and promotion of the Itzá language; the Asociación Solidaria de Acción y Propuesta de Petén (ASAPP), which fosters organic farming and the preservation of native seeds; Ut'an Samal, dedicated to the conservation and promotion of cultural traditions; Asociación Bioltza, working on nature conservation and the management of the communal forest reserve; and the Asociación de Plantas Medicinales, committed to the promotion of traditional healing methods.

## 2. Pilot workshop

The five local organizations identified and selected 25 young men and women between the ages of 15 and 22 to participate in a week-long immersion workshop which took place at Yaxhá, an archaeological

complex which lays within the borders of the Yaxhá-Nakum-Naranjo National Park. This ancestral place has an enormous significance for the Itzá people, particularly the site at Topoxté, an island settlement on Lake Yaxhá, which contain the only architectural remains in Guatemala which can be directly traced to the ancestors of the modern Itzá. Through successful negotiations with the National Council of Protected Areas of Guatemala (CONAP) and the Institute of Anthropology and History (IDAEH), we were given the opportunity to lodge and work a full week within the premises. This two national institutions were extremely collaborative and facilitated their bungalows, campsite, kitchen, offices and working spaces and encouraged the young Itzá to exchange with the resident archaeologist and the rest of the personnel. CONAP and IDAEH saw this occasion as an unprecedented opportunity to start involving the community with the strongest historical ties to the site.

The young workshop participants were able to interact in different ways with the monuments built by their ancestors: they were given extensive guided visits and star-watching sessions on top of ancient astronomical observatories; they could roam individually through the vast expanse and imagine life at a time when the city was still whole and thriving with activity; they worked in groups in a series of creative exercises that culminated with their own interpretation of the place in the form of drawings, videos, photo-stories, theater sketches and poems; they were also invited to conceive and design a space dedicated to the living Itzá culture, as a possible addition to the recently inaugurated interpretation centre. They were also introduced to Maya mathematics and Maya epigraphy (writing). The week was capped by a ritual ceremony performed by a traditional priest on the island of Topoxté.

Throughout the week, as they were inspired by the achievements of their forebears and their cultural self-esteem grew, the workshop participants were involved in various discussions about the consequences of cultural loss, discrimination and an inadequate educational system which doesn't recognize their distinctiveness, the degradation of their land and lake, and about what they can do to reverse a trend which is rapidly eroding their culture and threatening the integrity of their land. Community elders and members of the five local organizations accompanied and supported the youth in their reflection. Films and case studies were presented showing how other indigenous communities, and other indigenous youth throughout the world are dealing with these very same challenges.

### **3. Results**

As a result of the workshop, the participants have taken first steps to form a youth association dedicated to the protection of their heritage, promoting their culture and defending their landscape. They have elected a five-member board and have given themselves a name that can be translated as "Weavers of the Future". Their first project is to document and record the knowledge, stories, and memories of the oldest members of the community (given the sense of urgency that they feel about getting on with this endeavor before it is too late, OrigiNations has provided them with a video recorder and two photo cameras). Other envisioned activities include learning the Itzá language and developing children's books based on local stories; holding cultural and culinary events in the village; collaborating with schools in the development of culturally appropriate learning units and anti-discrimination drives; organizing reforestation campaigns and community clean-ups of the shores of the lake; informing the population about sustainable agriculture; learning about medicinal plants; promoting the establishment of a cultural centre in San José; proposing a scholarship system for indigenous youth who want to pursue professions conducive to the advancement of the cultural and natural heritage. They are also interested in exchanges with Maya youth from communities in neighboring Belize and Yucatán, with whom they share a common history, culture and language.

This first workshop has sparked among the young Itzá a renewed interest in their heritage and a commitment to protect it. At the same time it has united a committed but until now fragmented civil society around the common goal of supporting the emergence of a new generation of leaders who are rooted in their culture, well informed about the world, and devoted to defending the interests of the Itzá people.

