

# THE EMOTIONAL WORD OF THE YUCATEC MAYA. FROM UNIVERSAL TO CULTURALLY SPECIFIC



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## The theory of emotions

In the discussion about emotions, there are two opposite views :

**1. There exists a basic set of emotions** (Ekman 1980; Izard 1971) that are shared by all human kind and are the result of a long term selection for adaptive purpose to environmental constraints.

**2. Emotions are highly socially embedded** (Lutz 1986, 1988; Lutz & al. 1993). In this view, emotions are embedded within particular social, political and cultural contexts from which they can not be separated. This approach poses the problem of the commensurability of emotions and their translation into another ethnopyschological repertoire.

## The experimental and ethnographical approaches

In order to find out how these claims apply or not to the Maya ethnorepertoire of emotion, we used two different but complementary approaches:

**1. Experimental study:** we asked 15 Maya informants (7 Males, 8 Females) to label facial emotional expression taken from the Ekman faces set (Ekman & Friesen 1976). This research is part of a larger cross-cultural study about Categories in Language and Thought run by the L&C Group (Senft & al. 2007).

**2. Ethnographic and linguistic approach:** we analyzed the roots used in the linguistic construction of emotion labels. We also started to build a repertoire of emotional conventional expressions used among the Yucatec Maya.

## The linguistics of emotions, cognition, body state, and sociality

In **Yucatec Maya**, **emotions** are related to variations of the **óol** or Vital Energy (VE) of the person. The majority of **emotion labels** are constructed with this root:

Maya label	literal meaning	English equivalent
• <i>ha'as óolal</i>	smothered VE	sudden fear, surprise
• <i>ki'imáak óolal</i>	Good-?-VE	joy, normal state
• <i>lúub óolal</i>	fallen VE	sadness
• <i>yah óolal</i>	pain VE	pain (feeling)

But the root **óol** is also used for labelling **reasoning and cognitive capacities**:

Maya label	literal meaning	English equivalent
• <i>óoh-el</i>	VE-nom.suffix	to known
• <i>k'ah óolal</i>	aware(?) VE	knowledge, to remember
• <i>p'íla'an óolal</i>	opened VE	alert, sharp

So we have expressions such as:

*bey (t-)jinw-óol-e'* 'as far as I know, my feeling is'

Manner.DEC (PREP)E1-VE-TD

The root **óol** is also used in the linguistic construction of **physiological states**:

Maya label	literal meaning	English equivalent
• <i>tóoh óolal</i>	straight VE	to be in good health

Finally, the concept of **óol** also has **social implications**. The "loss of the VE" (*sa'at óola*) implies the loss of reasoning capacities and awareness of social rules, while the Spanish loan *looko* "crazy", implies only the latter but not the former, being actually closer to the English "sly".

Ekman face		Commentaries	Conventional Maya expressions
	<b>Target emotion:</b> Happiness <b>Maya Responses:</b> <i>ki'imáak óol(al)</i> 'happy'	<i>ki'imáak óol(al)</i> in Yucatec Maya has a broader meaning than 'happy' in English. It also refers to the "normal" state of a person. Yucatec Mayas consider that in this photo F. and his daughter look 'happy', <i>ki'imáak uyóolo'ob</i>	
	<b>Target emotion:</b> Sadness <b>Maya Responses:</b> <i>lúub óolal</i> 'sad' <i>k'oha'an</i> 'ill'	In Yucatec Maya, <i>lúub óolal</i> means literally "the fall of the VE", and is often translated as sadness (a basic emotion) although, for the Mayas, it involves the decrease of reasoning capacities and a bad physiological state. This is the reason why the woman on the Ekman photo is considered 'ill'. The child of this photo is actually ill and Mayas consider that his VE has fallen: <i>lúubl uyóol</i>	
	<b>Target emotion:</b> Disgust <b>Maya Responses:</b> <i>p'uha'an</i> 'angry, bothered' <i>Uyuts'm uni</i> 'he wrinkled his nose'	In Yucatec Maya, there is no word for 'disgust.' Maya participants recognized the expression of man on the Ekman photo as 'angry, bothered.' Maya also use description of the face to refer to emotional states. The wrinkled nose is conventionally used to express 'disagreement.' This is the face children usually make when they are given assignment that they don't want to comply with (like the child on the photo). Interestingly, in a force choice task, we asked participants to listen to a story about disgust. Then, they had to pick from a set of 6 Ekman photos of basic emotions what face would make the person in the story: 70% chose the Ekman face for disgust (on the left) ...	

## Conclusion: from universal to specific

The study of emotions among the Maya reveals the complexity of delimiting emotional labels since, in Yucatec Maya, emotions terms also intrinsically encompass cognitive, physiological and social states. Results from the experimental study in combination with the ethnographical approach seem to plead for a set of basic emotions which is culturally delimited and specified. Some emotional expressions can be cross-culturally recognized but they are used in every culture for specific pragmatic meanings. The example of disgust provides good evidence for this interference by culturally specific



*Su'ulakin* Yucatec Maya overlap two different emotions in the western ethnorepertoire: 'shyness' and 'shameless'. The *su'ulak* emotion involves shyness/shameless before or after an emotional event. It is usually

conceived among the Maya as the fear of not doing (have done) something the right way. This emotion serve important pragmatic social purposes.  
Its expression is conventionalized as the hands on the face or the head lying on the shoulder, the person looking away.

An interesting case of the embodiment of emotion into the conception of the person is surely the *íikim*, whose physical manifestation is the double cowlick. Mayas consider *íikim* the source of jealousy of a child towards his or her younger siblings.

A *íikim* child is said to literally "eat" his sister or brother (he would make them get ill constantly). Mayas parents, as soon as they notice their child is *íikim*, go to see a ritual specialist. He will perform a ritual called *k'eex*, "the exchange" in order to lessen the *íikim*'s effect.



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