

**SURVIVAL, CHANGE, AND CONTINUITY OF MAYA SPIRITUALITY:
THE AJQ'IJAB' OF QUETZALTENANGO, GUATEMALA**

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By

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Abstract

The 1990s were a decade of cultural and political change in Guatemala. Negotiations led to a Peace Agreement between guerrilla forces and the Guatemalan government after a 36-year Civil War. Mayan ceremonies, based in cosmology, mystical beings, the *Popol Wuh* book, the 260-day calendar and the burning of natural materials, emerged in public spaces for the first time in hundreds of years. Up to the 1980s these ceremonies were still labelled “*brujería*” (witchcraft), were attended by few people, were held in rural places and not socially accepted.

This dissertation is a study of the changes that occurred between these two decades and after. The main goal is to determine the conditions that motivated the spiritual leaders (*Ajq'ijab'*) to leave secrecy in the 1990s. The objectives are to describe the origins of Maya religion in the classic and post-classic periods; colonialism and the arrival in Guatemala of Catholicism and Protestantism and their hegemonic projects; how Mayan spiritual leaders, as organic intellectuals, negotiated and contested dominant ideologies, Christian religions, institutional racism and violence; and when they moved their place of prayer to rural locations. This study also shows the colonial and contemporary influences experienced by the *Ajq'ijab'* in their struggle to preserve their belief system.

This dissertation corroborates existing studies that demonstrate that the public resurgence of Maya identity overlaps the talks leading to the 1996 Peace Agreement; that the religious sphere in the country now includes Maya spirituality; and, while Guatemala remained under the domination of a small Creole oligarchy, Indigenous peoples were never passive actors.

Whereas there is scholarly agreement about when the rituals began to be publicly celebrated, the conditions and determinants from the practitioners' viewpoint have not been seriously studied. Therefore, the focus of this thesis is on the efforts of the Quetzaltenango *Ajq'ijab'* and scholars to tell this story from their own experiences. In a series of 13 semi-structured interviews, they shared their understandings about Maya spirituality; how most of them became *Ajq'ijab'* during Guatemala's armed conflict and how they experienced such conflict; how advancing Maya people's rights in the 1990s did not involve them. This thesis argues that Maya spirituality is currently in a transitional, changing, even contradictory, phase. On the one hand, no longer fearful of the state, with opportunities to grow organically, especially among youth and educational institutions. On the other hand, facing threats of disunity and deception through the commodification of their rituals to mere public tokenism.

Keywords

Maya religion/spirituality, spiritual guides, colonialism, hegemony, resistance, change

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This project began in the 1980s in my native city of Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. I am fortunate in having parents, Papá Augusto and my late Mamá Fidelia, who did not oppose my political activism or my curiosity and interest in Maya spirituality.

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Finally, my thanks go to my children, Luna and Tijash, and wife Tara, who were my sunlight in the darkest of times. Thank you to my stepchildren Nicholas and Noella for their encouragement.

DEDICATION

To mamá Lela (the late Fidelia Ixcot de Barreno) and papá Augusto Barreno Coyoy

To my Maya and Ladino *compañer@s*

To the victims and survivors of the Guatemalan genocide

To the Ajq'ijab'

To those, who out of love for humanity, struggle for a just world

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Map 1: Republic of Guatemala map¹



Departamentos (provinces) of Guatemala. The city of Quetzaltenango or Xelaju (marked with a moon) is the capital city of the *Departamento* with the same name.

¹ Mapade.org, “Mapa de la República de Guatemala,” last modified November 24, 2019 https://www.mapade.org/guatemala_para_colorear.html

Map 2: Ethnic groups of Guatemala map²



Ethnic groups of Guatemala. The K'iche Maya region is identified with the number 1. The Cakchiquel Maya region is identified with the number 2, the Ixil region with number 10 and the Kekchi region with number 11.

² Ibid..

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Prologue: Self-positionality

In the mid-1980s, while living in Quetzaltenango in my late teen, early-adulthood years, I participated in secret Mayan ceremonies. The venues were rural, hidden in forests, in or near caves or in front of large rocks and covered in the smoke of a sacred fire. The ceremonies were attended by a handful of people. Among them were two or three spiritual guides (Ajq'ijab'), the people who asked for the ceremony and one or two guests. After riding by bus or car, walking up-hill and preparing all the materials, a three-hour ceremony would start. With the spiritual guides' lead, the group invoked the 'four sides of the universe.' We first addressed the east, representing the sun and sunrise; then we turned counter-clockwise to the west to address the sunset and the night; the north, to invoke the wind; and lastly the south, to salute the water and earth. Then the spiritual guides mentioned ancient Mayan cities, the mountains, rivers and lakes of Guatemala and countries nearby.

Only after mentioning natural and cosmological names did they cite spiritual, mystical and historical Mayan names. Some used passages of the sacred book *Popol Wuh* to invoke their ancestors. The names I recall were Tz'akol, Bitol, Alom, K'ajolom, Tepew and Q'uqumatz. These were the mystical architects of life on earth. The mystical Ajq'ijab Ixmucane and Ixpiyacoc were the makers of humanity. They created the first human beings Balam Ki'tze, Balam Aq'ab, Majuk'utaj'e and Ik'i Balam and their wives.

All of us completed the initial invocation at the same time. Some of us, but not all, next proceeded to count the days of the 260-day lunar calendar. While some remained standing, others walked around the fire. The fire was made of natural materials, such as sugar, pine resin products known as *copal*, *ocote*, *cuilco* and *pom*, candles and incense. We began walking around the circle counter-clock-wise. We all tossed 13 pieces of *cuilco* (pine resin formed into small round pieces) as each of the 20 symbols of the calendar was recited 13 times.

The praying, and occasional singing was non-stop. Everyone was speaking in K'iche Maya, Spanish or both. The intense fire was the medium to communicate with the Creator, *Ajaw*, I was told. As the flames twirled, the prayers and counting became more intense. I also observed that at the beginning, during and at the end of the ceremony some Ajq'ijab or *sacerdotes Mayas* (Mayan priests), as they were called in those days, mentioned Catholic saints. When the symbol *Tz'i* (dog and symbol of justice) was mentioned some

Ajq'ijab', occasionally, asked their deities, to cease the repression against Indigenous people. Most of them were aware of what was happening in other parts of Guatemala.

The ceremony concluded when the calendar reached the current day's number (one to thirteen) and symbol of the 260-day calendar 'governing' that day. The fire extinguished slowly and on its own. Some kneeled and did the Sign of the Cross. Others did not. We cleaned the place around the fire; we shared our food or water with those who attended and, finally, said best wishes to each other. Back in the city, nothing about the ceremony, the people or the place was discussed except in private settings. There was no written agreement or coercive mechanism to keep things secret. We did it to protect the Ajq'ijab' -the ceremonial leaders, - the place, the ceremonies and ourselves. Protection, according to Linda Tuhiwai Smith, is an activity Indigenous peoples do. For example, protection can be "as real as land and as abstract as a belief about the spiritual essence of the land."³ Attending them meant criticism from relatives, friends and neighbours. I recall that the practice was not tolerated, even amongst many of Quetzaltenango's K'iche Mayan families. Most were Catholics, no matter their social class. Mayan rituals were considered an affront to God and the 'mother Church.'

When I attended my first Maya ceremony, as a student activist in Quetzaltenango in the middle and late 1980s, I was more concerned with the country's social and political situation than in something popularly known as "*la brujería*" (witchcraft). Guatemala was at the height of its 36-year Civil War. An older friend, who attended these secret gatherings, wanted me to know about something beyond the social movement against the government: an under-ground Indigenous movement. "This is not our war," he told me. "We are being used by both sides." I was puzzled. I knew most of the army's victims were Indigenous people. Most of Quetzaltenango's residents were also Indigenous. Curious, and without abandoning my student activism, I accompanied him to ceremonies in mountains, caves, and small towns.

In the following years, until 1989, I attended more ceremonies. As a young adult, I experienced different ways of building the fire and learned how each Ajq'ij interpreted it. This way of seeing and being part of the universe, the natural world, the underworld,

³ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, "Twenty-five Indigenous Projects" in *Critical Strategies for Social Research*, ed. William K. Carroll (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc., 2004), 86.

humanity, of counting time, the reverse order of things (counter-clockwise), the language, the manner of remembering and honoring mystical beings and historical figures eventually demonstrated to me that this was a different knowledge system being shared and passed to others. It was a system kept and protected by the K'iche Maya Ajq'ijab' of Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. They are, using Gregory Younging's definition, the "authoritative experts" who gained this knowledge from others, from places, from practising and from experience.⁴ I quickly learned that Mayan rituals were an affront to the minority Creole hegemony and the country's two main religions that began undermining Maya religion 500 years ago.

I noticed that my identity as a K'iche Maya was strengthened by these experiences. Moreover, my self-positioning as a K'iche Maya, participating in ceremonies and learning a new way of seeing the world, is an important cultural foundation of this study. It was nevertheless a difficult, hard-won struggle. In the 1980s, I feared the social rejection if people found I went to ceremonies. My parents did not object to my newfound cultural niche nor social activism. I nonetheless had to navigate between these two worlds. This tension became the basis of my Mayan and Guatemalan experience.

In the 1980s, Marxist scholar Severo Martínez Peláez influenced the academic community and university student leadership. In 1970, he wrote his seminal work *La Patria del Criollo*. In it, he briefly discusses Indigenous beliefs calling them "paganism."⁵ Catholic devotees also condemned these practises. Protestants, growing at a faster pace, became severe critics of anything Indigenous. Further polarizing that situation, Guatemala was in the grips of an international conflict: The Cold War. For years, large parts of the country were engulfed in an armed struggle. Marxist groups against military dictatorships supported by the United States led it. Military presence was common everywhere, especially under the rule of Generals Fernando Lucas García (1978-1981) and then General, and avid Protestant Pastor, Efraín Ríos Montt (1981-1983). The country was constantly under curfew and our rights as citizens were limited.

⁴ Gregory Younging, "Gnaritas Nullius (No One's Knowledge): The Essence of Traditional Knowledge and its Colonization Through Western Legal Regimes" in *Free Knowledge: Confronting the Commodification of Human Discovery*, eds. Patricia Elliott and Daryl Hepting (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2015), 155.

⁵ Severo Martínez Peláez, *La Patria del Criollo: Ensayo de interpretación de la realidad colonial guatemalteca* (México DF: Ediciones en Marcha, 1994 [1970]), 210. My translation

Ironically, some guerrilla fighters and supporters were foreign Catholic priests. Their theology of liberation resulted in the persecution and killing of priests, Catholic Action leaders and catechists by the army. However, the main target was the Indigenous civilian population of north-west Guatemala for two main reasons: because thousands of them joined the guerrilla forces and because most of the Indigenous civilian population were suspected of supporting the rebel forces. As a result, the army's scorched earth campaign carried out genocidal attacks against four Mayan groups between 1981 and 1983. The most affected areas were El Quiché, Chimaltenango, Huehuetenango, San Marcos, Sololá and the Verapaces provinces (*Departamentos*). People were also killed because of their ethnicity. The dead included the elderly, children and babies.

Quetzaltenango and cities with large Indigenous populations such as Momostenango and Totonicapán, experienced sporadic battles. For example, I recall one bombing attack against Quetzaltenango's public San Carlos University Western Campus (Centro Universitario de Occidente - CUNOC) and one battle near my old neighborhood. However, these urban centres were spared the large massacres that occurred in the "Ixil triangle," the Ixcán in northern El Quiché province, northern Huehuetenango, Chimaltenango and Cobán. In fact, school and university classes continued despite the selective killing and disappearances of professors and university students.

It was in this political violence, in the late 1970 and most of the 1980s, that most Indigenous, Ladino children (people of mix heritage), and I grew up. We studied in an education system that did not teach anything about how many Mayan groups existed in the country; our Indigenous history, customs, laws, languages and spiritual practices; and, with the exception of few teachers, much less about that historical moment.

Publicly, as Indigenous people we were referred to as *naturales* (natural people), in the best of cases, *indios* (Indians) most of the time, but never as Maya. Our parents' language was called *la lengua* (the tongue) and not K'iche Maya. To attend school, Indigenous girls were forced to abandon their Indigenous outfits (*trajes*) for uniforms. Everything was taught in Spanish, including the world's history, sciences, geography and religion. Catholic nuns used to visit public elementary schools to prepare us for our communion or confirmation as Catholics. The *Popol Wuh*, the sacred book of the Maya, was not mentioned in any of the classes. Indigenous parents, most of whom spoke *la*

lengua, did not teach us K'iche Maya. Instead, they encouraged us to learn *la Castilla* (Castilian Spanish), do our first communion and be good Christians.

At the end of my primary education and through high school, I learned more about what was happening in the countryside. A few teachers and, mostly, university and high school student leaders educated us about the massacres. They encouraged us to participate in marches and raise our voices against the army and ruling class. As a 13-year old child, I remember attending massive demonstrations. We protested the 1978 Panzos, Alta Verapaz massacre, the 1980 police burning of the Spanish Embassy and the killing of local university students in the late 1970s and most of the 1980s.⁶ I began to learn that activists, no matter their age and gender, were bullied, beaten, intimidated and threatened by police and military forces. In the worst cases, they were killed or disappeared. In Quetzaltenango, the *orejas* (spies) system was used to blow the whistle on neighbours, professors, schoolmates and colleagues suspected of 'subversive' activities. Indigenous and non-Indigenous civilians spied on other civilians.⁷ The folk response to the local killings and disappearances was "*talvez estaban metidos en algo*" (maybe they were involved in something [against the government]). Heavily censored, no local or national news outlet informed the public about the massacres occurring in rural Guatemala after the Panzos massacre. Despite the repression and fear, the urban youth-led demonstrations and organizing did not stop.

After a few years of student and Maya activism, I moved to Canada in 1989. Ironically, it was in an Indigenous college of this northern country where I began learning about Guatemala's linguistic groups; the country's Maya past and colonial history; the role of the Catholic Church in colonialism and its impact on the Indigenous worldview. I also learned that syncretism was a form of preserving *la costumbre*. I learned that by embracing syncretism and other forms of survival, my people were "acting and thinking strategically."

⁶ See Cindy Forster, *La Revolución Indígena y Campesina en Guatemala, 1970 a 2000: "Ver un día que nuestra raza maya fuera levantada,"* (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, 2012); Jim Handy, *Gift of the Devil: A History of Guatemala*, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1984), 246-47; see also Betsy Koefal, *For Every Indio Who Falls: A History of Maya Activism in Guatemala, 1960-1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010), 83-110.

⁷ See Beatrice Manz, *Refugees of a Hidden War: The Aftermath of Counterinsurgency in Guatemala*. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), 70-1.

Indigenous peoples who acted that way, according to Smith, were doing it for “long-term goals.”⁸

In my university classes, readings and talking to exiled Guatemalans I learned more about the origins of the ongoing war, including the extent of the genocide. It was here that I became aware of their efforts to educate other people about human rights violations; and their efforts to end the war. Added to that self-education I began participating in Indigenous ceremonies in and near Regina, Saskatchewan. I observed that language and the elements used in the ceremonies were different from those in Guatemala. However, the Elders, using their pipes, also invoked the four directions in identical order to the Maya way. Their prayers, using the Indigenous languages of the territory (Treaty 4) was continuous and concentrated. The smoke coming out of their pipes was the medium to communicate with the Creator.

Contrary to what I experienced in Guatemala, in Canada’s Treaty 4 territory the Indigenous Elders were a central part of Indigenous activities whether they were educational, cultural, social or political. I became aware that, as in Guatemala, their spiritual practices were also forbidden up to the 1960s. My interest in knowing more about Maya spirituality was influenced by both experiences. That led me to attend Indigenous ceremonies in Canada and visit spiritual guides when I traveled to Guatemala in the 1990s and subsequent decades.

Navigating two worlds, I began to learn how important ideology, race and religion were in conquering Guatemala and governing it; dominating its economy; imposing a new worldview; creating policies and actions to deal with the ‘Indian problem;’ and even within the Marxist guerrilla leadership which saw Indigenous cultures as just another form of ‘false consciousness.’ For groups in power or challenging that power, to be *Indio* meant to be “less than.” In their view, Indigenous people needed to be governed or led by the other. I also learned that ideology and race played a contradictory role in the practices of state terrorism. During the Civil War, some Indigenous individuals voluntarily cooperated with the state against their own people. More perplexing was the support I received from non-Indigenous schoolmates (in the local lexicon they are called *Ladinos*; culturally they consider themselves non-Indigenous) while I was harassed by Indigenous youth opposed

⁸ Smith, “Twenty-five Indigenous Projects,” 87.

to my activism and political ideas.⁹ People from El Quiché were not as fortunate as people like us living in large urban areas like Quetzaltenango. They were the target of large massacres and genocide.

Guatemala's Civil War ended in 1996. The government and the four guerrilla groups signed a Peace Agreement whose negotiations began in 1987. Yet the social conditions that led to the armed resistance did not improve. Most rural Indigenous people languish in poverty while the oligarchy retains economic and ideological control. While the Peace Agreement has largely been forgotten, the Indigenous rights accord, negotiated in Mexico in 1995, empowered the *Ajq'ijab'* to express their beliefs publicly after five centuries of secrecy. Although I moved to Canada, I maintained contact with some Quetzaltenango spiritual guides. I also attended ceremonies during my visits over the last 25 years. To the best of my ability, this thesis shares their version of events in the 1990s and thereafter.

⁹ This personal experience demonstrates the complexity of the racial and cultural relations in Guatemala. The *Ladino compañeros* (comrades) played a key role in one of the most difficult times I lived in Guatemala.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In December 1996, when the Peace Agreement between the government and guerrilla forces was signed, I visited the Guatemalan city of Quetzaltenango. I observed how the fear of previous years was transformed into hope and joy in towns and cities' streets. I also witnessed how Indigenous ceremonies became public events and more people were joining them before and after 1996. This observation became the source of my study's overarching question. How did the Maya belief system, in just a matter of a few years, go from five centuries of clandestinity to being practiced publicly? Although the main purpose of this study was to understand the counter-hegemonic struggles of the Quetzaltenango Ajq'ijab until the late 1980s, it also discusses the social, political, and cultural changes that took place from that decade to the 1990s. The study verifies that the main reasons for the traditional Ajq'ijab' of Quetzaltenango to abandon clandestinity during the peace process were anchored in their belief system. In the relative safety of living in this city, they became less fearful of the state and organized religions and began to communicate with other colleagues. The study also reveals a variety of challenges, changes, negotiations, and new fears they have faced since their 1990s cultural renaissance. These include new members and a diversity of views about their belief system, the effects of capitalism on spiritual practices, and the impact social factors have on their place of prayer. To achieve my objectives, I used an inter-disciplinary methodology: grounded theory and *la costumbre*.

Several studies demonstrate that Maya religion is neither a recent phenomenon nor was it fixed or isolated from other cultural events and influences in both pre-colonial and colonial times. The literature review briefly discusses the history of Maya religion, including the political and social functions it served during the pre-classic, classic and post-classic periods. These pre-colonial historical phases are defined by the development of a priesthood class. These intellectuals developed cartography to understand the cosmos, replicating them to build their cities. They also mastered mathematics to create calendars. A constant figure in the origins and development of Maya religion and its priesthood hierarchy is the *Ah-kih* or *Ajq'ij* (spiritual guide or timekeeper; Ajq'ijab' in plural).

The main periods of my review are the later colonial and neo-colonial periods. Although scattered, some studies mention how the Ajq'ijab's spiritual ceremonies survived

the European conquest and the intrusion of a hegemonic Christianity. This study corroborates that neither Catholicism nor Protestantism were able to erase these ancient spiritual beliefs, and that Mayan spiritual ceremonies adapted themselves to the times by practicing in secrecy, due to hegemonic pressures, and incorporating new influences into their practice.¹ The Ajq'ijab', as spiritual leaders, played a fundamental role as they passed their knowledge and skills to younger followers. Mayan religious and intellectual creations that withstood colonialism, albeit with some effects from external influences, include Mayan mnemonics such as the 260-day calendar; the sacred book of the Maya, the *Popol Wuh*; and the knowledge of natural materials used to build their sacred fire.

The modern literature about Maya spirituality, mostly written by non-Guatemalan scholars, and my interview findings each contradict colonial and neo-colonial descriptions of the Maya pantheon, ceremonies and passing of knowledge to others. In contrasting Catholic doctrine, Mayan ceremonies had nothing to do with worshipping the “devil.” Rather, Maya spirituality is focused on revering nature, the cosmos, ancestors and offering people an alternative to organized Western religions. I place special emphasis on the 1960-1996 Civil War period to demonstrate how state-sponsored violence mirrors the earlier, colonial conquest of Guatemala. Ironically, this conditioned the eventual peace process that allowed Maya spirituality to be practiced publicly after centuries of seclusion.

One of the places where Maya spirituality resurfaced was the city of Quetzaltenango, Guatemala's second largest city. Fifty-nine Mayan altars are hidden in the ten hills and mountains that surround this city.² Secret ceremonies were performed at these altars until the late 1980s. After speculating about why they celebrated their ceremonies in the dark, I learned it was fear that forced small groups to practice in hidden places at night or dawn. This all changed in the 1990s. The peace negotiations between Marxist forces and the Guatemalan government allowed the resurgence of Maya spirituality. The ceremonies became known, the numbers of spiritual guides increased, and new challenges emerged from this new conjuncture. Using the local protocol known as *la costumbre*, I was able to

¹ Borrowing Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity (*Location of Culture*, 1998 [1994], 4) this work demonstrates that neither Christianity nor Maya religion were fixed in time and place. They interacted and influenced each other even if that was not in their respective hegemonic and counter-hegemonic plans.

² A local Ajq'ijab' provided this information to the writer in August 2017 when I accompanied him, another Ajq'ij, two municipal workers, and several young men who were doing a visit to one of the Mayan altars as part of the municipal Territorial Land Use Plan (*Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial* -POT).

approach and meet the Quetzaltenango Ajq'ijab. I participated in some of their ceremonies and prayed with them in the altars and at their homes. Their names are kept confidential for safety reasons, even though some are no longer afraid of the Guatemalan state and society. Their anonymity does not minimize their contribution to this study.

To answer my research question, I interviewed traditional and non-government organization (NGO) trained spiritual guides, an apprentice and a top Indigenous academic, Rigoberto Quemé Chay, former Mayor of Quetzaltenango. They expressed various viewpoints about the Maya belief system and how it has evolved since the ceremonies became public. They described their experiences during Guatemala's Civil War, the peace negotiations, the subsequent Maya cultural renaissance, the differences that exist amongst them and the current situation.

This dissertation does not attend to the metaphysical properties attributed to Maya religion. Historically, this has proven to be both an obscure and dangerous path that frequently demonizes the Maya and their ceremonies. Fuentes y Guzman, for example, wrote he did not comprehend how a heavy "stone idol" he ordered be dropped into an abyss could return to its original place the next morning if it wasn't through the "power of the devil..."³ Martha Few's study of sorcery in the colonial city of Antigua Guatemala, shows how colonial authorities used inquisition to label Indigenous healers' work as evil and idolatrous and punish women.⁴ She cites witnesses who observed Indigenous women with supernatural powers. These included blood sucking, vomiting stones, hair, charcoals, corn husks and other items.⁵ 'Witches' could turn into vultures,⁶ black cats⁷ and cause death through spells.⁸ As in medieval Europe, attributing those 'powers' to women was a justification to control and punish them. This study does not depend on describing the validity or invalidity of the Ajq'ijab's personal beliefs. This study is therefore a socio-cultural examination of counter-hegemonic resistance rather than a metaphysical inquiry into powers colonial writers have attributed to them.

³ Cited in Severo Martínez Peláez, *La Patria del Criollo: Ensayo de interpretación de la realidad colonial guatemalteca* (México DF: Ediciones en Marcha, 1994 [1970]), 210. My translation.

⁴ Martha Few, *Women who Live Evil Lives: Gender, Religion, and the Politics of Power in Colonial Guatemala*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010), 81.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 48, 49, 66.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 57, 63.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 96, 119.

1.2 Organization of the work

This study is organized as follows. In the prologue, I have placed this project within the wider context of my culture, my place of origin and my historical experience. As an Indigenous Studies scholar, I reflect on my positionality and cultural relationships. They were central to generating my research question. They also set me in a particular exploratory direction. As a Quetzaltenango native, my positionality led me to use *la costumbre* to approach people. It let their voices be heard, both on the questions I asked and on topics they considered important to share. This method enhanced my access to local sources. It also enriched my understanding of their lived historical experience.

Chapter 1, the introduction, presents the topic, thesis statement and outlines the organization of the dissertation. Chapter 2 is a study of the literature about Maya religion. It relates my work to a rich scholarly tradition studying the Maya and their religion, especially during the pre-classic and classic periods. The colonial experience is also included in this chapter because the post-classic Maya used counter-hegemonic strategies to preserve their belief system during this period. At the beginning of colonization, Maya religious structures were replaced by the new Catholic order. Maya spirituality became an underground practice. For the next five centuries, Mayan ceremonies resisted relentless attacks from colonial and Catholic authorities. The chapter also addresses how scholarly literature defines the Maya religion by reviewing their studies about the spiritual guides, the *Popol Wuh*, the 260-days calendar and the ceremonial fire. The final parts of this chapter deal with modern interpretations of Maya religion, how it came to be called “Maya spirituality” and how these ceremonies became public in the 1990s. Finally, I describe Quetzaltenango’s spiritual guides since their experiences and views are the focus of my study.

In chapter 3, I describe the theoretical and methodological framework. Antonio Gramsci’s hegemony theory is used to analyze historical influences on Maya spirituality. Some scholars reject this theory. However, I will demonstrate that violence, religion and negotiations with the Native elites were used to coerce the Indigenous population and convert them to Catholicism. Another reason for using Gramsci’s theory is its flexibility to analyze complex cultural and political structures. Neither the concepts of hegemony nor organic intellectuals are absolute. As it will be demonstrated, neither the colonizer nor the

colonized were unified as groups against one another during colonial and, most especially, neo-colonial times. Rather, these historical blocs were informal, unstable and inconsistent alliances especially when Catholic priests, theology of liberation supporters, sided with Indigenous struggles. During the same period, the 1980s, non-spiritual Indigenous leaders were divided into two different ideologies. Above all, focusing on the struggle for hegemony helps explain how Mayan spiritual guides resisted religious attempts to destroy their “way of life” as they describe it. It also helps us to understand that the ceremonial practices were not inflexible but rather changing and evolving.

To better categorize and analyze the role of the *Ajq’ijab’*, the organic intellectuals of this Maya resurgence, I used grounded theory. During the fieldwork *la costumbre* and one-on-one interview methods helped me to obtain the participants’ perspectives on their experiences. During these conversations, I asked what made them leave secrecy and what the state of their belief system is now. Their data was classified into different categories. Coding this data resulted in fresh understandings on the renaissance and challenges of Maya spirituality.

The historical context of this study begins in chapter 4. The classic Maya are briefly described. The main people in this study are the K’iche Maya. The narrative traces their origins in Yucatan, Mexico and Petén, Guatemala, follows their migration to Central Mexico; finally, their conquest of the Guatemalan highlands in the 1200s. Chapter 5 focuses specifically on European colonization. It describes how colonialism influenced the colonizers and the colonized. It describes the colonial division of Guatemalan society by Spanish notions of class, race and religion. It explains how the Maya were subjected to forced labor; ideologies of race superiority; and the arrival of even more aggressive religions, which resulted in the violent oppression of Maya culture and spirituality in particular. Chapter 6 examines Guatemala’s Civil War (1960-1996). Amid violence and genocide, Mayan fighters, refugees, and the internally displaced were able to retain valuable aspects of their culture through various means. Quetzaltenango did not experience the same levels of violence other regions experienced. Although a few *Ajq’ijab’*, especially those from nearby small towns or rural areas, were intimidated by the army, this relative peace allowed the Quetzaltenango spiritual guides to continue practicing with caution.

Chapter 7 focuses on the case of Quetzaltenango and the local Ajq'ijab'. This is the city where much of what it is discussed in previous chapters, the history context, occurs. It is also where the field work took place. By observing how the ceremonies moved from secrecy to the public sphere my research question originated there. Another reason for selecting this modern city is that this is a site of sharp religious conflict. Catholicism and Protestantism dominate, the Mormon Church is evolving, and Maya spirituality is on the rise. In this chapter, Mayan spiritual leaders and Indigenous experts explain what led them to celebrate Mayan ceremonies publicly in the same decade that Indigenous activists helped end Guatemala's 36-year war. My study focuses on the spiritual leaders' reasons for abandoning secrecy and opening themselves up to public, religious and scholarly scrutiny. The participants also shared information they deemed important to know. For example, the traditional Ajq'ijab', had learned and practiced the traditional way for decades. They welcomed the peace talks. However, they also began to experience rapid changes to their place of worship, to traditional training, practices of gifting and a boom in followers. Thousands of people became spiritual guides all over Guatemala - including foreign scholars. - In this new historical conjuncture, some new Ajq'ijab' began to commercialize their knowledge by setting fees for ceremonies and training. Meanwhile, others began imitating Christian religious values. Quemé Chay and some spiritual guides also contrasted their withdrawal from city and national political affairs with the prominent leadership roles spiritual guides are playing in nearby rural areas. Lastly, as Quetzaltenango residents they face the same adversities as most Guatemalan citizens' face (i.e., poverty, unemployment and petty crime as the product of rampant government corruption). These conditions are once again, forcing them to make changes to how and where they conduct their ceremonies.

Chapter 8, the conclusion and final analysis, recalls pre-classical, classical and post-classical achievements, the foundations of what came to be known as Maya religion. It then focuses on the colonial and neo-colonial descriptions of Mayan ceremonies, finally exposed by foreign and some Indigenous scholars after more than four centuries of Criollo and Catholic hegemony. Indigenous beliefs as 'pagan' and 'evil' no longer appear in new scholarly works. Some studies focus on syncretism, the most important strategy to protect the ceremonies while demonstrating how Catholicism and Mayanism influenced each other. Key for this syncretic strategy was the *cofradía*, a Catholic brotherhood based on a

pre-colonial religious structure. Although Mayan spirituality was not fully understood by Mayan peace negotiators, it survived the 1981-1983 genocide and they included it, under cultural rights, in the final 1996 Peace Agreement. This chapter ends with the analysis of what the 13 participants revealed to this writer. My findings will demonstrate heterogeneity amongst Quetzaltenango's Ajq'ijab'. It will analyze how older participants experienced and overcame fear in the 1980s to the 1990s. The chapter also reveals points of agreement between the literature and the study participants regarding the peace process and what it meant for Maya spirituality. Their views and actions, to continue protecting their ceremonies, also show the site of prayer is moving. Identifying this feature is one of the main contributions of this dissertation. I learned that an exceptional change was occurring: the place of prayer was moving from rural to urban settings.

Chapter 2: Context and Existing Literature

Scholars have studied Maya culture and history from many perspectives. This chapter briefly examines studies using historical, anthropological, archeological, ethnographical, cultural, religious and spiritual approaches about the pre-classic and classic Maya. These works led us to understand the origins, priesthood structure and function of Maya religion during those periods. Although Maya culture includes languages, traditional technologies, outfits (*trajes*), music, dances, and other material and non-material creations this chapter's main emphasis is on the treatment of Maya religion. This religion was first described by waves of colonial chroniclers and four centuries later by Guatemalan scholars whose Marxist ideologies permeated their studies. As a result, Mayan symbols and ceremonies were treated as “evil” practises and paganism. These hegemonic views were profoundly challenged by modern interpretations of Maya religion and the strategies it used to survive. Beginning around the 1940s, scholars focused on syncretism, the mixing of two religions, the Maya strategy of preserving *la costumbre* (the traditional custom), and more recently have studied the Civil War, the 1990s peace process, the cultural renaissance and the fracturing of Christian hegemony. In this literature review I will identify and address the gaps that exist in the examinations of the Ajq'ijab', their ceremonies and places of prayer. For instance, while these studies help us understand the existence, change, and continuity of Mayan ceremonies and the spiritual guides, my study differs because I focus on the role the Ajq'ijab' played in resisting colonial and neo-colonial cultural hegemony but not without changing, negotiating, and interacting with the dominant religions.

This chapter also describes who the spiritual guides or Ajq'ijab' (Ajq'ij in singular) are and the symbols they use to practice Maya spirituality: the *Chol Q'ij* or the 260-day calendar; the sacred book of the Maya *Popol Wuh*; and fire, as the medium the Ajq'ijab' use to communicate with the *Ajaw* (Creator). The explanation of these mnemonic creations is followed by scholarly descriptions of modern Maya spirituality. In this chapter I discuss how this term, spirituality, became standardized in the 1990s. The public appearance of Mayan ceremonies in various parts of the country and Quetzaltenango, in particular, is discussed as a preamble to the main subject of this study. The chapter ends by describing

the research question, the reasons that led this writer to select this city as my place of study and the Ajq'ijab' as the main participants.

2.1 Origins, structures, and functions of Maya religion

The pre-classic Maya (1800 BC-AD 250), classic Maya (AD 250-900) and the post-classic Maya (AD 900-1521) developed a complex society that eventually branched out into several nations and confederations. During the peak of their development their scientific and calendar accomplishments were at the service of the religious and political class which governed and built their classic city-states. Religion was not a separate entity. It was integral to society. Maya religion was preserved in the form of spiritual ceremonies and religious mnemonics, which were strong enough to survive colonialism and the racist ideologies, policies and actions that followed.

The source of Maya spirituality, which connects the heavens with the earth, is the natural world, Jean Molesky-Poz wrote. This connection resulted not only in the origin of the Mayan calendars but also in

Terrestrial landscapes, spatial cartography, and mythic narratives to mirror the celestial events of the night sky. From 250-850 AD architects mapped astronomical space and laid over its geography, aligning architecture, settlement patterns and ritual practice with solar, planetary and lunar events...[Cities such as Abaj Takalik, Utatlan (Gumarcaaj), Uaxactún and Zaculeu and other cities]...present strikingly literal maps of the sky on dates associated with the Mayan creation or with important events in each polity's history.¹

Guillermo Cook argues Maya beliefs and practices are older than all the “main” religions of the world. He cites the example of the use of calendars, as depicted in classic Mayan ceremonial centers.² Prudence Rice argued that the skywatchers or daykeepers were “...individuals who possessed a body of recondite knowledge of the movements of the sun, moon Venus, and other celestial phenomena and who used that special knowledge to guide quotidian and ritual events, thereby maintaining order.”³ According to John D. Early, Maya

¹ Jean Molesky-Poz, “Mayan Spirituality (Guatemala Highlands)” in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron Taylor (Continuum, 2008), 1063.

² Guillermo Cook, ed., *Crosscurrents in Indigenous Spirituality: Interface of Maya, Catholic, and Protestant Worldviews* (Leiden, the Netherlands: E.J., Brill, 1995), 6, 7, 9.

³ Prudence Rice, *Maya Calendar Origins: Monuments, Mythistory, and the Materialization of Time*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2007), 187.

religion possessed a metaphysical, ‘infinite’ belief system. Their highest deity was “The One, the cosmic force, and the spiritual force” that creates everything and works in a cyclical way.⁴ In the Maya system, people are not separated from other entities, including the cosmos, natural and internal beings. It is for that reason that, according to Early, “each human has an animal counterpart [i.e., Nawal].”⁵

Like most societies, the Maya were preceded and influenced by other cultures. One of the most influential cultures was the Nahua. Daniel Grana Behrens describes the titles and responsibilities of the people who oversaw the writing and passing of information in Nahua and Mayan cultures. The differences between the two beliefs were minimal.⁶ In the Mayan religious hierarchs, the wise men were called *itz’aat* and in Nahua *tlamatini*.⁷ Besides guarding the “holy books,” the *tlamatini*’s duties also included “to prophecy the future, to cure, and to advise kings and people through divination.”⁸

During this classic period, there were eighty Mayan city-states. A leader named *k’uhul ajaw* ruled each nation-state. Other professions included the scribe (*aj tzib*), the sculptor (*aj-lu*), the religious interpreter (*chilam*), and the *aj k’uhuun*, which could be interpreted as “he of the holy books” or “one who keeps, guards,” or “one who worships, venerates.”⁹ Morales Sic description and function of the priesthood hierarchs is similar to Grana Behrens: the *Chilanes*, or fortune-tellers, responded to people’s questions; the *Nacon*, a life-long occupation, oversaw ceremonies of all kinds; The *Nacon* had four helpers named *Chaces*; and then there was the *Ahkin*, the general priest in charge of general things.¹⁰ The Florentine Codex portrays the role of the *tlamatini* and his nemesis, the bad wise man.¹¹

The wise man [is] exemplary. He possesses writing, he owns books. [He] is the tradition, the road; a leader of man, a rower, a companion, a bearer of responsibility, a

⁴ John D. Early, *Maya and the Catholic Cultures in Crisis* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2012), 12.

⁵ Ibid. 17.

⁶ Daniel Grana Behrens, “Mesoamerican Memory: Enduring Systems of Remembrance” in *Mesoamerican Memory: Enduring Systems of Remembrance*, eds., Megged Amos and Stephanie Wood (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 27.

⁷ Ibid. 15.

⁸ Ibid. 15, 24.

⁹ Ibid. 16.

¹⁰ José Roberto Morales Sic, *Religión y Política: El proceso de institucionalización de la espiritualidad en el movimiento maya guatemalteco*. (Guatemala: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2007), 28.

¹¹ Behrens, D, “Mesoamerican Memory: Enduring Systems of Remembrance,” 25.

guide. The good wise man [is] a physician, a person of trust, a counselor; an instructor worthy of confidence, deserving of credibility, deserving of faith; a teacher. [He is] an adviser, a counselor, a good example; a teacher of prudence, of discretion; a light; a guide who lays out one's path, who goes accompanying one. [He is] reflective, a confessor, deserving to be considered as a physician, to be taken as an example. He bears responsibility, shows the way, makes arrangements, [and] establishes order. He lights the world for one; he knows of the land of the dead; he is dignified [and] unrivalled. He is relied upon, acclaimed by his descendants, confided in, trusted – very congenial. He reassures, calms, helps. He serves as a physician, he makes one whole.

The bad wise man [is] a stupid physician, silly, decrepit [pretending to be] a person of trust, a counselor, advise[r]. [He is] vainglorious, vainglory is his; [he is] a pretender to wisdom...vain –discredited. [He is] a sorcerer, a soothsayer, a deluder, he deceives, confounds, causes ills, leads into evil; he kills, he destroys people, devastates land, destroys by sorcery.¹²

Grana Behrens explains that “any activity required consultation with the priests to find the appropriate [calendar] days to celebrate it...Many of the ceremonies included self-sacrifice such as piercing one's tongue, penis, nose or ears. Similarly, to maintain celestial harmony, mammals, birds and even humans were sacrificed.”¹³ Flesh piercing, or more concretely, giving one's own blood was the main offering to Mayan deities.

John D. Early, like Daniel Grana Behrens and José Morales Sic, argued the Maya maintained their beliefs by making offering to their deities. The *Aj-Kih* performed the rituals at a proper time, according to their calendar, and in the proper manner.¹⁴

In the old Maya social stratum, there was another priest: *Ah Kin Mai*, *Ahau Can Mai* or the High Priest *Mai*. Supported by the community, he acted as an advisor to the political Lords. This High Priest oversaw the naming of priests for other towns by first examining their capacity in the “sciences, and ceremonies, and committed to them the duties of their office, and the good example to people and provided them with books about them.”¹⁵

The Maya developed their own writing system and their own numerology. These two elements were crucial for the conception and development of their religion. The peak

¹² Ibid. 25. This dichotomy, as it will be shown in both parts of this dissertation, exist today. The *Ajq'ij* and its nemesis, the *Aj'itz*, maintain this battle, sometimes in the same place doing different ceremonies.

¹³ Ibid. 27.

¹⁴ Early, *Maya and the Catholic Cultures in Crisis*, 20.

¹⁵ Ibid. 29.

of Maya development, linked to “astronomy, the calendar, and hieroglyphic writing” was between 292 and 900 AC.¹⁶ The Yucatec, Tzetzal, and Chol Maya, all from southern Mexico, are credited as the ones who developed and used writing. The rest of the groups “borrowed the writing in the post-classic period.” The writing and numerology are depicted together in Maya literary creations. Based on a vigesimal (twenty) system the numbers are composed of dots (representing the value of one), bars (representing the value of five), and a symbol for the zero value.¹⁷ The Mayan codes are, therefore, a combination of logographs and numbers.

The Madrid Codex includes two pages clearly depicting the Mayan calendars. In her study of the Tzolkin, printed in the *Madrid Codex*, Meredith Paxton realized that the Maya did not count the calendar in the Western way (clockwise) but counterclockwise. Therefore, she changed the order of the codex from pages 75-76 to 76-75 to decipher both the 260-day Tzolkin and the 365-day calendar (*Ab* or *Haab*) in the same figure.¹⁸ In the center of the calendar there is a symbol of Ixchel (the moon deity), mentioned in the *Popol Wuh*. That led her to conclude that the Tzolkin patron is the Moon Goddess.¹⁹ She also identified 18-footprints joined by 20 symbols to give a total of 360 days (the *haab* or solar calendar) and five small footprints painted in the southeast corner to give a total of 365 days.²⁰

Around 900 AC, the classic period came to a halt. Although the main reason is unknown, it “may have been a social revolution” or “there was overpopulation and perhaps the [political] organization was not properly managed to integrate such a large population.”²¹ The classic Maya did not recover.

Whatever the reason, the K'ichean Maya people left the lowlands of what is present-day the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico and the Petén region of Guatemala. They travelled north-west to central Mexico and then to the Guatemalan highlands, as shown by

¹⁶ Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas, *Los Códices Mayas* (Chiapas, México: Litográfica Delta, S.A., 1985), 17. My translation.

¹⁷ Michael D. Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 91.

¹⁸ Meredith Paxton, *The Cosmos of the Yucatec Maya: Cycles and Steps from the Madrid Codex* ([Albuquerque]: University of New México Press, 2001) 36-7. During a ceremony, the counting is done counter-clockwise.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 49.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 39. Other authors simply write this calendar as *Ab*.

²¹ Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas, *Los Códices Mayas*, 22. My translation.

Jean Piel in Map 3 (see page 94). The people were led by K'ichean leaders, Balam Ki'tze, Balam Aq'ab, Majuk'utaj'e, and Ik'i Balam. As narrated in the *Popol Wuh*, when these leaders celebrated a ceremony with pom they first prayed to the east, where "Venus and the sun were born."²² This is a relevant piece of information because the rituals this writer observed in the 1980s followed this pattern of first addressing the east where the sun and Venus rise, and the use of the same material used today: the pine resin pom (*Pinus psuedostrobus*).²³

Whereas the *Popol Wuh* is the most important K'iche Maya book, The *Kaqchiquel Annals* book is as important to the Kaqchiquel Maya people. The Kaqchiquel knowledge-keepers maintained the teachings of their people orally and then wrote them, after the Spanish invasion, using western alphabet and numbers. They "began recording time [using Spanish] on the day 11 Ah (May 18, 1493) ..." ²⁴ This indicates that the K'iche and Kaqchiquel did not cease counting Maya time using their own numerology and calendars despite abandoning their classic cities or after the Spanish priests burned most of their books. Writing books was an essential component of Maya culture. Spaniards found them all over the Maya territory. Destroying them was a hegemonic strategy. Fray Diego de Landa's explanation of the books' content shows that he understood their ideological and cultural importance for the people. The action of destroying them also shows the Spaniards' ignorance of a very different worldview. Landa wrote:

These peoples also made use of certain characters or letters, with which they wrote in their books their ancient matters and their sciences, and by these and by drawings and by certain sign in these drawings, they understood their affairs and made others understand them and taught them. We found a large number of books in these characters and, as they contained nothing in which there were not to be seen superstition and lies of the devil, we burned them all.²⁵

²² Adrián Inéz Chávez, *Pop-Wuj: Poema Mito-histórico Ki-ché* (Pop-Wuj: Mythical-historical Ki-che Poem), (Quetzaltenango, Guatemala: TIMACH, 1997 [1979]), 79-83. These four leaders are also, in the mystical part, the first four men created out of corn by mystic Abuelos, Ixmucane and her husband Xpiyacoc. The pom, made from pine resin, is one of the most important natural elements in the mystical, historical and contemporary Mayan ceremonies.

²³ Jon R. McGee, *Native Religion, Cultural Survival, and Economic Change: Life, Ritual and Religion Among the Lacandon Maya* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Pub, 1990), 50-1.

²⁴ Adrián Recinos, *Memorial de Sololá, Anales de los Kaqchiqueles: Título de los Señores de Totonicapán* (The Sololá Memoirs, the Kaqchiquel Annals: The Lords of Totonicapán Papers), (Guatemala: Editorial Piedra Santa, 2007), 27.

²⁵ Cited in Paxton, *The Cosmos of the Yucatec Maya*, 9.

The Spaniards based their actions, not just in Guatemala, on the belief that God was on their side and used the bible to “explain the origin of its inhabitants.”²⁶ By burning the Mayan books, they attempted to eradicate any intellectual, scientific and religious accomplishments of an entire civilization. The post-classic cities, inspired by astronomy and mysticism, were reduced to rubble.

With no books as references and the constant destruction of their glyphs and stone deities, people began passing along their traditions orally, writing them in Spanish and merging their ceremonies with Catholicism. This is the period when syncretism was born but also when rituals were taken to the mountains and caves by practitioners and their apprentices. Ceremonies and Mayan mnemonics needed to be protected from destruction. A five-century counter-hegemonic struggle had begun.

The K’iche Maya wrote documents about ancient knowledge and history using the new language. Robert Carmack reviewed one of those documents, the *Título de C’oyoi* (The C’oyoi papers). The C’oyoi papers narrate the importance of religion and cultural protocols in the last K’iche war preparations against the invader in 1524. The papers estimate that “8,400 people and 39 flag bearers” from K’iche communities joined the Indigenous army. It narrates how before going to battle the warriors “[went] above the mineral springs and bled themselves by piercing.”²⁷ This ceremonial act is one of the last recorded blood offerings to the Mayan deities. War was next.

Leading the K’iche army was Tecum, grandson of the former K’iche ruler, Quicab. Tecum was carried throughout all K’iche communities to rally the troops. He was adorned with feathers and precious stones. Wherever he went he was received with drums and dance.²⁸ The numerous Nahua army accompanying the few Spanish troops in 1524 eventually defeated Tecum. When military conquest was achieved, the Spaniards’ Christian ideology began to dominate Guatemala. As discussed in chapter 3, they broke their treaty promises with the Nahua and dominated them like any other Indigenous group.

²⁶ Rice, *Maya Calendar Origins*, 12.

²⁷ Robert M. Carmack, *Quichean Civilization: The Ethnohistoric, Ethnographic, and Archaeological Sources* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), 302.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Colonial chronicler Francisco Fuentes y Guzman recorded that conquistadors were “[... *instruments chosen by God for this great task*].”²⁹ The moral sanction of God was invoked when the conquistadors took possession of the land and thereafter. Indeed, the Spanish concept of God was a continuous partner in the colonization of Guatemala. Fuentes y Guzman considered conquistador Pedro de Alvarado a demi-God “[... *a Hercules, who from his cradle could tear cobras apart*...]”³⁰ However, to the authorities’ dismay, the old religion was not destroyed.

In the late 1600s, one-hundred-and-fifty years had passed since conquest and the Maya were still not fully converted to Catholicism. Severo Martínez Peláez, in his seminal interpretation of Francisco Fuentes y Guzman’s *La Recordación Florida*, describes the Indigenous beliefs as *Paganismo Muerto y Paganismo Vivo* (Dead Paganism and Alive Paganism)³¹ as Maya people were still praying to ‘idols.’ He describes Fuentes y Guzman’s annoyance in the late 1600s when watching all kinds of stone-made “pagan figures” sprouting from beneath his land: “Everyday ugly and disproportionate figures of men and women, snakes, monkeys, eagles, and other infinite and ridicule figures are dug and brought up from the crop ducts...” Fuentes y Guzman’s comment demonstrates that the Indigenous religion was alive, but the Criollo colonizer wished to see it dead.³² It is for that reason that Fuentes y Guzman ordered the use of pick-axes to destroy the large stone figures. Their destruction caused a sense of grief for Indigenous people who witnessed such action.³³ Using violence was a colonizer hegemonic strategy to subdue any attempt of the subordinate groups to hold to old ideologies expressed in their religion.

During the same period as Fuentes y Guzman’s book (the late 17th century or 175 years after conquest), Indigenous rituals similarly angered Dominican missionary and vicar of the Guatemalan Catholic Church Friar Francisco Ximenez. For him, the rituals were “errors” and “foolish.” In his view, Mayan creation stories were inspired by “Satan the

²⁹ Cited in Martínez Peláez, *La Patria del Criollo: Ensayo de interpretación de la realidad colonial guatemalteca* (México DF: Ediciones en Marcha, 1994 [1970]), 52-3. My translation.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Cited in Martínez Peláez, *La Patria del Criollo*, 205-217. My translation.

³² *Ibid.* 209-10.

³³ *Ibid.* 210.

father of lies...”³⁴ Ximenez realized these spiritual beliefs were a “burning fire” among the people. To eradicate them, he transcribed the *Popol Wuh*, the source of the “doctrine,” into Spanish hoping to better convert Indians to Catholicism and kill that “fire.” Quiroa says Ximenez’s personal mission was to destroy paganism from its doctrinal origins. He transcribed the *Popol Wuh* into K’iche Maya, using Western alphabet, and into Spanish. His aim was to “recognize (uncover) idolatrous practises when the neophytes engaged in ritual performances...to eventually eradicate (uproot) them from Indigenous spiritual life.”³⁵ Martínez Peláez criticizes colonial authorities’ exploitation of Indigenous peoples but agrees with their labelling of Maya spirituality as paganism and idolatrous. Since the Indians “memorized this religion since they were breastfeeding,”³⁶ Catholic missionaries engaged in an aggressive campaign to erase Maya religion for the next 200 years. As a result, syncretism became the new norm in various Indigenous settlements.

In John D. Early’s interpretation of syncretism, the military clash between the Spanish and the Maya was also a battle of the gods. Since the former won the war the surviving Maya, without giving up on their gods, adopted the Spanish god. The process was eased as the colonized leaders “cooperated with the new rulers.”³⁷ Another key hegemonic strategy was to build Catholic churches and chapels on top of Mayan altars, cemeteries and temples. These Spanish and Criollo tactics did not erase the ancient religion from people’s memories. Morales Sic says that Indigenous commoners continued their ceremonies in these new places. As a result, “the framework was Christian with pre-Hispanic content.” Syncretism, in Guatemala, was born out of this process.³⁸ The XVI century *cofradías*, with pre-colonial roots, were the institutional result of amalgamating the two religions: with a Catholic façade (the *cofradías* or collectives honoring Catholic saints) and Mayan protocols and ceremonies (the *costumbre*) to ensure all celebrations were done as in pre-colonial times.³⁹

³⁴ Cited in Nestor Quiroa, Carlos “Missionary exegesis of the Popol Vuh: Maya K’iche’ Cultural and Religious Continuity in Colonial and Contemporary Highland Guatemala” (University of Chicago, 2013), 77.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Martínez Peláez, *La Patria Del Criollo*, 213. My translation.

³⁷ Early, *Maya and the Catholic Cultures in Crisis*, 31, 40.

³⁸ Morales Sic, *Religión y Política*, 32. My translation.

³⁹ Personal observation. *La costumbre* varies from town to town but in Quetzaltenango it consists of a series of protocols and rituals that include offerings for the Ajq’ij to be the guide for a ceremony. Depending on the town or city the *costumbre* involves a variety of other rituals.

Throughout colonization, the Maya also “reinterpreted various biblical stories using concepts of their own worldview, especially “emanations” and “cycles.””⁴⁰ The new Mayan towns and *cofradías* had to replace their deities with Christian ones as patron saints.⁴¹ For example, *Ix-Chel*, the moon and fertility ‘goddess,’ was replaced with the Madonna; and the Christian cross has been adopted in different forms, particularly as a “bridge” to the next world. Blakeley Coull’s main point is that Maya people knew their belief system for 3,000 years. In other words, no matter what the Catholic Church did to separate people from their ancient beliefs it did not work entirely, not even during the cholera epidemic that hit the country in the early 1800s. Flavio Herrera wrote a brief account, albeit denigrating them, of how the cholera epidemic forced Quetzaltenango’s Indigenous peoples who “prefer giving their money to a witch [for a cure]” than accepting medicine.⁴² Replacing their deities with Christian ones was more a strategy of survival than total conversion.⁴³ Syncretism became the new norm and the *cofradías* its main religious expression. Older K’iche men and women usually form these Catholic organizations.⁴⁴

The *cofradías* have pre-conquest origins that honored Mayan deities or patrons. For instance, the people of Momostenango belonged to the K’iche *Nijaib* lineage (now they carry Vicente as their last name) and had *Awilix* as a patron (or *cabawil* in K’iche) whereas the K’iche *Kawek* lineage of Quetzaltenango had *Tohil* as their patron or *cabawil*.⁴⁵ The *cofradías* and the ceremonies, Frank and Wheaton explain, “... reflected pre-conquest Mayan values emphasizing community service and cooperation over individual gain, adapted to the colonial situation.”⁴⁶ The *cofradías* “also became the most important

⁴⁰ Ibid. 45.

⁴¹ Blakeley Coull, (Sponsoring Faculty Kevin Shirley). [n.d.] *Donning the Mask: Mayan Belief, Christianity and the Power of Syncretism* (La Grange College), last modified November 21, 2018 https://www.lagrangecollege.edu/resources/pdf/citations/2014/10_Coull_History.pdf, 108.

⁴² Cited in Grandin, Greg. *La sangre de Guatemala: Raza y Nación en Quetzaltenango 1750-1954* (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, 2007) 119. My translation.

⁴³ Ibid. 114.

⁴⁴ Garrett W. Cook and Thomas Offit, *Indigenous Religion and Cultural Performance in the Maya World*, ([Albuquerque]: University of New Mexico Press, 2013) 37-45.

⁴⁵ Garrett W. Cook, *Renewing the Maya World: Expressive Culture in a Highland Town* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 27.

⁴⁶ Luisa Frank and Philip Wheaton, *Indian Guatemala, Path to Liberation* (Washington: EPICA Task Force, 1984), 17.

stepping stone in political progression.”⁴⁷ At the end of the 1800s, both the syncretic *cofradías* and the Catholic Church met a new religious challenger: American Protestantism.

The first wave of Protestantism began in the 1870s. A second wave followed in the 1950s as a “spiritual alternative to communism.” A third and massive growth came after the 1976 earthquake when people converted out of need, a movement called “*anima for lamina*” or “a soul for plastic roofing.”⁴⁸ The last main conversion era was during the peak of the 1980s Civil War when military dictator Efraín Ríos Montt was the Head of State.

Like Ximenez in the late 1600s, Paul and Dorah Burgess, beginning in 1913, realized the conversion strategies had to consider Mayan ancient beliefs. However, unlike the Dominican missionaries, the American couple combined Maya “ethnic redemption” with their evangelization project. The medium to achieve their goal was the *Popol Wuh*. They received a Microfilm Ayer MS 1515 copy of the original Ximenez manuscript, in possession of the Newberry Library in Chicago. With the assistance of a K’iche Maya speaker, Patricio Xec, the Burgesses transcribed the *Popol Wuh* in both Spanish and K’iche Maya in 1955. Their *Popol Wuh* was intended to convert Indigenous peoples to Protestantism by using the ancient prayers while ignoring the “tyrannical gods” which demanded blood from the believers.⁴⁹ They wanted missionaries to use their version of the book as a step towards Protestantism.⁵⁰ While Protestantism was gaining followers, the *cofradías* had to deal with a new threat to their resistance: The Catholic Action.

The *cofradías*, which worship a Catholic saint in a city, town, *parcialidad* or *cantón* (rural communities governed by a municipality), follow the Christian calendar and the Indigenous *costumbre*. In Momostenango, the main *cofradías* honor Saint James and Saint Philip. These *cofradías* and their *costumbre* faced critics from within their own culture. The Church, even if the rituals were at the service of the Catholic *cofradía*, labelled the *costumbre*, witchcraft and the new Catholic Action, mostly formed by Indigenous converts, in the 1950s. Those who practiced *la costumbre* were called *brujos* (sorcerers or witches). In Momostenango, Catholic Action leaders, Indigenous themselves, began calling Mayan

⁴⁷ Jim Handy, *Gift of the Devil: A History of Guatemala* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1984), 30.

⁴⁸ Virginia Garrard-Burnett, “Maya Catholicism” and “Mayan Protestantism” in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron Taylor (Continuum, 2008), 1067.

⁴⁹ Quiroa, “Missionary exegesis of the Popol Vuh: Maya K’iche’ Cultural and Religious Continuity in Colonial and Contemporary Highland Guatemala,” 89, 92.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 90.

beliefs and practices “barbarous superstition and its practitioners ‘savages.’”⁵¹ The *costumbristas* fought back. In 1952, when Italian priest Padre Maruzzo attempted to change the Church’s floor, to get rid of the copal remains and candle wax left there by *costumbristas*, Indigenous Momostecans opposed Padre Maruzzo and Catholic Action. Despite 400 Catholic Action members surrounding the church, thousands of *costumbrista* entered the building on 8 *Batz* of the Maya Calendar, the most symbolic day for *costumbrista*.⁵² Indigenous people continued burning copal on the church’s floor.

After the church incident, *costumbrista* leaders continued consulting with respected shamans when they held political parties’ nominations and celebrated rituals to continue with the *costumbre*.⁵³ The Mayan priests, or shamans as Carmack calls them, still selected their own leaders.⁵⁴ Similar hegemonic and counter-hegemonic actions in Jacaltenango, Huehuetenango and Nebaj, El Quiché are described by Morales Sic.⁵⁵ The Catholic Action was determined to convince Indigenous peoples that the *costumbre* was negative and called for people to ‘rebel’ against traditionalists.

The ‘rebellion,’ led by Catholic Action against the *cofradías*, enjoyed relative success in smaller towns. Ricardo Falla’s *Quiché Rebelde* or *Rebellious Quiche* centers on how the Catholic Action leaders, in San Antonio Ilotenango, El Quiché, rebelled against the traditionalists or *costumbrista*’ belief system since the 1930s.⁵⁶ Falla states: “The main reason for the reaction of the innovators, Catholic or Protestant, against the *cofradías* always had to do with the imposition of the *cargos* (responsibilities for patron-saint celebrations) and the large financial contributions these entailed.”⁵⁷ With the 1954 American backed invasion of Guatemala, the Catholic Action’s anti-communist crusade grew stronger in remote Indigenous areas.⁵⁸ A young Emeterio Toj Medrano, who later

⁵¹ Carmack, *Rebels of Highland Guatemala: The Quiche-Mayas of Momostenango*, 232.

⁵² *Ibid.* 239-40.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 313.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 321.

⁵⁵ Morales Sic, *Religión y Política*, 37. My translation.

⁵⁶ Ricardo Falla, *Quiché Rebelde: Religious Conversion, Politics and Ethnic Identity in Guatemala* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001), 2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 11.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 12

became an activist and guerrilla fighter, first supported the overthrow of Arbenz was one of the first Catholic Action's members.⁵⁹

According to Falla, Indigenous merchants who travelled to Guatemala City introduced Catholic Action to San Antonio, Ilotenango. This is the town where he served as a priest and where he did research for his dissertation and book. He explains that the merchants, in their travels to the capital city, did not see Ladinos doing *la costumbre*. Contrary to the traditional *cofradías*, any *cargo* (responsibility) in Catholic Action's traditional Catholic ceremonies did not require many expenses to celebrate. Nor did they have to practice any *costumbre*.⁶⁰ San Antonio people began converting due to their bad "luck" in business or because the *zahorin* (the Ajq'ij) could not save a sick relative. Once converted, they began ridiculing the *zahorin* and the animal symbols of the Maya calendar. Falla calls Mayan practices, such as praying in the hills, giving prominence to rocks or asking for luck, "reprehensible because they are efforts to disturb the balance of luck set up in an orderly way."⁶¹

Catholic Action members associated the *zahorines'* prayers with communication with the devil.⁶² They went to the extreme of tossing the contents of a *zahorin's* bundle (*tzite*) into the local canyon, a place associated with evil after a convert accepted Catholic Action ways. Falla listed people's conversion in "power structure" diagrams associating the Maya Sacred World and *zahorines* with the devil and the Catholic Action with God.⁶³ *Zahorines* were labeled "businessmen" who exploited people. Conversion, therefore, meant economic and religious liberation from traditions and the *zahorines*. The power of the *zahorines*, he found, began to wind down in the 1930s due to international influences, such as the Great Depression, and changes in national politics in the 1940s.⁶⁴ In 1970, due to the conversion phenomenon, Falla predicted that "although the number of *zahorines* is going to decline, the *zahorines* are not going to disappear in the next twenty or twenty-five

⁵⁹ Betsy Konefal, *For Every Indio Who Falls: A History of Maya Activism in Guatemala 1960-1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010), 31

⁶⁰ Falla, *Quiché Rebelde*, 63.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.* 88.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 119-20, 129-34.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 113.

years.”⁶⁵ He called this process of conversion as “liberation from oppression” from the “*principales-zahorines* and the *cofradías*.”⁶⁶

Joining the Catholic Action was not massive in cities with large Indigenous populations. In 1976, when Garrett Cook arrived in Momostenango to do his first study, there were twenty-one Catholic *cofradías*. He observed that one of the main *cofradía costumbre* takes place during Easter or holy week. Parallel to celebrating Easter, *costumbristas* celebrate the beginning of the rainy season and planting time. The syncretism and mix of other aspects of la *costumbre* can be deduced from the testimony of Pedro Contreras. He explains that one must “pay” his *cofradía* initiation dues, with alcohol, cigarettes and money, to the *cofradía* hierarchs. Protocols, offerings and burning *copal*, *pom* and candles must be done following the 260-day calendar. *Costumbristas* hired a *Chuch Kajaw* (Timekeeper or spiritual guide) to perform calendar ceremonies. In exchange for offerings, he asks the Mayan deities for everything in the dance to go well. The *costumbre* continues in Momostenango and now competes with new-age Ajq’ijab’ and the Halloween looking *convite* dancers.

Cook went back to Momostenango accompanied by Thomas Offit, 30 years after his 1976 study. In their view, what exists in Momostenango is no longer religious syncretism but *hybridization*.⁶⁷ To provide examples of hybridity, Cook and Offit say that now there are three currents in Momostenango: The Catholic is mixed with *costumbre*, the Maya movement based in the *Popol Wuh*⁶⁸ and the new Ladino led *convites*, which mock the *costumbre* dances but are influenced by consumerism and the media.⁶⁹

Concrete examples of hybridity, as observed by Cook and Offit, include the *costumbre* dances performed by the Maya during fairs honoring Catholic saints. Some of the most well-known dances are the Conquest Dance (to mock the Spanish conquest), the Moors Dance (to mock the Spanish war against the Moors), Monkey Dance and others.⁷⁰ Before performing the dancers must practice, but not without doing la *costumbre* first. For those doing the Monkey Dance, the *costumbre* includes going to the “four sacred

⁶⁵ Ibid. 159.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 218.

⁶⁷ Cook and Offit, *Indigenous Religion and Cultural Performance in the Maya World*, xxx.

⁶⁸ Ibid. xxxvi-vii.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 23.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 51. The parenthesis are mine. A local friend provided these dance interpretations to me.

mountains” representing the four cardinal directions.⁷¹ Failure to do the protocols and offering in the proper way, even if the church priest interferes, particularly when erecting the central pole, the *axis mundi*, can result in accidents, even death.⁷² “It is not the padre who is in charge here. That which is in command here is our tradition...,” a council member (*sindico*) said.⁷³

The next phase of the *costumbre* for the Monkey Dance includes the actual dance involving the *axis mundi*, represented by a “cosmogonic” 20-meter-tall pine pole erected in the center of the plaza. A rope is tied from the church’s roof to the pole’s top so the dancers (humans representing monkeys, tigers, jaguars and lions) enter the plaza, swinging from east to west. On July 25, the zenith of the dance amongst the Chorti Maya, “the Milky Way is in its north-south alignment making the cross with the ecliptic [the rope] that they refer to as the Wakan Chah arrangement.” Cook says this correlation is “strikingly Mayan.”⁷⁴ Therefore, dances like the Monkey dance are protecting Maya knowledge of time, energy and space. Syncretism allowed the protection of that knowledge.

Be it Catholicism, the *cofradías* and their *costumbre* or American Protestantism, scholars began to debate whether Indigenous peoples underwent a total conversion (“replacement” of their pre-colonial religion), syncretism or hybridization. Coull mentioned scholars such as Erick Thompson, on one side of the argument, who defended the replacement theory. On the other side of the argument, he cited Nancy Ferris, David Friedel, Linda Scheel, Victoria Bricker, Ian S. McLean and Munro S. Edmonson who argued for the syncretism theory. These authors provide examples such as Maya people replacing their old deities with Catholic ones to survive the violent acts of conquest and colonialism.⁷⁵ For example, and to support the latter position, Catholic priests now accept Mayan rituals inside their churches;⁷⁶ they are even learning Mayan spiritual teachings.⁷⁷ The harshest condemnations come from Protestants, including Mayan Protestant leaders.

⁷¹ Ibid. 240.

⁷² Ibid. 115-16. In the Maya mysticism, the Monkey represents the “thread of time” (see Table 1). My interpretation.

⁷³ Ibid. 115.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 109.

⁷⁵ Coull, *Donning the Mask: Mayan Belief, Christianity and the Power of Syncretism*. 104

⁷⁶ Thomas Hart, *The Ancient Spirituality of Modern Maya*. ([Albuquerque]: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 14-19.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 28-9.

They see Mayan rituals as an affront to God.⁷⁸ What upsets them is that Mayan spiritual guides respect “everything.” This has led them to define Mayan beliefs as polytheist when, the Mayan spiritual guides say, it is not.⁷⁹ The battle for new adepts is not simply religious.

I argue that new religions are tied to economic and political projects; and the ideology of conquering other peoples has not changed. With its claims to thrift, hard work and progress Protestantism, accompanied by American capitalism, assumed a sense of superiority over Catholic and Indigenous religions. For instance, C. Matthew Samson argues that both these religions represent the past. For him, Protestantism is the new ‘rational’ religion gaining Guatemalan converts. He argues “‘hybridity’ or ‘how the newness [Protestantism] enters the world’ paves the way to “contestation...resistance and appropriation.”⁸⁰ This view of hybridity, in which the new is superior to the old, is different from Cook and Offit’s hybridization.

Meanwhile, the role of the spiritual guides (Judith M. Maxwell calls them *aj’qija*) in Mayan public ceremonies “has become larger and more common... [They] lead their communities in reimagining themselves in post conflict Guatemala.”⁸¹ Mayan practitioners have no churches or permanent sites, at least not in the form of a closed structure. This makes the practice of their ceremonies a constant challenge. Maxwell explains the difficulties the Mayan spiritual guides face to maintain their altars free of religious, construction industry and government interference.⁸² These three forces periodically united to stop Mayan ceremonies, each using its role in society to justify their actions. The Mayan altars located in remote areas provide places for the *Ajq’ijab’* to pray. They also keep the collective memory of their ancestors and more recent historical moments alive for the Maya.⁸³

Although much of the Maya classic literature was burned during the Spanish inquisition, four codices survived the fires. Three of the four codices now carry the names

⁷⁸ Ibid. 27, 52.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 29.

⁸⁰ C. Matthew Samson, “Conversion at the Boundaries of Religion, Identity, and Politics in Pluricultural Guatemala,” in *Beyond Conversion and Syncretism: Indigenous Encounters with Missionary Christianity 1800-2000*, ed. David Lindenfeld and Miles Richardson (Berghahn Books, pp 51-78, 2011), 53.

⁸¹ Judith M. Maxwell, “Memory, remembering, and the construction of truth among Maya groups in highland Guatemala” in *Mesoamerican Memory: Enduring Systems of Remembrance*, eds., Amos Megged & Stephanie Wood, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 233.

⁸² Ibid. 234-35.

⁸³ Ibid. 236-37.

of the cities where they are stored: Dresden (Germany), Paris, (France), and Madrid (Spain). The fourth one, Grolier, is housed in Mexico's Museum of Anthropology and History.⁸⁴ The Ximenez' *Popol Wuh* is housed at the Newberry Library in Chicago. These museums kept the codices and the *Popol Wuh*, but much of the knowledge expressed in the calendars and the book are still used by the highland Ajq'ijab'.

In the historical description of the Maya religion, there is a consensus among scholars about the classification of their development into pre-classic, classic and post-classic periods. This is accompanied by a general agreement about their intellectual production, religion and the role the daykeepers or Mayan priests played in controlling time and society in those periods. The dispute begins with interpreting religion during the post-classic, post-conquest era. What is evident is that Dominican missionaries' attempts to eradicate Mayan rituals and the negative portrayal of Mayan beliefs, social structures and intellectual achievements by colonial chroniclers such as Fuentes y Guzman and priests like Francisco Ximenez had a lasting effect on Mayan ceremonies and people. For centuries, the ceremonies had to be practised "discreetly."⁸⁵

Whereas, Carmack, Fox and Early agree that the K'iche and other Mayan groups were polities with their own religion, which survived colonization in the form of syncretism, Samson had a different perspective. He wrote that religious conversion among the Maya began during the Spanish conquest when there "was neither a unified Mayan identity nor a single polity in the pre-Colombian [sic] territory comprising present day Guatemala."⁸⁶ Others disagree with this argument. For instance, Blakeney Coull argued that conversion affected Maya religion but did not replace it. He argued that syncretism was a matter of survival rather than totally converting to Catholicism.⁸⁷ My findings support Coull's argument.

Two of the most influential syncretism findings in my study show the survival of Maya religious and their cosmological beliefs changing and hiding under the veil of

⁸⁴ Ibid. My translation.

⁸⁵ Carlos Barrios, *Ch'umilal Wuj: El libro del destino* (Ch'umilal Wuj: The book of destiny) (Guatemala City: CHOLSAMAJ, 2004), 10.

⁸⁶ Samson, "Conversion at the Boundaries of Religion, Identity, and Politics in Pluricultural Guatemala," 55.

⁸⁷ Coull, *Donning the Mask: Mayan Belief, Christianity and the Power of Syncretism*, 114.

Catholic celebration. These findings were led by Garret Cook's study of Momostenango. His first study was in 1976, published in 2000, and then again 30-years later, this time accompanied by Thomas Offit. He found how each year, *costumbrista* dances such as the Monkey Dance or the *palo volador* (the flying pole) honoured Catholic saints but the dancers (dressed as two monkeys, one jaguar and one tiger) also resembled the relationship milky way, time and space of the classic Maya. Evidence shows that the Maya rituals were kept separate from the church but when the pre-colonial *cofradías* and dance groups prepare for their Catholic celebrations, they *must* do the *costumbre* first. No *costumbre*, no celebration. The *costumbrista*, I argue, through the *cofradías* were the main organic structure that kept the Mayan traditions, and the Ajq'ijab', alive. Syncretism, in other words, was the shield against, in historical order, colonial and Catholic authorities, Catholic Action and the new Protestant movement. The Ajq'ijab' were the human factor behind the survival, change, and continuity of Mayan ceremonies; while introducing the *costumbre* into Catholic celebrations, they incorporated Catholic elements in their ceremonies.

The Mayan priests of the past construed their time-keeping obligations from their astronomical observations. They controlled the calendar and its efficiency to predict the seasons, the rain, eclipses, and the “fate of the newborns and the negative and positive days to carry a social activity.”⁸⁸ Material evidence of the calendars can be found in the codices stored in European museums but the practice of observing the sunrise and sunset, of “greeting the Mam, or year bearer [of the calendar]” and “which stars and constellations are directly overhead” is kept by the “motherfathers” of Momostenango.⁸⁹

Morales Sic, drawing from Edgar Esquit, draws a distinction between the “new spiritual guides” or Ajq'ijab who follow the Maya religion and the spiritual guides who stayed with *la costumbre* or syncretism: the *Chuckajaw* (Motherfather).⁹⁰ As I observed in this study, some Quetzaltenango Ajq'ijab' are distancing themselves from the Catholic Church and syncretism to follow the “new” Maya spirituality.

In the next section, this study will attempt to demonstrate that despite the lack of colonial sources about the Ajq'ijab they were present in various historical moments.

⁸⁸ Early, *Maya and the Catholic Cultures in Crisis*, 27, 50.

⁸⁹ Rice, *Maya Calendar Origins*, 49.

⁹⁰ Morales Sic, *Religión y Política*, 86. My translation

Unintentionally, some of the few colonial works mentioned the *brujo* (witch), *Zahorin* (sorcerer), *Chuckajaw* (Motherfather) shaman, daykeeper, time-keeper or pagan worshippers without knowing that they were keeping track of a resilient group of people and their belief system. Modern works verified their existence.

2.2 The Spiritual Guides (*Ajq'ijab'*)

To maintain and pray to the Maya pantheon, to count time using the Mayan calendars and to keep the ceremonial fire required the participation of human beings. The *Ajq'ijab'* played that role. The source of their existence can be found in mystical stories, scattered historical references and contemporary academic works. Although they are mentioned as part of the classical Maya priesthood structure, the contemporary study of their existence only began last century.

The term *Aj-Kij* or *Ajq'ij* appears in the creation stories of the *Popol Wuh*, the sacred book of the K'iche-Maya. The Adrián Chávez version, and most versions for that matter, narrates how the mystical beings Feathered Serpent (Q'uqumatz) and the makers (Alom K'ajolom, Tz'akol Bitol) created the universe, the earth, the animals and finally humanity. Despite their top position in the spiritual hierarchy, these makers consult with a mystical female *Ajq'ij*, Ixmucane, to be the intermediary between them and their human creation.⁹¹ Ixmucane and her husband Ixpiyacoc used corn to create humanity. The K'iche, just like many other Mayan groups, inherited the belief system of their ancestors. This includes the inclusion of those who do 'bad omens' to others.

Jean Molesky-Poz found that the *Ajq'ijab'* become spiritual leaders for several reasons. One is answering a divine calling, "a call, a connection with all the ancestors," "a mission," "to serve," "as a destiny," "the day you were born on the calendar..."⁹² Other reasons include an alleviation to "sickness" or overcome one's fear of being called a "*brujo*" [witch]. Women, men and gay people of various professions and trades can become

⁹¹ Chávez, *Pop-Wuj: Poema Mito-histórico Ki-ché*, 6. My translation.

⁹² Jean Molesky-Poz, *Contemporary Maya Spirituality: The Ancient Ways Are Not Lost* (Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 2009), 66-9; Xic Escalante Villagrán, *Cosmovision y Espiritualidad: Meditaciones y Reflexiones del Pensamiento Maya* (Cosmovision and Spirituality: Meditations and Reflections of Mayan Thought), (Quetzaltenango, Guatemala: Silabario Ediciones, 2016), 21. My translation.

Ajq'ijab.⁹³ Falla observed Mayan men and women spiritual leaders three decades after he published the first edition of *Quiché Rebelde*.⁹⁴

After they decide to become an Ajq'ij, or accept their destiny, their “initiation” is next.⁹⁵ As Barbara Tedlock experienced, the training takes place at sites and on dates of the Mayan calendar chosen by the trainer Ajq'ij. For Tedlock, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, her training with a Momostenango Ajq'ij lasted “nine-months.” These nine twenty-day Quiche months [9 x 20] in sets of “permissions”: The first permission (four-one-days) was called “work service” (*chac patan*) to burn offerings at public shrines. The second (six-one-days) was “mixing pointing” (*baraj punto*). It included the teacher presenting the trainee with ‘divining seeds and crystals, transforming the novice into a daykeeper or shaman- priest.’⁹⁶ Training began at 4:00 or 5:00 a.m. The third permission was done in eight-one-days. The “novice is instructed to collect 150 ordinary dried beans or hard corn kernels” (substitutes for *tz'ite* seeds). At the end of the training Tedlock became an Ajq'ij and received her *tzite*. The *tzite* is the bundle containing 260 red beans of the coral tree (*Erythrina corallodendron*).⁹⁷

The Ajq'ijab' told Thomas Hart that in the order of deities *Qajaw* (“Our Owner” or God) is at the top, followed by *Mundo* (the world) and *Nantat* or Mother-fathers.⁹⁸ These names are constantly mentioned in the ceremonies, as the writer has experienced in Quetzaltenango. Those who request the services of a spiritual guide may or may not be familiar with the calendar. It is the job of a spiritual guide to suggest the best day, based on the calendar symbols, to perform a ceremony. The timing depends on what the person requests. They may be seeking guidance for “illness, bad dreams, domestic problems, or whatever.”⁹⁹

One aspect of the Maya belief system, not seen in other religious services, is how the Ajq'ij and the Aj'itz (the equivalent of ‘bad-medicine man’) interact. Both can be praying in the same place but using a different fire. They do not argue with each other. The

⁹³ Molesky-Poz, *Contemporary Maya Spirituality*, 65.

⁹⁴ Falla, *Quiché Rebelde: Religious Conversion, Politics and Ethnic Identity in Guatemala*, 245.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 74-5.

⁹⁶ Barbara Tedlock, *Time and the Highland Maya* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 59.

⁹⁷ Rice, *Maya Calendar Origins*, 49.

⁹⁸ Hart, *The Ancient Spirituality of Modern Maya*, 30.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 54.

antagonism is spiritual as the Aj'itz's task is to request negative omens against an individual or thing at the request of a person who pays him to do so.¹⁰⁰ Falla also identified two types of Mayan spiritual leaders in the 1960s, the *Zahorin* or *Aj-Kij* (Time-Keeper) and *Aj-itz* (specialist in evil). He says Indigenous Catholic Action members made no distinction between the two categories when attacking and ridiculing them.¹⁰¹ Falla acknowledges the *zahorines* may all be taken as “witch doctors.”¹⁰² Hart also mentions the *Aj'itz*. However, during his research he did not notice Catholic Action's animosity against the *Aj'itz* or *Ajq'ij*. Catholic Action was already decimated. What he found is that spiritual guides are not homogenous in their techniques. Each has different ways of working in a ceremony.¹⁰³ They can also be healers. People seek their knowledge of traditional medicines and prayers.¹⁰⁴

In their study of Momostenango, Cook and Offit found young that Momostecans were joining the emerging Maya religion out of a commercial motive.¹⁰⁵ Their findings contradict what Molesky-Poz found. Whereas people gave gifts or money to the *Ajq'ijab*, Roberto Poz and others argue they do not become spiritual leaders for the “commercial” purposes of making money.¹⁰⁶ Poz and other *Ajq'ijab* acknowledge that Maya spirituality's emergence has attracted not only Maya people but also foreigners and Ladino alike. For some it has become “popular” or a fad. Molesky-Poz explained that this concerns *Ajq'ijab* such as Carlos Escalante and Rolando Ixcot. They still remember when their group was small and closed.¹⁰⁷ Molesky-Poz stated:

The danger is that some *Ajq'ijab*' appropriate and misuse their positions for personal gain: power, money [as Cook and Offit found in Momostenango], or fame, thus, abusing this role in the community. This is in part because some individuals become *Ajq'ijab* too young or are not properly prepared.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 63-4.

¹⁰¹ Falla, *Quiché Rebelde*, 102.

¹⁰² Ibid. 112.

¹⁰³ Hart, *The Ancient Spirituality of Modern Maya*, 114.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 119, 130.

¹⁰⁵ Cook and Offit, *Indigenous Religion and Cultural Performance in the Maya World*, 140-42. Charging a fee is not something new in Momostenango. Temer in the 1920s, Goubaud Carrera in 1937, and Carmack found evidence that the “Chimanes” charged a “fee” for their services (in Robert M. Carmack, *Ki'aslemaal le K'iche'aab' Historia Social de los K'iche's* [The K'iche's Social History] (Guatemala: CHOLSAMAJ, 2001: 298-99).

¹⁰⁶ Molesky-Poz, *Contemporary Maya Spirituality*, 75, 85.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 88.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

Traditional or older Ajq'ijab' continue training and teaching others the mnemonics they know. They teach how to use the calendar to orient people, the places to perform the ritual; how to make the offerings; and learn how to "read" the fire. The ritual sites are in caves, hills, volcanoes or near water sources. Molesky-Poz calls them part of the "local - *mystical geography*."¹⁰⁹ The Ajq'ijab' classify these places in "*encantos*, places where one is more likely to encounter a spirit or where a specific, personalized, maybe anthropomorphic manifestation appears, or as altars (*kojb'al*, a place where you go to give something) where one says his/her prayers but doesn't necessarily do a ceremony."¹¹⁰

Space is important because this is where they brought the rituals, the *Popol Wuh* teachings, and to count time. When they pray space becomes part of the ceremony. They also call on the four corners of the universe, the sun, Venus, the moon and the *Nawals* (protectors or the other self) to join them.

The study and role of the mystical and first Ajq'ij, Ixmucane, and the first four K'iche grandfathers and four grandmothers who burned copal upon their arrival to present-day Guatemala have not been studied in-depth. Prudence Rice, citing Tedlock, did not refer to them as Ajq'ijab', argued that these "diviners, priests, skywatchers, or daykeepers – consulted written books to aid them in their prognostications."¹¹¹ Their presence is scattered throughout colonization but there is no in-depth study about their faith. Move forward to the 1900s, the study of the contemporary Ajq'ijab' shows two opposing views. One, led by Ricardo Falla, interpreted their existence and work from the outside. The other, steered by Barbara Tedlock, studied and learned from within. In 1970, Falla, a Catholic priest, viewed the spiritual guides (he calls them *Zahorines*) as oppressors and exploiters of their people. The road to freedom, in his observation, was conversion to Catholic Action. He interviewed Catholic Action activists but not a *costumbrista* or a *Zahorin*. Differing from Falla's study was Barbara Tedlock. She did not only study the Momostenango Ajq'ijab', but she was trained as one.

Another difference between Falla and Tedlock is the interpretation of the sacred bundle (*tzite*). For Falla's informants the bundle was associated with evil and for Tedlock

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 109.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 111.

¹¹¹ Rice, *Mayan Calendar Origins*, 49.

the bundle was to be used to serve the community in various ceremonies.¹¹² Falla had a change of opinion about Maya spirituality and those who practice it. In the epilogue of his book's 2001 edition, he wrote: "Mayan spirituality do not discriminate" against women and that it "may be described by many traits, but it cannot be defined in rigid concepts, like religion, which divide human beings."¹¹³

In both studies, the authors agree that the Ajq'ij's role and duty was to count time using the lunar calendar. What many scholars did not examine was how the Ajq'ijab survived five centuries of colonial and neo-colonial hegemonic efforts to abolish their clandestine practice. While I met the Ajq'ijab in the 1980s, it is clear that they were practising ceremonies long before that decade. As I recall, the ceremonies were not as elaborated, and never public, as they currently are. While Molesky-Poz and Escalante-Villagrán demonstrated the existence of the Quetzaltenango Ajq'ijab, the former examined the modern challenges they face including ceremonies becoming a fad or used for profit purposes. What my study addresses are not only the challenges but also how they are addressing those and newer challenges.

2.3 The 260-day calendar (*Chol Q'ij* in K'iche Maya)

Prudence Rice proposes that the development of Maya calendrical developments goes in hand with the story of the *Popol Wuh*'s "cosmogogenesis and human origins."¹¹⁴ The oldest records of the calendar are found in Monte Alban I in highland Oaxaca, Mexico from about 600 B.C. However, the lowlands of Mexico and Guatemala are the more likely geographical source of the original calendar since it includes symbols of monkeys, crocodiles, and jaguars. None of these inhabits the highlands.¹¹⁵ The calendar discussed here is the 260-day calendar, the *Chol Q'ij*, used for religious purposes.

Robert Carmack mentions that Archbishop Cortez y Larraz received a copy of three calendars, including the *Chol Q'ij*, from Quetzaltenango's K'iche people in 1770. Morales Sic attests that this (or a different) calendar, dated 1722, was found in San Pedro La Laguna, on the outskirts of Lake Atitlan, in the Sololá province. The author of *Calendario de los*

¹¹² Tedlock, B., *Time and the Highland Maya*, 66,

¹¹³ Falla, *Quiché Rebelde*, 245-46.

¹¹⁴ Rice, *Mayan Calendar Origins*, 11.

¹¹⁵ Tedlock, B., *Time and the Highland Maya*, 91.

mayas del altiplano de Guatemala (The calendar of the Guatemala Highland Maya) may have been both the local church chorus leader and a healer who “used the calendar to treat his patients and to celebrate ceremonies.”¹¹⁶ This indicates that the Ajq’ijab’ and the calendar had survived more than 250 years of colonialism.

Interpretations differ as to what is the first day of the 260-day calendar. According to Barbara Tedlock that is because the first day of the calendar was different for different communities. She wrote: “Although it is clear that 1 and 8 Quej and 1 and 8 Batz’ are important religious days in several if not all Quiche communities, there is no reason to conclude that one of them rather than another is actually the “first day” of the 260-calendar.”¹¹⁷ Like Carlos Barrios, but different to Tedlock, Jean Molesky-Poz begins her 20-symbol list with *B’atz’* (Monkey, cosmic thread), which she learned from Roberto Poz and María del Carmen Tuy. Also, identical to Barrios’ explanation is her account of how an Ajq’ij orients a person. She must explain not one but three or four symbols: the day a person was conceived, the day she was born, and the symbol in her palm or past, present and future. Roberto Poz, a long-time Ajq’ij, uses a more advanced zigzag formula, which he calls the “Plumed Serpent.” It connects several calendar symbols to know more about a person.¹¹⁸ Tedlock claims she does not “impose a good/bad day analytical opposition on my own data but to allow each day its full complexity.”¹¹⁹ However, “low numbers are considered gentle or weak because they indicate something new, while higher numbers are powerful and even violent, since they indicate older, riper, more serious matter.”¹²⁰

Three decades after Tedlock’s study, the modern Ajq’ijab use the calendar to “maintain equilibrium in their lives as well as in relation to other persons, to nature, and to God.”¹²¹ Identical to Tedlock and Carlos Barrios, Molesky-Poz studied each symbol. She adds that the calendar is used as a “psychological schema,” a position Time-Keeper Roberto Poz supports.¹²² According to Barbara Tedlock, each day held multifaceted predictions “which could be comprehended by specialists in such affairs; these auguries

¹¹⁶ Morales Sic, *Religión y Política*, 35. My translation.

¹¹⁷ Tedlock, B. *Time and the Highland Maya* 97. At the time she did her study the Civil War was not as widespread as it was two years later.

¹¹⁸ Molesky-Poz, *Contemporary Maya Spirituality*, 149-51.

¹¹⁹ Tedlock, B. *Time and the Highland Maya*, 99.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* 108.

¹²¹ Molesky-Poz, *Contemporary Maya Spirituality*, 128.

¹²² *Ibid.* 140.

influenced both the personalities and the careers of children born on a particular day [Chol Q'ij or the 260-day calendar] and the outcomes of events occurring on that day.”¹²³

The *Chol Q'ij* calendar contains 20 symbols, and each is counted 13 times. The 260-day calendar runs alongside the solar calendar. Both calendars form the calendar-round. This latter calendar has Year-bearers, or *Mam*, and they are *Quej*, *E*, *No'j*, and *Ik'*. They take possession of their cycles every 13 years.¹²⁴ Each Year-bearer has two assistant symbols or ‘secretaries’ (*ajtzib*).¹²⁵ After explaining how the Year-bearers are celebrated, Tedlock explains the mnemonics of each of the 20 symbols. It is the spiritual guide’s duty to know the mnemonics and the ‘gentle or weak’ and the ‘power’ of each symbol.

A revealing data about Barbara Tedlock’s training in Momostenango in the late 1970s is that the celebration *Waxajib B'atz'* (Eight Monkey or Eight Cosmic Thread) was not yet adopted as the “Maya New Year.” This every 260-day celebration is now well attended all over Guatemala. This indicates how influential the Ajq'ijab’s work has been in adopting this celebration. Other authors seldom mention one thing I observed in the ceremonies in the last three decades is that the calendar animals’ earthly and cosmological meanings were mentioned together with the contemporary full connotation. For instance, *Tzi* or dog is associated with justice; *Noj* with wisdom or intelligence; *Tzikin* or bird with business or money and *B'atz'* with time. When a person request to know his or her Maya symbol (in modern times this symbol is referred as *Nawal*) that is the information he or she receives. The role of the Ajq'ij is to find out in what Maya calendar symbol and number a person was conceived and born when compared to the Gregorian calendar.

What the Dresden Code shows, studied by Rice and Paxton, was kept and transmitted orally by the Ajq'ijab’. With few exceptions (Barbara Tedlock, Hart, Barrios and Molesky-Poz), most authors do not mention participating in ceremonies to observe how the *Chol Q'ij* was used. The movement of the sun, moon, Venus and the use of calendar is no longer used to control society as in ancient times. When the modern Quetzaltenango Ajq'ij uses the *Chol Q'ij* in a ceremony its symbols become guiding aids to walk around the ceremonial fire while he or she interprets the flames in combination

¹²³ Cited in Rice, *Mayan Calendar Origins*, 30.

¹²⁴ Molesky-Poz, *Contemporary Maya Spirituality*, 99.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* 100.

with the calendar's symbols. Deduced from Barrios, Rolando Ixcot, Tedlock and personal understanding, the twenty *Nawalib'* of the 260-day calendar are described in Table 1.¹²⁶

Table 1: The *Chol Q'ij* (260-day calendar)

	Symbol or <i>Nawal</i>	Spanish translation	English translation	<i>Nawal</i> (protector) of
1	B'atz'	Mono, hilo [cosmológico]	Monkey [cosmological] thread	Humanity, time, weaving
2	E	Camino	Road	Four directions, food
3	Aj	Caña	Corn cane	Arts
4	I'x	Jaguar	Jaguar	Mayan altars, spirituality
5	Tz'ikin	Pájaro	Bird	Material possessions
6	Ajmaq	Búho	Owl	Deceased
7	No'j	Idea, inteligencia	Idea, intelligence	Family, community
8	Tijax	Daga de obsidiana	Obsidian dagger	Spiritual medicines
9	Kawoq	Rayo, mujer	Thunder, woman	Women, midwives
10	Ajpu	Cazador	Hunter	Music, agriculture, sports
11	Imox	Lagarto, locura	Alligator, craze	Rain, water, craziness
12	Iq'	Viento, luna	Wind, moon	Life
13	Aq'ab'al	Amanecer	Dawn	Nature
14	K'at	Red	Net, web	Jails, punishment
15	Kan	Serpiente emplumada	Feathered serpent	Creation, justice
16	Kame	Muerte	Death	Underworld, sickness
17	Kej	Venado	Deer	Animals
18	Q'anil	Semilla	Seed	Semen, germination
19	Toj	Ofrenda	Offering	Fire and water
20	Tz'i'	Perro, coyote	Wild dog, coyote	Authority, justice

¹²⁶ Leonzo Barreno, "Indigenous Knowledge: A K'iche Maya perspective" in *Free Knowledge: Confronting the Commodification of Human Discovery*, ed. Patricia Elliot and Daryl Hepting (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2015), 144.

2.4 The *Popol Wuh*

According to Dennis Tedlock, the *Popol Wuh*, was originally written in hieroglyphs meaning that the writing is “ideographic,” conceptual, and done with “word pictures”¹²⁷ to illustrate the book’s various passages. That book, which looked like the surviving codices, has since disappeared. The archaic origins of the *Popol Wuh*, Rice wrote, indicates that the “seeds of which could have been planted five thousand or more years ago as Archaic daykeepers scanned the skies and memorized the recurring journeys of celestial bodies bearing the burden of time’s passage.”¹²⁸

Theologically condemned, the *Popol Wuh* book was transcribed and then used for conversion purposes in two Guatemalan historical periods: the colonial era represented by Spanish Friar Francisco Ximenez in the 1790s and by the Presbyterian mission represented by American couple Paul and Dora Burgess who lived in Guatemala from 1913 to 1964. Ximenez transcribed a version he received from K’iche Mayans. They had learned the Spanish language and alphabet to write what they learned from the original version. Only the Ximenez version survived and it is the source of all versions that followed, including, those written by Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, Efraín Recinos, Adrián Inéz Chávez, Dennis Tedlock and Enrique Sam Colop.

To counter the Christian strategical use of the book, the Chávez version was introduced and adopted by the practitioners in the 1980s and thereafter. The main content in the Chávez translation (which he titled *Pop Wuj*), and all versions for that matter, are cosmological battles, spiritual beings creating the universe and the creation of earth and life on it. The second part recounts the creation of humanity and the last part combines mystical-spiritual beliefs with historical events. What is unique about this version of the *Popol Wuh* is that a K’iche-Maya wrote it, for the first time in the modern era. Some Maya spiritual guides adopted Chavez’s version in the early 1980s.

The *Popol Wuh*’s mystical heroes include Hun Hun Ahpu¹²⁹ (One One Hunter or the old sun) and Seven Ahpu who fought against the Lords of *Xibalba* (the underworld).

¹²⁷ Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Wuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), 30-2.

¹²⁸ Rice, *Maya Calendar Origins*, 68.

¹²⁹ *Jun Ajpu*, in the original Spanish. In this dissertation, and as used by English language scholars, I use Hun Ahpu for English pronunciation purposes.

He was defeated, and his skull placed on a mystical calabash tree.¹³⁰ Princess Ixquic (the moon), daughter of one of the *Xibalba* lords, visits the tree. She becomes impregnated by Hun Hun Ahpu skull's saliva, giving birth to Hun Ahpu Xbalanque (One Hunter Xbalanque or the new sun).¹³¹ To avenge his father's death Hun Ahpu Xbalanque defeats the Lords of Xibalba. Dennis Tedlock found that Hun Ahpu Xbalanque is not one but two deities: twins Hun Ahpu and his brother, Xbalanque. They appear painted in classic Maya funerary vases attempting to defeat Seven Macaw¹³² and the Lords of Xibalba.¹³³ The drawings of the twin brothers link the K'iche Maya and other K'ichean peoples directly to the classic Maya.

Hun Ahpu and Xbalanque illustrations are not, remarkably, the only ones Tedlock found in his research. Another set of twins mentioned in the book are One Monkey and One Artisan (Hun Batz and Hun Chowen).¹³⁴ Again, in the Chavez's version, these two deities are one person but, in the drawing, they are clearly two. Even the Lords of Xibalba are depicted in a classic Maya funerary vase. Tedlock includes these drawings in his book.¹³⁵ After all these cosmological battles are over, the next stage is the creation of humanity.

The thought to create humanity was the work of the Plumed Serpent (Ququmatz in K'iche Maya and Kukulcan in classic Maya) and creators and makers Tz'akol, Bitol, Alom, K'ajolom, in council with the labour of grandfather Ixpiyacoc and grandmother Ixmucane. They created, after three failed attempts, the first four couples of K'iche Maya out of corn.¹³⁶ After "leaving the east" (Chichen Itzá), crossing the Gulf of Mexico, overcoming cold seasons and not seeing the sun for days, the four couples gave birth to their lineages. They next went to the Toltec capital, Tulan Siwan (today Tulan de Allende, Mexico), where they met and then said farewell to many other tribes.¹³⁷ Before departing Tulan, the K'iche Maya received patron deities to revere: Tohil, Awilix and Jacawitz. Prior to becoming stone, these three deities, especially Tohil, helped the K'iche Maya to trick and defeat other

¹³⁰ Chávez, *Pop-Wuj: Poema Mito-histórico Ki-ché*, 11-30.

¹³¹ *Ibid.* 35, 64.

¹³² Tedlock, D., *Popol Vuh*, 90-1.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 154-55, 156-57.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 106-07.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹³⁶ Chávez, *Pop-Wuj: Poema Mito-histórico Ki-ché*, 66-8. All these deities are mentioned in Mayan ceremonies.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.* 70-81.

tribes, who tired of K'iche mistreatment and use of their people for sacrificial purposes, decided to fight the K'iche and steal their fire.¹³⁸ In one single battle, the writers recorded 24,000 enemy combatants.¹³⁹ After victory, the K'iche Maya carried their stone idols until reaching Chi-Ismachi (near Gumarcaaj). Internal battles forced some lineages to separate from and fight the K'iche leadership. In the fifth and sixth generation, they founded their last capital city, Gumarcaaj (near today's provincial capital of El Quiché). Internal strife continued until the 1524 Spanish conquest.¹⁴⁰

The *Popol Wuh* authors kept records of the victories and defeats of the Maya and the K'iche Maya. However, the writers who passed this information to Ximenez lamented the disappearance of the “word” or the original *Popol Wuh*.¹⁴¹ Nonetheless, they still recorded the last Gumarcaaj K'iche rulers during conquest, Oxib Kiej (Three Deer) and Belejeb Tzi (Nine Dog). Alvarado burned them alive in 1524.¹⁴²

The book is also used or interpreted from different angles. Garret W. Cook found that Momostenango, an urban place, became the *Popol Wuh* (he calls it the *Popol Vuh*). Hun Hun Ahpu (One One Hunter, the old sun) became Jesus Christ; One Death became Saint Simon; the twins Hun Ahpu (One Hunter, the younger sun) and Xbalanque became Corpus (an entombed Christ) and Capitagua (a crucified Christ) respectively; and Ixquic (the twins' mother, the moon) became Immaculate Mary.¹⁴³ The 1976 dances Cook observed paid homage to Catholic saints and to deities mentioned in the *Popol Wuh*. The *costumbre*, in protocol, ceremony, and dances, was the practical continuation of the book's oral tradition. K'iche scholar Víctor Racancoj, from a very different angle, gives a socioeconomic interpretation of the *Popol Wuh*. For him the Maya went from a primitive

¹³⁸ Ibid. 81-93.

¹³⁹ Tedlock, D., *Popol Vuh*, 53

¹⁴⁰ Chávez, *Pop-Wuj: Poema Mito-histórico Ki-ché*, 100-01, 103.

¹⁴¹ Ibid. 109.

¹⁴² Ibid. 110. Notice the name of the leaders: a number, from one to 13, preceded the calendar symbols (out of the 20 Nawals or symbols that make the 260-day calendar) of the person. With the arrival of the Spaniards, Indigenous people began to be named with Spanish names. Most of the calendar symbols became last names and they are still used by the K'ichean people. Thus, it is common to find people with the last names Batz, Noj, Tzikin, Akabal, Quemé, Quiej, Toj, and others. My observation.

¹⁴³ Cook, G., *Renewing the Maya World: Expressive Culture in a Highland Town*, 203. Observe that Cook agrees with Tedlock that Hun Ahpu and Xbalanque were twins. The difference is that for the former the twins were male whereas Cook maintains that Xbalanque was female.

state to a civilized state as expressed in their language, agricultural, social, mathematical and astronomical achievements.¹⁴⁴

Quiroa's comparison of theological commitments of Ximenez and the Burgess couple to converting Maya people to their respective religions show two things. First, the conversion attempt using the *Popol Wuh* was not fully accomplished; instead, it left a "deistic" religion. Second, they show the ancient beliefs' resilience. In Ximenez times, two hundred years had passed since the Spanish conquest. Four hundred years had passed when the Burgesses settled in Guatemala in 1913.

The book has been interpreted from opposite viewpoints. Ximenez called the *Popol Wuh* the work of "Satan."¹⁴⁵ Coe called it "the greatest single work of Native American literature."¹⁴⁶ I argue that The *Popol Wuh* is neither satanic nor a mere work of literature. Despite personifying the Ajq'ij as evil and the *Popol Wuh* as his doctrine, together with the 260-day calendar, most of the book's deities are mentioned in a modern Maya ceremony. This accounts for their importance in Maya spirituality. The book contents are not myths (non-existent) but are participatory and transcendent in the Ajq'ijab's prayers and time counting. This is what I recall from my observations. In the 1980s ceremonies most, and sometimes all the mystic characters mentioned in the *Popol Wuh*, were 'called' into a Maya ceremony: Ququmatz or Feathered serpent, Tohil (the sun), Awilix and Jacawitz, and the first four human couples as well as their spiritual and material creators. The animals mentioned in the *Popol Wuh* and the 260-day calendar, the *Chol Q'ij*, are revered not just as animals but as *Nawals* (protector animals or the other self) and each played a social, cultural, political or cosmological function. They include monkey, dog, jaguar, deer, bird, serpent, and others. In a ceremony, the *Popol Wuh*'s mystical heroes, the lords of the underworld, cosmological entities and animals were integral parts of a whole. Humans were another part of that relationship.

Instead of fully indoctrinating people and converting them to Christian religions, I argue, the *Popol Wuh* became a useful tool for Mayan practitioners to add more elements

¹⁴⁴ Victor A. Racancoj, *Socio-Economía Maya Precolonial* (Guatemala: CHOLSAMAJ, 2006 [1994]), 28-61.

¹⁴⁵ Chávez, *Pop-Wuj: Poema Mito-histórico Ki-ché*, xxvi. For purely technical reasons, the writer uses the letter "h" to substitute the letter "j" in the *Popol Wuh*.

¹⁴⁶ Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code*, 99.

to their ceremonies. Adding the *Popol Wuh* and other iconic elements, since the late 1970s, is what Morales Sic calls “invention.” I call it change and continuity because the *Popol Wuh* contents are not new elements of the ceremonies. The book only confirmed the oral tradition. As examined in this study, Mayan ceremonies were adapting to their new reality. By abandoning secrecy in the 1990s the Ajq’ijab showed that their spiritual practices contained or recovered mnemonic resources, such as the *Popol Wuh* and the calendars, they considered worth re-introducing to their ceremonies in contemporary times.

2.5 Fire as the spiritual medium

To create a fire in a ceremony, the Mayan spiritual guides’ burn different types of pine and other tree resins (such as ocote, copal, cuilco, pom, rashpom) plus incense, chocolate, candles, sesame seeds, and other natural elements. Fire is the main medium the Ajq’ij uses to ‘communicate’ with the Ajaw (Creator) and the universe to seek answers to their own questions or requests from others.

According to Xic Escalante Villagrán, fire “is the oldest ritual left by the primal Maya.”¹⁴⁷ Fire is used to gain concentration, to heal and to communicate with people.¹⁴⁸ Roberto Poz told Molesky-Poz that the “smoke carry our prayer, our intercessions, our language, to God. The fire also is the language through which God speaks to us.”¹⁴⁹ One of Molesky-Poz informants, Catarina, used the fire to find “the understanding of the ancestors” she had marveled about since she was a child.¹⁵⁰ These three traditional Ajq’ijab, Xic Escalante-Villagrán, Roberto Poz, and Catarina, had the skills to interpret and find answers in the fire used by their ancestors.

The *Popol Wuh* describes *Abuela* (Grandmother) Ixmucane doing a ceremony, using incense, before the corn to honor his grandsons Hun Ahpu and Xbalanque; and how “the first humans – the great wise ones, the great thinkers, penitents and sacrificers”-unwrapped their copal (pine resin), and there was a sense of achievement in their hearts when they unwrapped it.”¹⁵¹ They did a ceremony to thank the sun and patron deity, Tohil,

¹⁴⁷ Xic Escalante Villagrán, *Cosmovision y Espiritualidad: Meditaciones y Reflexiones del Pensamiento Maya* (Quetzaltenango, Guatemala: Silabario Ediciones, 2017) 16. My translation.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. 16. My translation.

¹⁴⁹ Molesky-Poz, *Contemporary Maya Spirituality*, 159.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. 155

¹⁵¹ Cook, *Renewing the Maya World: Expressive Culture in a Highland Town* 160.

upon reaching their destination in what is today's Guatemalan highlands. The use of white incense, copal, pom and other resins to produce a ceremonial fire continue today.

The *Popol Wuh* also describes that when the K'iche Maya left Tulan they received the fire and their patron deities (Tohil, Awilish and Jacawitz) to keep the memory of their place of origin, their deities, and ancestors alive. They also brought the pom with them. The pom is another type of pine resin still used and burned in ceremonies.

Contemporary Ajq'ijab interpret how the fire moves. They communicate its meaning to the person who requested the ceremony: "if the fire moves in the direction of the sun, it is a good prognosis; if it moves clockwise, something adverse may happen. Further, the meaning depends upon how fast the flame moves and whether it swirls upward, sparks, or crawls along the ground."¹⁵² Escalante Villagrán describes fire as the "splendor" (*grandeza*) of the ceremony. The human-universe connection is revealed in the effect of the "size, length of time, and sparks" of the fire. The Ajq'ij must be "mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually concentrated" to interpret those three fire effects. In that way they can assist individuals and communities advising them how to solve their problems with intelligence or how to make positive actions and achieve harmony."¹⁵³

In the practitioners' belief, fire has healing powers. Escalante Villagrán says the fire "burns fears...its circular energy is to face adversities and helps the spirit to reach higher dimensions."¹⁵⁴ Spirit, he says, translated to K'iche and Mam Maya means "breath" (*Rub'uxel* in K'iche and *T-Xew* in Mam). Therefore, as long as the Ajq'ijab keep doing the ceremonial fire, they will keep spiritualism alive (i.e., breathing).

Fire is the highlight of a Maya ceremony no matter the size nor the amount of natural materials used. It is fire, shaped in a circular way, what the Ajq'ij uses to remember his or her ancestors; to thank or ask for something; to count time around it; and more importantly to interpret how and in what direction the flames twirl and inform the person or persons who asked for the ceremony.

The lack of literature about the meaning of fire, except the *Popol Wuh*, Molesky-Poz findings and Escalante Villagrán's explanation, indicates two things: the lack of

¹⁵² Ibid., 163.

¹⁵³ Escalante Villagrán, *Cosmovision y Espiritualidad*, 11, 17. My translation.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. 16.

consultation with the Ajiq'jab' or participating in their ceremonies or at the discretion of some researchers they did not disclose the ways of the Ajq'ijab'. In either case, fire is what became synonymous with witchcraft. In popular language I recall people referring to the Ajq'ij, other than brujo or bruja (sorcerer or witch), as “*él o la que quema* (he or she who does the fire).” My study, different to most studies about the Ajq'ijab', will show that in the process of planning and carrying out my conversations, fire was part of the ceremonies and meeting people. I observed that fire can be as small as the flame of one candle or as large as a *Waxajib B'atz'* (Maya New Year) ceremony when large quantities of natural materials are used.

2.6 Religion or spirituality? Modern interpretations, changes, and mimicry

As examined above, until the 1524 Spanish and Nahua conquest, scholars portrayed the Maya as a people with a religion because, using Western standards, they believed in a supreme being, they had a priesthood structure, they had places of prayer and a pantheon. Beginning in the conquest era their ceremonies were taken to the outside boundaries, away from the conquerors, and the new Catholic religion. The Ajq'ijab' became invisible and nameless people who were labeled as witchcraft practitioners. When the ceremonies became public knowledge in the early 1990s, a brief debate took place about whether it was a religion or spirituality. Some of these Indigenous religions leaders wanted to see Maya spirituality in the same category as Catholicism and Protestantism and promoted a dialogue with these churches. Non-religious activists identified Maya spirituality as distinct from other religions altogether. In the process, several national organizations, with headquarters in Guatemala City, were created, each with its own view on how to institutionalize Maya spirituality. Institutionalizing Maya spirituality has supporters and critics. As my own research demonstrates the practice has been promoted, and accepted, as Maya spirituality.

Victor Montejo states: “Mayan creation myths explain the integration of interrelationship that must exist between humans, plants and animals for their collective survival. For this reason, most indigenous scholars make a distinction between religion

and spirituality.”¹⁵⁵ The survival of the rituals is allowing practitioners, especially in urban areas, to debate their status within Guatemala’s religious sphere.

In one book, *Crosscurrents in Indigenous Spirituality: Interface of Maya, Catholic, and Protestant Worldviews*, Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers, who are Catholic, Protestant or Maya, criticize Spanish colonialism while promoting a dialogue between the Christian faith and Indigenous religions. A few rejected Christianity outright. Promoters of the dialogue included Kaqchiquel Maya Protestant Reverend Vitalino Similox, Quechua theologian Goyo Cutimamco, K’iche Maya Evangelical pastor Moises Colop and former Catholic priest, K’iche Maya Wuqub’ Iq. Meanwhile, Chilean Fray Pablo Richard called for an Indigenous appropriation of the gospel.¹⁵⁶

Others defined the Maya belief system as a religion based in the millennial belief of a supreme being (*Ku* in Yucatec-Maya according to Lopez-Hernandez; *U Cux Caj Ulew* or “Heart of Heaven and Earth” according to Colop, and *K’uk’umatz* according to Similox). They argued that Maya religion included a priesthood class, a hierarchy of deities, sacred documents and celebrations and other similarities with Christian religions (Wukub’ Iq’). Similox also argued that Maya theology existed long before Europeans came to the Americas. Although it “may not have all the scientific presuppositions and epistemological foundations of Christianity, it possesses its own complex of meanings, methodology, and sources.”¹⁵⁷ Following that line of thought, Lopez-Hernandez listed 14 categories that, in his view, define Indigenous theology. He argues that these categories can be applied to most Mesoamerican religions:

First: “the God that speaks.”

Second: “Singing the tradition” to worship the divinity.

Third: “Dancing the myths” which is a form of pedagogy, Lopez-Hernandez says, “to transmit the content of the faith.”

Fourth: The prayers.

Fifth, “Throwing the corn” in the air to discern the future.

¹⁵⁵ Victor Montejo, “Mayan Spirituality” in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, Bron Taylor, ed. (Continuum, 2008), 1060.

¹⁵⁶ Cook, *Crosscurrents in Indigenous Spirituality: Interface of Maya, Catholic, and Protestant Worldviews*, 39, 57, 199, 259.

¹⁵⁷ Vitalino Similox cited in Cook, *Crosscurrents in Indigenous Spirituality*, 37.

Sixth, “Reading the [ancient] calendar” to predict the future based on one’s date of birth.

Seventh: “Being a torch” for one’s people (i.e., an Elder, a wise person, a counsellor).

Eighth: “Being a mirror” of one’s heart and face.

Ninth: Counselling others in life: at birth, puberty, marriage, investiture for a new task and at death.

Tenth: The “blooms of war” between day-night, heaven-earth, man-woman, health-disease, etc.

Eleventh: The theological qualities to “soar to the heavens as eagles, to stalk the earth like jaguars or to glide serpent-like under earth and water.”

Twelfth: To understand the “signs of time” and nature.

Thirteenth: “Deciphering the dreams” to analyze and comment on reality.

Fourteenth: “Keeping alive the historical memory.”¹⁵⁸

Kekchí Maya scholar Antonio Pop Cal opposed these two positions, calling it Maya religion and entering into a dialogue with Christian churches. He rejected the “Good News of love” based on the gospel’s violent past on Indigenous land. He stated:

We are urged to imitate the crucified Christ who was humiliated and cruelly assassinated by the Jews. Then, as a further incentive to forbearance, the church offers us a rosy and promising future. We are told however cruel the calamities we suffer in this life, much greater still be our consolations after death. Indigenous Christians accepted the veracity of these doctrines, while allowing themselves to be robbed of their possessions. With hands clasped, they looked toward heaven where they hoped to find the eternal joy of revenge—the weeping and gnashing of teeth of their enemies...The purpose of Christian evangelization is to snuff out any impetus toward rebellion. It means to dissolve, once and for all, our dreams of vindication so that we might become assimilated into the Christian body. Its objective is to “bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ (Eph. 1:10). To this end, Christians must become Jews unto the Jews, gentiles to the gentiles, and “indios” to the “indians.”¹⁵⁹

Eventhough Indigenous Catholic and Evangelical efforts to call the practise religion did not succeed it showed that ceremonies existed. Citing Houtart, Morales Sic argues the resurgence of the pre-colonial, pre-capitalist Maya religion was “clearly anti-system.” This

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. 157-59. This is a summary of Lopez-Hernandez’s Indigenous theology.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. 220.

gives context to the work of specialist and religious leaders who are “inventing the [Maya] religion based on recovering the past.”¹⁶⁰

The term “spirituality,” in opposition to religion, eventually began to take form and was widely used by scholars and activists of the 1990s Maya renaissance. Former mayor of Quetzaltenango, Rigoberto Quemé Chay, explains that using spirituality in that decade was politically motivated and not because Indigenous and non-Indigenous negotiators in the peace process fully understood Maya spirituality.¹⁶¹ In that decade, the Guatemalan government and the guerrilla forces included the Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples as part the Peace Agreement on March 3, 1995. During the peace process, a “Maya spiritual ceremony” took place in the central plaza with President Ramiro De Leon Carpio (1993-1996) attending.¹⁶² The peace talks concluded with the signing of the final Peace Agreement on December 1996.

Another reason for calling Mayan ceremonies “spirituality” was to “cleanse” their practice of any Christian influence, even as they duplicate much of what organized religions do. For instance, Morales Sic also found Mayan ‘national’ organizations’ offices decorated with Mayan symbols and with Mayan altars inside their buildings. Some members of these Pan-Mayan movement organizations participated or supported the creation of national spiritual organizations headquartered in Guatemala City. Publications of the *Popol Wuh* and the *Chol Q’ij* were re-introduced.¹⁶³

Montejo observed that the Ajq’ijab’ were organized into a national association after coming out of seclusion in the 1990s.¹⁶⁴ Morales Sic found not one but several national organizations that, in his view, were institutionalizing Maya spirituality. In some of these spiritual guides’ organizations Maya “religion is being politicized and politics is being spiritualized.” For instance, organizations such as *Defensoría Maya* (Mayan Rights Defense Centre) limited the positions of national and community leadership to those born under the symbols B’atz and Kan. In their view, these two *Chol Q’ij* (260-day calendar)

¹⁶⁰ Morales Sic, *Religión y Política*, 19. My translation.

¹⁶¹ Quemé Chay, Rigoberto. Interview by Leonzo Barreno, Quetzaltenango, August 19, 2017, interview 6, transcript.

¹⁶² Barrios, *Chu’umilal Wuj*, 10.

¹⁶³ As Ahkin told me, the *Popol Wuh* and the calendar were reintroduced in the Quetzaltenango area in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This is the time I joined the ceremonies. Ahkin, Interview by Leonzo Barreno, Quetzaltenango, August 16, 2017, interview 3, transcript.

¹⁶⁴ Montejo, “Maya spirituality and Maya Catholicism,” *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, 1060.

symbols are the most appropriate to choose leaders. However, in doing so, Morales argues, they are “reducing the chances of many people who have leadership skills but whose Nawal are one of the other eighteen *Nawalib*’. This will restrict their participation and power sharing in a democratic process.” Whoever aspires to leadership positions must also be 25 years old or older. In Morales view, the Defensoría Maya, in limiting younger people to become leaders, is imposing “Gerontocracy.”¹⁶⁵ This style of institutional building has its critics.

Molesky-Poz described “the danger of the institutionalization of Maya spirituality.” She warned against fundamentalist interpretations of Maya spirituality to convert people. She argued this is not the reason for the Maya movement’s growth.¹⁶⁶ To express her arguments she had access to people, ceremonies and information only rivaled by Barbara Tedlock and Garret Cook’s studies in Momostenango, Thomas Hart, and Carlos Barrios’ studies.

Whether influenced by the growth of national spiritual guides’ organizations or not Catholic churches located in large Indigenous towns are now accepting the practice of rituals inside their buildings. This indicates that the church has its own goals for conversion purposes as well. John Early, after studying the growth and acceptance of Christianity among the Maya, mentions how “Mayan Catholic priests initiated a movement for the enculturation of the ‘wisdom of the ancestors’ as a Maya Christian theology... founded in the traditions of the community.”¹⁶⁷ In Momostenango, this competition for new members is pitting *cofradía* costumbristas, who practice syncretism, against the new young Ajq’ijab.

Cook and Offit observed young Momostecans joining “cultural activist Maya religion, some of whom might be willing to serve as dancers, though that pool in Momostenango may involve more women than men and generally lacks the seemingly critical family connections to ancestral and recent dancers.”¹⁶⁸ Some former members of the *cofradías* are now joining the “entrepreneurs,” young Ajq’ijab who train people into Maya spirituality.

¹⁶⁵ Morales Sic, *Religión y Política*, 70. My translation

¹⁶⁶ Molesky-Poz, *Contemporary Maya Spirituality*, 174-75.

¹⁶⁷ Early, *Maya and the Catholic Cultures in Crisis*, 439.

¹⁶⁸ Cook and Offit, *Indigenous Religion and Cultural Performance in the Maya World*, 133.

Montejo, meanwhile, discusses the New Age Movement. This movement is different from the internal differences between the traditional *Ajq'ijab'* and the non-government organizations or *comunidad* trained *Ajq'ijab'*. Foreign scholars, who have acquired "...appropriate Maya knowledge of the sacred, such as the Maya calendar are becoming shaman themselves." Montejo calls them "white-shamans" or "plastic medicine men and women."¹⁶⁹ It is not clear if Montejo was including Barbara Tedlock and Thomas Hart as part of this New Age Movement, since they became *Ajq'ijab'* and wrote books about their experiences.

Maya spiritual guides face common challenges. In "Mayan Spirituality and Conservation (Western Highlands, Guatemala)" Estuardo Secaira argues, natural spaces are important to perform ceremonies and revive Maya spirituality. He claims this is particularly true "among young intellectuals and professionals who look for ways to differentiate themselves from mainstream society and reaffirm their Maya identity."¹⁷⁰

The lagoon of Chicabal, near Quetzaltenango is the Mam Maya spiritual place to pray for rain. Local landowners formed an ecological organization (ASAECO) to manage the lagoon and for their agricultural needs. The terrain proved unsuitable to grow corn. With assistance of a Dutch agency, the San Martin Sacatepéquez municipality and ASAECO have conserved the land and lagoon for tourist purposes.¹⁷¹ Bathing, swimming, and fishing are not allowed, and signs ask visitors to "respect the Mayan altars." However, not everything is for spiritual purposes. The owners of the surrounding lands, and thus members of ASAECO, are Protestants. The Maya *Ajq'ijab'* believe they do not "fully respect the Maya spirituality and the lagoon as a sacred site."¹⁷²

One of the novelties this writer has observed in the last three decades is that spiritual guides allow people to take pictures or film their ceremonies. This contrasts with what the writer has learned and witnessed in Canada where Elders do not allow taking pictures or filming their ceremonies. Hart, Morales, Molesky-Poz, Escalante and this writer took full advantage of this difference. In Hart's book, there are pictures of how to put the natural

¹⁶⁹ Montejo, "Maya spirituality and Maya Catholicism," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, 1061.

¹⁷⁰ Estuardo Secaira, "Mayan Spirituality and Conservation (Western Highlands, Guatemala)" in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron Taylor (Continuum, 2008), 1068.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 1070

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

materials in a circular manner, with colors representing the four cardinal points, the earth and the sky, before starting the actual ceremony;¹⁷³ of people initiating their journey to become Time Keepers;¹⁷⁴ burning the natural materials, in the “sacred fire,” in actual ceremonies;¹⁷⁵ and of syncretism where ceremonies are performed for Catholic saints.¹⁷⁶ The most thought provoking of all photographs are those revealing the work of an Elder Ajq’ij. He is shown using the contents of his sacred bundle (*tzite* in K’iche Maya) for “divination” purposes.¹⁷⁷

Another challenge, or the result of intercultural relations, is the mimicry of Indigenous *costumbre* dances. The new *convites* are an expression of Indigenous-Ladino cultural relations, as both groups form them, but what these new dances do is to mimic the Indigenous *costumbre* dances. Cook and Offit show pictures of the different Halloween-like costume characters dancing in the *convites*: from Freddy Kruger, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, the rock band Kiss, to Barack Obama.¹⁷⁸ In Cook and Offit’s view, the *convites* “value competition, egoism, and novelty, which are contrary to traditional Maya values.”¹⁷⁹ The new *convite* dances are not Maya. They mostly resemble a Halloween parade. Unlike the “monkey dance,” the *convite* does not do *la costumbre*.

Espiritismo (quackery or Spiritism) is another novelty that made its appearance in Mayan ceremonies in the 1980s. Some argue ‘traditional’ ceremonies included pom, ocote and candles only. According to Mr. Pedro Ixchop, followers of Spiritism introduced, “chili peppers, bottles, fire-crackers, and other elements not commonly used in a ceremony.”¹⁸⁰ These items, as per personal experience, cause strong smells, explosions, and watery eyes. Only the Ajq’ij or Aj’itz knows the purpose of using those substances. Some Ajq’ijab are critical of their ‘entrepreneurial’ or innovative colleagues. Lucas Ticum criticizes those “*que solo engañan*” (those who only deceive others).” He laments, “*hay mucha mentira y engaño*” (there are too many lies and cheating). Some of the lies Ticum mentions include deceiving women to take advantage of them (*aprovecharse de la mujer*). He criticizes

¹⁷³ Hart, *The Ancient Spirituality of Modern Maya*, 37, 38, 53, 54.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. 97.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. 61, 62, 80, 225.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. 15, 16, 82, 168, 179, 180, 182.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. 109, 110.

¹⁷⁸ Cook and Offit, *Indigenous Religion and Cultural Performance in the Maya World*, 97-102, 110-115.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. 158.

¹⁸⁰ Morales Sic, *Religión y Política*, 64. My translation

Ajq'ijab' who overcharge these women and some Ladino Ajq'ijab' who collect many *varas* (the tzite or bundle) to claim more energies than others. He argues there is no need to have many bundles: "One is enough."¹⁸¹

Finally, there is no agreement as to how much is too much. Indigenous organizations now do invocations at each activity. While spiritual leaders, like Felipe Gomez, welcome the "[public] won spaces" (*espacios ganados*) in the state apparatus, these ceremonies can be used for "other purposes" such as legitimizing a government activity. Even Rigoberta Menchú is critical of events organized by Indigenous institutions that do not include Mayan ceremonies.¹⁸² She is not alone; political leaders of different ideologies now include Mayan ceremonies in their activities.

When Mayan ceremonies became a frequent activity in the early 1990s the initial debate, as demonstrated in *Crosscurrents in Indigenous Spirituality: Interface of Maya, Catholic, and Protestant Worldviews*, was whether it was a religion, compared to Christianity, with its own theology or was something else. Indigenous Catholic and protestant religious leaders and scholars who wrote about the subject agreed that before colonization the Maya believed in one supreme deity (called with different names), possessed a pantheon and a priesthood structure. Based on that, most of them described it as a religion. Others, like Pop Cal, disagreed in how to relate it to Christianity. He rejected Catholicism or any form of Christianity that promises eternal salvation but condones exploitation.

Pop Cal's position, without mentioning his name, was categorized as "hostile" and "visceral"¹⁸³ by Lopez-Hernandez who called for a dialogue between Christian and Indigenous theologies. He acknowledged that Indigenous religion "has won the support of a few indigenous intellectuals among our people."¹⁸⁴ Although Lopez-Hernandez attempts to fit Indigenous ceremonies and beliefs into a Christian-like structure did not succeed, it is clear that national Mayan spiritual organizations, created and based in Guatemala City, are attempting to institutionalize Maya spirituality. Another modern impasse these

¹⁸¹ Nicolás Lucas Ticum, *Filosofía del tiempo y de la claridad* (Guatemala City: Ediciones Maya' Na'oj, 2017), 138-40.

¹⁸² Morales Sic, *Religión y Política*, 76-7. My translation.

¹⁸³ Ibid. 142.

¹⁸⁴ Cited in Cook, *Crosscurrents in Indigenous Spirituality: Interface of Maya, Catholic, and Protestant Worldviews*, 167.

organizations face, as studied and further explained by Morales Sic in the next section, is how to relate with the Guatemalan government and how to attract new followers because some Indigenous Catholics and Protestants see Maya spirituality as “pagan” even if they work for these or other Indigenous organization.¹⁸⁵

Only recently have scholars such as Tedlock, Hart, Morales Sic and Molesky-Poz approached the spiritual guides to know their views about their ceremonies and learn from them. Meanwhile, Lucas Ticum, Cook and Offit, and Molesky-Poz found some of the modern challenges facing Maya spirituality such as using the position as Ajq’ij for deceptive intentions, for-profit initiatives and as a fad. Irrespective of how Mayan ceremonies are used today, the question remained, until then, when did these changes occurred. How after centuries of secrecy, did ceremonies become public and diverse? Next section provides answers to this question and what happened when they were no longer persecuted by state or church.

2.7 The 1990s public appearance of Mayan ceremonies during the peace process

Mayan spiritual guides began celebrating public ceremonies in the early 1990s for the first time in modern history and as part of a larger popular and Pan-Maya movement demanding the end of the Civil-War. Negotiations to end the war culminated with the signing of the Peace Agreement in 1996. The first 1990s ceremonies showed Maya spirituality survived colonialism and the recent war. The peace process was the conjuncture that allowed the resurgence of Maya spirituality.

Irma Alicia Velásquez Nimatuj in her 2002 study of Quetzaltenango affirms that “the Mesoamerican Cosmovision persists. After five centuries, the rituals, the use of the calendar, and a diversity of traditions shared by poor and non-poor Indigenous peoples continue thus demonstrating a collective millenarian memory.”¹⁸⁶ Key to such survival was syncretism. She adds that those who practise Maya spirituality, as part of the cultural negotiation, also practise other religions to avoid the violent destruction or persecution of their own rituals as was done during conquest and colonization.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Morales Sic, *Religión y Política*, 56.

¹⁸⁶ Irma Alicia Velásquez Nimatuj, *La Pequeña Burguesía Indígena Comercial de Guatemala* (The Indigenous Petty Bourgeoisie of Guatemala), (Guatemala City: CHOLSAMAJ, 2002), 137.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 153-4.

Montejo experienced personally how “the civil war was used by the Guatemalan army to ridicule, intimidate or label spiritual leaders as guerrilla sympathizers.”¹⁸⁸ In the early 1990s they countered the government and non-Mayan people’s celebration of the Columbus Quincentenary’ commemoration. In Montejo’s view, the Maya “have ruptured the silence imposed on them and have begun to perform their ceremonies without fear of being called *brujos*, or witch doctors, but as Mayan experts in the ancient calendar and sacred knowledge.”¹⁸⁹ He also discusses how spiritual beliefs extend to agriculture, the land, the cosmos, community life and modern threats to Maya spirituality.¹⁹⁰

In an identical argument to Montejo, Jean Molesky-Poz describes Catholic and Protestant efforts to acculturate the Maya but she also mentions how the “state-sponsored terror” that began in the late 1970s targeted “community leaders and *Ajq’ijab*’ as well as Catholic priests and lay workers...”¹⁹¹ To maintain their beliefs alive, the *Ajq’ijab*’ resisted government and religious attacks, ridicule, persecution and violence. She argues that state violence made them live in fear until the late 1980s.¹⁹² That fear, however, dissipated in the 1990s when Mayan ceremonies began to take place in public gatherings. She adds, “No longer able to bear the alienation, disempowerment, and disillusionment associated with the state and other religious forms, they [small groups of Maya] sought a spirituality corresponding to their own social and religious meaning.”¹⁹³ Once they came out of secrecy, Mayan ceremonies began to appear all over the highlands.

Like Montejo, Thomas Hart argues it was in 1990 and 1991, as part of the continental “500 Years of Resistance” movement, that Mayan activists raised awareness about recent repression against their people. Thus, he says, “Mayan spirituality was re-examined, and Mayan priests began to emerge from the shadows to restate their philosophy and to refute the accusations that have been heaped upon them for so long.”¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁸ Victor Montejo, “Mayan Ways of Knowing: Modern Mayans and the Elders” in *A Will to Survive: Indigenous Essays on the Politics of Culture, Language and Identity*, ed. Stephen Greymorning (New York: McGraw Hill, 2004), 164.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 166.

¹⁹¹ Molesky-Poz, *Contemporary Maya Spirituality*, 28.

¹⁹² *Ibid.* 18-20.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.* 29.

¹⁹⁴ Hart, *The Ancient Spirituality of Modern Maya*, 6.

Santiago Bastos and Manuela Camus are more specific than Hart. They claim that the first Maya ceremony took place on October 11 and 12, 1990 when *Majawil Q'ij*, a Guatemalan coordinating body of popular and Indigenous organizations met to prepare the Second Gathering of the “500 Years of Indigenous and Popular Resistance Campaign.”¹⁹⁵ *Majawil Q'ij* chose Quetzaltenango for the 1991 gathering. The Quetzaltenango continental gathering, dominated by the Latin American leftist movement, was a catalyst to launch Rigoberta Menchú candidacy for the Nobel Peace Prize, which she eventually won later that year. It also alienated the local Maya cultural movement. After a brief separation, Bastos and Camus explain how the Indigenous popular movement (the *clasistas* led by the Peasant Unity Committee -CUC) eventually found common ground with the Mayan cultural organizations grouped under the Council of Guatemalan Mayan Organizations (COMG) to participate in the peace negotiations.¹⁹⁶

Similarly, Maria Stern identifies the early 1990s as the re-emergence of the Maya movement. During this time, the terms *indios* (Indians) and Indigenous began to be replaced by the pan-identity *pueblo Maya* (Mayan people), as a “political stance” to maintain their own group identity.¹⁹⁷ Several events strengthened the *Ajq'ijab* groups’ resilience: “the 1992 International Year of the Indigenous Peoples became symbolic as “five hundred years of Indigenous resistance.” Rigoberta Menchú received the Nobel Peace Prize; K’iche-Maya Rigoberto Keme [sic] Chay was elected Mayor of Quetzaltenango.”¹⁹⁸ Other local and international documents and gatherings “also opened a space for the public reclamation of Indigenous spirituality.”¹⁹⁹

At the end of the Civil War in 1996, competition began among traditional Catholicism, other Catholic denominations specifically the Charismatic and the ever-growing Protestants. This was going on at the same time as the emergence of a Pan-Maya movement. The peace agreement and the post-war allowed the mushrooming of other national organizations representing *Ajq'ijab*’ but with different objectives and ways of

¹⁹⁵ Santiago Bastos and Manuela Camus, *Quebrando el Silencio: Organizaciones del pueblo maya y sus demandas 1986-1992* (Breaking the Silence: mayan people’s organizations and demands 1986-1992), (Guatemala: FLACSO, 1996), 96.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 177.

¹⁹⁷ Maria Stern, *Naming Security – Constructing Identity: ‘Mayan-Women’ in Guatemala on the Eve of ‘Peace’* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 50-1.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 30.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

passing their beliefs to others. Some of the Mayan activists, who were not Maya spirituality practitioners, began to cultivate “rural supporters and encouraged the revitalization of shamanism as a pan-community activity.”²⁰⁰

Morales Sic also found that Indigenous organizations now include Maya spiritual celebrations as part of their activities, publish “Mayan calendars” and sometimes make their staff participate in ceremonies. That does not mean that all the Indigenous personnel believe in the Maya faith. On the contrary, in the *Academia de Lenguas Mayas* (the Mayan Languages Academy), not all employees are believers of the Maya belief system. The Academy’s cultural coordinator, José Sanik, explained “the [Indigenous] Evangelicals are apathetic to the celebrations. They go because they are forced to attend and when they are there they tend to interrupt and talk among themselves.”²⁰¹ Maya spirituality is still a “pagan custom” to followers of other religions, be they Indigenous or not.

Another national organization is the Guatemalan Mayan Priest Association. The Association grew and obtained legal status in 1994. At the time of Morales Sic’s research, it had 15 offices.²⁰² This shows how the Maya belief system went from being a hierarchical religion to adapting Catholic deities and symbols to continually adapting itself to Guatemala’s social and political realities. This adaptation to city life and dealing with the government also shows the variety of relationships with one of the former oppressors.

These organizations call themselves “Confederations, Conferences, Ministries, Foundations, Associations, and all terms that show their capacity to reinvent themselves using contemporary terminologies.”²⁰³ These organizations’ main achievement, as a follow-up to the Peace Agreement regarding Indigenous spiritual rights, was Decree 261-97 to create a joint commission to protect Mayan altars. The beginning of this Indigenous-government commission failed because Indigenous representatives “wanted everything to be done fast” and the government representatives were afraid that protecting sacred places meant expropriating private lands.²⁰⁴ The second phase of this commission resulted in the creation of the National Council of Spiritual Guides. The main winner in this process was

²⁰⁰ Early, *Maya and the Catholic Cultures in Crisis*, 402-04.

²⁰¹ Morales Sic, *Religión y Política*, 56. My translation.

²⁰² *Ibid.* 88. My translation

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.* 100. My translation.

the government which now “has specialists in the Maya religion, many of them are Ajq’ijab’. As government employees they cannot break the law.”²⁰⁵ Morales Sic’s findings show Government did not need to coerce spiritual guides living in Guatemala City. Some are now government employees.

One organization with ties to the government is the Kakulha Foundation led by Mr. Cirilo Pérez. Mr. Pérez makes no ethnic distinction when his organization trains a new Ajq’ij. On January 14, 2008, he gave the *vara* (the tzite or bundle accrediting someone as Ajq’ij) to non-Maya Alvaro Colón, then president of Guatemala. Then, Colón named himself “Minister of the Maya Solar Calendar.” Other national organizations do not agree with giving the *vara* to Ladinos. Felipe Gomez of the Oxlajuj Ajpop National Confederation says is “not correct to give the *vara* to non-Maya, because they will never live as one [as a Maya].”²⁰⁶ Gómez also added that Ladino and foreigners have approached his organization to obtain the *vara* [bundle] but it is not correct to give the sacred bundle to just anybody “without proper training.”²⁰⁷

Cook and Offit observed “Calendric divinations are making a big comeback, through an individualistic not familiar application.”²⁰⁸ Regardless of the “pyramid scheme” used by these groups to train others at a cost, graduating spiritual guides become prominent figures in Momostenango despite family disapproval. These “entrepreneurial” guides also support the *costumbre*.²⁰⁹ Cook and Offit do not specify how much contemporary spiritual guides charge to train others. To be trained as an Ajq’ij, Barbara Tedlock paid Q20.00 (then the equivalent of US\$20) in 1975, the same as other trainees.²¹⁰ Cook and Offit argue that modern Mayan Ajq’ijab’

still make offerings of copal and candles at hilltop shrine, but they interrupt their invocation to answer cell phones, and the invocation may have been learned from teachers in classes in Quetzaltenango and often come directly from the *Popol Wuh*, which had been lost to the Mayan and not known or used in the oral tradition of indigenous religionists in 1976.²¹¹

²⁰⁵ Ibid. 101. My translation.

²⁰⁶ Ibid. 91-8. My translation.

²⁰⁷ Ibid. My translation.

²⁰⁸ Cook and Offit, *Indigenous Religion and Cultural Performance in the Maya World*, xxiii.

²⁰⁹ Ibid. 140-42.

²¹⁰ Tedlock, *Time and the Highland Maya*, 59.

²¹¹ Cook and Offit, *Indigenous Religion and Cultural Performance in the Maya World*, xvii.

Although Mayan guides perform daily ceremonies, their main celebration became the *Waxajib B'atz* (Eight Monkey or Eight Cosmic Thread) better known as Maya New Year. This celebration, following the *Chol Q'ij* or the 260-day calendar, is gaining official recognition among Mayan organizations as it is now celebrated regularly.²¹² Escalante Villagrán mentions that spiritual guides can perform civil unions (*union de parejas* or weddings), which include four steps or circles (ceremonies) to prepare the couple before they wed. They can also lead death ceremony preparations which involve visiting the dying person and including that individual in candle and flower rituals. Simultaneous ceremonies in different places are held to reminisce about someone's life who has passed away. Other ceremonies include fertility ceremonies to assist couples who can't have children and time-keeping ceremonies for the Milky Way flying-pole and monkey dance (*palo volador* and the *baile del mono*) dancers.²¹³

Jean Molesky-Poz, Hart, and Montejo noted that practicing Mayan ceremonies in public has not been an easy road. What they demonstrated is that after nearly five centuries of secret counter-hegemonic struggles the ceremonies survived. The peace negotiations, more than any other event or process taking place in the 1990s, were catalyst for the spiritual guides to come out of hiding. Some of the very first public ceremonies took place in Guatemala City and Quetzaltenango. This is the time when they began abandoning clandestinity while others created national Mayan spiritual groups based in Guatemala City. Indigenous scholar Morales Sic found organizations that depend on government's support while others maintain a counter-hegemonic opposition.²¹⁴

The national spiritual organizations claim they are not political organizations. However, Morales Sic argues they are now "monopolizing the religious and political leadership of the Maya movement...because they assume the 'official' representation of Indigenous people, especially the Maya, before the government, the state and international organizations." Further, there are organizations that are attempting to standardize the practice of the ceremonies and others (the *espiritistas*) are experimenting with new materials, acting on their own, and charging for their services. Mayan spiritual

²¹² Morales Sic, *Religión y Política*, 71.

²¹³ Escalante-Villagrán, *Cosmovision y Espiritualidad: Meditaciones y Reflexiones del Pensamiento Maya*, 28-49

²¹⁴ Morales Sic, *Religión y Política*, 119. My translation.

organizations are emerging in other parts of Guatemala and not all the Ajq'ijab' belong to these groups.

In her study of Quetzaltenango, Velásquez argues, but does not expand on the subject, that syncretism allowed Maya spirituality to survive in that city. Although Molesky-Poz found some modern challenges facing the Quetzaltenango Ajq'ijab, her interviewees did not tell her about the divisions amongst them and the current problems they face. In this study, through observation and interviews, the Ajq'ijab' explained how syncretism allowed their mentors and themselves to hide their faith. Until the late 1980s, their numbers were small and while not organized they were a closed circle of people. With the Maya renaissance of the 1990s all changed. In our conversations, they expressed their views about those changes and their differences of opinion in topics they wanted to share. Not at the same level as the 'national' organizations based in Guatemala, in Quetzaltenango there are also those who maintain a counter-hegemonic struggle, those who do ceremonies publicly and others who profit from it.

2.8 The Quetzaltenango Ajq'ijab' in the literature and my research question

Quetzaltenango, described in more detail in Chapter 7, is Guatemala's second largest city. The last Guatemalan census was in 2002. In that year, 127,569 people were living in the city: 63,714 identified themselves as Indigenous but only 9,674 said they spoke a Maya language; 63,855 said they were non-Indigenous.²¹⁵ In 2018, a new census was underway. The city's approximate 2018 population was 166,723 people.²¹⁶ This is the city where I was born, grew up and where I met, and learned from the Ajq'ijab in the 1980s.

Cook and Offit refer to Quetzaltenango as the "Quetzaltenango School" where young Momostecans, and people from other regions, go for their training to become

²¹⁵ República de Guatemala, Instituto Nacional de Estadística, *Características de la Población y de los Locales de Habitación Censadas* (Population Characteristics and Household Census) (Guatemala: INE, 2002), Last modified November 24, 2019,

<https://www.ine.gob.gt/sistema/uploads/2014/02/20/jZqeGe1H9WdUDngYXkWt3GIhUUQCukcg.pdf>

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²¹⁶ República de Guatemala, Instituto Nacional de Estadística, *Guatemala: Estimaciones de la población total por municipio. Período 2008-2020* (Guatemala: Total Population Estimations per municipality. Years 2008-2020) (Guatemala: INE, 2018), Last modified December 2, 2018,

[http://www.oj.gob.gt/estadistica/reportes/poblacion-total-por-municipio\(1\).pdf](http://www.oj.gob.gt/estadistica/reportes/poblacion-total-por-municipio(1).pdf), 3.

spiritual guides. The Ajq'ijab of this K'iche Maya city, surrounded by several Mayan altars, are the focus of my study.

When Molesky-Poz did her study in the early 2000s she focused and spent most of her time in Quetzaltenango and surrounding towns like Zunil (8 kilometers south of Quetzaltenango). She interviewed several local Ajq'ijab' and Indigenous scholars to understand what Maya spirituality meant for them. K'iche Maya scholar Daniel Matul told Molesky-Poz "Maya Cosmovision is a form to understand, relate with, and be human with all elements of nature."²¹⁷ Ajq'ij Roberto Poz stated that for the Maya there are three phases about the creation of life: "the void, silence, and soul." He told her that the *Popol Wuh* contains a creation story when "the sky alone is there." In that nothingness and silence the Heart of Sky and The Sovereign Plumed Serpent made sound when they spoke to create life.²¹⁸ That is the reason, Poz said, why the Ajq'ijab, as humans, "give praise, [are] givers of respect, providers, and nurturers."²¹⁹

The Ajq'ijab' celebrate their ceremonies in specific places they call *tz'ijolb'al tz'ij* where they can "speak to the cosmos, and can be used to ask for better health, cure illnesses, good crops, buying goods and other [requests to the Creator]."²²⁰ In Quetzaltenango, and other Guatemalan regions, these places are popularly known as "enchanted, ceremonial centers, Mayan altars, sacred places..." (*Encantos, centros ceremoniales, altares Mayas, sacred places...*) and are located in hills, volcanoes, rivers, caves and near large rocks.²²¹

Xic Escalante Villagrán, a Quetzaltenango Ajq'ij, explains the trainees, be they from the city or not, have to "attend talks, do research, interrelate with Elders, understand the needs of their community, and know the history of our people."²²² They must do rituals in 40 ceremonial centers: "The first 20 visits are during the day" and the Ajq'ij accompanies the trainee. The other 20 are done by the trainee alone and at night "starting with the last place he visited during the day."²²³ These ceremonial centers are located around Quetzaltenango's mountains and smaller towns and mountains outside the city.

²¹⁷ Molesky-Poz, *Contemporary Maya Spirituality: The Ancient Ways Are Not Lost*, 35.

²¹⁸ Ibid. 36-7.

²¹⁹ Dennis Tedlock cited in Molesky-Poz, 38.

²²⁰ Escalante-Villagrán, *Cosmovision y Espiritualidad: Meditaciones y Reflexiones del Pensamiento Maya*, 11. My translation.

²²¹ Ibid. 15. My translation.

²²² Ibid. 21. My translation.

²²³ Ibid. 21-2. My translation.

At the end of the training, there is a ceremony and a meal at a specific shrine where the novice receives his or her bundle.²²⁴ The “vara” [is] a small bundle, which contains 260 *tz’ite* seeds (*Erithrina coralloderendro*).²²⁵ Only then can the new Ajq’ij visit shrines and “commemorate births, marriages, deaths, planting and harvesting for her lineage.”²²⁶ Those who complete the training can continue on their own spiritual path, perform rituals and follow “elevated dreams.”²²⁷ The Ajq’ijab’ told Molesky-Poz that their main responsibility is to serve the community, “to cure, to give advice, [or] to orient.”²²⁸ After the first level of training, they can continue learning and acquiring new skills. Escalante Villagrán explains the categories, the skills an Ajq’ij develops, and what he or she can do for people:

Nab’e Ajq’ij – First as Timekeeper: she or he has acquired knowledge about the 260- day lunar calendar, the [20] Nawals and the 13 energies. She does personal and collective ceremonies.

Ukab’ Ajq’ij – Second as Timekeeper: she uses the 365-day calendar; she begins to use her mind to know the round calendar and the circle of fire.

Urox Ajq’ij – Third as Timekeeper: she mastered the two calendars and works with the Tz’ite’. In this stage she can serve the community, has knowledge of medicinal plants, can cure [illnesses] and can interpret the phases of the moon.

Ukaj Ajq’ij – Fourth as Timekeeper: he has extraordinary talent. She can read the calendars, interpret the Nawals, can interpret the fire’s flames, can consult the Tz’ite’, can cure people, knows about time and space, and can begin training others.

Uro’ Ajq’ij or Ajitz’ – Fifth as Timekeeper: he knows and practices all the above. He has a delicate concentration, efficient and great mental development. By doing the respective ceremonies, he protects the dancers of the *palo volador* (the Flying Pole dance) and the monkey dance. He can strengthen his skills and personal behaviour through his transformation to other dimensions.²²⁹

Escalante Villagrán categories are identical to what Charles Wagley found in his 1941 and 1949 studies among the Mam Maya of Santiago Chimaltenango in the province

²²⁴ Tedlock, B., *Time and the Highland Maya*, 66; Escalante-Villagrán, *Cosmovision y Espiritualidad*, 26.

²²⁵ Tedlock, B., *Time and the Highland Maya*, 66; Alvarado cited in Molesky-Poz, *Contemporary Maya Spirituality*, 76. The *tz’ite* seeds resemble small red beans.

²²⁶ Molesky-Poz, *Contemporary Maya Spirituality*, 77.

²²⁷ Ibid. 80.

²²⁸ Ibid. 83-4.

²²⁹ Escalante-Villagrán, *Cosmovision y Espiritualidad, Meditaciones y Reflexiones del Pensamiento Maya*, 22-3. My translation. This writer completed the first stage in 2007.

of Huehuetenango. He observed the works of the chmaan: the *chaamb'aj* or *aj q'ij* (person of the sun/day[s]/time) and the powerful *aj mees* (person of the table). The former was very similar to the contemporary K'iche Maya *Ajq'ij* (Timekeeper) of Quetzaltenango whereas the second was perceived as someone with “divinatory powers.” There was also the female *xhb'ool* or herbal curer/midwife. A fourth person was the *ky'aawil* “who bewitched people.”²³⁰ This last person is comparable to what Escalante calls *Ajitz'*. Both cultures use the prefix “Aj” to identify the skill or profession of the person who counts time (*q'ij* in Mam, *q'ij* in K'iche). This shows that there are different categories of *Ajq'ijab'* among the Mam and the K'iche Maya. These identical categories and ‘informal’ structures have withstood time. Since the 1980s I became familiar with the K'iche ceremonies practised by the Quetzaltenango *Ajq'ijab'*, mostly by those in the first level (*Nab'e Ajq'ij*).

As Morales Sic stated, government agencies, mostly in Guatemala City, now employ their own Mayan spiritual guides. None of the people I interviewed claimed to work for the government in that capacity. However, one event in 2012 at Quetzaltenango’s central park showed the split between older *Ajq'ijab'* and the non-government organizations trained spiritual guides. A more detailed description of my conversations with 11 Quetzaltenango *Ajq'ijab'* and two non-spiritual guides and the categorization of my discussions with them is the main piece in this study’s chapter 7. Molesky-Poz and Escalante’s recent works confirmed the *Ajq'ijab'* existence in Quetzaltenango. The former is an academic work, the latter is an *Ajq'ij* account of what their belief system is; how one becomes an *Ajq'ij*; what he or she can do after the training; and what are the meanings of their ceremonies and the sacred fire.

In Quetzaltenango I noticed gaps that needed to be examined or that the *Ajq'ijab'*, during the conversations, wanted to share. This thesis attempts to fill that gap by asking them.²³¹ By listening to the practitioners directly this study’s main contributions are to know how they maintained their beliefs during Guatemala’s Civil War. They recalled personal experiences and the abrupt changes that took place during that decade; what is currently happening to the traditional ways in which they acquire the *Ajq'ij* status and the

²³⁰ Cited in John M. Watanabe, *Maya Saints and Souls in a Changing World* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1992), 188, 190, 191.

²³¹ Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies, Characteristics, Conversations and Contexts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 114.

changes to their spiritual space (i.e., places where they live, interact and practice their ceremonies). One last contribution has to do more with methodology than content of the study. In my role as an Indigenous researcher, I verified that the *costumbre* is still used in Quetzaltenango. Therefore, Western and Indigenous methodologies, when used respectfully can complement each other when involving Maya people and topics.

My research question proves the reasons that led the Ajq'ijab, from their perspective, to move from centuries of secrecy to holding public ceremonies. While many have studied this phenomenon, none has studied through the eyes and experiences of the Ajq'ijab themselves. As explained in the literature and Chapter 7, the Ajq'ijab existed in various Mayan communities. They inherited the creations of a classic and post-classic religion that left them material and “non-material cultural legacy – one that acknowledges the important role of astro-calendrical phenomena...”²³² They resisted colonization, neo-colonization and the Civil War, but in the early 1990s, they began to experience changes not observed before.

Following the advice of the Ajq'ij who performed the first ceremony and using grounded theory's flexibility I decided to let participants expand on themes they thought were important. Drawing from Charmaz, this extra information “reveal images of present or possible self and evokes feelings. Thus, these events mark time and become turning points.”²³³ For instance, after the war, Quetzaltenango became a training ground and as result the number of Ajq'ijab increased in the city and in other towns and cities. Identical to what they shared with Molesky-Poz, the older Quetzaltenango Ajq'ijab worry about institutionalization as much as the spectre of commercialization.²³⁴ They spoke about the commodification of Maya spirituality; they expressed concern about Indigenous youth, trained by Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) called *comunidades* or *escuelas*, who are inventing new ways of becoming Ajq'ijab thus avoiding or changing the *costumbre*. It is for that reason that I decided to interview younger Ajq'ijab trained in this non-traditional way. The traditional and the NGO trained spiritual guides think of their ceremonial practices as a political expression. What both groups have in common is that

²³² Rice, *Maya Calendar Origins*, 29.

²³³ Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis* (London: SAGE Publications Inc. 2009 [2006]), 116.

²³⁴ Molesky-Poz, *Contemporary Maya Spirituality: The Ancient Ways Are Not Lost*, 143.

neither group, nor individual, is competing for political leadership positions. The current neo-liberal policies of cultural inclusion, of city and country, only accept their ceremonies as long as they do not challenge the elite's political power. Last, the traditional guides expressed that they were no longer afraid of the government or society. They are now afraid of common crime near and in the rural altars. Consequently, spiritual urbanization in the form of home altars is becoming a growing alternative to their traditional rural altars.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework, Methodology and Methods

3.1 Hegemony

This study draws from Gramsci's theory of hegemony, generally, and the organic intellectuals in particular. It focuses on how the dominant religion can be used by or be a partner of the dominant political class to secure the consent of the lower classes for their own oppression or, instead, direct its opposition to the ruling groups when it sides with the subaltern groups. The subaltern groups also possess the capacity to oppose, or even collaborate with, hegemony for assimilation and oppression purposes. Moreover, the organic role of the Mayan spiritual guides was key to maintain alive, although in secrecy and displaying Catholic influences, Maya spirituality for five centuries of Spanish colonization and neo-colonization. When consent was not achieved through law, education and religion, military force was used to dominate Guatemala's Indigenous peoples. Converting the Maya population to Christianity was part of that colonial project. The colonizer's violence and constant abuse forced the organic Ajq'ijab to hide their practice in remote areas.

Despite disagreements in using hegemony to understand peasants or Indigenous struggles, I apply Gramsci's concept of the 'organic intellectuals' to the traditional Ajq'ijab because until the 1980s, as keepers of core Mayan spiritual values and cultural and cultural achievements, they survived relentless attacks from those in power, from Christian religious institutions and Guatemalan intellectuals. These Mayan organic intellectuals directed the spiritual ideas and aspirations of Maya spirituality. Departing from the notion that all societies have intellectuals and based on the readings of Gramsci's notebooks, Quentin Hoare & Geoffrey Nowell Smith argue that these type of "non-traditional" intellectuals "seemed indeed to represent a historical continuity uninterrupted even by the most complicated and radical changes in political and social forms."¹

My rationale for using hegemony and organic intellectuals as the theoretical foundation of this study is based on two premises: hegemony is not a dogmatic theory and

¹ Quentin Hoare & Geoffrey Nowell Smith, eds., *Antonio Gramsci: Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, eds., (London: Electronic Book Company, 1999 [1971]), Last modified December 2, 2018 <http://abahlali.org/files/gramsci.pdf>, 137.

it can be applied to situations and times other than industrial societies or class struggles. In the Guatemalan case, the Ajq'ijab' interact, adapt to change, and strive for maintaining their belief system. Hegemony and counter-hegemony in Guatemala are about a constant process of negotiation, change, and compromise expressed in how the Catholic religion and Mayan ceremonies interacted and influenced each other since colonial times. For further illustration, I borrowed Glenn Coulthard's term "stretch" and apply the concept of organic intellectuals to the spiritual guides or Ajq'ijab'. I argue that they were the hidden and nameless pillars for Indigenous cultural resistance, in secret, but resistance, nonetheless. As analyzed in chapter 2, they were and are the keepers, tellers and trainers of Maya spirituality. They possess the "capacity to choose the deputies [the apprentices] ...to whom to entrust this [spiritual] activity of organizing the general relationships external to the business itself."² They did not use coercion for others to join. In the 1990s this organic role, and how they conduct ceremonies, began to change and continues to change in Guatemala and particularly those living in Quetzaltenango.

To provide the participants' view this study used grounded theory. This methodology does not only seek to enquire but aims to develop theory from and by the subjects through "immersion "in the field."³ Thirteen participants were interviewed to develop theory from their past and current experiences in preserving Maya spirituality. As a complement to grounded theory, and as a Quetzaltenango native, I followed the traditional protocol *la costumbre* used by the local Indigenous people to ask for a traditional service or when they ask a favour from another person. Therefore, I used local protocols to consult with a local Ajq'ij about what steps to follow before and during my interview with participants. I also used *la costumbre* protocols to approach and meet participants.

² Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, "The Intellectuals: The Formation of the Intellectuals" in *Antonio Gramsci, 1891-1937: Selections from the Prison Notebooks Of Antonio Gramsci*, eds., (Social Theory) <https://soth-alexanderstreet-com.libproxy.uregina.ca/cgi-bin/SOTH/hub.py?type=getdoc&docid=S10019883-D000003>, 6.

³ Ian Dey, *Grounding Grounded Theory: Guidelines for Qualitative Inquiry* (San Diego, California: Academic Press, 1999), 29; Judith A. Holton, Isabelle, Walsh, *Classic Grounded Theory: Applications with Qualitative and Quantitative Data* (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, 2017), 30.

3.1.1 Historical hegemonic analysis

The current study, as the evidence shows, does not assume that Maya spirituality, as part of Maya culture, was fixed or in absolute polarization to Christianity. What this paper demonstrates is that the Mayan ceremonies, the calendars, the *Popol Wuh* and other intellectual and material creations were devices for ongoing spiritual resistance. Scholars have mostly focused on the socio-economic history of Guatemala, including Mayan culture but rarely on spiritual aspects of such culture which survived colonialism and much less on the organic role the spiritual leaders played in religious counter-hegemony.

Greg Grandin, similar to what Severo Martínez Peláez wrote in 1970, begins his text by “assuming” that current Indigenous cultures are the result of being “formed within historical processes – colonialism, capitalism and making of the State - which has also generated many other results such as Ladino identity, [social and political] resistance, repression, racism, ethnic renaissance, nationalism, and political legitimacy.”⁴ He then explains that such “approach” (*enfoque*) is “difficult to adopt [to study] Guatemala...because popular classes, the Maya in particular, have a different history and culture than those produced by the Guatemalan state.”⁵ In other words, while colonialism influenced Indigenous societies and cultures, including the spiritual ceremonies, they were not destroyed because they were rooted in a different historical process. To demonstrate that the Mayan Ajq’ijab were the subaltern population’s organic intellectuals who resisted colonialism while constantly adapting to their new reality, I relied on direct and scholarly readings about Antonio Gramsci’s analysis of religion and its social influence as a model of how hegemony works in societies as the approach to use in this study.⁶

According to Reed, Gramsci said that common sense, folklore and religion are resistant to hegemonic change because they have cultural properties, which can be channeled for counter-hegemonic purposes.⁷ In other words, traditional worldviews and feelings can themselves be a material force for change.

⁴ Greg Grandin, *La Sangre de Guatemala: Raza y Nación en Quetzaltenango 1750-1954*, (Guatemala: Ciudad Universitaria, 2007), 21.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Robert Bocoock, *HEGEMONY* (Chichester: Ellis Horwood Limited, 1986), 60.

⁷ Jean Pierre Reed, “Theorist of Subaltern Subjectivity: Antonio Gramsci, Popular Beliefs, Political Passion, and Reciprocal Learning,” in *Critical Sociology*. 07/2013. Volume 39, Issue 4. (SAGE

Hegemony, as a term, was not invented nor first used by Gramsci. He simply applied it to his reality, the fight against fascism in Italy. However, he also clarified that hegemony was not the monopoly of one group or another and not specific to one period. Hegemony means “moral and philosophical’ leadership...which is attained through the active consent of major groups in society.”⁸ Gramsci, according to Day, credits Lenin for the “great event of the theorization and realization of hegemony.” Meanwhile, Bocock wrote that Gramsci asserted that hegemony can be achieved when “the intellectual, moral and philosophical leadership provided by the class, or an alliance of classes, and class fractions which is ruling, successfully achieves its objective of providing the fundamental outlook for the whole of society.”⁹

Although a Marxist, Gramsci had a distinctive difference – and this distinction is central to this dissertation. Unlike Marx or Lenin, Gramsci included culture as an important level in hegemonic struggles. Reed states that for Gramsci, “class struggle is therefore more than economic struggle.” Culture is also determinant. It is the terrain where people move.¹⁰ And it is that terrain where dominant and dominated classes struggle for hegemony. William Roseberry, in his analysis of Gramsci, says that the dominant class, in control of the state, pursues “juridical and political” and intellectual and moral leadership.¹¹ By contrast, the subaltern who is not in control of the state, typically grounds its counter-hegemonic opposition in social movement organizations and dissent through intellectual and cultural expressions. However, the challenge for both groups is to achieve “unity” within their own groups.¹² In Guatemala, the dominant economic and political elites have maintained unity by constantly reinventing the monolithic term ‘*indio*’ (Indian) and

Publication), Last modified November 21, 2018,

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0896920512437391>, 564.

⁸ Bocock, *HEGEMONY*, 11. Fascism gave life to the corporative state or Americanization of the European modes of production “(which depends upon unemployment not employment; it protects a minimum standard of living for the employed, which would itself collapse and provoke serious social upheavals if there were free competition).” Fascism is a reactionary not a revolutionary form of power.⁸ Gramsci challenged that power resulting in his incarceration.

⁹ Cited in Bocock, *HEGEMONY*, 63.

¹⁰ Reed, “Theorist of Subaltern Subjectivity: Antonio Gramsci, Popular Beliefs, Political Passion, and Reciprocal Learning,” 562.

¹¹ William Roseberry, “Hegemony and the Language of Contention” in *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico*, ed. Gilbert Michael Joseph, (Duke University Press, 1994), 359.

¹² *Ibid.*

applying it to 21 Mayan groups. That unity has been challenged throughout history by Indigenous cultural expressions that have resisted racism and violence to dominate them. In response, the elites, using the state and their organic intellectuals, have used different mechanisms to retain power.

According to Reed, for Gramsci, people's worldviews were cultivated by religion, law, educational institutions, political movements and parties, more so than the media's focus on day-to-day issues.¹³ Gramsci wrote that "there does not exist any independent arty class of intellectuals, but **every social group has its own stratum of intellectuals** or tends to form one [emphasis is mine]."¹⁴ He expected progressive intellectuals to provide leadership to others. On that point Robert Bocoock, Lorenzo Santoro, and Jean Pierre Reed agree on how Gramsci interpreted the relationship between intellectuals and subaltern populations. For Gramsci, intellectuals are not the only ones capable of philosophy; he credits **common people with 'spontaneous philosophy' through their language, common sense and religion or belief system** [emphasis is mine].¹⁵ He also emphasized that intellectuals should not impose their will or feel superior to people. They occupied the contradictory role of both reflecting and leading the articulation of popular passion.

Gramsci argues that the intellectuals' abstract knowledge added to the common-sense passion of the masses can effectively lead counter-hegemonic action. He also discussed that common sense has its other side which is the desire to "make it" or, on the other hand, lacks passion for the struggle or has too much of it. In either case a struggle cannot be sustained and instead brings disunity.¹⁶

Education is therefore key to avoid disunity. Long before Paulo Freire, Gramsci suggested teacher and pupil learn from each other in a process of "reciprocal learning." Intellectuals cannot be separated from the people; they must interact.¹⁷ For example, intellectuals can teach them the philosophy of praxis by creating 'polemic' with these traditional philosophies.¹⁸ Instead of imposing, intellectuals should use critical analysis to

¹³ Reed, "Theorist of Subaltern Subjectivity: Antonio Gramsci, Popular Beliefs, Political Passion, and Reciprocal Learning," 12.

¹⁴ Hoare and Geoffrey, *Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 217.

¹⁵ Bocoock, *HEGEMONY*, 59.

¹⁶ Gramsci, 1987: 392, cited in Reed, J.P., "Theorist of Subaltern Subjectivity: Antonio Gramsci, Popular Beliefs, Political Passion, and Reciprocal Learning," 570.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 572.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 573.

engage students questioning their social reality. Although the Mayan spiritual and organic intellectuals did not operate in the same manner as those discussed by Gramsci and the readers of his works, they hid in caves or held secret meetings to carry on this intellectual-pupil interaction. This clandestine communication played a major role between those who knew the core elements of Maya religion and their apprentices in resisting colonial hegemony even amid persecution and punishment.

Deducing from Gramsci's theory, therefore, the concept of hegemony has the same importance as non-Western concepts of the world. Although peasants and Indigenous peoples have rarely achieved hegemony after their lands and social structures have been colonized by imperial powers or the new republics, this study shows that Quetzaltenango, our place of research, was an exception to the norm. Using their cultural traits and traditional relations of production, Indigenous peoples in this largely K'iche Maya city were, and are, constantly in a hegemonic struggle, or in alliance, with the dominant Spanish, Creole, and then Ladino groups.

Grandin shows how the K'iche economic and political elite, not the common people, cooperated with the state and the municipal government. However, these Indigenous elites also challenged the authorities when individual and community interests were at risk, such as Guatemala's declaration of independence from Spain in 1821. Despite their claims to have their own *cabildo* (Indigenous municipal council), which they had for 300 years, the K'iche elite lost their independent council in 1895.¹⁹ From that date on Ladino and K'iche elites shared power through a "mixed" municipal council. Eventually, the K'iche lost its separate Indigenous municipal authority. Hidden in that K'iche opposition to total subjugation were the spiritual guides.

3.1.2 Hegemony: Critics and other alternatives

Hegemony has its critics. James C. Scott's extensive studies in Southeast Asia provides one example. Hegemony, he says, "is simply the name Gramsci gave to this process of ideological domination...through culture, religion, education, and the media"

¹⁹ Grandin, *La Sangre de Guatemala*, 34-5.

and the consent and passive compliance of subordinate classes.”²⁰ Scott argues that hegemony studies “fail to make sense of class relations in Sedaka [Malaysia] but also are just as likely to mislead us seriously in understanding class conflict in most situations.”²¹ He also does not agree with the Marxist statement that peasants possess “false consciousness.” In the case of Sedaka they are not fully subordinate to the rich. Quite the opposite, he says that the peasants “are likely to be more radical at the level of ideology than at the level of behaviour, where they are more effectively constrained by the daily exercise of power.”²²

Scott asserts further that Gramsci’s hegemony “works primarily at the level of thought as distinct from the level of action. The anomaly, which the revolutionary party and its intelligentsia will hopefully resolve...”²³ Hegemonic theory is “applicable only at those times when power relations virtually preclude open forms of resistance and protest. Only under such conditions are the constraints on action so severe as to produce near hegemonic appearances.”²⁴

Scott wrote that peasants may not be theorists, but they do know what is ‘just’ and ‘moral.’²⁵ To build his argument Scott discusses peasant struggles in the Philippines, China, and Europe. Using phenomenology, he says “peasants are thus not much subject to mystification about class relations; they do not need outsiders to help them recognize a pattern of growing exploitation which they experience daily.”²⁶ For them, subsistence, based on ‘reciprocity’ as a matter of rights and morals, is what matters.²⁷ Reciprocity is justice and legitimacy. According to Scott, peasants can accept some form of exploitation if in return they are provided with some protection for their subsistence.²⁸

Evidently, Scott does not embrace hegemony theory as a framework for understanding peasant life and their resistance against oppression in any of his books. As

²⁰ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 315-16.

²¹ *Ibid.* 317.

²² *Ibid.* 331.

²³ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 90.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 91.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 167.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 173.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 176.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 193.

he argues, peasants in Southeast Asia were not at the same level as workers in capitalist societies. Scott's final analysis of Gramsci is that the role of a

“... Subordinate class is to create a counter hegemony that will ultimately be capable of transforming the society. This position may have some merit for mature capitalist societies, where an elaborated ideology may already be in place. But it ignores the central fact that it has been capitalism that has historically transformed societies and broken apart existing relations of production.”²⁹

Scott does not delve deeper into Southeast Asians peasants' pre-Islam Indigenous culture. One of the only occasions he mentions medicine men (*bomoh*) is when a *bomoh* is consulted to find a stolen object or identify the thief. The objects “mysteriously reappeared” after word of mouth said that the *bomoh* was consulted. He saw, without identifying the person, who stole it.³⁰ The *bomoh* is only treated as a form of quackery, accorded a peripheral role and is certainly not considered central to people's fight against capitalists.

Islam, however, is central to the life of peasants and landlords. Scott discusses the religious practice of *Zakat peribadi*, a Muslim religious charity. Islam, as per the Koran, Scott says, “does not discourage the faithful from becoming rich, it asserts that the rich have an obligation to share a portion of their wealth with those who are poor and without property.”³¹ The funds they raise are not a tax but a “sacred obligation” which the rich give to the mosque for distribution.³² In order to receive the zakat a poor villager has to have a “good reputation” for working their land rather than neglecting it. The second mechanism is the *Derma*, which is collected when a poor person is in need, for instance, for funeral expenses.³³ Last is *Kenduri*, or feast, put on by both rich and poor. The rich who do not help (*tolong*) are called *sombong* (arrogant, someone who feels superior). The rich, however, can discriminate against people by selecting who is a “good poor” and who is not.³⁴ On the other hand, the poor “have a vested class interest in emphasizing, and exaggerating, the income and property of their wealthy neighbors.”³⁵ However, all these

²⁹ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, 346.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 270.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.* 170-71.

³³ *Ibid.* 172.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 204.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 201

religious and community traditions, at the time of Scott's study, were declining. This negatively affected and personalized the rich-poor relations.³⁶

In Sedaka, Malaysia, the attack is not against capitalism, as Islam allows it, but against capitalists who the peasants see not respecting the rituals of their Muslim religion. Scott's views minimize the peasants of comparable agency to analyse and transform their social conditions. He only focuses on their current state and Islamic religion rather than their pre-Islam Indigenous history as basis of their cultural resistance. Like Christianity in Guatemala and North America, Islam was a colonial religion now, as Scott suggests, embraced by the people of Sedaka. If the peasants consult the *bomoh* (traditional medicine man) it indicates that pre-Islam traditions still exist and resist.

Despite Scott's objections to hegemony, I argue that a theory such as this shall not be interpreted as an orthodoxy, applicable to one region, one problem, and one period. It is for that reason that for the purposes of this study I echo William Roseberry's argument that hegemony is a process. He says that it is "fragile" and not a "monolithic" concept.³⁷ More importantly, he states that hegemony is a "problematic, contested, political *process* of domination and struggle."³⁸ It is, therefore, resisting domination what shapes the subaltern to act and resist the ruling class.³⁹ Moreover, and considering the flexibility of hegemony, Gramsci did not "assume that subaltern groups are captured or immobilized by some sort of ideological consensus." Further, he considered the subaltern "active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formation."⁴⁰

Other works, in their theoretical framework, that support my argument in using hegemony (to analyze Indigenous peoples struggles) are from Indigenous scholars Glenn Coulthard and Howard Adams who use political economy (Marxism) to explain the socio-economic and cultural relations in Canada and how the state coopts Indigenous leaders through "Indigenization." Coulthard's *Red Skin, White Masks* is about the politics of recognition in Canada. Coulthard does not disregard Marx's primitive accumulation of capital. What he does is to "stretch" the concept to show Marx's theory in other parts of

³⁶ Ibid. 175-76, 181.

³⁷ Roseberry, "Hegemony and the Language of Contention," 358.

³⁸ William Roseberry, "Hegemony, Power, and Language of Contention," *The Politics of Difference*, ed. Edwin Ni. Wilmsen and Patrick McAllister (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 77, 81.

³⁹ Ibid. 80.

⁴⁰ Roseberry, "Hegemony and the Language of Contention," 360.

the world. He argues that what occurred in Canada was more a ‘dispossession’ of land that in his view continues today. In Canada, there is a “colonial relation” not simply a “capital relation.”⁴¹ Dispossession is not a thing. It is the “sum effect of the diversity of interlocking oppressive social relations that constitute it.”⁴² Land is also exploited. By the same token, if Indigenous peoples are not proletarians how does their condition of colonized people, be maintained? To frame that colonial relation, Coulthard uses Fanon to explain how colonialism works “mainly through the unrelenting and punishing forms of violence.”⁴³ Further, he rejects the neo-liberal politics of recognition and reconciliation. He argues that a colonizer does not need recognition from the colonized but his labor, or as in the Canadian case, land.⁴⁴

Coulthard’s argument that a colonial relationship still exists in Canada is comparable to that of the late Métis scholar Howard Adams. He says Colonialism is a “complex national system of racial, cultural and political dominations which produces privileges beyond the surplus value generated by capitalism.”⁴⁵ Further, Canadian colonialism is not a thing of the nineteenth century; it has deep roots in the arrival of Europeans to Indigenous lands when they enslaved Indigenous peoples in the 1600s. In Adams view, the term ‘fur-trade’ is misleading because the French forced Indians to ‘contribute’ with furs or die. The more their business grew the more Indian slaves they needed. He argued that besides businessmen, politicians, and the Catholic Church also owned Indian slaves. This unequal relationship was based on the Eurocentric belief of superiority over Indigenous peoples. Europeans created hegemonic constructions of who was “civilized” and who was not.⁴⁶ Adams also mentioned the successful ‘indigenization’ of government programs transferred to Indigenous elites that follow the five stages of colonialism: invasion, destruction of indigenous social structures and a new ideology, imposition of new government, capitalism, and racism.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Glenn Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 10.

⁴² *Ibid.* 15.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 16.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 40.

⁴⁵ Howard Adams, *Tortured People: The Politics of Colonization* (Theytus Publications, 2002), 7.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 21.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 52-3.

In Guatemala, neither the government nor the Church persecute spiritual guides; however, new strategies were created to control them. For example, Morales Sic demonstrated that the Guatemalan government now employs some Ajq'ijab'. As part of the state payroll, they cannot contradict their employer's policies and actions. Similar to what Adams argued about Canada's "indigenization," Guatemala uses two neo-liberal mechanisms, the peace accord and the constitution, both acknowledging Indigenous cultural rights. These rights do not challenge Guatemala's economic and political elites, as I will describe in more detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

3.1.3 Hegemony: A bridge between phenomenology and political economy

The relative emphasis placed by Scott on phenomenology and colonialism's political economy by Coulthard and Adams, each underline, not directly, the important role hegemony analysis can play in analyzing Indigenous people's ongoing colonial experience. It connects the subjective reality of lived experiences under conditions of social domination, in the larger socio-cultural and politico-economic forces and institutional struggles that shape Indigenous people's experience.

I argue that the hegemonic analysis of colonial history helps explain why the social invention of the Indian was comparable in North America and Guatemala. In Canada, for example, land was the main commodity, whereas in Guatemala it was both land and labour. Indigenous labour was secured by creating laws to justify exploitation. The Spaniards' hegemonic promotion of racial and cultural superiority, based on the ideology of blood purity, is still present in Guatemala. It is for that reason that, quoting Roseberry, an "analysis of the language of race...is necessary for an interpretation of [the long list of social, political, cultural and racial hegemonic and counter-hegemonic expressions in Guatemala]." ⁴⁸ For instance, as discussed in Chapter 5, two of the country's most prominent scholars, young Miguel Angel Asturias and Severo Martínez Peláez, despite their pioneering contributions to understand Guatemala's history and political economy, endorsed Spanish, Criollo and Ladino hegemony based on racial superiority in their initial literary works. Other scholars and Indigenous people constantly opposed these essentialist

⁴⁸ Roseberry, "Hegemony, Power, and Language of Contention," 75.

expressions of racial superiority. Counter-hegemony was a constant process, even in modern times.

Culture, in Gramsci's view, does not simply have an anthropological meaning. Quoting Gramsci, Kurtz says that it is rather "the exercise of thought, the acquisition of general ideas, the habit of connecting cause and effect...enlivened by (political) organization...personified in the intellectuals."⁴⁹ In other words and as stated above, organic intellectuals are not unique to the ruling classes. Rather, ideas evolve whether expressed by the colonizer or colonized even if the former denies the latter any intellectual capacity. Those who lead societies promote what is best for the dominant classes and social groups that are aligned within their historical bloc. In this cultural struggle, Indigenous peoples were not passive actors.

The Mayan spiritual guides did not give up their ancient way of believing. At the same time, they adopted new beliefs into their ceremonies. The colonizer's violence and constant abuse forced the organic Ajq'ijab' to hide their practice in remote places. Mostly nameless, they appeared sporadically throughout colonisation to revive popular attachment to their old religion. These intermittent demonstrations parallel Florencia Mallon's findings in Mexico and Peru. Maya counter-hegemony was not a single event but a "continuous process and outcome."⁵⁰ Hybridity through syncretism was occurring. Thus, the Ajq'ijab' asserted their agency through religious activity, in both Mayan and Catholic celebrations, throughout colonialism and neo-colonialism. The process, at times, put Maya costumbrista in conflict with the Catholic Church.

The Ajq'ijab' work and the slow conversion of the masses irritated and worried the Catholic hierarchy. To avoid punishment, most Maya adapted Christian elements in what came to be known as syncretism, the veil to maintain the local practice known as *la costumbre* (the custom or the tradition). In maintaining the spiritual part of the *costumbre*, Indigenous people kept the Maya worldview alive. The Ajq'ijab', even if he or she was consulted in secret, played a leading role of continuous learning and teaching. As this study

⁴⁹ Donald V. Kurtz, "Culture, poverty, politics: cultural sociologists, Oscar Lewis, Antonio Gramsci," in *Critique of Anthropology*, 09/2014, volume 34, No. 3 (SAGE Publications, 2014), 330.

⁵⁰ Florencia Mallon, *Peasant and Nation in the Making of Modern Mexico and Peru* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1995), 6.

shows, they are not a homogenous group. Some, especially those living in Guatemala City, chose to affiliate with the government.

3.1.4 Grounded Theory and *la costumbre*: An inter-disciplinary methodological approach

The field-work of this study combined grounded theory and the local K'iche Maya *costumbre* (the traditional custom) to obtain information. The former provided me with the plan to construct questions; categorize the answers and create theory - based on the participants' worldview and experience. The *costumbre*, I learned from family, cultural belonging and my past personal spiritual journey. It gave me the cultural steps, protocols, and the 'talk' (*el hablado*) required when approaching someone for a traditional service: Approach and ask people for their help in a respectful way. I implemented a form of methodological syncretism: using a Western methodology and *la costumbre*.

3.1.4.1 Grounded Theory

This philosophy of discovering concepts grounded in data and then explaining them draws from Anselm L. Strauss and Barney G. Glaser (1967) in “the discovery of theory from data.”⁵¹ In the grounded theory approach, data is “systematically collected and analyzed without...forcing [a] predetermined theoretical framework.”⁵² Grounded theory focuses on what emerges from the data (the transcripts and notes). The data considered in this dissertation were the spiritual guides' life experiences before, during and after the 1980s-armed conflict. Data included the places they live, how they acquired their knowledge; how they experienced the armed conflict and the eventual peace agreement and what they think about the current use of their ceremonies. Another feature of classical grounded theory is “to create hypotheses not to test them.”⁵³ It is a theory-building method that allows for “theoretical flexibility” as it evolves and allows for new information and constant comparison. The open-ended character of grounded theory allowed me to enhance

⁵¹ Ian Dey, *Grounding Grounded Theory: Guidelines for Qualitative Inquiry* (London: Academic Press, 1999), 33.

⁵² Judith A. Holton and Isabelle Walsh, *Classic Grounded Theory: Applications with Qualitative and Quantitative Data* (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, 2017), 12.

⁵³ Dey, *Grounding Grounded Theory: Guidelines for Qualitative Inquiry*, 20.

the questionnaire as it was designed. When people shared new information with me, I realized that information was relevant to them and to this study.

According to Strauss and Corbin “action and/or interaction lie at the heart of grounded theory.”⁵⁴ To understand how people act and interact, and how they relate to data, in particular places grounded theory involves four steps: generating or coding data; integrating categories; delimiting those categories; and writing the emerging theory.⁵⁵ Coding is not simply the accumulation of evidence but is “governed only by theoretical evidence.”⁵⁶ For instance, Charmaz describes coding as “the process of defining what the data are about. . . It is our first analytical step. Coding means naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data.”⁵⁷ Straus and Corbin similarly describe ‘open coding’ as “the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data.”⁵⁸ A researcher’s task is to “define what is happening in the data and begin to grapple with what it means.” In grounded theory one must “1) name each word, line or segment followed by 2) a focused, selective phase that uses the most significant or frequent initial codes to sort, synthesize, integrate, and organize large amounts of data.”⁵⁹

Categories emerge because of data analysis and are not simply labels but the result of data.⁶⁰ The theory, the result of analyzing categories, “has to reflect but also transcend the local context.”⁶¹ Open coding is followed by connecting the categories, then focusing on a core category. Codes or families of codes are the result of conditioning factors. There are causal and “intervening conditions.” The former includes “those which lead to the occurrence or development of a phenomenon.” The latter may involve diverse conditions factors such as “time, space, culture, economic status, technological status, career, history and individual biography.”⁶² A combination of such conditions may be necessary to produce an event. In this study, Guatemala’s Civil War was a necessary condition leading

⁵⁴ Cited in Dey, *Grounding Grounded Theory: Guidelines for Qualitative Inquiry*, 149.

⁵⁵ Dey, *Grounding Grounded Theory: Guidelines for Qualitative Inquiry*, 7.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 96.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 43.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 97; Holton and Walsh, *Classic Grounded Theory: Applications with Qualitative and Quantitative Data*, 81.

⁵⁹ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*, 46.

⁶⁰ Dey, *Grounding Grounded Theory: Guidelines for Qualitative Inquiry*, 61.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 89.

⁶² *Ibid.* 155-56.

to the Peace Agreement. Consequently, the periods I focused on in my interviews were the 1980s, the 1990s and thereafter. As the war ended, the practice of Maya spirituality changed all over Guatemala - including Quetzaltenango. Other intervening conditions that shaped the form of those changes included the places of prayer, the socio-economic changes affecting the Ajq'ijab, how they obtained their *vara* (the bundle), and whether they became spiritual guides before or after the peace process.

The criteria to complete grounded theory analysis require categories and coding of those intervening conditions and they must “fit and [have] relevance.”⁶³ To create this study’s significant categories I followed the criteria of avoiding “theoretical saturation.”⁶⁴ Having too much information in one category was avoided by letting participants address key topics but also expand into topics where they wanted to share. The flexibility of grounded theory thus allowed me to explore categories not initially identified in the study proposal. The open-ended questions allowed participants to provide data without being confined by the researcher’s pre-established questions and understanding.

3.1.4.2 *La Costumbre* as an Indigenous research protocol in action

The next step of my methodological approach was to use *la costumbre* protocols. I learned the *costumbre* teachings in my youth as I accompanied my parents on traditional ‘petitions’ in the 1970s and 1980s. The personal petition I remember best took place in 1980, when my parents asked a shoemaker to teach me his trade. They brought gifts to him, including bread, chocolate and other food. After my parents’ petition, the shoemaker accepted the gifts and he replied. He agreed to teach me his trade but told my parents that, in order to succeed, I had to follow his instructions and attend daily. Missing work, even if I were an apprentice, would end the deal. After a few months of training, I became a shoemaker in 1981 at age 15.

As I was growing up, I observed more elaborate *costumbre* protocols, particularly when the parents of my sisters’ future husbands requested my parents’ permission for my sisters marrying their sons. The gifts included several baskets containing cooked food, chocolate, bread and alcohol. In this case, an intermediary called “*tertulero*” (*Kamalbe*, the

⁶³ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*, 54.

⁶⁴ Melanie Birks and Jane Mills, *Grounded Guide: A Practical Guide* (London: SAGE, 2011), 99.

guide), was the main spokesperson for the asking family. He also led the prayers. After praying, the petitions were done with both sides addressing each other with reverence and respect. Larger and more planning-intensive *costumbre* traditions are involved during marriages, to honor a Catholic saint and other social events. In my research, I used the same protocols. I had become further familiar with the gifts and the talk when I requested for ceremonies during my travels to Guatemala in the 1990s and thereafter. These *costumbre* protocols reinforced my methodology by building access, trust, openness and goodwill with these traditional and non-traditional sources.

As an Indigenous researcher, and a Quetzaltenango native, I understood the importance of these protocols and I followed Blumer's 'Respect your subjects' principle when doing the research.⁶⁵ In fact, this is the *costumbre* main principle: respect. In most Indigenous groups respect is a "consistent value."⁶⁶ It is for that reason that, before travelling to Guatemala I consulted a local public university research coordinator about policies for doing research with local people. Ironically, I was informed that there is no written policy, from the Maya perspective or local institutions, on how to do fieldwork research in Quetzaltenango's Indigenous communities.

In using *la costumbre* protocols, I was following what Shawn Wilson identifies as 'axiology' or "a set of morals or a set of ethics."⁶⁷ Michael Anthony Hart expands on axiology, which matches what I did in the field:⁶⁸ The axiology supporting my study has several components. I was in control of the research and took ethical responsibility for how it was conducted; I respected individual participants and places; I shared and presented ideas to the key informant and the *Vida Digna* collective; I ensured participants felt safe; I was not intrusive in my observations; I listened and respected participants' emotions; I did not judge their comments; I honored what they shared with me; I was self-aware of my own listening and behavior and I acknowledged that I brought my own experience and subjectivity to this study. I also brought a commitment to compromise, without sacrificing

⁶⁵ Ibid. 19.

⁶⁶ Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 116.

⁶⁷ Cited in Michael Anthony Hart, "Indigenous Worldviews, Knowledge, and Research: The Development of an Indigenous Research Paradigm" in *Journal of Indigenous Voices in Social Work*, Vol 1, Issue 1, February 2010 Last modified November 25, 2018, https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/bitstream/10125/15117/v1i1_04hart.pdf, 6.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 9-10.

university ethics or disrespecting the local *costumbre*. My self-positionality and belonging to the local culture, I acknowledge, was an advantage. The trust endowed on me by the participants was reciprocated by respecting their local protocols, time and space.

As Margaret Kovach argues, this cultural identification is key to a researcher's critical reflexivity or "self-location."⁶⁹ Self-location is an important part of Indigenous research and the "I" and "subjective knowledge" are part of it. In my case, my Indigenous self-hood helped me during my trips to Guatemala. During my 2017 field trip, this self-positionality empowered me to "share personal aspects [of my] own experience with research participants" and to build reciprocity, rapport and trust with them.⁷⁰ That relationship goes back more than three decades.

Before travelling to Quetzaltenango, I also communicated with my main informant. In an email message to the writer on June 29, 2017, he suggested doing three ceremonies. The first ceremony was to "ask for permission to begin the research, [the second] was to provide [me] with strength and correct mistakes [after the first interviews], and the last one was for the ending [of the research]." Once in Quetzaltenango, I began planning the first ceremony before contacting participants.

Mayan ceremonies use materials that can be found in local markets. My contact gave me a list of items to buy in two different places. With a list in hand, I went to the municipal market, *La Terminal*, in Quetzaltenango's zone 3. Most merchants of *el Mercado* are *Quetzaltecas*, they are middle-class Indigenous women from Quetzaltenango. They own or rent a market space from the city. It measures no more than 4 metres wide by 3 metres deep. Wearing colorful *trajes* (traditional outfits), they and their children invite people to buy their products. Their small businesses are packed with candles of all sizes and colors, resin pine products, chocolate, incense and colorful bottles of 'magic' potions. Arriving at my recommended vendor, I bought the main pine resin products of *copal*, *cuilco*, *rashpom*, and incense, cacao, coin-shaped chocolate, wax and white candles. From the market, I went to the entrance of the local cemetery in zone 1 to buy chrysanthemum flowers. These materials were used in the ceremonies and as traditional gifts (*ofrenda*) to each of the 13-research participants.

⁶⁹ Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*, 110.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

The next step was to identify and contact my informants. My key contact introduced me to the collective *Vida Digna* (Dignified Life). He and another member of the collective provided me with contact information for 20 spiritual guides. Only two people in the list were members of the collective. Most of them, I was told, were Ajq'ijab'. Due to financial constraints (I planned for 12 participants), and to avoid data saturation, I decided to contact people not on the list. I contacted nine people on the *Vida Digna* list and seven responded. I contacted five other people not on the list. I knew two of them were Ajq'ijab', who received their training in NGOs called "school" (*escuela*) or "community" (*comunidad*). I also contacted a former guerrilla fighter, now Ajq'ij and two participants who were not spiritual guides. One of them was the former mayor of Quetzaltenango, Mr. Rigoberto Quemé Chay. Another was a female apprentice. The thirteenth person was a member of *Vida Digna*. She learned the purpose of my study after I had completed most interviews and while I reported to the collective members. She volunteered to participate late. In total, I interviewed 13 people, including the key contact, nine males and four females.

Once I gathered all the materials I needed for the *ofrendas* and ceremonies (but before calling, visiting and interviewing people), the time came to host the first ceremony. During the ceremony, the Ajq'ij did not just pray but mentioned this study on several occasions. More importantly, when it came my turn to lead the ceremony I made some mistakes in counting time using the Maya calendar. The Ajq'ij used these mental errors to advise me. He told me to avoid mistakes as much as I could when visiting and talking to people. There was no magic or metaphysical act to prepare me to do the interviews. The ceremonial teachings helped me to prepare mentally, physically and to organize my materials before I called people. In approaching them, I was complying with university ethics and, above all, respecting people's traditions.

For the personal *ofrendas* (traditional gifts or offerings), I only needed pine resin copal, traditionally made chocolate and a dozen white candles. I unwrapped the materials and separated them as needed. I also added one braid of sweet-grass I obtained from a Cree Elder's Helper (see photo 1). The sweet-grass was a personal gift and a symbol of my continuous relationship with the traditional Treaty 4 Elders and Helpers. Of all the products in the bag, the sweet-grass was the only one I didn't buy. Anytime I delivered the bags, I explained to each of my hosts how Canadian First Nations people obtain the sweet-grass

and what ceremonial uses they give to it. While First Nations Elders and their helpers use the sweet-grass' smoke to smudge themselves or cleanse a place, the Ajq'ijab' use the fire flames and smoke for the same purpose.

The *costumbre* teachings came in handy when I presented my *ofrenda*, both to the traditional Ajq'ijab' who did the ceremonies for this study and to each of the participants. I noticed that these traditional protocols of reciprocity were still intact. I was giving something to receive something. Even Quemé Chay and the younger 'community' graduates understood my request and the meaning of the *ofrenda*. Once they accepted it, a sense of respect and trust was achieved.



Photo 1: Barreno, L. 2017. *The ofrendas* (The traditional gift)

After the ceremony, the second step of the local *costumbre* was to present the “*ofrenda*” (the gift or offering) to the participants. Only then were subjects engaged on the research topics. Moreover, the interviews turned into visiting first and then later into conversations. Some participants, especially the traditional Ajq'ijab' or Abuelos (including male and female) I have known for more than three decades. Some invited me to pray at their home altars. As we did in the 1980s in the mountains, we prayed to the cosmos, to

nature, to the mystical and historical ancestors and to people who kept the practice alive. Only when they felt ready did the interviews begin. Only after a friendly conversation did the encounter conclude.

The study results, in chapter 8, do not predict what is going to happen to Maya spirituality. However, there is a pattern I have observed since the late 1980s and that is a pattern of transformation. Maya spirituality and its membership is not static. Due to political and economic influences, Maya spirituality is now practised by different people, using different ways and for different purposes. This study does not propose alternatives or solutions to my object of study. It seeks to understand how the spiritual guides' experience connects to the counter-hegemonic resistance of their historical predecessors.

3.1.5 The Maya ceremony to ask permission

After presenting my offering to the Ajq'ij, whom I have known for 35 years, and explaining the motives of my visit in Quetzaltenango, we both proceeded to go to an "altar" located in *La Pedrera* Mountain. One of the first things I observed was that the meeting to start walking towards the altar was not 5:00 a.m. as it was in the 1980s or even early 1990s. This day, we began walking uphill at 10:00 a.m.⁷¹ I observed the same situation two more times: there was no longer fear of being watched, harassed or questioned by authorities. As I will discuss later, we took other security measures while walking towards and in the altar which indicated to me that there were new threats against the Ajq'ijab'.

When we arrived at the altar I noticed that the rocks and ground were blackened, showing past uses people made of the place. Before doing anything, we stood before the altar and asked permission to the mystical beings, the universe, to the altar's *Nawal* (protector) and ancestors to do the ceremony. Next, we swept away any garbage near the space where we were going to build our fire; the remains from previous ceremonies were carefully removed and placed in a site separate from the garbage. Once the area was cleaned, I unpacked all the materials I bought in the market and placed them on the ground. I passed along each type of material to the Ajq'ij as he instructed me.

⁷¹ The altar, like the 58 other altars surrounding the city, is a modest place where large rocks or small caves are located. The land where the altar is located has belonged to my father's family for generations. From here, one can observe parts of the city's historic centre. After solving an initial mistake (neither the Ajq'ij nor I brought matches, so we walked downhill to find a store) we began preparations for the ceremony.

Using white incense, the same material mystical Ajq'ij Ixmucane used to pray for her grandchildren Hun Ahpu and Xbalanque, the Ajq'ij made a circle and then divided it in four equal parts (see photo 2). At that point, he invited me to participate. Both of us placed the bigger pieces of the small bowl-shaped *copal* on top of the incense and on top of each quadrant. The quarter-shaped chocolate pieces were placed on top of the copal, following the shape of the circle. The candles, the pine resins *rashpom* and *ocote*, and the flowers were put on top of the other materials. The Ajq'ij instructed me to keep about 100 wax and white candles and two pounds of the coin-shaped *cuilco* (350-400 pieces) as we were going to need them to count time during the ceremony.



Photo 2: Barreno, L. 207. *The circle*

With all the materials, we built a pyramid-like mound. Next, the Ajq'ij tied a ceremonial cloth (*zut*) around his head, signifying his earned status as a spiritual guide, and extracted his *tzite* (the sacred bundle) from his backpack. By this time, it was noon. He lit a candle in front of the circle and began to talk in K'iche Maya. My K'iche Maya is very limited, so he asked me, in Spanish, to place four candles inside a small cave. I was to 'tell' (*dígale*) the place and its *Nawal* (protector) the reason for the ceremony and what I wanted to achieve during my time in Quetzaltenango. The rocks, the cave, the sun, the stars, and the place are inanimate objects but for the duration of the ceremony they became part of it.

After my petition, I returned to the fire. By facing the east first, the two of us acknowledged the four quadrants of the universe. The ceremonial fire began by igniting as many candles as fast as we could in the main circle. The fire was swift, intense and hot. Constant flames lashed up and to the sides. When burning, the combined materials produced a natural aroma and a darker reddish liquid emanated out of all the resin materials.

At the beginning, we stood about two feet from the fire. Praying. With the counting of the calendar, we moved in continuous, counter-clockwise circles. From beginning to end, the Ajq'ij mentioned my petition to him: to ask that the research go well, and the final product be of some use for people and for knowledge. He also asked me to participate in the counting. I took turns mentioning the twenty *Nawalib'* (plural of *Nawal*) of the Maya calendar, what each meant in the calendar and for this ceremony. After each of the 20 *Nawalib'* we counted and tossed 13 pieces of cuilco into the fire (see Photo 3). This writer made a second mistake: I forgot one of the *Nawalib'*. Observing my mental error, the Ajq'ij came to my aid. He mentioned it and the ceremony continued. During the narrating, he interpreted the swirling of the flames.



Photo 3: Barreno, L. 2017.
Counting time.

After nearly two hours, the ceremony came to an end. We waited until the fire was quenched. At this time, the Ajq'ij told me the petition (*la petición*) went well except the two mistakes I made. He used those mistakes to remind me of the importance of doing the *costumbre's* ceremony at the beginning of any action and before asking questions of the

participants. He advised me not to forget the *ofrenda* (the offering), another phase of the *costumbre*, when visiting each Ajq'ij; to visit with people before asking questions; to memorize the main questions; to check my tape-recorder; and to ask people for their permission before using it. He said not to be too mechanical with the questions (asking the same questions to all participants), to not use paper and pen and to not interrupt people, let them say whatever they want to say.

The ceremony, and specifically the mistake I made when counting, made me remember the questions I wanted to ask. It also reminded me that people's culture and ways of communicating differ from Western cultures. I thanked the Ajq'ij; we gathered our belongings and walked downhill. That evening, I attempted to memorize all the questions and how to obtain people's consent.

3.1.6 The participants

Most of this study's participants live in Quetzaltenango. Two of them were not Ajq'ijab. The exceptions were Mr. Rigoberto Quemé Chay, former Mayor of Quetzaltenango (1996-2004) and Ixchel, a middle-aged woman who has accompanied her Ajq'ij mother for 30 years but has not yet decided to become a spiritual guide herself. In her words, "this is a serious responsibility." Two of the participants were not from the city. The youngest, Hijo del Agua (son of water), is a traditionally trained 29-year-old Mam Maya who interacts with Quetzaltenango's K'iche spiritual leaders but lives in a Mam community north of the city. Nan Ixkik, a female, now lives in Quetzaltenango but she is native of a K'iche town south of the city. In total, nine men and four women ranging from 29 to 78 years old participated in this study. Table 2 lists the participants in the order in which they were interviewed, their approximate age, role in this study, profession, their Maya cultural belonging, and the seven people I knew and did not know. To protect their anonymity all participants but one was given synonyms.

While the participants do not live in extreme poverty, they are neither poverty stricken nor members of the bourgeoisie. Some of the professionals and Quemé Chay are members of the Indigenous middle class. They work in various professions or occupations and one was unemployed. Two of the women are weavers, one is a market vendor and one works for the state. Most of the men are professionals. One has a doctorate degree, two

have master's degrees, two have Licentiate (Bachelor) degrees, one is completing his university studies and two are small business owners. Quemé Chay is now a retired university professor. Three participants invited me to pray at altars in their houses. One of them allowed me to take pictures of his family's altar (See photo 4). A large bowl-shaped stone contains water. Around it there are Christian and Mayan symbols.

Table 2: The Participants

No.	Name	Approx. age	Sex	Role in this study	Profession/ occupation	Maya group	Known to the writer
1	Jun Aj**	65	M	Ajq'ij	Small business owner	K'iche	Y
2	Kieb Aj**	58	M	Ajq'ij	Real estate agent	K'iche	Y
3	Akhin*	78	M	Ajq'ij	NGO Director	K'iche	Y
4	Kablajuj Tzikin*	60	F	Ajq'ij	Market vendor	K'iche	N
5	Job Aj**	56	M	Ajq'ij	University lecturer. NGO trained.	K'iche	Y
6	Rigoberto Quemé C.	70	M	Academic	Retired professor. Former Mayor of Quetzaltenango	K'iche	Y
7	Ixmucane**	65	F	Ajq'ij	Weaver	K'iche	N
8	Im Nijaib*	39	M	Ajq'ij	Unemployed. NGO trained.	K'iche	Y
9	Hijo del Agua*	29	M	Ajq'ij	University student	Mam	N
10	Ojeb Aj**	44	M		NGO director (former guerrilla fighter)	K'iche	N
11	Oxib Aj**	70	M	Ajq'ij	University professor	K'iche	Y
12	Nan Ixquic*	58	F	Ajq'ij	Government employee	K'iche	N
13	Ixchel**	35	F	Apprentice	Weaver	K'iche	N

Note: * Pseudonym chosen by participant

** Pseudonym chosen by this writer



Photo 4: Barreno, L. 2017. *Maya family altar*

Most meetings took place in the participants' homes. All interviews were in Spanish. The only place I visited outside Quetzaltenango was a Mam Maya town, 10 kilometres North West of the city. On average, I visited with each person for at least 20 minutes before starting the interview. We used this time to get to know each other's family backgrounds. These were relationship building minutes. If we knew each other, the time was used to talk about family and other social issues. Nan Ixmucane, whom I did not know, recalled a visit to Maximon, a syncretic deity, located in Santiago Atitlan, Sololá in the 1980s. We both attended this event. This coincidence eased the transition from visiting to interviewing.

Just as I did with the Ajq'ij to do the first ceremony, and as part of the *costumbre*, I presented all participants, Ajq'ij or not, an offering containing copal, chocolate, candles and sweet grass. The giving and receiving of the offering are in itself a ritual. I held the bag while telling the receiver the motive for my visit. With his or her hands down, each person waited until I finished talking. Then, they either prayed or thanked me for the offering. Once that traditional request is completed, the conversations began. This is the third step, and the main one, of the *costumbre*. They began responding to my questions or expressing what they thought was important for this study.

3.1.7 Method: Semi-structured interviews of the *Ajq'ijab'*

The first and main method was non-structured interviews in the manner of Margaret Kovach's description of conversations. In choosing the conversational method I respected the local Indigenous worldview and protocols to obtain a service, a favour or, in this case, knowledge. Kovach wrote that a conversational method "honors orality... and upholds the relational which is necessary to maintain a collectivist tradition."⁷² In most conversations, they took the lead by not only responding to my questions but using stories to contextualize their answers. To obtain their participation, I followed my main contact, and ceremonial *Ajq'ij*, recommendation of not using papers before and during the interviews. Instead, he added, inform them about the study and obtain their consent orally. I used that strategy with most of the contacts he provided to me. I did ask other participants for their written consent, which they provided, especially with participants I knew were academics. Nonetheless, all of them, except for Quemé Chay, have their names protected by using pseudonyms.

After the introduction, without papers on hand (see Annex "B" for Questionnaire), I asked entry questions. Then I moved to the main questions I remembered because, as Charmaz indicate, these people had "relevant information."⁷³ Special emphasis was in the causal and intervening conditions, the interactions and the consequences of their decisions and actions.⁷⁴

The inquiries in my questionnaire focused on their views about what motivated them to become *Ajq'ij*. I asked what are their opinions about Maya spirituality; what they remember of the 1980s and before; what the political conditions were in both the 1980s and 1990s that made them leave seclusion; what the determinants were to reach such a decision; and finally, what role, if any, they play in other social, cultural and political aspirations of the Maya people. I asked extra questions when relevant information not previously considered, or a sub-category, emerged. For instance, in one of the first interviews, with Ahkin and the eldest of all participants, the issue of using Maya spirituality

⁷² Margaret Kovach, "Conversational Method in Indigenous Research," *First Peoples Child & Family Review: An Interdisciplinary Journal Honoring the Voices, Perspectives and Knowledges of First Peoples through Research, Critical Analyses, Stories, Standpoints and Media Reviews*, Volume 5, Number 1, 2010, 42.

⁷³ *Ibid.* 25.

⁷⁴ Dey, *Grounding Grounded Theory: Guidelines for Qualitative Inquiry* 180, 188-89.

for profit purposes was mentioned. At that moment, I recalled Garret and Cook’s “pyramid scheme” findings in Momostenango and I wanted to know if such scheme was used in Quetzaltenango. As a follow-up to their response, two participants mentioned the creation of *comunidades* (communities) and *escuelas* (schools) led by young university students or professionals who were training new spiritual guides. Once again, I had no knowledge of these organizations, so I asked for further information when the issue was raised. Consequently, others mentioned that some colleagues were charging money for their services and using different strategies to promote themselves. This led me to ask other participants about the veracity of those statements.

This information became significant. I observed how participants recalled positive events about their beliefs and then recalled “negative events” currently happening to their spiritual practices. In short, most do ceremonies to serve other community members. However, they also acknowledge the existence of for-profit colleagues; the division that exists among “schools”; the use of radio ads promoting to cure illnesses, solve economic problems, and ensure safe travel to the United States for those travelling illegally to such country and other “magic” solutions. Providing information about these approaches to commodify Maya spirituality, drawing from Charmaz, “reveal images of present or possible self and evokes feelings. Thus, these events mark time and become turning points.”⁷⁵ This extra information enriched the categories, descriptive theories (see table 3) and my final analysis provided in chapter 7.

Table 3: Data Coding, Categories and Theories:

No.	Data coding (from transcriptions)	Category	Theories
1	Spiritualism (Ajq’ijab’ description): - Nawalism; - A way of life; - The balance in one’s life; - Not organized like religion; - Taught by traditional people; - Taught in non-governmental organizations or “schools” (new).	Maya spirituality or religion?	Resilience to colonialism and neo-colonialism

⁷⁵ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*, 116.

	<p>Religion (academic description):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It was institutionalized; - It had values, principles, philosophy and morality; - Rural Mayan Priests were victims of the army. Only the rituals survived; 		
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Older participants became Ajq'ijab' during this period for personal or health reasons; - They were afraid of the state; afraid of spies; afraid of society; feelings of shame; - Stigma and discrimination against rural Indigenous people; - They were aware of high intensity war in other regions; aware of the Kekchí Ajq'ijab' being killed; - Catholic Action members and Jesuits priests were persecuted; - Secret ceremonies, meetings and training took place in Quetzaltenango and other regions; - Protestant Churches blossomed; - The Quetzaltenango Ajq'ijab' survived; - A multicultural, multi-ethnic, multilingual society was constitutionally recognized during the war. 	<p>Maya spirituality during the armed conflict.</p> <p>Praying as a political act in a dystopian time.</p> <p>Caves and rural altars as places for organic Ajq'ijab' continued teaching and learning.</p>	<p>Quetzaltenango as incubator in the 1980s.</p>
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fear began to disappear; - Cultural boom; - Large numbers of people; (young and old, Indigenous and Ladino) become Ajq'ijab'; - "Schools" (NGOs) were created; - Fees for ceremonies appeared; - Public ceremonies began in 1991; - "Spiritualism" gained strength; - Ajq'ijab' were not included in peace negotiations but their belief system was. "Witchcraft, spirituality or religion"? It was unknown to peace negotiators; 	<p>Juncture: Maya spirituality as "icing on the cake" during peace negotiations in the early 1990s and final 1996 agreement.</p> <p>Ceremonies became commodities.</p>	<p>Peace Agreement: "light at the end of the tunnel"</p>
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Schools as an alternative to <i>La Costumbre</i> of who can become an Ajq'ij and how to train him/her; - "Spiritualism" and use of 260-day calendar were standardized; - For-profit ceremonies as cause for division; 	<p>Post- Peace Agreement resistance and negotiations.</p>	<p>Resistance.</p> <p>Imitation.</p> <p>Tokenism.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Imitating other religions and beliefs: <i>Ceremonia negra</i> (black magic ceremonies); - Attempts of K'iche spiritual hegemony began (one calendar, one tzite, use of more materials, some made in Mexico or China); - Ceremonies became larger, colorful, more expensive than in non-K'iche communities; - Rural and small Ajq'ijab remain celebrating using basic materials. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Competition between traditional, NGO trained spiritual guides and <i>espiristas</i> emerged. 	
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Brujería (witchcraft) is still used to denigrate Mayan ceremonies; - Local authorities use the ceremonies for token purposes; - Indigenous youth groups use ceremonies for folkloric purposes (for their female candidates to win the local beauty pageant); - Competition among Ajq'ijab' (<i>quien es mejor</i>) - Competition from new NGO groups; - Fatigue among traditional Ajq'ijab; - No single Ajq'ij claimed magical powers; - "Hope" in the future. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No witchcraft, no magic? How to attract youth? Faith in the Ajq'ij's talk 	Perseverance through diversity
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No role in local or national politics; - No national political role for Quetzaltenango Ajq'ijab' after the war; - Ajq'ijab' are as poor as common people; - Economic needs forces some local Ajq'ijab' to charge fees for their services and not focus on leadership roles; - In near rural areas and small towns, the Ajq'ijab' are becoming the community's spokesperson. No interest in national politics, however; - Hope in bringing traditional and new NGO Ajq'ijab' together; - Education centres as an alternative to bring Mayan teachings to students, including spirituality. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Ajq'ijab in community, city and national politics. Quetzaltenango on path to recover ancient role to educate Maya and non-Maya people about Maya culture. 	Political leadership as a possibility: education as a bridge
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Maya spirituality's re-emergence is now public knowledge; - Armed struggle is a thing of the past; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paradoxes: - War and state violence; 	A space shift: from place to energy.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Respect for and quality of life for spiritual guides has improved; no more state persecution; - Society has become more tolerant; - Past Ajq'ijab' are remembered in ceremonies; - Traditional Ajq'ijab' are retreating from public spaces; the new <i>comunidades</i> graduates support to continue the public practising to dispel notion of witchcraft; - Common or organized crime in the form of robberies and vandalism are the new intrusions to practice ceremonies; - Fear is returning. A new strategy is born; - Self-protection strategies are resulting in returning to the city. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Peace and common violence; - Space and energy. 	
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The other method I used was writing memos of my observations. I was interested in recording details about the place they live (Quetzaltenango), how to prepare for the ceremonies and the ceremonies themselves. Memos “are records of [the researcher’s personal] thoughts, feelings, insights and ideas in relation to a research project.”⁷⁶ Holton & Walsh call them field notes.⁷⁷ Charmaz divides memos into early and advanced memos. The former explores qualitative codes of what is happening in the field and what participants are doing. The latter compares categories and sub-categories emerging from the data.⁷⁸ Categories “explicate ideas, events, or processes in [the] data.”⁷⁹

“Memo writing leads directly to *theoretical sampling*. Theoretical sampling is strategic, specific, and systematic... [it] seek statements, events, or cases that will illuminate [the] categories.”⁸⁰ Other types of data supporting the interviews, observation and memos were scholarly literature, photographs, maps, and drawings.⁸¹

To develop my categories, after collecting my data, I did theoretical sampling and constant comparative analysis.⁸² My final ‘storyline’ was not simply descriptive but an

⁷⁶ Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide*, 40.

⁷⁷ Holton and Walsh, *Classic Grounded Theory: Applications with Qualitative and Quantitative Data*, 70-1.

⁷⁸ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*, 80-1.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 91.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 103.

⁸¹ Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide*, 68.

⁸² Ibid. 71.

abstract theory that reflects the data collected from participants. That theory, or theories, according to Glaser, should encompass “interrelated grounded concepts based on an emergent theoretical code.”⁸³ Whatever the result, as proposed by Holton & Walsh, the final product will be subject to comparison, scrutiny, relevance and open for verification with new studies.⁸⁴ The categories and proposed abstract theories (see table 3) are the result of merging grounded theory with *la costumbre*. As described in Chapter 7, these categories and theories are what the participants expressed. Using questionnaires alone and not following *la costumbre*, in my case, could have not produced these results.

⁸³ Holton and Walsh, *Classic Grounded Theory: Applications with Qualitative and Quantitative Data*, 16.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 155.

Chapter 4: The Maya, the K'iche Maya, conquest and resistance

With a population of at least eight million people, today's Maya include 31 linguistic groups, most of them living in southern Mexico and Guatemala.¹ There are Mayan groups in Belize, Honduras and El Salvador. All Mayan groups occupied a territory of 325,000 square kilometers.² In Guatemala, there are 21 Mayan groups. My people, the K'iche Maya, with more than one-million people is the largest group. The Maya represent, officially, 43 per-cent of Guatemala's population.³

Generally, the history of the Maya is divided in three periods: pre-classic, classic and post classic. This chapter briefly describes the Maya of the classic period (AD 250-900), and then focus on the post-classic K'ichean Maya who arrived in the Guatemala highlands around AD 1200. Using Indigenous and Western sources this chapter explains the composition of this confederation, when they arrived in the highlands, formed by four nations: the K'iche, the Kaqchiquel, the Tzutuhil and the Rabinal Maya. Internal struggles for cultural and political hegemony began long before the arrival of the Spanish and Nahua who conquered the region in 1524. Of concern to this chapter is the beginning of Christianity as part of a larger Spanish hegemonic project. Simultaneously, it is the beginning of Mayan counter-hegemonic struggles by taking the Mayan ceremonies to caves in the mountains.

4.1 The Maya

The Mayan periods include the Paleo-Indian (20,000-8,000 BC), pre-classic Maya (1800 BC-AD 250), classic Maya (AD 250-900) and the post-classic Maya (AD 900-1521).⁴ Whereas agriculture, permanent settlements, pyramid constructions, commerce, subsistence economy and "complex social organizations" were achieved in the pre-classic period, the zenith of the culture was during the classic period.⁵

¹ Michael D. Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2012 [1992]), 49.

² Víctor Racancoj, *Socio-Economía Maya Precolonial*, (Guatemala: CHOLSAMAJ, 2006 [1994]), 17.

³ José Roberto Morales Sic, *Religión y Política: El proceso de institucionalización de la espiritualidad de la espiritualidad en el movimiento maya guatemalteco* (Guatemala: FLACSO, 2007) 13. My translation.

⁴ Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas, *Los Códices Mayas* (México: Litográfica Delta, S.A., 1985), 19-29.

⁵ *Ibid.* 19-20. My translation. Recent discoveries in northern Guatemala, where American archeologists found more than 60 thousand structures may add more information about the pre-classic and classic Maya.

According to Mexico's Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas (UACH), Leonardo Manrique pursued one of the theories of how the Maya reached the Mexican and Guatemalan jungles. He proposed that the early days of the Maya could be traced back to 8,000 BC in what is now Texas. Then they travelled south and in 2,000 BC split in two groups: the Huastec (who still inhabit northern Mexico) and the Winik (the rest of the Maya) who by 100 to 500 AD developed into the current groups.⁶ Prudence M. Rice, in her "Chronological intervals in preclassic Mesoamerica" situates the Maya, and other Mesoamerican people, in a Paleoindian/Lithic stage in pre-8,000 BC; the pre-classic in 1600-1200 BC; and the early classic in A.D. 200-450.⁷ Both scholars present identical chronological intermissions. However, for Manrique the Maya were already present 8,000 BC whereas for Rice, Mesoamerican people were still in Paleo-Indian stage.

During the pre-classic period, people were ruled by a "political-religious system led by a small elite who lived in the civil-ceremonial centers. The headman was both the civil leader and high priest." Religion became consolidated with priests and buildings honoring deities. Rituals evolved for "fertility, to forecast special days for specific actions. Human and animal blood were part of those special days' celebrations."⁸ Rice mentions human sacrifices, and adds that the "basis of political power – that is, legitimization –for early leaders" was based on "numeracy, the recording of time, and the keeping of calendrical records..."⁹ Further, she cites Parker Pearson and Richards 1994a, to mention the advance of architecture "which structures the space experienced by humans and is the supreme earthly embodiment of cosmic order."¹⁰ In the classic period, the Maya built:

Larger civic-ceremonial centers...and its urban style continued to be based in platforms and pyramids surrounding rectangular plazas such as Palenque and Yaxchilan. The bigger buildings were the more complex in their construction and use. They were used as [astronomical] observatories, ball-game courts, funerary pyramids and palaces.¹¹

⁶ Ibid. 16. My translation.

⁷ Prudence M. Rice, *Maya Calendar Origins: Monuments, Mythistory, and the Materialization of Time*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, Austin, 2007), 16.

⁸ Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas, *Los Códices Mayas*, 20. My translation.

⁹ Rice, *Maya Calendar Origins*, 11, 26.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas, *Los Códices Mayas*, 20. My translation.

At this time, art is observed in the interior and exterior of the buildings. Paintings on stucco represented “men and women, animals, birds and gods, or humans depicted as gods.”¹² The ancient cities’ walls and monoliths preserve two features of the society: the writing and numerology accomplishments of the classic and post-classic Maya and the class divisions. In those ancient mediums “dynasties, the nobility, commoners and slaves were painted or sculpted.” This indicates the participation of specialists such as artisans in ceramics, sculptors and writers.¹³

Agriculture, based in corn, beans and squash production and commerce, remained the basis of their economy.¹⁴ In his study, Victor Racancoj argues that there is no evidence of private land ownership among the Maya.¹⁵ Mexican scholar Alberto Ruz Lhuillier disagrees. He mentions two systems of land ownership: collective and private. The *calpules* (villagers’ lands and parcels) were for collective use. The state, noblemen, the rich and plantation owners possessed private property.¹⁶

Identical to the K’iche Maya, the Yucatec Maya of today’s southern Mexico, called the number one-day *kin*; the next unit is twenty or *uinal*; 360 days (20 x 18) is one *tun*; the 7,200 days is one *katun* (360 x 20); and the 144,000-days is one *baktun* (7,200 x 20). The base date, quoting Thompson, “from which almost all Mayan dates were counted is 13.0.0.0.0 4 Ajau 8 Cumku... now usually correlated with August 11, 3114 B.C.”¹⁷ The Yucatec Maya managed different calendars and celebrated ceremonies, which “connected the coming year with one direction in a rotating series oriented successively toward the south, east, north, and west... [the Chilam Balam book] mention the center as the fifth position of the universe.”¹⁸ Even Landa witnessed how Yucatec Indians “put incense to burn to four gods called Acantuns, which they located and placed at the four cardinal

¹² Ibid. 21. My translation.

¹³ Racancoj, *Socio-Economía Maya Precolonial*, 69. My translation.

¹⁴ Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas, *Los Códices Mayas*, 20. My translation, 22.

¹⁵ Racancoj, *Socio-Economía Maya Precolonial*, 69. My translation.

¹⁶ Alberto Ruz Lhuillier, *The Ancient Maya* (Mérida, Yucatán, México: Producción Editorial Dante, S.A. de C.V., 1992), 26.

¹⁷ Meredith Paxton, M., *The Cosmos of the Yucatec Maya: Cycles and Steps from the Madrid Codex* ([Albuquerque]: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 2; Rice, P. *Maya Calendar Origins*, 47.

¹⁸ Paxton, *The Cosmos of the Yucatec Maya*, 15.

points.”¹⁹ The *Chilam Balam*’s fifth position of the universe is represented in the *Tzolkin* as a tree. According to Paxton, Thompson said:

“We learn that the *yaxche* is the tree of abundance; that it was set up at the time of the creation, in the center of Earth or (and?) at the four sides, providing the first man with food; that it serves as a path from one celestial or terrestrial layer to another; and that it is prominent in the land of abundance, beneath the earth, where the dead repose.”²⁰

Paxton also deciphers the Venus Table found in the *Dresden Codex*. She then relates it to the *Tzolkin*. Venus has a synodic period of 584-days (68). The Maya called Venus the morning star. Venus disappears for 8-days every Maya Calendar Round. The base date scholars use is 11.0.3.1.0 1Ahau 13 Mac or June 15, 1227. Paxton mention other dates and then compares them to Gregorian dates.²¹ The 2,920-day lines of Venus “are approximately commensurate with the solar year.”²² She also says, “Five synodic periods of Venus ($5 \times 584 = 2,920$) are equal to 8 solar years ($8 \times 365 = 2,920$).”²³ Using the Madrid and Dresden Codices, she also shows the summer solstices of June 15, 1227, in the Julian calendar, and the Yucatec Maya observed the winter solstice of December 13, 1324²⁴ from the ancient city of Chichen Itza.

The Yucatec Maya still practice rain ceremonies, with children as the main participants. They very much resemble the frog figures, and a fifth figure with a Chac head in the center, found in the *Madrid Codex*.²⁵ The ceremonies celebrate rain. The Chichen Itza cenote, a deep natural well exposing ground water underneath, is the cosmological center of the Yucatan peninsula. This association of Western scholars deciphering Maya knowledge with current ceremonies is not limited to studying the Yucatec Maya.

The decipherment of Mayan codes is now a scientific accomplishment. Coe says the decipherment of the Mayan codes is “one of the most exciting adventures of our age, on a par with the exploration of space and the discovery of the genetic code.”²⁶ Coe presents a chart in appendix B of his book where the western alphabet is applied to interpret Mayan

¹⁹ Totzer, 1941, cited in Paxton, *The Cosmos of the Yucatec Maya*, 16,

²⁰ Paxton, *The Cosmos of the Yucatec Maya*, 25.

²¹ Ibid. 69.

²² Forstemann, 1906: 182, cited in Paxton, *The Cosmos of the Yucatec Maya*, 76.

²³ Paxton, M., *The Cosmos of the Yucatec Maya*, 77

²⁴ Ibid. 78-9, 92-3.

²⁵ Ibid. 104-05.

²⁶ Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code*, 7.

symbols.²⁷ One example, using this chart, is on page 265. It describes Stella 3 of Piedras Negras in Petén, northern Guatemala and bordering Mexico. He claims that all languages “may be categorized as logophonic, syllabic, and alphabetic.”²⁸ Maya writing is logophonetic, like Sumerian, Chinese and Egyptian, not alphabetic. One of the first issues Coe laments is how one of the most spectacular civilizations the world has ever known is currently a “‘folk-culture’ with little or no voice in their own destiny.”²⁹ The Yucatec and the K’iche inherited knowledge created during the classic period and preserved through ceremony in the post-classic and modern eras.

No definitive theory explains what led the Maya to leave the lowland city-states, located in the jungles of Yucatan-Mexico and Petén-Guatemala, and interrupt their scientific achievements in the post-classic era. However, they did not disappear as a people. Indicators of their arrested development, according to the Autonomous University of Chiapas, are in the year 900 AD. After 600 years of progress, there is a “complete stop of writing dates and texts in stone glyphs.”³⁰ Rather than a complete halt in recording time, their history and other astronomical events, during the post-classic period, the codices were written in amethyst paper (*papel de amate*).

Ruz argues that along the abandonment of the large (city-state) centers, foreign (Indigenous) invasions, and rural rebellion against the ruling classes ended the classic Maya period. The new regimes were unable to build a system like that of their ancestors.³¹ During the 900-1520 AD, smaller nations built newer civic-ceremonial centers which were not as large and elaborate as those of the classic period. These cities in southern Mexico and the Guatemalan highlands were built more as fortresses for their defense than to be large urban centers because, Ruz argues, his was a period of invasions to control land and trade routes.³² Subsistence agriculture and trade remained the basis of the economy.³³

George W. Lovell provides a background of the Guatemalan highlands. These lands are different from the jungles from which the K’ichean originated. He argues that humans

²⁷ Ibid. 278-81.

²⁸ Ibid. 26.

²⁹ Ibid. 47.

³⁰ Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas, *Los Códices Mayas*, 29. My translation.

³¹ Ruz, *The Ancient Maya*, 93.

³² Ibid. 94.

³³ Ibid. Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas, *Los Códices Mayas*, 23. My translation.

arrived in the Totonicapán region, 50 kilometers east of Quetzaltenango, around 15,000 BC; and that sedentary villages appeared in 1,500 BC until AD 500 when city-states started to emerge.³⁴ Meanwhile, Robert Carmack says the K'iche Maya began to occupy the important K'iche Maya centers Gumarcaaj, Xelajuh, and Momostenango in 900-1200 AD. Therefore, prior to the K'ichean arrival, the Mam-Maya (200 to 1400 B.C) inhabited these lands.³⁵ In other words, other people inhabited the highlands long before the K'ichean invaded it.

Indigenous sources, the *Kaqchiquel Annals* and the *Popol Wuh*, do not indicate reasons for the K'ichean leaving the Mexican lowlands. They state only that the tribes “travelled from the other side of the ocean [Chichen Itza via the Gulf of Mexico], to go to Tulan.”³⁶ The book also mentions the Yaki, the Yolkuat and the Ketzalkuat (Toltec?) peoples, part of their original group, who stayed in Tulan. Other peoples and not only the four groups that immigrated to the Guatemalan highlands, therefore, composed the K'ichean confederation.

The four mystic-historical K'ichean ancestors and their wives went back to their places of origin while the people, after leaving Tulan (today Tulan de Allende, in central Mexico), travelled south to the highlands. They reached Gumarcaaj around 1200 AD. The *Popol Wuh*, in its last pages, describes how in the sixth generation since their arrival, they expanded to today's Chichicastenango (originally given to the Kaqchiquel), Chi Mikina (today's Totonicapán) and She Lajuj Noj (today's Xelaju or Quetzaltenango).

³⁴ George W. Lovell, *Conquest and Survival in Colonial Guatemala: A Historical Geography of the Cuchumatán Highlands, 1500-1821* (Montreal and Kingston: Mc-Gill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 40-1. Totonicapán is largely a K'iche Maya province.

³⁵ Robert Carmack. 1995. *Rebels of Highland Guatemala: The Quiche-Mayas of Momostenango* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press), 8, 38.

³⁶ Recinos, A. *Memorial de Sololá, Anales de los Kaqchiqueles: Título de los Señores de Totonicapán*, (The Sololá Memoirs, the Kaqchiquel Annals: The Lords of Totonicapán Papers), (Guatemala: Editorial Piedra Santa, 2007), 15. My translation.

Map 3: K'iche Maya place of origin, migration and settlement by Jean Piel



Map 3: Map of Southern Mexico and Guatemala showing the classic Maya territory in the lowlands (IV-X centuries), the migration of the K'iche Maya from Tulan to the Guatemalan highlands (XI-XIII centuries), Aztec expansion (1300-1520), K'iche Maya expansion around Gumarcaaj (1200-1524), Cakchiquel Maya territory (1524), route taken by Pedro de Alvarado and the Nahuatl speaking people to reach and conquer the K'iche (1524).³⁷ - The map does not show the K'ichean confederacy migration from the lowlands by crossing the Gulf of Mexico, to Tula in the 900s as the *Popol Wuh* narrates.

³⁷ Jean Piel “Quichelândia: ocho siglos de historia de una frontera interna que nunca fue definitivamente integrada a Guatemala” (Quicheland: eight centuries of an internal border never fully annexed to Guatemala), *Centro de estudios mexicanos y centroamericanos*, Last modified November 24, 2019 <https://books.openedition.org/cemca/686>

4.2 The K'iche Maya as conquerors and conquered

After the collapse of Toltec centers [such] as Chichen Itza and Tula”³⁸ the “Quichean State” included four different nations: the K'iche (my ancestors), the Cakchiquel, the Rabinal and the Tzutuhil. They traveled towards the highlands establishing their capital city in Gumarcaaj or Uvatlán (near the current city of Santa Cruz, capital city of the El Quiché province). They controlled most of the highlands until the Spanish conquered the region.³⁹ - The terms Quiché and K'iche refer to the same people used throughout this paper. El Quiché is the official name of the capital city and *departamento* (province) of the same name.-

Molesky-Poz explains, Gumarcaaj was built following “spatial cartography” in alignment with the terrestrial landscape. Chávez argues the Maya believed the “universe was a great pyramid. In the top was *Ajaw*, or God...” Therefore, he says, they used the concepts of the sky (above), the square (below) and the four quadrants of the universe to build their temples. Below the temples and cities was *Xibalba* or the underworld.⁴⁰ Hence, Ángel Julián García Zambrano explains the “interdependence of landscape and settlement” to build the K'iche capital. From a south-to-north axis, the city “exhibits a similar alignment with a concave mountain recess on the northern horizon.”⁴¹

Another García Zambrano example is Teotihuacan. Built before and much larger than Gumarcaaj, this city displays the Pyramid of the Sun framed by a distant sierra. From a north-south axis view, the Avenue of the Dead is aligned with a concave mountain. For García Zambrano, these two ancient cities are “modeled” after the tunnel and cave at Ndaxahua. To find and establish these settlements, he describes the religious idea based in “the participation of a deity in breaking through the earths’ crust (*tepetlatl*) to ensure that

³⁸ John W. Fox, *The Quiche Conquest: Centralism and Regionalism in Highland Guatemala State Development* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978), 40-1.

³⁹ Lovell, *Conquest and Survival in Colonial Guatemala: A Historical Geography of the Cuchumatán Highlands, 1500-1821*, 40-1.

⁴⁰ Adrián Inés Chávez, *Pop Wuj, Poema Mito-histórico Ki-ché* (Pop-Wuj: Mythical historical Ki-ché Poem), (Quetzaltenango, Guatemala: TIMACH, 1997 [1970].) v.

⁴¹ Ángel Julián García Zambrano “Transference of Primordial Threshold Crossing onto the Geomorphology of Mesoamerican Foundational Landscapes” in *Mesoamerican Memory: Enduring Systems of Remembrance*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, ed. Amos Megged and Stephanie Wood, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 227.

food and other resources come forth and sustain life.”⁴² Gumarcaaj, and possibly Iximche, the Cakchiquel capital city, was the last city built using Maya knowledge.

Since the 1200s, the K’icheans built “more than thirty provinces that made up the Quiché kingdom.”⁴³ The towns were socially divided between lords (*ajawab*), the commoners (*al,c’ajol*) and possibly the warriors (*achij*). The new kingdom was politically ruled by the Nima Quiché, provincial chiefs, town officials, and lineage heads.⁴⁴ The main head of state was Quik’ab who governed the confederation from 1425 to 1475.

The K’iche settlements are now abandoned ruins, destroyed during or after the Spanish invasion. Nevertheless, Proskouriakoff’s drawings of Gumarcaaj, Chisalim, Ismachi, Pakaman, and Resguardo⁴⁵ show Toltec and Mayan influences not only in the design of the cities but also in its religious beliefs: veneration to Q’uqumatz (Kukulcan of the Maya or Quetzalcoatl of the Aztecs) Tojil, Awilish and Jacawitz.⁴⁶ Ruins of temples in honor of these four deities can be observed in Gumarcaaj.

The K’ichean confederation began to dissolve in 1470 when war broke out between the K’iche against the Kaqchiquel and the Tzutuhil. The war continued for several decades affecting all factions.⁴⁷ This was the time of Qik’ab, the last K’ichean ruler when the war began.⁴⁸ The Kaqchiquel, following Qik’ab’s advice, established their capital city in Iximche (near today Tecpán, Chimaltenango).⁴⁹ In 1475, after 300 years of their alliance, the Kaqchiquel officially separated from the K’ichean confederation. The war continued for the next 50 years. The *Kaqchiquel Annals* narrate the frequency and cruelty of the warring parties. In one single battle, the K’iche lost up to 16,000 soldiers.⁵⁰ However, a deadlier, new and invisible enemy killed more people than any war: smallpox.⁵¹ This European disease reached the Guatemalan highlands in 1520, four years before the actual

⁴² Ibid. Figures 11.2 and 11.3, 227-28.

⁴³ Carmack, *Rebels of Highland Guatemala*, 30.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 35.

⁴⁵ Fox, *The Quiche Conquest*, 21-30.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 37, 59.

⁴⁷ Carmack, *Rebels of Highland Guatemala*, 40.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 104.

⁴⁹ David Carey Jr., 2001. *Our Elders Teach Us: Maya-Kaqchiquel Historical Perspectives* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2001), 45; Recinos, A. *Memorial de Sololá, Anales de los Kaqchiqueles*, 76-7. My translation.

⁵⁰ Recinos, *Memorial de Sololá, Anales de los Kaqchiqueles*, 86.

⁵¹ Ibid. 95.

arrival of Spaniards to this region. Smallpox killed people regardless of age, sex and political status. In desperation, people fled to the forests. The book writers witnessed how “dogs and vultures devoured corpses. Mortality was terrible. Our father and grandfather also died. We became orphans.”⁵² The Kaqchiquel were defenseless against the plague.

After the Spanish and the Nahuatl speaking Tlaxcaltecs and Cholulans conquered the Mexica (Aztec) in 1519, they departed Tenochtitlan in November 1523. They arrived at K'iche territory in February 1524. The invading Indigenous armies outnumbered their commanding Spanish forces, which until then, were still Treaty partners. The Nahuatl-Spanish alliance was agreed in what is today Mexico and recorded in canvas-like *lienzos*. Like the post-classic Mayan books (the K'iche *Popol Wuh* and Kaqchiquel *Annals of the Kaqchiquel*), the Nahuatl had skilled people “who used traditional mnemonic devices and agreed-upon pictorial conventions to remember and pass on information as accurately as possible.”⁵³ In her paper “Rediscovering Forgotten Memories” Florine Asselbergs discusses two *lienzos* describing the agreement. The drawings were made in present-day Guatemala after conquering Mayan groups. *The Lienzo de Quauhquechollan* (painted in the 1530s) and the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* (painted in the 1550s), begin with a meeting scene in which two sides make a treaty (see figure 1). In the two *lienzos* the Nahuatl representatives are depicted giving gifts of precious stones to the Spaniards. In return, they received the Spanish “Habsburg double-headed eagle, the heraldic coat of arms of the Spanish kings.”⁵⁴ This alliance made the conquest of the Mexica (Aztec) in 1519 and the K'iche in 1524 possible.⁵⁵

Lovell asserts that the Spanish forces included “120 cavalry, three hundred infantries, and several hundred Mexican auxiliaries from Cholula and Tlaxcala.”⁵⁶ Cholula and Tlaxcala warriors recorded their conquest of the Guatemalan highland in their *Lienzo de Quauhquechollan*⁵⁷ showing the different places, battles against Non-Nahuatl Indigenous forces and the routes of their voyage.

⁵² Ibid.95-6

⁵³ Florine Asselbergs, “Rediscovering Forgotten Memories,” in *Mesoamerican Memory: Enduring Systems of Remembrance*, ed. Amos Megged and Stephanie Wood, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 34.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 37.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 40, 43.

⁵⁶ Lovell, *Conquest and Survival in Colonial Guatemala*, 58.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 204.

Figure 1: Lienzo de Quauhquechollan⁵⁸



On March 7, 1524, Alvarado sent a messenger to the Kaqchiquel Headmen of Ahpozotzil and Ahpoxahil, urging to send their warriors to “kill the K’iche,” they immediately sent two-thousand warriors to annihilate their enemies.⁵⁹ This indicates that Alvarado knew that the K’iche and the Kaqchiquel nations were rivals at that specific time. Three Indigenous groups with thousands of warriors each, led by a few hundred Spaniards,

⁵⁸ Universidad Francisco Marroquín, *Quauhquechollan: El Lienzo de la Conquista* (Guatemala City: Universidad Francisco Marroquín [original in Museo Casa de Alfeñique, Puebla, México], Last modified, November 24, 2019 <https://lienzo.ufm.edu/vea-lienzo/vea-el-lienzo/>

⁵⁹ Recinos, *Memorial de Sololá, Anales de los Kaqchiqueles*, 100.

fought the K'iche. The smaller Mayan nations of present-day Guatemala and El Salvador later experienced the same fate, as their conquered people became Spanish subjects.

The Quetzaltenango battles lasted a few weeks. The rest of the *C'oyoi papers* narrate the first days of Christianity in K'iche territories. With the K'iche army defeated the political leaders of Xelajuh surrendered to conquistador Pedro de Alvarado. To save their lives the six local leaders gave Alvarado

Presents of gold, pearls, emeralds, and diamonds. The Adelantado [Pedro de Alvarado] thanked them and gave them the title of *Don* and made them *principales* [authorities] of this town and gave a sword to each one of these six *principales*; he also dressed them in Spanish clothes.⁶⁰

The deal reached by the new Quetzaltenango *Dones* was good for them but not for other Indigenous leaders, especially those from the K'iche capital city. After securing Quetzaltenango, Alvarado kept advancing east towards Gumarcaaj. Fearing the city was a death trap for him and his troops he killed the last of the K'iche national rulers by burning them alive and burning Gumarcaaj. It is believed, John Fox says, that it was in this city where “the authors of the [original] *Pop Wuj* lived.”⁶¹ Francisco Fuentes y Guzman, chronicler and former colonial governor of Guatemala, described what happened to Indigenous peoples:

When the Spaniards conquered these countries and extensive kingdoms, the Indians were warlike, gifted to govern, and ingenious, and among them were...masonry workers, stonework artists, silversmiths, orifices, carvers, and historians, and with many other skills. Now they are cowards, rustic, with no talent, without government, misplaced, with no art, and full of malice. This shows that all things mutate, even those countries in the world that are stable are subject to a continuous mutation and variation.⁶²

Fuentes y Guzman's 1690 comments show how conveniently the colonizer describes the Maya social situation after one-hundred and seventy years of colonization. What he failed to mention were the economic benefits the *encomienda* and *repartimiento*

⁶⁰ Carmack, *Rebels of Highland Guatemala*, 45.

⁶¹ Fox, *The Quiche Conquest*, 185. The conquistadors' first settlement was not Gumarcaaj but Iximche, capital of the Kaqchiquel-Maya, former K'icheans who allied with Alvarado to conquer K'iche towns in resistance. Iximche architecture is like that of Gumarcaaj. The alliance soon broke, as the Spaniards demanded more gold and taxes from the Kaqchiquel.

⁶² Cited in Martínez Peláez, *La Patria del Criollo*, 206. My translation

provided to him and his compatriots. He also did not mention how the Criollo elites used the native elites to maintain control of the *resguardos* (communities).

Conclusion

The Maya kept records of cosmological, social, religious, political and military interest. They used stone, pottery and paper. Knowledge production and dissemination was through mnemonic instruments such as pictographs, books, *Titulos* (papers), songs, architecture and so on. These expressions of collective memory have endured through time and colonialism alike. They gave “active agency” to Mesoamerican peoples, including the K’ichean confederation. The *Popol Wuh* book shows the link between the classic and post-classic Maya.

Although a social revolution, due to overpopulation, drought or some other reason may have been the cause of the Maya departure from the lowlands in the 900s, there is no mystery about what happened to at least one Maya confederation formed by distinct groups. As evidence suggests (see Map 3), the K’ichean migrated to Tula-Mexico, in Toltec territory. In their subsequent exodus from central Mexico to the Guatemalan highlands in the 1200s, they brought some of their classic knowledge with them. They imported agriculture based on corn, architectural skills, religion, numerology and the sacred book, which contained pre-classical and classical mystical beliefs, achievements and history. After spending time with them, the K’ichean Maya became heavily influenced by Toltec culture, including their religion.

One unique characteristic of the Maya was their vigesimal-based number system. In their circular shaped calendars, numbers are counted counter-clockwise. This was not simply an order of things -circular- but a different way of thinking, writing and seeing the world. Similarly, the language was written using images (logophonic). When the conquistadors and missionaries saw those images and numbers they saw nothing but “lies of the devil” so they burned the books. With their records destroyed, Indigenous peoples were portrayed as a people with no culture. This provided an important rationale for colonial and modern racism, exploitation and social exclusion. The Criollo elite argue further that

the Indian ‘degradation’ did not begin with conquest but “since the collapse of the Maya civilization in the eleventh century.”⁶³

This last view negates the link of the post-classic Maya (Mam, K’iche, Kaqchiquel, Tzutuhil, Rabinal, Kekchí, and other groups) with the classic Maya. Instead, the Criollo elite refer to these people as *indios*. Notwithstanding such racist view, the modern Maya are slowly knowing Mayan accomplishments.

Michael Coe wondered how such a great civilization had become a ‘folk culture.’ When scholars deciphered the picture-words called codes, Coe celebrated this academic accomplishment as “one of the most exciting adventures of our age, on a par with the exploration of space and the discovery of the genetic code.”⁶⁴ Undeniably, it is due to Mayanists like Landa, Thompson, Coe, Scheele, and Stuart, that there are methods to decipher them. Maya civilization did not remain frozen in time, rather it is a culture transformed by its struggles. That is precisely what gave the Ajq’ijab agency in an unorthodox manner: they were not visible to the authorities and that was key to keep the ceremonies alive.

The lengthy war between K’iches and Kaqchiqueles in the late 1400s, added to the deadly smallpox epidemic, decimated former Indigenous allies. The Spanish and the Nahua to conquer them in 1524 used that division and a K’iche weakened military force. Contrary to what this writer learned through his public education while living in Guatemala, the Spanish were only a minority when compared to the Indigenous forces who aided them in conquering the K’iche. The Kaqchiquel alone provided 2,000 warriors to the cause. Indigenous peoples warred with other Indigenous peoples, but the Spaniards ended up patenting conquest. As they had done with the Nahua, the Spanish dominated the region by betraying the Kaqchiquel, used Islamic teachings and Spanish legislation.

After 500 years of Spanish presence in Guatemala and their hegemonic project of destroying the religious or spiritual aspect of the conquered peoples such a feat has not been accomplished. The people nor their beliefs were destroyed. Carey, for instance, relies

⁶³ Arturo Taracena Arriola, “From Assimilation to Segregation: Guatemala, 1800-1944” Part II- Racialization in the State in the Long Nineteenth Century, in *Histories of Race and Racism: The Andes and Mesoamerica from Colonial Times to the Present*, ed. Laura Moskowitz (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 95.

⁶⁴ Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code*, 7.

on several Elders of five Kaqchiquel communities, mainly Chimaltenango, and surrounding areas, to situate this Mayan people throughout Guatemala's colonial and modern history. He is critical of how Spaniards, Creoles and Ladinos have appropriated land, discriminated and exploited the Kaqchiquel to grow the national economy, build the national army and to assimilate them. The Maya continue to be a force the colonizer pretends to minimize.

The colonized Maya lost control of their rich lands and their political structures were used to control the common people. However, their culture and ceremonies, albeit with some changes, were not replaced. Maya spiritual elements such as the calendars and the *Popol Wuh* were the main targets of Spanish destruction but even these survived. After thousands of years of socio-cultural development, Maya religion could not be replaced in a few years, no matter how violent the conquest. The continuous use of these spiritual objects shows a constant resistance to colonial domination and religious hegemony.

Chapter 5: Class, race, and religion in Guatemala

The current study describes and analyzes the Maya of the past, linking their accomplishments with the Maya of the present. Despite the modern emphasis, even constitutional, that Guatemala acknowledges different cultures, the main divisions, including at Quetzaltenango, remain along “racial, ethnic, and class” lines. According to Greg Grandin, blood ideology is what “marks these identities and continues to be a powerful ideology.”¹ This concept of believing in blood ‘purity’ reinforced the colonizer’s assumed racial and spiritual superiority over Ladino and Indigenous peoples. Laws, military violence and religion went hand in hand when conquering Guatemala.

This chapter describes how social class, alongside race, continue to be the main social dividers in Guatemala. A third divide is religion which, was used as an ideological tool to dominate Indigenous peoples. Colonial society was based on the expropriation of Indigenous lands and the exploitation of their labour. It was then fed by Spanish and Criollo racist ideologies and by promoting an Indio-Ladino division. When the dominant class was challenged, in colonial or modern times, they responded with extreme forms of violence.

In Guatemala, the Catholic Church’s cultural hegemony was unchallenged for almost four-hundred years. It was then confronted by the pro-American Protestant sects, which brought a new ideology with it: American capitalism. Both rivals focused on converting Indigenous people. Equally relevant is that individual voices against their own fellow citizens’ treatment of Indigenous peoples were part of colonialism’s contradictory project.² Religion was similarly instrumental for the Maya Ajq’ijab’ who resisted colonization. It helped them to keep Maya spirituality hidden under the cover of syncretism.

¹ Greg Grandin, *La sangre de Guatemala: Raza y nación en Quetzaltenango 1750-1954* (The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation in Quetzaltenango) (Guatemala: Ciudad Universitaria, 2007), 122.

² Cited in Leonzo Barreno, *In search of the Indio: A Critical Discourse Analysis* (Regina: University of Regina library, 2011), 55. Speaking against abusing Indigenous peoples began as early as 1511 with Antonio de Montesinos. Other theologians opposed Montesinos. Using Aristotelian theories Scottish theologian John Mair wrote that the Indians, “who live like beasts,” were natural slaves. The main debate took place in the 1550s during the “Valladolid debates” between Dr. Ines de Sepulveda, personal chaplain to King Ferdinand, and Fray Bartolome de las Casas. Sepulveda argued that the Indians were barbarians and he called for “waging war against the Indians and converting them to Catholicism by force.” De las Casas, argued that the Indians were Crown tributaries and “not slaves or servants of the conquistadors,” and portrayed them as “noble people” capable of rational thinking.

5.1 Colonialism, social classes, ideologies, and Indigenous resistance

Drawing from Fanon's critique of French racism in Algeria, racism was an important element of Spanish imperialist cultural hegemony in Guatemala. Like Christianization, 'blood purity' ideology provided the means to dominate the mind and body of the colonized.³ In this ideological and cultural war, both the Indigenous self and the Maya worldview in which it was anchored came under sustained and systematic racist attack.

Divine authority was 'officially' and 'legally' deployed by 'civilized' Christians since Indigenous peoples were considered godless barbarians (during colonialism) and child-like (during the recent genocide). Jean-Loup Herbert says "one year after the European landed in the Americas the Pope legitimized the expropriation of Indigenous lands" because Indigenous peoples were considered infidels, idolatrous and godless.⁴ In more recent times, influential scholar Martínez Peláez argues that the "*indios*" (Indians) of today are "product of the colonial regimen" who lost their "territories and even their own freedom, and through conquest, became patrimony of the conquistadors and their descendants."⁵ He proclaims the 'Maya' are dead, describing their survivors today as 'Indians.'

Other scholars disagreed with Martínez Peláez argument that the Maya and their more than two-thousand years of history were 'dead.' For instance, Jean-Loup Herbert, using a Fanon's quote, calls this argument "schizophrenic" as it simply "interpolates classic archeological data with observations made by Spanish chroniclers from the XVII century."⁶ Herbert's critique is in clear allusion to Martínez Peláez review of colonial chronicler Francisco Fuentes y Guzmán's 1690 book *La Recordación Florida*. Meanwhile, for Carlos Guzman Bockler, supporting theories of racial superiority "feeds a colonial relationship" based on the exploitation of Indigenous peoples to first benefit Spaniards and

³ Franz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution* (New York: Grove Press, 1969), 35.

⁴ Jean-Loup Herbert and Carlos Guzmán-Bockler, "Las Relaciones Ecológicas de una Estructura Colonial" in *Guatemala: Una Interpretación Histórica Social* (Guatemala: A Historical and Social Interpretation), (Guatemala City: CHOLSAMAJ, 2002 [1970]), 78.

⁵ Severo Martínez Peláez, *La Patria del Criollo: Ensayo de Interpretación de la Realidad Colonial Guatemalteca* (The Creoles Motherland: Interpretative Essay about the Guatemalan colonial reality) (México City: Ediciones en Marcha, 1994 [1970]), 44, 571.

⁶ Jean-Loup Herbert, "La Sociedad Precolonial: La Sociedad Autóctona Guatemalteca antes de la Colonia" in *Guatemala: Una Interpretación Histórica Social* (México City: Ediciones en Marcha, 1994 [1970]), 24.

then the Criollos.⁷ The exploitation of Indigenous peoples goes back to the very first day of conquest.

The higher their military rank and the more Spanish blood a person claimed the more power and wealth they acquired during the days of conquest. Breaking Treaty promises and war alliances with their Indigenous allies posed little obstacle. As already described in Chapter 1, the Nahuatl speaking Tlaxcaltecs and Quauhquechollan (or Cholula), recorded their travels to Guatemala in *lienzos* to confirm their military alliance with the Spaniards and their victories. They drew maps, including places like Chimaltenango and Ciudad Vieja (today Antigua Guatemala) where they planted their military headquarters.⁸ In these *lienzos* the Nahuatl soldiers are shown using Spanish swords to conquer the K'iche and other peoples. However, rather than enjoying the wealth and power as they expected the Nahuatl "ended up living poor and often in miserable circumstances."⁹ The *lienzos*

fell into oblivion, meanwhile, on the Spanish side, the opposite happened: accounts of triumph such as the letters of Hernan Cortes [conqueror of Mexico] and Pedro de Alvarado [conqueror of Guatemala] were published...the Nahuatl co-conquistadors [were portrayed] as only one of many who were defeated and subjected to the Spanish crown.¹⁰

The conquistadors continued using their Indigenous subjects to conquer other nations. After knowing that Conquistador Pedro de Alvarado burned alive the last K'iche leaders in Gumarcaaj (depicted in the *Lienzo de Quauhquechollan*), the Kaqchiquel Mayan rulers, B'eleje' K'at and Kaji' Imox, pledged loyalty to the conquerors. They provided them with gifts and invited them to stay in their capital city, Iximche. Such gestures were not enough for Alvarado and his brother, Jorge. They wanted more gold and payments. They began threatening and mistreating the Kaqchiquel who had welcomed them. Alvarado told the leaders: "Why haven't you brought me the metal [gold]? If you don't

⁷ Carlos Guzmán-Bockler and Jean-Loup Herbert, "El Nacimiento de la Situación Colonial," *Guatemala: Una Interpretación Histórica Social*, (México City: Ediciones en Marcha, 1994 [1970]), 58-9.

⁸ Florine Asselberg, "Rediscovering Forgotten Memories: Recollection and Emotion in Nahuatl Conquest Pictorials." In *Mesoamerican Memory: Enduring Systems of Remembrance*, Amos Megged and Stephanie Wood, eds., (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 43.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

bring me all your tribes' money I will burn you [alive] or will hang you.”¹¹ The threat of using fire to kill people and the abuse of power led the Kaqchiquel to abandon their capital city. Like the Tlaxcaltecs and Quauquechollan before them, the Kaqchiquel realized too late that the Spaniards did not keep their word and promises.

They fled to the mountains and began a five-year resistance (1524-1529). K'iche warriors joined the Kaqchiquel for two years during the war. With an army of 30,000 men they fought the conquistadors and their Indigenous allies from 1526 to 1528. Finally, the K'iche agreed to peace and to continue paying taxes to the Spaniards.¹² The Kaqchiquel surrendered in July 1529. Once in control of the main Indigenous populations, Alvarado received 400 men and 400 women to search for gold for his personal treasury and to build a new city.¹³ The dispossession of lands and exploitation of Indigenous allies and enemies alike was the basis of the early colonial economy.

The Spanish used the *Requirimiento* (the requirement) consisting of reading a document, in Latin, to the Indigenous peoples they encountered in the Americas, including Guatemala. Indigenous peoples had the choice of either accepting Christianity and the rule of the Crown or be warred upon.¹⁴ In what is present-day Guatemala, Fray Bartolome de las Casas was critical of this approach because Indigenous peoples not only did not understand Latin much less the Spanish true intentions. He said, “I did not know whether to laugh or cry when he read those theological absurdities aimed at legalizing slavery.”¹⁵ For the Spaniards “language was the companion of empire”¹⁶ and “government and religion are two brothers...,” something they learned from Islam.

¹¹ Adrián Recinos, *Memorial de Sololá, Anales de los Kaqchiqueles, Título de los Señores de Totonicapán* (The Sololá Memoirs, the Kaqchiquel Annals: The Lords of Totonicapán Papers). (Guatemala: Editorial Piedra Santa, 2007), 102. Alvarado had already burned alive the last rulers of the K'iche kingdom. Observe the use of fire by the Spaniards to kill humans; and the results of this study in which fire is considered by the Maya as the medium to communicate with the Creator.

¹² David Carey Jr., *Our Elders Teach Us: Maya-Kaqchiquel Historical Perspectives* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2001), 43.

¹³ Recinos, A., *Memorial de Sololá, Anales de los Kaqchiqueles*, 107.

¹⁴ Patricia Seed, *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe's Conquest of the New World 1492-1640*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006 [1995]), 71; Morales Sic, J.R., *Religión y Política*, 30.

¹⁵ Martínez Peláez, *La Patria del Criollo*, 65.

¹⁶ Seed, *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe's Conquest of the New World 1492-1640*, 8. See also William Roseberry's “Hegemony, Power, and Language of Contention” regarding how ruling classes use language as an activity of history and as a social instrument, 74-76.

Based on their experience, from the Moorish occupation of Spain beginning in the eight century,¹⁷ the Spaniard leadership used the same tactics in the Americas. The Muslims did not treat Spanish leaders as slaves even if they not converted to Islam. They retained their old privileges. They granted those same freedoms to Muslims when they reoccupied Spanish territories in Europe in 1492.¹⁸ Spaniards transplanted that tradition to the Americas. They allowed leaders of the Indian “*repúblicas*,” to retain their kinship privileges and serve as allies to control the masses. Alvarado extended this offer to the leaders of Xelajuh (Quetzaltenango). Conversely, the *Requirimiento* (reading the summons to submit to God and the Crown or face war), blamed Indians for any human loss if they did not convert to Christianity and pledge loyalty to the King.¹⁹ Bartolome de las Casas remained one of the main critics of this Islamic practice.²⁰ He wrote to the King of Spain reminding him that the Indians were his property, as the sovereign, and not of the conquistadors who were exterminating them.²¹

Along the *Requirimiento* two other colonial institutions were implemented: The *Encomienda* (the commission or entrust to exploit people) and the *Repartimiento* (the commission²² to distribute Indians to Spaniards and to transfer Indigenous peoples’ riches to the Crown). These two similar mechanisms, plus the *reducciones* (congregations) resulted in the “subjugation and exploitation of the Indian placing him as an inferior being during colonization” while it provided prosperity to Spaniards and Creoles.²³ To illustrate these colonial mechanisms Lovell says that each Spaniard *Encomendero* received a congregation and the Indian tributaries, some as many as 500 people, within it. The Maya were forced to supply the Spaniards with corn, cotton, beans, blankets, salt, chickens and other foods.²⁴ The *Encomienda* and *Repartimiento* systems also used local *caciques*

¹⁷ Seed, *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe’s Conquest of the New World 1492-16408*, 73.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 86-7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 88.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 71, 93.

²¹ Martínez Peláez, *La Patria del Criollo*, 71-2. My translation.

²² Jim Handy, *Gift of the Devil* (Toronto, ON: Between the Line, 1984), 22.

²³ Martínez Peláez, *La Patria del Criollo*, 96. The Creoles or Criollos (Spaniards born in Guatemala) began competing with the newly arrived Spaniards for land and Indians.

²⁴ George Lovell, *Conquest and Survival in Colonial Guatemala: A Historical Geography of the Cuchumatán Highlands, 1500-1821* (Montreal: Mc-Gill-Queen’s University Press, 2005 [1985]), 97.

(headmen or chiefs), who did not pay tribute (taxes or provide free labor) in return for ruling their own people.²⁵

The different Mayan nationalities were rechristened as Indians and natural slaves at the service of the conquistadors. In the very early days of occupation, they were branded like cattle; an Indian in Guatemala was then sold for 2 pesos (in Mexico, an Indian was sold for 50 pesos).²⁶ Until the 1542 New Laws, which gave a brief respite to Indigenous peoples, these mechanisms were used to maintain their subjugation and exploitation. The *Encomienda*, which included the conversion of Indigenous peoples to Catholicism, led Catholic missionaries into competition to convert Indigenous peoples. The *Cakchiquel Annals* recorded that in 1553, “Our Padres, the Franciscans and the Dominicans, fought in Xelahub [Quetzaltenango]. The Franciscans wanted to take-away Xelahub from the Dominicans.”²⁷ At the end of the XVI century, there were 200 *Encomiendas* in Guatemala.²⁸ This means 200 Spaniards received land and hundreds of Indigenous people each to work the land. The Catholic orders received payment depending on how many people were under their care for conversion.

In his influential work *La Patria del Criollo* (the Creoles’ Motherland) Martínez Peláez argues that Indigenous peoples, who he only refers as *indios* (Indians), were considered part of the landscape. Consequently, they became the property of “two-colonial masters”: the Spanish Crown and the Spaniards (and then Creoles) who fought for control over lands and the Indian labour force. He stated, “land without Indians was worthless.”²⁹ In the early years of urban settlement, Martha Few wrote of present-day city of Antigua Guatemala. Colonial divide-and-conquer strategies placed the Spanish men at the top, Mulato men (a mix of Spanish with African slave) as militias and Indigenous males as a police force.³⁰

Martínez Peláez asserts that contemporary Guatemalan social classes have roots in colonialism.³¹ There was an exception: The Indigenous Dons of Quetzaltenango. After the

²⁵ Carmack, *Rebels of Highland Guatemala*, 85.

²⁶ Martínez Peláez, *La Patria del Criollo*, 67, 76. My translation.

²⁷ Recinos, *Memorial de Sololá, Anales de los Kaqchiqueles*, 114.

²⁸ Carmack, *Rebels of Highland Guatemala*, 97.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 165.

³⁰ Martha Few, *Women who Live Evil Lives: Gender, Religion, and the Politics of Power in Colonial Guatemala* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010), 26.

³¹ Martínez Peláez, *La Patria del Criollo*, 570.

K'iche Maya army was defeated, the Quetzaltenango Indigenous new “*Dones*” (Sirs, Lords), were baptized and given new Christian names, Spanish clothes and a sword each. They were under Alvarado’s command and charged with converting their people to Catholicism. From then on, the new society was divided by race, castes or social layers (then into social classes), and by religion. The Indigenous *Dones* acted as the intermediaries between their people and the new Spanish leadership. Unlike other Indigenous groups this Quetzaltenango elite enjoyed the new economy’s benefits by owning property and some of the local means of production. They rivalled the local Spanish and Creoles, learning the language and legal process, to own as much or more land than the Europeans by 1687.³²

In other parts of Guatemala, the Ladino (people of mix Indigenous-Spanish heritage), were at first treated as badly as or worse than the Maya. The Ladino, just before the Criollo independence of Spain in 1821, were seen as people “with no principles and no manners.”³³ To “civilize” Indigenous and Ladino peoples, the post-independence Criollo implemented regulations. These included using Spanish or Western clothing, fluency in Spanish, proficiency in literacy, becoming consumers of Western goods, owning private property, producing for the world-market, and becoming Catholics. These requests, supported by both Conservatives and Liberals, were “designed to exclude Indians from the civilizing dynamic required for citizenship.”³⁴ Indigenous autonomy, argues Taracena, only ensured Criollo domination, the Ladino assimilation and the Indigenous segregation.³⁵ Ladino were assimilated without coercion. Indigenous peoples remained apart from that project.

Nevertheless, long before they were accepted as ‘citizens,’ the Ladino moved into Indigenous towns. For example, in Momostenango, 12 Ladino people, made their appearance in the 1683 town census. Their numbers grew steadily in 1797 from 164 (4 per cent) to 230 in 1804, to 277 in 1813. Throughout the latter periods, Spaniards and Ladinos lived in the main area of town. Only a few Indigenous people lived there.³⁶ When Carmack

³² Grandin, *La sangre de Guatemala*, 40.

³³ Martínez Peláez, *La Patria del Criollo*, 341.

³⁴ Arturo Taracena Arriola, “From Assimilation to Segregation: Guatemala, 1800-1944,” Part II- Racialization in the State in the Long Nineteenth Century. In *Histories of Race and Racism: The Andes and Mesoamerica from Colonial Times to the Present*, ed. Laura Moskowitz (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 111.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 98.

³⁶ Carmack, *Rebels of Highland Guatemala*, 63-4.

did one his last count in Momostenango in the early 1970s, Ladinos, who worked in the urban trades, were only 300 people compared to 40,000 K'iche.³⁷ Ladino ethnic status, according to Carmack, “shows the importance of ethnic status in the community and the political domination the Ladino were capable of keeping over the K'iche.”³⁸ He also mentions that despite the “extensive cultural exchange” that existed between the two groups the “cultural differences were emphasized” with the Indigenous traits as inferior.³⁹ This Indigenous “inferiority” has roots in the colonization period.

Besides the expropriation of Indigenous lands and exploitation of their labour, the Criollo, and then the Ladino to some extent, monopolized the ideological and political system. Just like the conquistadors debated before, the question was what to do with the Indian. The pre-1821 independence from Spain and independence period intellectuals argued that Guatemala, despite being so rich in resources was not on par with other Latin American countries. In their ideological view, the Indian was “the cause for national underdevelopment and a burden [*lastre*] for development.”⁴⁰ According to Herbert, others wished the Indian to be annihilated or, in the best of cases, assimilated by waves of European immigrants.⁴¹ Criollo intellectual Cecilio Del Valle praised Inca and Aztec cultures but not the Maya or, in his view, the Indians. Other Criollos describe them as “lazy, drunk, and shiftless.” According to García Giráldez, this attitude eventually resulted in [the 1980s] genocide.⁴² They saw the Indian as an obstacle to ‘progress.’ By framing the Indian as lazy, they justified force labour and eugenics. Some scholars suggested extermination as some proposed, were possible solutions.

After colonial authority ended in Guatemala the remaining Maya lands started to be taken by the Ladino. The most significant date for the Ladino political takeover, but not

³⁷ Robert M. Carmack, *Ki'aslemaal le K'iche'aab' Historia Social de los K'iche's* [The K'iche's Social History] (Guatemala: CHOLSAMAJ, 2001), 344.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid. 345.

⁴⁰ Jean-Loup Herbert “Expresiones Ideológicas de la Lucha de Clases: De la Discriminación Racial Institucional a su Mixtificación: El Indigenismo” (Ideological Expressions of Class Struggle: From Racial Institutional Discrimination to its Mixtification: Indigenism) in *Guatemala: una Interpretación Histórico-Social* (Guatemala: CHOLSAMAJ, 2002 [1970]), 145.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Teresa García Giráldez and Marta Elena Casaús Arzú, “La nación cívica y la nación civilizada: el espacio del indio en Valle y Batres” in *Las redes intelectuales centroamericanas: un siglo de imaginarios nacionales (1820-1920)* (Guatemala: F&G Editores, 2005), 36-7. My translation.

the economy as that remained in Criollo hands, was during the 1871 Liberal revolution. The new government supported the taking of Indigenous lands, mostly illegally or by using tricks.⁴³ This brought severe crisis to Indigenous peoples as the remaining lands eroded or did not produce enough food. Consequently, the Maya had to migrate to coastal plantations in search of work.⁴⁴ This situation spread across all over the highlands and continues to this day. The Maya became peons of the new owners.⁴⁵

Liberal President Barrios accelerated the growth of coffee, sugar and cotton plantations in the rich coastal and semi-coastal lands. With their lands expropriated or reduced, Indigenous peoples became the workforce through “forced labor, legalized debt peonage, imprisonment, fines, and vagrancy laws.” These practises in the plantations lasted until the 1944 revolution.⁴⁶ Forcing Indians to work was justified, according to Ladinos and Criollos, because of their moral decline (*degeneración*). In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Criollo and Ladino intellectuals proposed eugenics for the Indians moral and physical restoration (*regeneración*).⁴⁷

According to Marta Elena Casaús Arzú, the *regeneración* solution for the Indian problem was reminiscent of the 1820s debates. Advocates argued for eugenics to “improve their race through mix-breeding with superior races, supporting European migration, or improving them through forced labour or military service.”⁴⁸ Criollo, and by this time the Ladino, intellectuals aspired for Guatemala to be like Europe or the United States. Prominent Guatemalan writer Miguel Angel Asturias, who later in his life was a Nobel Prize Winner (1967) in Literature, supported eugenics, or “crossbreeding” as he calls it, in his 1923 university thesis when he was a young scholar. He proposed immigration by bringing people from “Switzerland, Belgium, Holland, Bavaria, Württemberg and the

⁴³ John D. Early, *Maya and the Catholic Cultures in Crisis*. (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2012), 51.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 59-60.

⁴⁵ Carey Jr., *Our Elders Teach Us*, 84.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 87.

⁴⁷ Taracena Arriola, “From Assimilation to Segregation: Guatemala, 1800-1944,” 107.

⁴⁸ Marta Elena Casaús Arzú and Teresa García Giráldez “El indio, la nación, la opinión pública y el espiritualismo nacionalista: los debates de 1929. (The indian, the nation, public opinion, and the nationalist spiritualism: the 1929 debates). In *Las redes intelectuales centroamericanas: un siglo de imaginarios nacionales (1820-1920)*, (Guatemala: F&G Editores, 2005), 213. My translation.

Tyrol.”⁴⁹ His position was criticized by another Ladino intellectual, Miguel Asturias Morales (not the winner of the Nobel Prize), a *Nuestro Diario* journalist, Asturias Morales was influenced by other Latin American intellectuals and ideologies like Vitalism and Spiritualism, which “rejected the idea of racial superiority and inferiority.” Inspired by Alberto Masteffer’s *Minimum Vital*, Morales wrote against the slave-like plight of Indigenous peoples. He criticized those who, like young Miguel Angel Asturias, were promoting eugenics in the 1920s. Instead, he valued “Indigenous work as one of the main creators of the country’s wealth”⁵⁰ and not as the cause for national underdevelopment. Then came the 1944 revolution and the ten-years of “spring” (1944-1954).

Two consecutive progressive governments wanted to modernize Guatemala’s economy. The Forced Rental Law “obliged landowners either to cultivate their land or rent it to landless peasants.” This law benefited mostly ladino peasants living in the south coast.⁵¹ Another law, and the reason for calling the measure “communist” by the American government, was the Agrarian Reform Law that expropriated land from rich landowners and the American owned United Fruit Company.⁵²

The 1952 agrarian reform implemented by President Jacobo Arbenz was a temporary relief for some Indigenous people because the assimilation through education programs continued. For example, the revolutionary government created the assimilationist *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* (National Indigenous Institute).⁵³ Consequently, according to Manz, for the highland Maya, this period “had little direct political impact... As a result, the overthrow of Arbenz had few repercussions in most highland communities.”⁵⁴ Grandin states that urban Quetzaltenango workers, including Indigenous workers, used the revolutionary period to organize themselves in unions, ask for better wages, and be in

⁴⁹ Miguel Ángel Asturias, *Sociología Guatemalteca/Guatemalan Sociology* (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona State University, 1977 [1923]), 99-104.

⁵⁰ Casaús Arzú, “El indio, la nación, la opinión pública y el espiritualismo nacionalista: los debates de 1929,” 230. My interpretation and translation. While in Guatemala, Salvadoran intellectual Alberto Masteffer promoted his “La Economía del minimum vital” (*Minimum Vital Economics*) in which collectivist economy is at the service of society to satisfy their vital needs and achieved an integral life. Cited in page 224.

⁵¹ Luisa Frank and Phillip Wheaton, *Indian Guatemala: Path to Liberation* (Washington: EPICA Task Force, 1984), 24.

⁵² *Ibid.* 25

⁵³ Taracena Arriola, “From Assimilation to Segregation: Guatemala, 1800-1944,” 110.

⁵⁴ Beatriz Manz, *Refugees of a Hidden War: The Aftermath of Counterinsurgency in Guatemala* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 9.

solidarity with fellow workers.⁵⁵ Further and taking into consideration the class complexities among the local K'iche Maya, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Quetzaltenango middle class residents first backed the revolution but gradually withdrew their support especially when the local elite and the print media labelled the unions “communists.”⁵⁶ Even though Arbenz, a native of Quetzaltenango, won the 1950 national elections, the support in the city was not as large as with the first revolutionary government of 1944 led by Arevalo. During Arbenz term, the anti-revolutionary forces began to enjoy external support. On June 7, 1953 an American plane flew over Quetzaltenango dropping pamphlets announcing the “liberation hour” from communism was coming soon.⁵⁷ Land reform ended, and a reign of terror would begin.

Added to the American support, the Catholic hierarchy allied with anti-communist groups, accused Arbenz of being a communist, and fought against his policies in Indigenous territories.⁵⁸ When the CIA's chosen Guatemalan mercenaries invaded Guatemala in 1954 the land (mostly in the Atlantic and Pacific coasts) was again monopolized by a few. The country's class divisions regressed to colonial arrangements. In 1964, Ladino or foreigners owned 75 percent of the agricultural land. Indigenous peoples owned 25 percent.⁵⁹ The Indigenous and poor Ladino smallholdings (*minifundio*) represented 15 percent of the arable land, its production was 50 per cent for internal consumption and 0.7 percent for export; the large *fincas* or estates (*latifundio*) used 35 per cent of their land; and 95 percent of its production was for exportation.⁶⁰ Alfonso Huet argues this inequality in land ownership plus the abuse and exploitation against Indigenous peoples in *las fincas* (large estates) was one of the main roots of the Civil-War.⁶¹

With a few exceptions, such as the local Indigenous petty bourgeoisies in cities and towns with large Indigenous populations, Indigenous peoples remained at the bottom of

⁵⁵ Grandin, *La sangre de Guatemala*, 301.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 302-04.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 312.

⁵⁸ Frank and Wheaton, *Indian Guatemala*, 26.

⁵⁹ Jean-Loup Herbert, “Las Relaciones Ecológicas de una Estructura Colonial,” *Guatemala: Una Interpretación Histórico Social* (“Ecological Relations of a Colonial Structure,” *Guatemala: A Historical-Social Interpretation*) (Guatemala: CHOLSAMAJ, 2002 [1970]), 94. My translation.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 95. My translation.

⁶¹ Alfonso Huet, *Nos Salvó la Sagrada Selva: La Memoria de Veinte Comunidades Q'eqchi'es que sobrevivieron al Genocidio* (The Sacred Jungle Saved Us: Memories from Twenty Q'eqchi'es Communities that Survived Genocide) (Cobán, Alta Verapaz: ADICIWakliiqo, 2008), 19.

the social ladder. Either by force or choice to alleviate their economic situation, or convinced by *contratistas* (intermediaries), Indigenous groups, like the Kaqchiquel continued working in Criollo and Ladino plantations. For instance, in the 1970s, “nearly half the Kaqchiquel population in Poaquil had to migrate to the coast because of a dearth in labor opportunities in their community.”⁶²

5.2 Race, otherness, and racism

Notwithstanding these class divisions, it is race more than any other social marker, which separates Indigenous peoples from the other social groups: Criollo and Ladino. The Indian was a recurrent “problem” since Guatemala’s creation. The Spaniards ended up as victors, due in part to their use of technology, horses and treason which provided enough evidence for Martínez Peláez to write that European laborers, the lowest of the colonizer class, were “intellectually superior to Indigenous priests or wise men.”⁶³ The conquistadors, the Criollo, and then the Ladino, based their domination on the belief of race superiority.

For young Asturias, “the Indian represents a past civilization and the mestizo, or *ladino* as we call him, a future civilization.”⁶⁴ In similar language but from a critical view, Taracena argues the Criollo project was to divide the population into Indians and Ladinos, the latter “represent Guatemalan nationality, while Indians were simply inhabitants of the country and residents of local administrative units.”⁶⁵ Today, four racial groups, constitutionally, form Guatemala: “Ladinos or mestizo, the Mayans, the Xincas, and the Garifuna [African-Guatemalan].”⁶⁶ The small Criollo or white minority is not included in this constitutional definition even though they continue ruling the country. Since the last

⁶² Casaús Arzú, M.E., “el indio, la nación, la opinión pública y el espiritualismo nacionalista: los debates de 1929,” 88.

⁶³ Martínez Peláez, *La Patria del Criollo*, 28. My translation.

⁶⁴ Miguel Ángel Asturias, *Sociología Guatemalteca/Guatemalan Sociology: El Problema Social del Indio* (Guatemalan Sociology: The Social Problem of the Indian, translated by Maureen Ahern) (Tempe Arizona: Arizona State University, Center for Latin American Studies, 1977 [1923]), 65; Betsy Konefal, *For Every Indio Who Falls: A History of Maya Activism in Guatemala, 1960-1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010), 18.

⁶⁵ Taracena Arriola, “From Assimilation to Segregation: Guatemala, 1800-1944,” 108.

⁶⁶ Morales Sic, *Religión y Política*, 13.

century, the Criollo minority uses the Ladino, who became “civilized” using Criollo standards, as the intermediary to oppress and discriminate the Indian.⁶⁷

Race, as a social construct, plays a powerful role in acculturation, social status, systemic discrimination, exploitation and state violence if necessary. The Maya also use it as a defense mechanism against the other. Hale and Grandin argue, race is used by the Maya to differentiate themselves from the Ladinos and the powerful white-Criollo minority. ‘Educated’ Maya, who in the past passed as Ladino or themselves chose to be Ladino, are now challenging “The twentieth-century image of Guatemala as a Spanish-speaking Ladino country...”⁶⁸ Maya from this selected group lead the modern Pan-Mayanism movement and who are proposing new ways of education for their people.

According to Carey: “the goal of education in Guatemala since independence has been the acculturation of the Maya.”⁶⁹ The Kaqchiquel of Chimaltenango welcomed education however were opposed to the acculturation of Liberal President Barrios’ education ideas. Decades later, the Kaqchiquel noticed, especially under Ubico’s dictatorship (1930-1944), that “most schools were an overt attempt to inculcate Maya with Ladino ideas. The curriculum included lessons in Spanish literacy, morality, natural history, grammar, arithmetic, and civic instruction.”⁷⁰ The government also assigned police to enforce Maya children’s attendance.⁷¹ In another town, Santiago Chimaltenango, in the department of Huehuetenango “race and not a person’s relationship to the land, came to define social and legal status.”⁷² As studied by Hale “... although socially inferior to whites, Ladinos consider themselves superior to Indians.”⁷³

In the Kaqchiquel people’s view, “community, language and ethnicity does not preclude divisions.” Therefore, they are not afraid of mentioning their internal struggles or disagreements with people or political ideologies that threaten their collective well-being. For example, K’iche journalist Estuardo Zapeta, who began opposing Indigenous

⁶⁷ Taracena Arriola, “From Assimilation to Segregation: Guatemala, 1800-1944,” 97-8.

⁶⁸ Kay Warren, *Indigenous Movements and their Critics: Pan-Maya Activism in Guatemala* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 11.

⁶⁹ Carey Jr., *Our Elders Teach Us*, 154; See also Betsy Konefal, *For Every Indio Who Falls*, 5.

⁷⁰ Carey Jr., *Our Elders Teach Us*, 157.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 163.s.

⁷² John M. Watanabe, *Maya Saints and Souls in a Changing World*. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1992), 54.

⁷³ Hale, cited in Watanabe, *Maya Saints and Souls in a Changing World*, 56.

collective rights, after returning to Guatemala from the United States, is criticized. One young man told Carey: “He [Zapeta] writes against us, to bring us down, and that is a shame.”⁷⁴

Since colonial times, some members of the Indigenous petty bourgeoisie have sought to become Ladino by law or by marrying Ladino women to mitigate Ladino and Creole structural racism against them.⁷⁵

From the Ladino perspective, and even though they have Indigenous blood, acknowledging Indigenous ancestry causes dishonor. For instance, one of Charles Hale’s informants admitted having Indigenous blood. After identifying herself as a “Mestiza,” she was scolded by her extended family. They were horrified and corrected her. She changed her mind, telling Hale she was a Ladina not Mestiza. Admitting *mestizaje* (mixed-blood) was an insult to her entire family. Similarly, they felt repulsion when they went to a fair in the township of Comalapa, Chimaltenango. “How low we have fallen,” they said after seeing too many Indigenous people at the fair.⁷⁶

In her critical work *Guatemala: linaje y racismo* (Guatemala: lineage and racism) Marta Casaús Arzú deciphers the family trees of the Creole oligarchy, of which she is a part. She shows the ideology and *modus operandi* of how these families rule Guatemala: believing in ‘pure’ Spanish blood and entrenching it through intra-cultural marriages.⁷⁷ Believing in blood purity trickles down in Guatemala: the more Indigenous blood, according to the Creole oligarchy and the Ladino who aspire to be Creole, the more deprived a person is. Some Indigenous people internalized this scheme of discrimination to discriminate their own people. For instance, Montejo describes how respect for Jakaltek Mayan spiritual leaders, the *Ahb’eh*, or “keepers of the ancient Mayan calendar, “dwindled” even before the war.⁷⁸ In his view, this is the result of the Guatemalan Ladino education system. It taught Indigenous children that Mayan spiritual leaders, who in the

⁷⁴ Carey Jr., *Our Elders Teach Us*, 254.

⁷⁵ Irma Alicia Velázquez Nimatuj, *La Pequeña Burguesía Indígena Comercial de Guatemala* (Guatemala City: CHOLSAMAJ, 2002), 44.

⁷⁶ Charles R. Hale, *Más que un indio: Ambivalencia racial y multiculturalismo neoliberal en Guatemala*, (Guatemala City: AVANSCO, 2007), 234-36.

⁷⁷ Marta Casaús Arzú, *Guatemala: linaje y racismo* (Guatemala: lineage and racism) (Guatemala: F & G Editores, 2007), 5.

⁷⁸ Victor Montejo, *Voices from Exile: Violence and Survival in Modern Maya History*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 175.

past educated them, were evil people.⁷⁹ Discrimination was not just a daily practice; endemic racism became violent and genocidal.

Even progressive forces, such as guerrilla groups, unions, and academics did not consider Indigenous peoples as potential leaders and disregarded their identity as Maya in favour of the generalization “Indians.” When the guerrilla movement was at its peak, Ladino Marxist leaders refused to “negotiate” Mayan rights during the war and refused to negotiate Indigenous rights in the event they won the revolution. There were also accusations of guerrilla fighters executing Indigenous fighters accused of forming their own guerrilla group.⁸⁰ Actions like these fueled the Maya *culturalistas*’ thesis that no matter who ruled Guatemala racism was not going to be solved.⁸¹ After the war, Indigenous scholars, like Demetrio Cojtí, not only criticized the Guatemalan state but also the Marxist groups. In response, the former guerrilla Ladino leaders denied Indigenous combatants were ill treated and that they did not address the Indigenous claims for leadership positions during the armed conflict. This Indigenous/former guerrilla leaders’ debate has not included how the national army used Indigenous males in its ranks and for what purpose.

The army has proven to be a useful institution for the Creole oligarchy to maintain power in Guatemala, both before and after the war including using it for genocide. Racism remains key to how the army operates. At the beginning of its creation, the Ladino led army did not welcome Mayan soldiers. They were viewed as unworthy, incapable of fighting or untrustworthy.⁸² Eventually, the army became an instrument of assimilation and oppression within its ranks.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Mayan soldiers made up most of the troops and remained so even during the 1980s, when they were ordered to kill their own people. Although the army provided some ‘benefits’ such as Spanish language, formal education and a wage to Mayan males,⁸³ it was a vehicle for indoctrination.⁸⁴ Military training and actions, like the education system biases Montejo found against the Jakalte-

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Hale, *Más que un indio*, 138-40. According to Konefal “They [the executions of Mayan leaders] remain rumors, unsubstantiated by the UN and Catholic Church truth commissions,” 144.

⁸¹ Konefal, *For Every Indio Who Falls*, 73, 116-18.

⁸² Carey Jr., *Our Elders Teach Us*, 178, 187.

⁸³ Ibid. 181-82, 192.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 185.

Maya, contradicted Kaqchiquel upbringing and respect for life.⁸⁵ Using anti-communist discourse, according to the United Nations Commission for the Historical Clarification, the army killed Maya people *en masse*.⁸⁶

Contrary to the 1980s and early 1990s, the Ladino intellectual left have now adopted Mayan rights claims with some ambivalence.⁸⁷ In private, they are afraid of not achieving Guatemalan unity because “Indigenous peoples, as political actors, are knocking on the door.”⁸⁸ On the other side of the political spectrum, neo-liberal governments and Criollo/Ladino elites embraced Maya cultural rights, as in “development with identity.” They even supported enshrining those rights within the constitution as long as they did not threaten White and Ladino authority.⁸⁹ Nonetheless, this cultural accommodation did not sit well with some Ladino military leaders outside Guatemala City. One Chimaltenango Coronel, for instance, does not see the Marxist forces as a threat anymore. “We finished them off” he said in the early 1990s. Instead, he told Hale, “radical Mayan activists” are the new threat.⁹⁰

The group Hale did not study in detail is the small “white population,” the Criollo. This Euro-Guatemalan elite is what the Ladino aspire to be. However, the Criollos see the Ladino as “*choleros*” (brown-nosers) who carry the “Mongolian spot,” proving they are Indians.⁹¹ In other words, the Criollo elite feed the Ladino’s fear of a perceived growing Maya movement. Even though the Ladino are perceived to be less than (the Criollo), the Ladino feel superior to the Maya. Hale argues that dissident Ladinos can bridge the Ladino-Maya divide to calm Ladino fears while advancing Mayan rights.⁹²

Whatever means they used to rule Guatemala, the white/Criollo and then the Ladino did not achieve total hegemony over the Indigenous population. Becoming Maya, as opposed to the colonial invention of the stereotypical Indian, became central to the Maya movement as it opposed the Ladino state and its violent and assimilationist goals.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 186.

⁸⁶ In Barreno, *In search of the indio*, 68.

⁸⁷ Hale, *Más que un indio*, 145.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 202.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 39, 58.

⁹⁰ Ibid. 61.

⁹¹ Ibid. 271.

⁹² Ibid. 318-19.

5.3 Religion

Counter-hegemonic resistance is not an automatic reaction. Nor does it envelop all members of an oppressed society. Its potential for cultural expansion is particularly limited when assimilation has led large segments of the colonized, mainly the leadership, to accept the colonizer's culture and religion. In addition to social and racial divide, a third force, religion, divides the population between the Maya who practice ancient beliefs and non-Maya (and Maya) who practice Christian religions. The two dominant European religions arrived in Guatemala at different times but with similar goals and strategies of conversion.

Throughout Guatemala's history, this type of internal division and of counter-hegemonic resistance, within the Church itself, saved Indigenous peoples from total slavery. However, it did not save the Maya from continuous exploitation because the Church received payments, known as the *sínodo* (synod), to convert people to Catholicism. Under these violent conditions, the ceremonies left the Mayan settlements, or congregations, to new and secret places. Mayan practices and teachings had to adapt to the new reality by going underground and syncretizing.

After 400 years of religious domination, the pro-American Protestant sects confronted the Catholic Church. Both rivals focused on converting Maya people using both Christian and Indigenous methods. Even centuries after their arrival, they noticed that the Maya kept their belief system hidden under the veil of syncretism. Henceforth, laws, military violence and religion went hand in hand during colonial and modern times. Equally relevant is that dissenting European voices against their own fellow citizens' treatment of Indigenous peoples were part of colonialism's contradictory project.⁹³ However, that opposition did not change the colonization process because as colonizers they also received benefits.

Liberal President Justo R. Barrios, who implemented secularism, welcomed Protestant churches in the 1870s. After 350 years of Catholic religious monopoly, Protestantism brought the "capitalist or liberal model of the United States" to Guatemala.⁹⁴ Protestantism, just like Catholicism, wanted to "erase indigenous cultural and linguistic

⁹³ Barreno, *In search of the Indio*, 55.

⁹⁴ Nestor Quiroa, "Missionary exegesis of the Popol Vuh: Maya K'iche' Cultural and Religious Continuity in Colonial and Contemporary Highland Guatemala" (University of Chicago, 2013), 81, Last modified December 17, 2018 <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdfplus/10.1086/671250>

traits from Guatemala's social makeup."⁹⁵ It is under that neo-colonial and assimilationist goal that Paul and Dorah Burgess arrived in 1913, settled in Quetzaltenango and worked amongst the Maya until 1964. They first observed the deplorable socio-economic conditions of this population describing it as "semi-slavery." They also defined their rituals as "signs of spiritual deficiencies" and the spiritual leaders as "witch doctors."⁹⁶

Ted G. Jelen and Clyde Wilcox explain: "In Central America, Pentecostal missionaries have had remarkable success in luring some of the most religiously active citizens away from the Catholic Church."⁹⁷ According to them, "dominant religious traditions...may become lazy", as commercial firms they are "in competitive religious "markets" must strive to attract adherents in order to survive and prosper."⁹⁸ Both Protestantism and Catholicism continue to gain or lose recruits in what Jelen and Wilcox call the "religious market." Indeed, spiritual entrepreneurs "must strive to attract adherents in order to survive and prosper."⁹⁹ In Guatemala, as in Latin America, there is "competition with established Catholic and other denominations."¹⁰⁰ Mayan believers find themselves in this new reality.

Dominant religions continue to take a central stage in Guatemala, arguably to the detriment of democratic values and Indigenous cultures. However, this competition can also result in productive confrontation. "Religion clearly can serve a public purpose as a source of social cohesion and political legitimacy, as well as being a source of regime opposition."¹⁰¹ The public appearance of Maya spirituality, even with some syncretic expressions showing its adaption to change, in the 1990s resulted in strong positions among Maya and non-Maya people regarding religion. Maya spirituality is now a new actor in the Guatemalan religious debate. The difference is that Catholicism and Protestantism, as institutionalized religions, continue to dominate the Guatemalan conversion.

In 1995, 24.1 percent of Guatemala's 10.6 million people were considered Protestants. Anne Motley Hallum claims the percentage "may be even ten percentage

⁹⁵ Ibid. 82.

⁹⁶ Ibid. 84-5.

⁹⁷ Ted G. Jelen and Clyde Wilcox. 2002. *Religion and Politics in Comparative Perspectives: The One, the Few and the Many*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 13.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 3.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 5.

points higher...”¹⁰² In Guatemala, the Pentecostal missionaries “stepped into a religious community vacuum” left by the Catholic Church. According to Hallum, Catholic priests oversaw 15,000 to 30,000 parishioners, while evangelical pastors “grew up in the village where they preach and are always available.”¹⁰³ For widows and orphans of the Civil War the Pentecostal Church became a “religion of survival,” quoting Linda Green’s argument, through their congregations, they joined others to “build houses, plant and harvest corn, and also socialized nightly at services.”¹⁰⁴ Like Latin America generally, Guatemala is now home to “Traditional Catholics, Charismatic Catholics, liberation theology (Progressive) Catholics; and Mainline Protestants, Neo-Pentecostals, Pentecostals, **indigenous religions** and secularism [emphasis is mine].”¹⁰⁵

New religions and Indigenous spiritual practitioners must still deal with laws imposed by established religions. Even if they claim to be separate institutions, the dominant Christian denominations continue to use the state to oppose the celebrations and rituals of subordinate populations. However, Christian cultural hegemony is gradually becoming fragile, fractured and increasingly vulnerable. Under conditions of open inter-denominational competition, religious beliefs have increasingly become a choice. The anti-colonial resonances of the Mayan cultural and spiritual alternatives, even if prone to internal divisions, pose a resurgent challenge to a divided Christianity.

Conclusion

Research shows that the Nahua and Toltec cultures influenced the Maya and the K’iche Maya just like Islam influenced Spaniards. Like the Europeans, the Mesoamerican peoples were conquering other Indigenous nations and settling in their lands. Political and cultural hegemony, and resistance, existed in the Americas long before Europeans arrived. The K’iche, and other Mayan nations, when invaded by the Spaniards, had to resist colonial and more contemporary efforts of total subjugation. The ideology of blood purity, class

¹⁰² Anne Motley Hallum, “Looking for Hope in Central America: The Pentecostal Movement,” *Religion and Politics in Comparative Perspectives: The One, the Few and the Many*, ed. Ted G. Jelen and Clyde Wilcox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 226.

¹⁰³ Ibid. 228.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 229.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 233.

domination and a hegemonic religion were part of those efforts. Other actions include laws and education to separate the Maya of the past from the Maya of the present.

The Spanish conquest, occupation, and respective Indigenous resistance wars were exceptionally violent. It also involved alliances, as recorded in the Nahuatl *lienzos*, used to conquer and dominate Indigenous groups. The treaties were eventually broken and forgotten. Some of the main conquistador tactics were to burn people alive, burn all the knowledge production, burn Indigenous people's houses, crops and brand them like cattle to own or sell them. These early tactics, using fire and extreme forms of violence, were identical to those used by the Guatemalan army in the 1980s. The goal, in both periods, was to inflict fear to coerce the population into conformity. Indigenous spirituality, no longer in the form of a structured religion, survived both periods.

Quetzaltenango did not have the size and importance of Tenochtitlan of the Aztecs or Cuzco of the Incas. However, the conquistadors aimed at conquering it because of the riches of this major K'iche Maya city. Instead of rebelling the six political leaders of Quetzaltenango pled loyalty to the conquistadors. In return, they obtained symbolic and secondary privileges under the new rulers. In other parts of Guatemala, the political leadership of each Indigenous nation was killed. Mayan kingdoms were fractured into congregations through the *Encomiendas* and *Repartimiento* systems. The religion of the people was no longer cosmological-nature-mystical. The new hegemonic religion did not admit "paganism." Instead, it persecuted and punished those who practiced the old religion. Though the Spaniards governed with cruelty, individual Catholic priests like Bartolome de las Casas also opposed them. He convinced the Spanish King that the conquistadors were killing the Indians. The King created some laws to save the Indians because they, and not the conquistadors, were the source of his wealth. The Church also benefited from these laws.

The Nahuatl who allied with the Spanish may have conquered the Aztec and the K'iche, but their blood was not Spanish. They were not allowed to rule nor become rich as their *Lienzo* partners did. As part of the hegemonic project of the ruling elites, Spanish history and accomplishments are taught in the school system. Conquest is highlighted and glorified. The Nahuatl's role in conquest, except re-naming Indigenous towns, do not exist in official history texts. Anything Maya was and continues to be denied or minimized.

One resistance strategy used by some Maya was to flee the congregations, to living in the forests or mountains to escape oppression. Most people stayed in the congregations (*Reducciones*) ruled by the *Encomienda* system, which included their indoctrination into the new religion. What can be observed in this process is that Maya people who were forced to live in the congregations did adopt Christian deities, names, celebrations and symbols in their religious practices and in their social organization. The main structure born out of syncretism was the Catholic *cofradías*. These Catholic religious organizations proved to be crucial in the survival of Maya spirituality into modern times.

The Maya survived colonial mechanisms created as part of the colonizing project. In the last century, and the belief in race superiority led Guatemalan intellectuals to propose eugenics to 'improve' the Indigenous race. Meanwhile, dictators created vagrancy laws to justify their exploitation. Although the 1944-1954 revolution lasted only 10 years, it left a legacy of new resistance and negotiation models that have lasted to the present day. Indigenous peoples were not a monolithic whole both culturally and socially. For instance, Indigenous cultural resistance to Arbenz was from two fronts: from the Catholic Action's anti-communist ideology and from the *Cofradía* leaders who saw their interests threatened by Arbenz' policies.¹⁰⁶ However, the social situation of the Indigenous masses continued to deteriorate as they did not receive benefits from the American chosen president in 1954 nor thereafter. On the contrary, since 1954, military men took turns to be *el presidente* of Guatemala and ruled the people as he wished since he had the backing of the United States government. Students and peasant unions were persecuted and declared illegal. The Catholic hierarchy was a collateral winner in 1954. To maintain their privilege, the government, with the support of the Guatemalan oligarchy and the CIA used state-terrorism against various groups in the 1970s and 1980s. The northwest Indigenous peoples lost any hope for another progressive government. The guerrilla forces found fertile ground for a revolutionary war, among Indigenous peoples.

¹⁰⁶ Frank and Wheaton, *Indian Guatemala*, 27.

Chapter 6: Civil War and genocide

Colonialism did not erase various cultural features of the Maya. Their worldviews, languages, community organizations, their *trajes* (daily clothing and regalia), the *costumbre*, and Mayan ceremonies were transformed but not destroyed. What colonialism and the 1954 American intervention achieved was to strengthen the Guatemalan oligarchical rule in the country and their animosity towards Indigenous peoples. The term *indio* (Indian) was used by oligarchs during conquest to name Mayan groups. This identity-stripping generic terminology remained through colonization and in most recent times (1981-1983) to justify the killing of Maya people.¹

Indigenous peoples' social situation was a double-edged sword: a cauldron for liberation, as shown in their participation in guerrilla groups, as well as the government's repression concluding in genocide. This chapter describes the origins of Guatemala's Civil War, the main players in it, and when the rebel forces moved into Mayan territories. The Civil War was not only fought with guns, it was also a source of debate between the guerrilla leadership and Indigenous activists about Indigenous rights during the war and if in case the revolution was won. The Guatemalan army responded with lethal force when Indigenous peoples joined the armed struggle.

Killing Maya for being Maya -who the army simply referred as *indios*- was the basis for genocide. At the end of a 36-year conflict, a Peace Agreement was signed in 1996. Whereas government and rebel forces signed the final document, the root causes of the war continued affecting rural Maya and women the most. Neoliberal governments acknowledged the existence of racism and the "multicultural, multiethnic and multilingual" reality of Guatemala but the relations of power and capitalism were not altered.

¹ Leonzo Barreno, *In search of the Indio: A Critical Analysis of the Discourse to Oppress the Mayan people of Guatemala* (Regina: University of Regina Library), iv. See also Cindy Forster, *La Revolución indígena y Campesina en Guatemala, 1970 a 2000: "Ver un día que nuestra raza Maya fuera levantada"* (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, 2012), 24, 48. My translation

6.1 A war turned into genocide and refugees: The 1970s-1980s

The armed struggle began within the Guatemalan armed forces.² In the early 1960s, a rebel military group opposing President Miguel Ydígoras arose.³ Originally composed of young soldiers they opposed the use of Guatemalan soil by American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to train Cuban mercenaries to invade Cuba.⁴ Seeing their interest threatened once again, the American government partly financed the Guatemalan military. Jim Handy states: “Between 1963 and 1969, 29 per cent of all U.S. military-assistance loans went to Guatemala.” This assistance was justified under the Cold War military aid and direct intervention in this “banana republic.” For example, the American government created the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, a U.S. military base, outside Columbus, Georgia where Latin American soldiers, including Guatemalan soldiers, were trained to carry out genocidal campaigns in the western hemisphere.⁵

In the 1960s, repression was still not as extreme in the highlands where most Indigenous peoples live. Early contact between the guerrilla leadership and Indigenous fighters, organized under the FAR (Rebel Armed Forces), began as early as that decade.⁶ Some Maryknoll priests, who were working with Indigenous people’s colonization of northern Huehuetenango, became guerrilla fighters. Although some of them were expelled from the country, they left people organized in cooperatives.⁷

In the 1970s, guerrilla activities and army repression intensified in the urban areas. In the capital city, the Guatemalan government focused its attack on Ladino intellectuals, union leaders and the public San Carlos University students.⁸ In this same decade and after unsuccessful operations in eastern Guatemala the guerrilla forces moved to Indigenous territories as the “guerrillas initially believed that Indian peasants would support the

² Alfonso Huet, *Nos Salvó la Sagrada Selva: La Memoria de Veinte Comunidades Q’eqchi’es que sobrevivieron al Genocidio* (The Sacred Jungle Saved Us: Memories from Twenty Q’eqchi’es Communities that Survived Genocide) (Cobán, Alta Verapaz: ADICI Wakliiqo, 2008), 320.

³ Jim Handy, *Gift of the Devil* (Toronto, ON: Between the Line, 1984), 153.

⁴ *Ibid.* 231.

⁵ Anthony J. Hall, *American Empire and the Fourth World: The Bowl with One Spoon* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003), 365.

⁶ Luisa Frank and Phillipe Wheaton, *Indian Guatemala, Path to Liberation* (Washington: EPICA Task Force, 1984), 35.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Handy, *Gift of the Devil*, 176-78; Frank and Wheaton, *Indian Guatemala*, 54.

revolution *en masse*...”⁹ One of the first and most active groups was the EGP (Guerrilla Army of the Poor). They appeared in the western highlands in January 1972.¹⁰ Their target recruits were Indigenous members of Catholic Action.¹¹ By this time the Catholic Action and some foreign priests, but not the Church leadership, had changed their anti-communist rhetoric and embraced theology of liberation. The idea of aiding poor people, through a grassroots movement was personified by Paulo Freire’s “*concientizacão*” (consciousness-raising) which was “designed to teach the lower classes that their impoverished situation was the result of social structures that could be changed.”¹² The “Catholic Action became at once a religious, political, and cultural movement.”¹³ The Catholic Action, which arrived in Guatemala in the 1930s, was not just a religious movement attacking the *costumbristas*. As community leaders they sought the support of priests coming to their communities to organize Indigenous peoples in rural and urban areas.

The social conditions of Maya people in the highland parishes, especially after observing their exploitation and Ladino racism in the *fincas* (large estates), convinced many foreign priests, mainly the Catholic Maryknoll and Jesuits, to support the beginnings of a Pan-Maya movement aimed at cultural revitalization. This initial support came in the form of “Indigenous Seminaries” or socio-political workshops for Indigenous students, the publication of *Ixim* and *Notas Indígenas* (Indigenous News). They also supported the creation of the *Coordinadora Indígena Nacional* (National Indigenous Coordination) whose early members included Ricardo Cajas, from Quetzaltenango; Antonio Pop Caal, from Cobán; Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil, from Tecpán, Chimaltenango...and Emeterio Toj, from El Quiché.¹⁴

Parallel to the guerrilla groups moving into Indigenous territories in the second half of the 1970s, this was also the beginning of the Indigenous *culturalistas* (culturalist or Maya specific) and *clasistas* (classists or class-focused), who for the most part supported

⁹ Handy, *Gift of the Devil*, 234.

¹⁰ Ibid. 244. By the early 1980s, all four groups, The Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP), the People in Arms Revolutionary Organization (ORPA), the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR) and the Guatemalan Workers Party (PGT) operated in the region. They all merged into the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG).

¹¹ Early, *Maya and the Catholic Cultures in Crisis*, 239.

¹² Ted G. Jelen and Clyde Wilcox, *Religion and Politics in Comparative Perspectives: The One, the Few and the Many* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 199.

¹³ Betsy Konefal, *For Every Indio Who Falls: A History of Maya Activism in Guatemala, 1960-1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010), 33.

¹⁴ Ibid. 66.

each other. When it came time for joining the war, only the *clasistas* made the decision to join the rebel forces. The main reason other Indigenous people joined was to end centuries of economic exploitation and racist abuse.¹⁵ As expressed by Indigenous elders, class-consciousness and cultural identity were not new to them when the guerrilla fighters arrived in their territories. They knew who their enemy was (the national army) as they had suffered beatings and humiliations by soldiers since the 1930s.¹⁶ The 1976 earthquake which destroyed people's homes and fields and the government's lack of interest to respond to people's needs exacerbated the poor conditions of Maya people¹⁷ and heightened the commitment of the Indigenous *clasistas* for an armed struggle. This commitment led to the creation of the Committee for Peasant Unity (CUC) in 1978. Indigenous founders of CUC, such as Emeterio Toj, Pablo Ceto and Gregorio Chay, were or became EGP members. The *culturalistas*, meanwhile, "...resisted joining a revolutionary struggle...without first addressing... [the issue of] interethnic relations in our country."¹⁸

By the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, most of the military's victims were Maya, as shown in the 1978 Panzos massacre and the 1980 burning of the Spanish Embassy, which Indigenous activists occupied to protest army atrocities in El Quiché Department. These two carnages showed two things: the plight of Indigenous peoples in the Departamentos of Alta Verapaz, El Quiché and Huehuetenango. It also showed the violent stance the Guatemala state was taking to deal with insubordinate peoples. According to the Guatemala News and Information Bureau (GNIB, now housed at the University of Princeton, New Jersey) thousands of Indigenous peoples joined the armed struggle, especially, in the north-west Departamentos. Most Indigenous fighters, like Gabriel, joined the revolution for Indigenous survival purposes and because they had acquired a class analysis of their situation.¹⁹ For Cindy Forster these guerrilla fighters fit into Gramsci's "organic intellectuals... [whose] historical tools to understand alliances and divisions" occurred during the war. Forster demonstrates Indigenous participation and opinions in Guatemala's Civil War.²⁰

¹⁵ In Forster, *La Revolución Indígena y Campesina en Guatemala, 1970 a 2000*, 29. My translation

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Frank and Wheaton, *Indian Guatemala*, 47.

¹⁸ Konefal, *For Every Indio Who Falls*, 73.

¹⁹ In Forster, *La Revolución Indígena y Campesina en Guatemala, 1970 a 2000*, 18. My translation.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 19. My translation.

The culturalist *Movimiento Indígena* and the classist CUC held talks, hosted by EGP, but the EGP Ladino leaders did not welcome their claims for Indigenous inclusion in the guerrilla leadership.²¹ Consequently, most culturalists did not join the war. There were further divisions in other civil-society fronts. Embracing “liberation theology” brought several priests and Catholic Action leaders into conflict with the Catholic Church hierarchy. Priests working in poor and remote Indigenous areas joined the Marxist-led liberation movement despite their Church superiors’ accusations of “not [only] supporting but... initiating violent revolution [by] forming their own guerrilla movement.”²² Aware of some foreign priests’ involvement in the armed struggle the military regimes began targeting liberation theology priests. The government ordered several Maryknoll priests to leave the country. For example, American Melville brothers were expelled for supporting the EGP.²³ The army killed dozens of foreign priests, including Spanish priests Faustino Villanueva and Juan Alonso.²⁴ Jesuit priests who joined the armed struggle included the founder of CUC (Committee of Peasant Unity) priest Fernando Hoyos,²⁵ Irishman Donald McKenna and many others.

John Early discusses the priests’ moral justification for joining revolutionary movements. “Just war,” he says, is a concept that has been discussed from Aristotle to Augustine to Aquinas.²⁶ He explains the four conditions to be met to justify revolutionary violence: it must be morally acceptable, there was no other option, military and political is necessary grounds to obtain social justice.²⁷ However, he also noticed that even with the priests’ joining the struggle, the EGP leadership never included the Maya in its National Directorate.²⁸ By contrast, Father Ronald Hennessey questioned EGP’s real chances for winning the war and if it would bring social justice to Guatemala. He compared their violent tactics with those of the Guatemalan military.²⁹ These conflicts split the church. Foreign missionary priests, who arrived in Guatemala during the Cold-War years to

²¹ Ibid. 124-25, 134.

²² Ibid. 52.

²³ Frank and Wheaton, *Indian Guatemala*, 35.

²⁴ Konefal, *For Every Indio Who Falls*, 332.

²⁵ John D. Early, *Maya and the Catholic Cultures in Crisis* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2012), 365-70.

²⁶ Ibid. 377.

²⁷ Ibid. 378.

²⁸ Ibid. 380, 382.

²⁹ Cited in Early, *Maya and the Catholic Cultures in Crisis*, 383-85

strengthen the Catholic Church's role among the Indigenous population, ended up joining the guerrilla groups.³⁰ Others, especially the hierarchy, chose to "stay out of politics" or support the military regimes.³¹

The Army's response in the 1960s and 1970s was the "100% Solution" which meant, "kill every individual who was a member or collaborator with a subversive organization."³² Although this first plan was unsuccessful, the next two decades brought more state violence, supported by the American government, to Mayan communities.

Although the 1978 Panzos and the 1979 Spanish Embassy massacre had already occurred, according to Grandin, "until 1981, most of the state violence victims were Ladino... Indigenous people were not the target until 1981 when the military implemented the scorched earth campaign."³³ In that same year, Manz says, "guerrilla groups were conducting daily operations in nine out of twenty-two departments...It appeared that the insurgents would soon permanently control sections of the Indian highlands."³⁴ By then, thousands of Indigenous men and women in El Quiché, Chimaltenango and Alta Verapaz were either fighting with or supporting the guerrilla organizations. According to Carlotta McAllister, the reason people from Chupol, El Quiché, joined the EGP was because, based on their cultural teachings and religious syncretism, they knew what was good and evil (social consciousness) in that historical moment.³⁵ Rigoberta Menchú's testimony is similar to what McAllister found in El Chupol. Both Indigenous and Catholic teachings influenced her to join the Catholic Action, then CUC (the Peasants Unity Committee) and finally support the armed struggle.³⁶ In her activism, she met and interacted with progressive *Ladino compañeros* who did not fit the Ladino scheme she had known before.³⁷ Rodrigo Asturias (*nom de guerre* Gaspar Ilom), recalled similar experiences of how 8 to 15 Ladino "rugged" fighters were welcomed and joined by "thousands" of Indigenous

³⁰ Frank and Wheaton, *Indian Guatemala*, 29.

³¹ *Ibid.* 63

³² Early, *Maya and the Catholic Cultures in Crisis*, 250.

³³ Greg Grandin, *La Sangre de Guatemala: Raza y nación en Quetzaltenango 1750-1954* (The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation in Quetzaltenango) (Guatemala: Ciudad Universitaria, 2007), 23.

³⁴ Beatrice Manz, *Refugees of A Hidden War: The Aftermath of Counterinsurgency in Guatemala* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), 15.

³⁵ Carlotta McAllister, *Good People: Revolution, Community and Conciencia in a Maya K'iche Village in Guatemala* (PhD Dissertation, John Hopkins University, 2003), 47.

³⁶ Rigoberta Menchú, *An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (London: Verso, 1992), 80, 118.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 166-68.

people, many of whom joined the armed struggle.³⁸ Indigenous and Ladino activists and fighters experienced the wrath of state terrorism.

It is evident that by the early 1980s three guerrilla groups have established military units in the highlands: mostly the EGP (The Poor People's Army), then the ORPA (People in Arms Revolutionary Army) and FAR (The Rebels' Armed Forces). Several events, such as selective killings and massacres, became turning points for Indigenous people of north-west Guatemala to join the revolution. Added to the repression and the massacres people joined because they were conscious about their colonial history and present reality. Joining an armed struggle represented an opportunity to change that situation. Indigenous peoples were not child-like creatures, as perceived by the government, nor were they indoctrinated into socialist ideas to enter the war. Those who joined the war did so after analyzing their social situation as described by Cindy Forster (2012).

Parallel to the massacres in the highlands the army carried out urban sweeps in the capital city. Moreover, when American president Jimmy Carter cut military aid to Guatemala in the late 1970s, the army received 'intelligence' and technological support from Israel, Argentina, Chile and Taiwan.³⁹ The press, which for the most part did not report on the massacres, published some of the rebel actions given the proximity of these provinces to the capital city. This confirmed "the urban nightmare of an imminent Indian uprising."⁴⁰

Father Luis Pellecer, a member of EGP, was kidnapped in June 1981 and on July 4, of the same year, Indigenous leader and CUC founder Emeterio Toj was kidnapped in Quetzaltenango by security forces. These two abductions were a temporary blow to the guerrilla movement as both men were forced to appear before the press condemning the armed struggle.⁴¹ This caused mass confusion for their followers in the struggle. Toj Medrano escaped in November 1981, four months after his capture. Although Gustavo Meoño, an EGP leader, claimed that the group had liberated Toj, he was still seeing with suspicion by the armed Left and by la *Coordinadora Indígena* (National Indigenous Coordination). The *Coordinadora Indígena*, because some but not all its members joined

³⁸ Forster, *Revolución Indígena y Campesina*, 227-28.

³⁹ Frank and Wheaton, *Indian Guatemala*, 59.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 62.

⁴¹ Ibid. 64; Konefal, *For Every Indio Who Falls*, 135-141.

the revolution, fell apart. People lost faith in the strength of the movement. This was only the prelude to mass state terrorism.

Beginning in 1981, under the regime of General Romeo Lucas Garcia and his brother and Minister of Defence, Benedicto Lucas (both Kekchí Maya from Cobán), the military government planned and implemented military campaigns to deal with the guerrilla movement, but mostly the Indigenous civilian population. The operations included the *Ceniza* 81, and then under Rios Montt, *Victoria* 82 and *Firmeza* 83 (Ashes 81, Victory 82, and Steadiness 83). The Victory 82 plan main pillars were “eliminate,” “annihilate,” and “exterminate” the enemy.⁴² Genocide was the result of implementing those plans against Ixil, Jakaltek, K’iche and Kekchi Maya, and other Mayan groups living in the highlands. The army took advantage of “the remoteness of the highland villages and the deep-seated ethnic prejudice of the non-Indian population, especially in the urban areas.”⁴³

For Manz “the mass terror” affected the “Ixil triangle” in northern El Quiché the most. This includes the municipalities of Santa Maria Nebaj, San Juan Cotzal and San Gaspar Chajul. The total Ixil triangle population was 47,900 people and this is where the army “applied its counterinsurgency strategy with the greatest coherence.”⁴⁴ Another highly affected area in this same departamento were the Ixcán villages.⁴⁵ In 1982 alone, “at least 69 massacres were carried out in the department of El Quiché, as a result of which at least 22 Indian villages were totally destroyed.”⁴⁶ With very few scholarly works such as *Indian Guatemala* (Frank and Wheaton, 1984), *Gift of the Devil* (Handy, 1984) and *Rigoberta Menchú* (Menchú, R., 1992 [1983]) the world had no idea of the extent of the genocide until the war came to an official end in 1996. Menchú’s brother, mother’s, and father’s deaths are only a microcosm of what occurred in El Quiché. Her brother was captured, tortured, and killed in September 1979; her father died in the burning of the Spanish Embassy in January 1980; and her mother was kidnapped, raped, and murdered in April of that same year.⁴⁷ In a shocking description, Cindy Forster demonstrates the extent

⁴² Sanford, 2003b, 4, cited in Barreno, *In Search of the Indio*, 69.

⁴³ Frank and Wheaton, *Indian Guatemala*, 73.

⁴⁴ Manz, *Refugees of A Hidden War*, 97, 99.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 127

⁴⁶ Frank and Wheaton, *Indian Guatemala*, 76.

⁴⁷ Menchú, *An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, 172-74, 183-87, 195-98.

of the genocide. Entire pages of her book gives voice to those who witnessed the army's cruelty against the Indigenous civilian population, including testimonies from a few deserting soldiers. The Guatemalan soldiers, trained to do so, dismembered bodies with machetes, ate body parts of men, women and babies, castrated alive or dead bodies, raped women and young girls, left dead bodies hanging from trees, and or burned bodies dead or alive.⁴⁸ Many of these acts were accompanied by racist remarks against the victims. During his term as Dictator, President Rios Montt acknowledged in 1983 "we are dismembering [*descuartizando*] women and children." Anthropologist Shelton Davis and journalist Allan Nairn described these atrocities as the "Guatemalan holocaust."⁴⁹

The 'Civil War' (1960-1996) resulted in 200,000 deaths, 45,000 'disappeared.' Two million were internally displaced. Tens of thousands fled into exile; 263 of the 422 massacres countrywide were committed in the Departamento of El Quiché,⁵⁰ according to the Catholic study known as the REHMI (acronym for Recovery of the Historical Memory). The Guatemalan army's actions accounted for 93 per cent of the crimes resulting in more than 190,000 deaths as reported by the United Nations Historical Clarification Commission.⁵¹

Genocide occurred in 205 cases documented by REHMI. Those cases, also described by Cindy Forster, included killing unborn Indigenous babies, by killing the mother and the foetus and the slaying of boys and girls. The army's plan was to "destroy the seeds reported one REHMI informant. Even if the child was one or two-years old all are seeds."⁵² As done in Ixil and K'iche regions, rape and the dismembering of women's bodies was a common practise against the Kekchí people of Cobán.⁵³ In some massacres, churches and schools functioned as "human ovens" to burn people alive.⁵⁴ Planes and helicopters, owned by the oligarchy and large landowners (*finqueros*), bombed communities.⁵⁵ Despite sporadic victories, at the end, the guerrilla groups were unable to

⁴⁸ In Forster, *La Revolución Indígena*, 48, 49, 82, 83, 370, 371, 398, 399, 446, 465, 467, 471, 475,

⁴⁹ In Forster, *La Revolución Indígena*, 400. My translation.

⁵⁰ Ricardo Falla, *Quiché Rebelde: Religious Conversion, Politics and Ethnic Identity in Guatemala* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001), 235-37.

⁵¹ Early, *Maya and the Catholic Cultures in Crisis*, 260.

⁵² REHMI, cited in Barreno, *In search of the indio*, 74.

⁵³ Huet, *Nos Salvó la Sagrada Selva*, 74-7; Manz, *Refugees of a Hidden War*, 92.

⁵⁴ REHMI, cited in Barreno, *In search of the indio*, 75

⁵⁵ In Forster, *La Revolución Indígena*, 322.

arm and protect the Maya population. In the Kekchí people's case, the rebels abandoned those who fled to the jungles.⁵⁶ In Chupol, El Quiché, EGP leaders did not provide guns to Indigenous peoples, as they were not convinced these people were converted to the revolutionary cause.⁵⁷

Victor Montejo, a Jakaltek-Maya scholar, interviewed the former Indigenous soldier Chilin Hultaxh who participated in his own people's repression. Hultaxh and Montejo eventually became targets of the army because the first deserted the army and Montejo for not cooperating with the armed forces. The actions of soldiers like Hultaxh, and those quoted in Forster's book, gave personal context to the 1980s conflict particularly as it affected Jakaltek-Maya of Huehuetenango. Soldiers, especially the feared *Kaibiles* (named after a Mam Maya warrior) tortured, killed and dismembered their Mayan victims' bodies.⁵⁸ Hultaxh testified that dead Indigenous peoples were treated like animals: "Don't bury those dogs, those pigs; they are guerillas. Let the buzzards take care of their fucking bodies." According to Montejo, "This way of [military] thinking shocked the Maya people who were accustomed to burying their dead with rituals and great respect."⁵⁹ Although the war was 15 years old, Montejo thinks 1982 marked the "Darkest Year in Modern Mayan History."⁶⁰

In Early's opinion, the Maya "were misled by theoretical ladino Marxists and helped by some idealistic but military naïve Liberation Catholics, both pastoral workers and Mayan catechists. Therefore, they participated in an undertaking that lacked objective morality, as it lacked military possibility and perhaps political possibility."⁶¹ However, Indigenous survivors, quoted by Forster, argue that the Ladino fighters were the "novices" (*novicios*) amongst people wishing to end centuries of exploitation and abuse.⁶² For Indigenous peoples living in remote northern Guatemala the war meant death, internal

⁵⁶ Huet, *Nos Salvó la Sagrada Selva*, 320-21.

⁵⁷ Carlotta McAllister, C., *Good People: Revolution, Community and Conciencia in a Maya K'iche Village in Guatemala* (PhD Dissertation, John Hopkins University, 2003), 252.

⁵⁸ Victor Montejo, *Voices from Exile: Violence and Survival in Modern Maya History*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 54, 67, 92, 114, 176.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 190.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 52

⁶¹ Early, *Maya and the Catholic Cultures in Crisis*, 392.

⁶² In Forster, *La Revolución Indígena*, 29.

displacement (as those who survived in the jungle under the name of Communities of Population in Resistance or CPR), or exile in Mexico.

Under the banner of nationalism, sovereignty and national security, the Guatemalan state saw northern Indigenous peoples as enemies. It proceeded to eliminate or control them using other Indigenous people.⁶³ One of General Rios Montt's most effective military tactics was to create the para-military Civilian Patrols (PAC). The army commanded the PAC all over Guatemala. In 1982, the peak year of the war and genocide, PAC members reached between 800,000 to 1 million armed men.⁶⁴ The army forcibly recruited Mayan men and boys between the ages of 16 to 60 to serve in these para-military units. Those who resisted were killed or disappeared.⁶⁵ Those who became PAC members or soldiers were brainwashed to see women community leaders as 'subversives' and sexual objects.⁶⁶ Indigenous boys who were taken to army barracks eventually returned to their communities as brainwashed, rejecting their Mayaness, rejecting their previous cultural identity. This was a military tactic for members of PAC and young soldiers "to cross a threshold after which they are unable to return to any role in the community because they would be rejected by their fellow Indians."⁶⁷ In the eyes of the community, these soldiers symbolized the Ladino state and the Ladino community: the cultural 'enemy.' Indigenous soldiers and the PAC carried out the massacres that forced tens of thousands of their own people into exile.

Hundreds of small Mayan villages were destroyed, hundreds of thousands of people were internally displaced and 150,000 fled to Mexico.⁶⁸ On occasion, the Guatemalan army violated Mexican sovereignty to persecute and attack Mayan refugees across the border.⁶⁹ Living in refugee camps represented another challenge for the Maya. Exile was traumatic,

⁶³ Maria Stern, *Naming Security – Constructing Identity: 'Mayan-Women' in Guatemala on the Eve of 'Peace'* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 46-7, 75.

⁶⁴ Steve Bastos and Manuela Camus, *Quebrando el Silencio: Organizaciones del pueblo maya y sus demandas 1986-1992* (Breaking the Silence: Mayan people's organizations and demands 1986-1992) (Guatemala: FLACSO, 1996), 39.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 77.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 80-2; See also Konefal, *For Every Indian Who Falls*, 152. The government admitted that by 1983 more than 1.3 million armed men formed PAC membership.

⁶⁷ Frank and Wheaton, *Indian Guatemala*, 80.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 85. Of these number 46,000 were recognized as refugees by the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and were assisted by the Mexican refugee assistant program (COMAR).

⁶⁹ Montejo, *Voices from Exile: Violence and Survival in Modern Maya History*, 118-19.

despite Mexican authorities' humanitarian record in welcoming non-Indigenous exiles from other countries the Mexican military also attacked refugees and destroyed their Lacandon jungle camps in July 1984.⁷⁰ While some Mexicans, like the Catholic Church, helped the newcomers, others took advantage of them.⁷¹ Some did not want Mayan refugees on their lands or in their schools.⁷² Humiliation and exploitation in Mexico, according to informants, was better than living in Guatemala.⁷³

In the face of these adversities, Mayan communities agreed to work together while in refugee camps. They won the support of the Chiapas Catholic Church, especially Father Samuel Ruiz of the San Cristobal de las Casas parish, the Mexican government and international agencies. They not only organized at the community level. They also created an umbrella organization, the CCPP (*Comisiones Permanentes de Representantes de los Refugiados en México* or the Refugees' Permanent Commissions in Mexico). It became the "official refugee organization of the return [to Guatemala]."⁷⁴ Mayan refugees, officially recognized by the United Nations, reached 46,000 in Mexican refugee camps.⁷⁵ They kept their sense of "community" and traditional way of life in the form of "weaving, communal work, and organization and in developing other types of economic production...they were not completely isolated from the mother culture of their Guatemalan communities."⁷⁶ They also kept their dances and songs, and fabricated new music instruments in the refugee camps. While a few stayed in Mexico or moved to other countries, most refugees' aim was to go back to Guatemala.

Despite the constant army threats and labelled "lazy Indians," guerrilla sympathizers or even subversives, most Mayan refugees returned home in groups.⁷⁷ After witnessing the macabre death of their relatives, the burning of their crops, shacks and animals and after 10 years of exile they returned as a transformed people. Yet they did not give up on their ancient traditions. In fact, keeping their cultural values made their return

⁷⁰ Frank and Wheaton, *Indian Guatemala*, 88.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 108-09, 116, 124.

⁷² *Ibid.* 180.

⁷³ Manz, *Refugees of A Hidden War*, 158-61.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 193.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 1.

⁷⁶ Montejo, *Voices from Exile*, 198.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 222, 234.

possible. They faced a new reality after their exile in Mexico. In most cases their lands were taken by large landowners or poor peasants supported by government programs.⁷⁸

With the end of the war also came the decline of Catholic Action.⁷⁹ Competition increased from other Catholic denominations such as the Charismatic, the ever-growing Protestants, and the emergence of a Pan-Mayan movement. Members of the latter began to cultivate “rural supporters and encouraged the revitalization of shamanism as a pan-community activity.”⁸⁰ Urban, educated Indigenous professionals grouped under the Council of Guatemalan Mayan Organizations (COMG) created in June 1990 led the Maya cultural movement. The main voice of this movement was Kaqchiquel Maya scholar Demetrio Cojtí.⁸¹ Unlike some CUC members, the COMG membership did not participate in the war. CUC membership was in the highlands and the south-coast plantations where most of the military campaigns took place.

Large Indigenous enclaves did not experience the same fate as those described above. Denis and Barbara Tedlock and Garret Cook studied Momostenango in the late 1970s to write their respective books. None of them mentions the ongoing war. The town remained politically loyal to conservative governments. Members of the Momostenango Indigenous elite, like their Quetzaltenango counterparts, even supported the most extreme right-wing political party, the Movement for National Liberation.⁸² The People in Arms Revolutionary Organization (ORPA) attempted to get Momostenango Indigenous people’s support with no success.⁸³ However, some young Momostecans, rural teachers and cooperative activists began to show support for the rebel forces in the form of leaflets and graffiti and two guerrilla cells (*foco guerrillero* in Spanish) based in the rural cantons of Pasajoc and Xequemeya. Against those guerrilla efforts, some urban Momostecans (of K’iche Maya origin) were ready to fight alongside the government.⁸⁴ Rich Ladino, loyal to the government, established a para-military civil patrol (PAC) of 400 Momostecans. The

⁷⁸ Manz, *Refugees of a Hidden War*, 143.

⁷⁹ Early, *Maya and the Catholic Cultures in Crisis*, 272.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 404.

⁸¹ Bastos and Camus, *Quebrando el Silencio*, 99.

⁸² Robert Carmack, *Rebels of Highland Guatemala: The Quiche-Mayas of Momostenango* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 327.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 370.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 373.

PAC proved to be a useful mechanism for the military even in places where there were no battles.

The war ended in December 1996, but racism, social inequalities and religious competition did not cease. The guerrilla forces have all but disappeared and the oligarchy, the political and economic elite, continues to rule Guatemala. As Casaús Arzú argues, the Criollo elite goes into an “oligarchical metamorphosis” when others are in control of government, but rarely ceding power to other forces.⁸⁵ In some respects, she argues the blood-bound oligarchy maintained its hegemonic power over other groups. Therefore, formal democracy, as allowed by the Criollo oligarchy, continued its rocky transition with the military gaining new strengths. Neither the Maya (whether classist or culturalist) nor the Ladino Left controlled the state. As Quemé Chay explains in Chapter 7, Indigenous leaders were coopted by the state. However, as we have discussed, in Guatemala, there cannot be hegemonic domination without Indigenous counter-hegemonic resistance or negotiations.

6.2 Post-war events: The Maya *culturalistas*, the *clasistas*, and the peace process

Christian Democrat Vinicio Cerezo, a civilian, after decades of military rule, became president in January 1986. He and other Central American presidents began efforts to end Guatemala’s Civil War as early as 1987.⁸⁶ Cerezo had to use international support because, internally, he had the opposition of the powerful Criollo oligarchy and the army.⁸⁷ In fact, the army continued its military campaigns in the Ixil Maya area and repeatedly threatened Cerezo with a *coup d’état*. The next president, Jorge Serrano, continued with the “Total Peace” efforts between the Guatemalan government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG).

⁸⁵ Marta Elena Casaús Arzú, *Guatemala: linaje y racismo* (Guatemala: lineage and racism) (F&G editores: Guatemala, 2007), 6.

⁸⁶ Editorial Piedra Santa, *Guatemala Acuerdos de Paz Para Todos: Con sugerencias didácticas para su aprendizaje y vivencia* (Guatemala: Editorial Piedra Santa, 2007), 8. The meetings and negotiations took place in Madrid, Spain (1987); Oslo, Norway (1987); Ottawa, Canada and Quito, Ecuador (1990); Puebla, Mexico (1990); Querétaro, Mexico (1991). The 12 accords were agreed between 1994 and 1996 in Mexico and finally signed in Guatemala City in December 1996.

⁸⁷ Bastos and Camus, *Quebrando el Silencio*, 44, 50-1.

The 1990s peace negotiations were a catalyst for bringing Mayan demands to public light stirring controversies and stimulating publications on Indigenous subjects. The left/right wing debate allowed Mayan intellectuals, from both classists and culturalists, to take part in Guatemala's post-war dialogue. Using the press or other publications, the culturalists were demanding ethno-cultural solutions as in their view "the Maya were dominated by a dominant group – the Ladino."⁸⁸ The classists wanted socio-economical solutions, including human rights, affecting Indigenous peoples in the war zones. However, both sides demanded to be involved in the Guatemalan peace process. Their participation was part of the civil society inclusion in the negotiations.⁸⁹

Post-war publications and press columns allowed ideological debates not observed before. The *culturalistas* (culturalist or Maya specific) focused on Mayan rights; they were opposed by Ladino *clasistas* (classists or class-focused) who criticized the former for being mostly urban and elitist Indians. Using the press, *culturalistas* criticized the Left and vice versa. Cojtí referred to the Ladino Left as, following Guzman Bockler's thinking, "colonial leftists." He praised the Indigenous *clasistas* for their "heroic" armed struggle against the government but criticized them for "manipulating the Indigenous issue." He pointed out to the 1991 Quetzaltenango's Second Gathering of the "500 Years of Indigenous and Popular Resistance" when Indigenous representatives were overpowered by "leftist Ladino" and Latin American Marxist-Leninists. This domination was evident during the discussions and at the closing anti-imperialist march when tens of thousands of rural Indigenous people marched through the streets of Quetzaltenango.⁹⁰ At the end of the gathering, feeling that the "ethnic" question was not discussed and their members discriminated, COMG left the national coordination body and with other Indigenous groups of the continent created the *Coordinadora de Organizaciones y Naciones Indígenas del Continente* –CONIC- (Indigenous Nations and Organizations Continental Coordinating Body).⁹¹

In 1996, *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala* was published. It was the same year the Guatemalan Civil War came to an end. It was no coincidence that Guatemalan Mayan and non-Mayan scholars, mostly American, saw a window of opportunity. They expressed

⁸⁸ Ibid. 173.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 52.

⁹⁰ Warren, *Indigenous Movements and their Critics*, 35.

⁹¹ Bastos and Camus, *Quebrando el Silencio*, 171-72.

views not previously tolerated during the war. Guatemala's most prominent Mayanist scholar, Demetrio Cojtí, wrote "The Politics of Maya Rein vindication." He cited the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to call the Maya people nations "...entitled to certain rights, including the right to self-determination."⁹² After stating that the Mayan nations are entitled to autonomy and human rights he lists "The Immediate Demands of the Mayan People [within the Guatemalan State]." His demands go from very basic needs to utopian political requests. For example, he demanded, that since Maya people constitute 60 per-cent of the national population, they should be "60 per cent of the Congressional representatives and 60 per cent of those representing Guatemala in international organizations."⁹³ COMG, the national umbrella Maya organization, endorsed Cojtí's position.⁹⁴

One of the leading voices against Cojtí and the culturalists or "Maya fundamentalism" was Mario Roberto Morales. He called Mayanists "elitists." Further, he said this elite "do not represent the masses of impoverished "indios" because they are far removed from community leaders."⁹⁵ He also called Pan-Mayanism a commodity for consumption, "a product for the academic funder's market, on the one hand, and on the other, a basis for the game of democracy and for the tourist market."⁹⁶

Other Indigenous scholars, such as Victor Montejo, began to express a centrist position. For instance, in reviewing Montejo's *El Q'anil*, Gabriel Estrada says, "[*El Q'anil*] represents a return to Maya cultural movement separate from the popular leftist context" represented by Rigoberta Menchú's book (*I, Rigoberta Menchú...*). He argues, the editor, Elisabeth Burgos, to "change her story," coerced Menchú. On the other hand, for Montejo, David Stoll's critique of Menchú's book is used by some right-wing Americans and Guatemalans to "discount all verified reports of the genocidal attempts to demolish Mayan communities."⁹⁷

⁹² Demetrio Cojtí, "The Politics of Maya Rein vindication," in *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala*, ed. Edward Fischer and Brown R. McKenna, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 27.

⁹³ Ibid. 33.

⁹⁴ Bastos and Camus, *Quebrando el Silencio*, 156.

⁹⁵ Ibid. 41.

⁹⁶ Ibid. 43.

⁹⁷ Gabriel Estrada, "Victor Montejo's El Q'anil Man of Lightning and Maya Cultural Movements." *Latin American Indian Literature Journal: A Review of American Indian Texts and Studies* (California State University, Long Beach. Vol. 24 No. 2, Fall 2008), 200.

In the back and forth name-calling between leftists and Mayanists, studies and discussion of Mayan spiritual issues and criticism of Christianity began to appear. Enrique Sam Colop's "The Discourse of Concealment and 1992," albeit not an in-depth study, was critical of Guatemala's politicians and scholars' discourses. Colop criticized scholars such as Octavio Paz and Severo Martínez Peláez for their views of Indigenous peoples as inferior and the Spaniards as superior human beings.⁹⁸ Even the *Chilam Balam* 'prophecies' are challenged by Colop. He did not give credit to the notion that Indigenous peoples referred to the Spaniards as "gods." Instead, and Colop knew several Indigenous languages, he argued that Spaniards were called "agents of misery" and Jesus Christ as one of the "dreaded Lords of death."⁹⁹ Similarly, he criticized those who have attempted to delegitimize the *Popol Wuh* as an Indigenous creation by calling it a Mestizo (mixed blood people) literary production.¹⁰⁰

The 1990s debates and publications showed Indigenous participation in civil-society organizations such as the Mutual Group of the Disappeared (GAM), The National Widows Organizations (CONAVIGUA), and *Runujel Junam*, an organization supporting to disarm and remove PAC from Indigenous communities. It also confirmed the presence of a movement seeking cultural rights and autonomy. After denouncing both the government and the URNG for not having Indigenous negotiators nor including Indigenous rights as part of the peace process,¹⁰¹ both ideological Indigenous forces, which broke relations in 1991, had an indirect participation in achieving the 1995 "Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples," negotiated in Mexico, as part of the final peace agreement.

The final Indigenous Rights accord is composed of six articles. Each article contains specific provisions. Consequently, Accord 5 - The Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples - contains the "Cultural Rights" to speak Indigenous languages, to bear personal Indigenous names, the right to protect sacred places, the right to wear traditional outfits (*trajes*), it acknowledges Maya science and technology, calls for education reform,

⁹⁸ Enrique Sam Colop, "The Discourse of Concealment and 1992," in *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala*, ed. Edward Fischer and Brown R. McKenna, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 107.

⁹⁹ Ibid. 108.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 110

¹⁰¹ Bastos and Camus, *Quebrando el Silencio*, 176.

access to Indigenous mass media, and the right to practice Maya spirituality. More specifically, it calls for the respect for Indigenous spiritual guides and their sacred places.¹⁰²

Indigenous representatives who were part of the *mesas* or *comisiones* (joint commissions) were grouped under the *Coordinadora de Sectores de la Sociedad Civil* (Civil Society Coordinating Group).¹⁰³ They, more specifically Indigenous intellectuals like Cojtí and Quemé Chay, drafted the document but they did not sign it.¹⁰⁴ URNG and government representatives gathered in Mexico did.

Charles Hale calls the 1995 agreement on Indigenous rights as “the most fundamental of the seven [sic] accords.”¹⁰⁵ In its preamble, the agreement calls for Guatemalan society to acknowledge the historical “racial discrimination” and encourages everyone to eliminate it. The specific rights for Maya people included:

language, Mayan religious rights, Maya spirituality, the use of their traditional outfits, education, respect for Indigenous traditional law [*ley consuetudinaria*] to solve internal community affairs, and those traditional lands used for subsistence and spiritual activities, all within the broadest definition of Guatemala as a “multicultural, multi-ethnic and multilingual” nation.¹⁰⁶

In Hale’s view these rights were granted under a “orthodox neoliberal” government, led by right-wing politician Alvaro Arzú, that opposed labour and social-welfare laws while supporting capitalist projects. In other words, the Indigenous agreement represented the “most trivial and token acknowledgment of the Maya” that did not modify the economic and political power of the dominant political and economic classes.¹⁰⁷ Indigenous peoples, since then, became dominated by a neoliberal system in which the rights they achieved did not threaten the capitalist relations prevailing in Guatemala. Post-war Indigenous efforts to obtain more rights officially ended during a national referendum in 1999.¹⁰⁸ As Quemé Chay explains in the second part of this study, most Indigenous bureaucrats or leaders who

¹⁰² Editorial Piedra Santa, *Guatemala Acuerdos de Paz Para Todos*, 34-8.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* 52.

¹⁰⁴ Santiago Bastos, “Derechos Indígenas y el proceso de paz: los lastres irresueltos del conflicto” *Revista: Harvard Review of Latin America* (David Rockefeller Center: Harvard University), Last modified November 24, 2019 <https://revista.drclas.harvard.edu/book/derechos-indigenas-y-el-proceso-de-paz-spanish-version>

¹⁰⁵ Charles Hale, *Más que un indio: Ambivalencia racial y multiculturalismo neoliberal en Guatemala* (More than an Indian: Racial ambivalence and neoliberal multiculturalism in Guatemala) (Guatemala City: AVANSCO, 2007), 97. The final agreement included 12 not seven accords as Hale wrote.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* 98.

¹⁰⁸ Bastos, “Derechos Indígenas y el proceso de paz: los lastres irresueltos del conflicto.”

ended up working for the government were coopted by it or they simply discontinued their activism. What the peace negotiators did not envision was the impact the peace process, the accord on Indigenous rights, and the final agreement had on the practice of Maya spirituality as the Ajq'ijab' discussed in Chapter 7.

6.3 Mayan women as deities, activists, *guerrilleras*, and spiritual guides

For the peasant [Indigenous] majority, at the heart of their [revolutionary] struggle was land. Land was seen a feminine principle.¹⁰⁹

With very few exceptions, the role of women in pre-colonial and colonial Guatemala has not been studied in-depth. In precolonial Guatemala, especially in the *Popol Wuh* narratives, women appear as divinities and part of the creation stories. During colonialism, women were targets of the Spanish Inquisition. In more recent times rural Indigenous women, who were community leaders, became a threat to “national security” when many of them joined the revolutionary war in the 1980s. Mayan women were killed and controlled not only by a violent Guatemalan state but were also discriminated against by males. It is within that role of discrimination that women not only fought back, they maintained their Maya identity and in the process preserved and reproduced culture.

When the spiritual beings, Feathered Serpent and the Maker and Modeler gather to discuss the creation of the four human couples, a grandmother, Ixmucane, and a grandfather, Ixpiyacoc, are tasked with the enterprise. From pre-classic, classic, post-classic, colonial and contemporary times, Mayan women appear repeatedly: as deities, as makers, creators of life, and then as enemies of the state, as activists and lately as spiritual guides. Molesky-Poz says that in the *Popol Wuh*

the nature of the Creator is an enlightened being, a totality in duality, with multiple manifestations: great knower and great thinkers in their being; Mother and Father: *Alom K'ajolom*, the Bearer and the Begetter; *Bitol Tz'akol*, the Maker, the Modeler, who amass and give form to materials that make up the Earth, plants, animals and humans.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Forster, *La Revolución Indígena*, 354.

¹¹⁰ Molesky-Poz, “Mayan Spirituality (Guatemala Highlands),” in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron Taylor (Continuum, 2008), 1063.

Within the Tzolkin there is a female symbol, Ixchel (the moon deity), also mentioned in the *Popol Wuh*. For Paxton, the Tzolkin patron, Ixchel, is the Moon Goddess.¹¹¹ Other *Popol Wuh* female deities are Ixkik (Blood Moon) and Ixmucane (Little Jaguar Sun or Full Moon). They are credited with giving life to the sun.¹¹² The latter is the mother of Hun Hun Ahpu (the old sun). The former, Ixkik, becomes pregnant by Hun Hun Ahpu when he spat saliva into her hand palms. She gives life to Hun Ahpu (the new sun) and Xbalanque. Grandmother Ixmucane and her husband Ixpiyacoc are the “Ajq’ijab” who also created the first K’iche Mayan people out of corn. They are Balam Akab and his wife Kaha Paluna; Balam Kitze and his wife Chomija; Mahukutah and his wife Tzunumha; and Iki Balam and his wife Kakishaha.¹¹³ The belief in these mystical beings as the first humans, four men and four women, on earth did not change when the Spaniards arrived. They continue to be mentioned during the current ceremonies.

With its Christian morals and actions, the Spanish inquisition wanted to eradicate ‘heresy’ and any other form of non-Christian worship.¹¹⁴ Indigenous women were the main targets. After Iximche, former capital city of the Cakchiquel, the Spaniards moved to their new settlement. The city of Santiago (today Antigua Guatemala) began to be built in 1541. Martha Few’s book gives a unique perspective about gender power struggles in Santiago de los Caballeros during 1680-99. Santiago de los Caballeros was the capital city of a territory, which included southern Mexico and all Central America.

The Spanish population was fearful of an uprising as they soon became a minority in a multi-ethnic city which, by the end of the late seventeenth century, had a population of 39,000 people. Relatives, religious leaders, authorities and elite Spanish women besieged non-Spanish women living in the city suspected of sorcery. Accusations against Mulatto (mix of Spanish and Africa female slaves) and Indigenous sorcerers varied from making spells, so males would do female chores,¹¹⁵ to serving potions for unbridled

¹¹¹ Paxton, *The Cosmos of the Yucatec Maya*, 49.

¹¹² *Ibid.* 55-6.

¹¹³ Adrián Inés Chávez, *Pop Wuj: Poema Mito-histórico Ki-ché* (Pop-Wuj: Mythical Historical Ki-ché Poem) (Quetzaltenango, Guatemala: TIMACH, 1997 [1970]), 67. My translation.

¹¹⁴ Martha Few, *Women who Live Evil Lives: Gender, Religion, and the Politics of Power in Colonial Guatemala* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010), 10.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* 32-5, 62.

sexuality to elite Spanish women,¹¹⁶ to attacking Catholic priests¹¹⁷ or to enchanting the authorities.¹¹⁸ The human body, Few says, was the battleground for sorcery. The ruling classes also sought the “control of women’s bodies and their sexuality, a primary focus of colonial authority and power. This was in part achieved through the threat of sexual violence.”¹¹⁹

Among the ‘women who lived evil lives’ in Santiago de los Caballeros (today Antigua Guatemala) were women who, no matter what they argued in their defense to the inquisitors, were painted with the same witch or sorcerer’s brush. Among them were midwives, healers and herbalists. They attracted respect from their communities but mistrust from the colonial rulers, who considered these women as an affront to their authority. These women were “brokers of social relations in community life, consulted by men and women from all social and ethnic groups and paid for their services.”¹²⁰ Since healing was the source for their economic emancipation, they attracted the envy of other women. Some would go to great lengths to see these unconventional women, the ‘sorcerers,’ in jail.¹²¹

Apart from Martha Few’s research, studies about Indigenous women’s roles during colonialism are scarce. However, John Early mentions some of the internal problems facing the Maya, especially women. Problems included intergenerational conflicts; the high costs of the rituals, “the ostentations abundance of candles, incense, food, music, dances, and alcoholic drinks”; witchcraft; alcohol abuse; women’s subordination;¹²² malnutrition, low life expectancy, high mortality rates and other pressures from early globalization and Ladino dispossession of their lands.¹²³

During Guatemala’s Civil War, Ixil, Mam, Kaqchiquel, K’iche Maya women, and peasant women from other Indigenous groups, were involved in the armed struggle. The war empowered and affected them in different ways. Despite the machismo and physical abuse from their husbands or disapproval from relatives and neighbors, women joined the

¹¹⁶ Ibid. 39.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 47-8, 57.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 35-6.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 44.

¹²⁰ Ibid. 130.

¹²¹ Ibid. 102, 104.

¹²² Early, *Maya and the Catholic Cultures in Crisis*, 63-69.

¹²³ Ibid., 74-80

guerrilla groups, especially the EGP. Negative and racist comments about their gender, language, *trajes* (traditional outfits), and as exploited low-class workers empowered them to fight alongside men. They overcame the fear of dying and risked their lives as organizers in the large sugar and coffee plantations (*fincas*), and as fighters. Some of them achieved the rank of guerrilla commanders (*comandante*). It was in the guerrilla camps where these “women achieved their highest dignity in partnership with men.”¹²⁴

The Guatemalan state, with the support of the US government, did not see gender when they saw rural Indigenous peoples, and especially guerrilla fighters, as enemies. Under the banner of nationalism, sovereignty and national security, it proceeded to eliminate or control them.¹²⁵ Within that context, national security became a source of insecurity for Mayan women. Armed and non-armed Indigenous women saw the state as a threat to their lives and cultures.¹²⁶ The military apparatus attempted to destroy not only communities and families but also the cultural fabric of Mayan people in the most macabre of ways using bacteriological weapons during the scorched earth campaign.¹²⁷ While thousands joined the guerrilla forces, as Forster describes, others used their organizations to analyze their social position as poor people, as exploited workers in large plantations, as landless people and as women.¹²⁸ Headed by Rosalina Tuyuc, one of the most active women led organizations in the 1980s and 1990s, despite constant army harassment, was CONAVIGUA, the National Widows Council. Other influential women include Rigoberta Menchú, the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize winner and Otilia Lux Cotí, a member of the Historical Clarification Commission tasked with investigating human rights abuses during the Civil War.

The war showed Mayan women as active participants playing different roles. They used their culture and its markers as the axis to organize and use arms, despite the movement’s domination by males. Increasingly, women became proud of their Mayaness, their languages, their *trajes* (traditional clothing), codes of behavior, customs, and tradition, including spirituality. Forster argues

¹²⁴ Forster, *La Revolución Indígena*, 380. My translation.

¹²⁵ Stern, *Naming Security – Constructing Identity*, 46-7, 75.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* 40, 64.

¹²⁷ Forster, *La Revolución Indígena*, 294.

¹²⁸ Stern, *Naming Security – Constructing Identity*, 146-156.

At the national level, the process to re-value Maya identity could have (*hubiera*) emerged without the genocide period, but the dictators' and their allies' intense racial hate [for Indigenous people] ensured, with a terrible irony, a return to Indigenous identity and a defeat for lineal mestizaje.¹²⁹

Forster mentions the case of one Indigenous girl (*niña*), who became a Mayan priest (*sacerdotisa* Maya), but also a social organizer in the factories (*maquilas*) later in life.¹³⁰ Expressions of culture, social consciousness, and political maturity are in many of these women's struggles. They organized even if the state or other para-military apparatus threatened their security. Rosa, one of Stern's informants says, "If you organize, you are considered bad, if you don't the same. It's better to organize."¹³¹ Despite 36 years of war and 20 years of 'peace', not much has changed for Mayan women. They face discrimination, exploitation and abuse, the triple threats to their security.

With the reemergence of Maya spirituality, women became involved in this Pan-Maya movement. As Molesky-Poz found, men, women and gay people can become Timekeepers. They, in turn, will train others. Both Barbara Tedlock and Thomas Hart refer to the trainers as "mother-father" (*Chuchkajawib*) or "*Nantat*" respectively.¹³² In fact, Barbara Tedlock, an American female scholar, became an Ajq'ij and was treated as any other local person. Some of the Molesky-Poz's informants were female. She learned how to interpret the 20 symbols of the sacred calendar from Roberto-Poz and María Del Carmen Tuy.

Conclusion

Racism was not the reason for war in Guatemala, as Ricardo Falla recounts in his book *Massacres in the Jungle* (1994).¹³³ However, it became an integral part of it when Indigenous peoples, particularly in El Quiché Departamento, joined or were suspected of supporting the revolutionary groups. The region's Indigenous peoples, in the military and oligarchy's view, were supposed to be child-like subjects of the state. Thus, the

¹²⁹ Forster, *La Revolución Indígena*, 57. My translation.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* 58.

¹³¹ Stern, *Naming Security – Constructing Identity*, 128.

¹³² Barbara Tedlock, *Time and the Highland Maya* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982) 35.

¹³³ Cited in Barreno, *In search of the Indio*, 69.

involvement of Indigenous fighters, and their Church leaders, in guerrilla organizations was useful to justify genocide against four different rural Mayan groups. Indigenous peoples in large urban centers like Quetzaltenango, except a few youths who joined the rebel forces, did not join the armed struggle. As found by Forster, the ORPA spared Quetzaltenango for “logistical” reasons.

Rigoberta Menchú and Montejo describe the war, genocide, exile and people’s return to their homeland. Montejo also shows how the war drove cultural disruption, adaptation and transformation of the Mayan people. Stern gives a lengthy theoretical discussion of security and insecurity because it is within that dichotomy that Guatemala operated during the Civil War: what was security for the state, which saw itself as a sovereign threatened by foreign influences, became insecurity for those their State saw as a threat.¹³⁴ She stated “The concept of security bears with it ‘insecurity’...Simply, if one were totally ‘secure’, then one would not need security.”¹³⁵ Drawing from Hansen (2000), Stern questions the discourse of ‘national security’ reflecting elites’ interests and not the masses who have to circumscribe to the state terror it justified.¹³⁶ Forster demonstrates, from Indigenous peoples own narratives and guerrilla sources, the extent of state terrorism. The Guatemalan armed forces, with American and Israeli financial, intelligence, and technological support, carried out the Guatemalan genocide.¹³⁷

When the army targeted Indigenous peoples, as reported by the Human Rights office of the Guatemalan Catholic Church, the armed forces dehumanized its victims (as the Menchú family experienced). Soldiers killed the elderly (the keepers of the culture), women (the creators of life), and children and babies (the seed of the culture). The army justified genocide by labelling the people’s collectivist organizations as communists.¹³⁸

Re-enacting conquest, the military used Indigenous soldiers to terrorize their own people, destroy and burn their homes and crops. The para-military militias known as PAC, acted with contempt and abuse toward common people, especially women. The army’s elite unit known as the *Kaibiles* burned people alive, including children, and dumped their

¹³⁴ Stern, *Naming Security – Constructing Identity*, 9, 17, 18, 25-8.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* 10.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* 22.

¹³⁷ Forster, *La Revolución Indígena*, 41, 50, 73, 85, 106, 107, 137, 145.

¹³⁸ Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala, *Guatemala, Nunca Más* (Donostia [Spain]: Tercera Prensa-Hirugarren Prentsa S.L.), 1998, 77. See also Forster, *La Revolución Indígena*, 43.

bodies in pits. Under the Rios Montt regime the formula 30/70 meant to eliminate 30 percent of the Indigenous population living where guerrilla groups were active.¹³⁹

Destruction of communities also meant the destruction of Catholic and Mayan religious places of prayer.¹⁴⁰ Out of fear, many people joined new religions, especially the Protestants. Comparable to conquest, the only option to practice Mayan ceremonies (and Catholic services), among the Kekchi people, was to flee to the jungles. This is the case of the Verapaz populations in resistance. They continued their *mayejak* (Maya ceremony) using *pom*, *ocote* and candles.¹⁴¹ When people were not able to find more of these elements they kept praying. Praying to the *Ajaw* (the Creator) was an essential act in the darkest of times.

Analogous to the refugees in Mexico, the Kekchi communities in resistance, after years of surviving army bombardments, the burning of their crops and starvation, decided to return to Cobán beginning in 1983. However, when some guerrilla individuals knew of the people's decision to return, they killed Indigenous leaders.¹⁴² When people began to return the army killed some of their leaders.¹⁴³ This situation continued until 1988 when the last group returned to Cobán. The main sanctuary for a few people was Cobán Catholic Church.¹⁴⁴ Most ended up in "model villages" funded by American Protestant sects.

The end of the war and 20 years of 'peace' have not meant much for Maya people, especially for women and northwest rural Maya. As discussed in this dissertation's second part, in the Maya culturalist leaders' efforts to learn how to run government, the government coopted them. The *clasistas* versus the *culturalistas* debate has all but disappeared. Indigenous newspaper columnists such as Irma Alicia Velasquez and Quemé Chay focus mostly on social Indigenous issues. After a search, I have not found any columnists currently demanding Maya autonomy.

While the *Popol Wuh* teaches that among spiritual mystical figures (the Alom K'ajolom and Tz'akol Bitol), the maker Ixmucane, the hero twins' mother, Ixquic, include females they do not appear in past or current spiritual leadership positions. Most rural Maya

¹³⁹ Forster, *La Revolución Indígena*, 414.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. 79

¹⁴¹ Huet, *Nos Salvó la Sagrada Selva*, 103-04.

¹⁴² Ibid. 170-71.

¹⁴³ Ibid. 179.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. 187-94

and women continue to be discriminated, exploited, abused, yet their organizing also continues in the post-war era. Despite this machismo Mayan women are becoming Ajq'ijab'. As this writer observed in the 1980s in Quetzaltenango, women were becoming spiritual guides in similar numbers as men. The peace process only accelerated their organic participation in joining other Ajq'ijab'. However, Mayan women still struggle to become leaders in the male dominated Mayan spirituality organizations. Of all the 'national' Ajq'ijab' groups Morales Sic identified (2007) none had a woman leader. Of all the women Ajq'ijab' interviewed for this work none occupied a spiritual leadership position.

Chapter 7: Quetzaltenango and the Ajq'ijab'

Space is as important as the events and time that led to design this study. Before introducing the Ajq'ijab' and letting their voices tell their experiences, this chapter describes the origins and history of Quetzaltenango. This is one of the cities, where Maya traditions persisted, adapted, and survived. Borrowing Renée Green analogy of a stairwell, Mayan culture in Quetzaltenango, including spirituality, was and remains in a “liminal space.”¹ Whereas they are constantly changing and adapting, they are not located at a polarized inflexible point. In this chapter the Quetzaltenango Ajq'ijab' expressed their views about Maya spirituality, the reasons and period they decided to become spiritual guides, the situation of their practice in the 1980s and the changes that are occurring to their belief system since the 1990s when the peace negotiations were underway.

This chapter also includes accounts from two non-spiritual guides who interact, directly (Ixchel) and indirectly (Quemé Chay), with the traditional and the non-government organization (NGO) trained Ajq'ijab'. As the literature shows, Maya spiritualism survived colonialism and the Civil War. For the most part, those who kept the calendar and the ceremonial fire active for almost 500 years were nameless people. With the exception of Ted and Barbara Tedlock, who mention Don Andres Xiloj as their mentor in Momostenango in the late 1970s, most scholars do not name people who practiced Mayan ceremonies before the 1980s.

Each individual possesses his or her belief about Maya spirituality. This chapter describes the most salient information they provided to me. As the focus of my original enquiry, most of the traditional Ajq'ijab' recalled personal experiences during the Civil War and their resilience to keep practicing their ceremonies in secret spaces. They agree that the 1990s cultural renaissance, but more especially the peace negotiation process, was the main reason for the resurgence of their belief system allowing the K'iche Maya Ajq'ijab' to travel to other regions, visit and learn from colleagues from other Mayan groups. Categories not originally part of my objectives are included in this chapter because they reflect the importance such matters have for the participants. These categories include the effects of the 1996 Peace Agreement in the cultural renaissance and the subsequent

¹ Cited in Bhabha, *the location of culture*, 4.

commodification of their ceremonies and the imitation of other religions. Using their ceremonies for token and political gain is forcing some spiritual leaders to limit their public participation when they feel used by politicians of all ethnic backgrounds. They also expressed opinions about their role in local politics and the difficulties they face (i.e., petty crime) when going to the altars in the mountains. These social conditions are forcing them to seek a new space to continue their ceremonies.

7.1 Historical and contemporary Xelaju or Quetzaltenango

Quetzaltenango was called *Culaja* (pronounced Kool-aha) when the Mam Maya lived there until the 1200s. Then the K'iche Maya renamed it She-Lajuj-Noj (in English it means Under the Ten Wisdoms).² The K'iche short name is Xelaju, or colloquially, Xela. The Nahuatl conquerors renamed it Quetzaltenango (the Quetzal's wall) in 1524. The city is located south of Gumarcaaj, the pre-colonial capital city of the K'iche, and 200 kilometers west of modern Guatemala City. At the time of the 1524 conquest, Xelaju was the "principal center for the rich and [was] heavily populated."³ This was not Tenochtitlan, in both size and wealth, but it was the main target to conquer south of the Aztec territory. Different from other conquered cities, however, there are no pre-colonial ruins to show the size of this K'iche commercial centre. The only evidence of this ancient civilization is its people, especially the Indigenous caciques or elites, and the *maceguales* (the commoners). Both groups played central roles in the colonial and modern history of Guatemala due to their relations of production.

Scholars like Carmack and Fox have attempted to find pre-conquest remains of the city, but their efforts have been fruitless. No evidence has been found about whether the city suffered the same destruction as Gumarcaaj and Tenochtitlan (i.e., destroyed by the conquistadors). One possible explanation of its destruction is in the *Kaqchiquel Annals* that

² Under the Ten Wisdoms refers to the city's Nawal. *Noj* means Wisdom and is one of the calendar symbols. In the Maya worldview, everything has a *Nawal*.

³ Robert Carmack, *Rebels of Highland Guatemala: The Quiche-Mayas of Momostenango* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 168.

says the city was destroyed on December 24, 1571 by the explosion of a nearby volcano.⁴ This natural phenomenon occurred almost 50 years after the arrival of the Spanish and Nahua conquistadors. After conquest, the city remained inhabited by the K'iche and micro-ruled by the new Indigenous Dons. In 1689, the city had only 150 Spanish/Ladino inhabitants and 2,500 K'iche. In 1770, the Spanish/Ladino population grew 10-fold to 1,539 and the K'iche counted for 2,589. The K'iche population stagnation was due to “mix weddings... immigration...or by becoming Ladino.” To be Spanish or Ladino freed them of forced labour and paying taxes.⁵

It was in Quetzaltenango where Carmack claims the “Native Calendars” were found in 1770. Carmack states: “Clandestinely, many aspects of the aboriginal calendar system continued to be used in Guatemala during the colonial period and even in modern times.”⁶ The first calendar is a “365-day solar cycle, correlated with the Christian calendar for the year 1685.” Carmack mentions three other calendars and among them is the “260-day divinatory calendar... [where] good, bad and mixed fates are given in Quiche glosses [brief explanations in K'iche] ...” Carmack deduces that these calendars were transcribed in 1722, were kept secret, and given to Catholic priest Cortes y Larraz in 1770. Further, he says, “The transcriptions must have been made by educated members of the cacique class at Quetzaltenango; Christians still steeped in Quiche traditions.”⁷

The same year, 1770, that the calendar was given to Cortes y Larraz, 21 K'iche and eight Ladino Catholic associations known as *cofradías* co-existed in Quetzaltenango. Member fees sustained the K'iche associations. In return, the *cofradía* “covered the funeral expenses of the membership, charity for the poor, mass services for the death, candles and incense, as well as food, drinks, and music for their annual fiesta.”⁸ By this time, Catholic and Indigenous traditions were part of Indigenous life and the Ladino began organizing their own *cofradías*.

⁴ Adrián Recinos, *Anales de los Kaqchiqueles, Memorial de Sololá, Anales de los Kaqchiqueles: Título de los Señores de Totonicapán* (The Sololá Memoirs, the Kaqchiquel Annals: The Lords of Totonicapán Papers) (Guatemala: Editorial Piedra Santa, 2007), 122.

⁵ Greg Grandin, G., *La Sangre de Guatemala: Raza y nación en Quetzaltenango 1750-1954* (The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation [in Quetzaltenango]) (Guatemala: Ciudad Universitaria, 2007), 81-2. My translation.

⁶ Robert Carmack, *Quichean Civilization: The Ethnohistoric, Ethnographic, and Archaeological Sources* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), 164.

⁷ Ibid. 167.

⁸ Grandin, *La Sangre de Guatemala*, 52. My translation.

According to Greg Grandin, until 1806, when the first Spanish council (pre-municipality) was created, Quetzaltenango remained a *pueblo de indios* (an Indian republic) where *principales* (principals or headmen) ruled their own people, the *maceguales*, by collecting taxes and administering their labour.⁹ Before and during independence from Spain, Quetzaltenango was hit by smallpox epidemics in 1815 and 1826 and a cholera epidemic in 1837. These epidemics affected the K'iche the most.¹⁰ Associating cholera with Indigenous people's lack of hygiene "gave the Ladinos an opportunity to consolidate their identity and promote that identity as universal."¹¹

Combined with the weakening of the central Conservative Criollo government, the Liberal Ladino of Quetzaltenango went so far as to declare independence from Guatemala in February 1838. The new leaders named the new Central American country, Los Altos (the Highlands State).¹² The local Indigenous elites, and highland communities, did not support the declaration. Instead, they supported conservative leader Rafael Carrera. After retaking the city, he executed the Ladino leadership and returned Los Altos to Guatemala two years later.¹³ Carrera restored Indigenous autonomy but under Conservative government domination. In 1871, the Liberals, under General Justo Rufino Barrios, took control of the state from the Conservatives and a dark period for Indigenous peoples began. General Barrios brought back segregation policies against Indigenous peoples and provided more power to Ladinos.¹⁴ A large Barrios statue still dominates Quetzaltenango's central park honoring him and his Liberal reforms.

In 1926, Wallace Thompson called Quetzaltenango "the largest indian city in the world...with a unique atmosphere, thousands of indians live here in brick and adobe houses, they use western clothing and, yet the city streets are of a pre-Hispanic Indigenous origin."¹⁵ Quetzaltenango was also the cradle of Guatemalan Ladino intellectuals educated in the national public San Carlos University. Together with Guatemalan and other Central

⁹ Ibid. 101. My translation.

¹⁰ Ibid. 142. My translation.

¹¹ Ibid. 135. My translation.

¹² Ibid. 145. My translation.

¹³ Ibid. 147-48. My translation;

¹⁴ Arturo Taracena Arriola, "From Assimilation to Segregation: Guatemala, 1800-1944," Part II- Racialization in the State in the Long Nineteenth Century, in *Histories of Race and Racism: The Andes and Mesoamerica from Colonial Times to the Present*, ed. Laura Moskowitz (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 102.

¹⁵ Cited in Grandin, *La sangre de Guatemala*, 37. My translation.

American scholars, they sought a solution to the “Indian problem” or ‘*degeneración*’ in the 1920s. Eugenics (intermarriage with Europeans) was a temporary fad, but racism endured. Despite the systemic racism, the local K’iche Maya became divided in modern social classes. The elite K’iche Maya remained a strong economic force in the city.

Whatever the local Indigenous people’s social status, Quetzaltenango “offered greater educational opportunities to area Mayans than were available in most part of the highlands.”¹⁶ Irma Alicia Velasquez’s class analysis of Quetzaltenango’s K’iche Maya middle class and petty bourgeois families is, in some respects, a modern continuation of Grandin’s findings about the city. She divides the K’iche into three subgroups. The first subgroup seeks to increase its wealth and is not interested in the social situation of most Maya. They tend to support or belong to right wing parties, including the anti-communist party that overthrew President Jacobo Arbenz Guzman in 1954.¹⁷

The second subgroup, on the contrary, sees itself as part of a pan-Maya alliance. Some of the early culturalist leaders came from this subgroup. Although some of these leaders had talks with CUC and EGP member Emeterio Toj Medrano, as discussed by Konefal, they did not embrace the armed class struggle. Separate from these discussions, other local civilians joined ORPA (People in Arms Revolutionary Organization). According to the GNIB, the ORPA “attracted the support of many [intellectual] civilians” in Quetzaltenango but the city was “protected as a [ORPA] logistics site and thus was not a place chosen for military operations.”¹⁸ A few young Indigenous people, predominantly university students, joined the revolutionary movement in the 1980s. The army killed or abducted university students suspected of having leftist ideas. “Disappeared” Indigenous and Ladino youth, were never seen again.¹⁹

One of the second subgroup’s strategies was to achieve political representation in Quetzaltenango and compete against the Ladino people who controlled the city municipal power. As a result, they created the political group Xel-Ju. This political body, as part of the National Council of Indigenous Organizations (COMG), hosted the Second Gathering

¹⁶ Betsy Konefal, *For Every Indio Who Falls: A History of Maya Activism in Guatemala, 1960-1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010), 58.

¹⁷ Irma Alicia Velázquez Nimatuj, *La Pequeña Burguesía Indígena Comercial de Guatemala*, (The Indigenous Petty Bourgeoisie of Guatemala) (Guatemala City: CHOLSAMAJ, 2002), 107.

¹⁸ In Forster, *La Revolución Indígena*, 241, 322.

¹⁹ Velázquez Nimatuj, *La Pequeña Burguesía Indígena Comercial de Guatemala*, 142-43.

of the Americas' Indigenous Peoples in October 1991. As discussed above, this event proved crucial to the separation of the Indigenous culturalists from the tutelage of Latin American Left-wing politics because the Latin America Left refused to include Indigenous rights in the discussions and final manifesto. In 1994, the group Xel-Ju put forward Rigoberto Quemé Chay as their candidate for Mayor and he won two consecutive municipal elections in 1996 and 2000.

According to Velásquez, the third subgroup is more interested in maximizing profits in their small and medium businesses than achieving cultural or political emancipation. They do not know much about the social situation of most Maya and are not interested in learning more about it. This subgroup represents most of the K'iche petty bourgeoisie. They are a volatile group that during national elections move from one party to another depending on their interests. Regardless of their economic status, the Indigenous elite are also victims of racism, as experienced by most Maya. In her gender analysis, Velasquez is critical of how the K'iche Maya's patriarchal system also keeps women in a second-class citizen position. She found that local K'iche men, when attending gender forums and conferences, refer to gender relations as "complementary" roles and in their view subordination does not exist in Quetzaltenango.²⁰

What Velásquez Nimatuj describes in her book confirms the existence of an Indigenous bourgeoisie that is heterogeneous in its political and economic interests. Some of them also practice Mayan ceremonies. In the 1980s, 1990s and still today, this writer observed that members of this Indigenous elite either asked a spiritual guide to conduct a ceremony for them or themselves practiced the rituals in rural, isolated places just like any other Maya who practice Maya spirituality.

Although it was in this city where the initial Spanish campaign to convert Indigenous people began and where the Protestant movement established a Bible School, Christian conversion was only semi-accomplished. Dozens of sites around Quetzaltenango show the ancient rituals continued. Quetzaltenango is now home to people from all over world. However, the two main groups remain the Ladino and the K'iche Maya.

²⁰ Ibid. 152



Photo 5: Barreno, L., 2017. *Quetzaltenango* (She-Lajuj Noj or Xelaju)

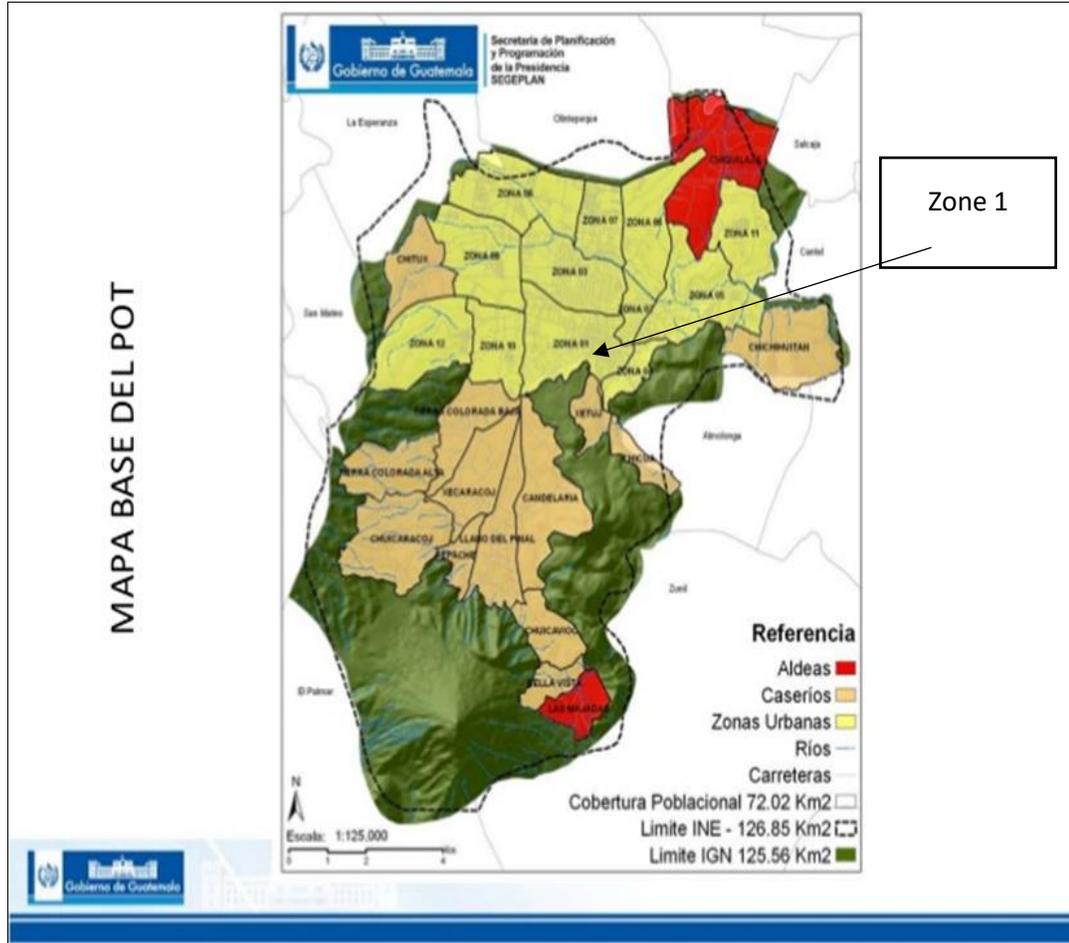
Rural communities called *caseríos* surround the city, divided in 12 *zonas* (zones), and *aldeas* (see map 4). The historical centre is in zone 1 and it features Greek, Roman, Italian, German and Spanish inspired buildings, parks, colourful Indigenous markets, narrow cobblestone-streets, adobe and stone-houses, monuments, the Cathedral Catholic Church and the central park. The architects of the colonial structures were European, but the labour was Indigenous.

In the local Indigenous Ajq'ijab' memory, an ancient K'iche Maya city lies buried under the current historical centre's colonial and modern buildings. The Cathedral Church, the municipal building, the musical museum (formerly a prison) and other colonial era buildings surround central park (*parque a Centro America*). One of the participants, Ahkin, explained that "inside the cathedral there are three *Nawals* [protectors]: One is *Noj* [idea, intelligence], the second is *Tzi* [dog or justice] and the other one is *Kawoq* [thunder, woman]."²¹ Jun Aj said he has heard of these *Nawals* but has not seen them. What they mean by a *Nawal* is either a large rock or a place where pre-conquest people performed their ceremonies, now hidden under a Catholic symbol or structure, in this case

²¹ Ahkin (pseudonym), interview by Leonzo Barreno, August 16, 2017, interview 3, transcript.

Quetzaltenango’s Cathedral. “When I go to Church I pray to the *Nawals* even though it is a Catholic service,” Ahkin said.²²

Map 4: City limits of Quetzaltenango²³



Ssoto, L. 2011. “*Diagnósticos y Análisis de las Dinámicas Territoriales: POT Quetzaltenango*”

Explanation: The urban zones are in yellow; the *caseríos* in orange and the *aldeas* in red. Urbanization is extending to the last two areas. The mountains and hills surrounding Quetzaltenango, where the altars are located, are colored green.

²² Ibid.

²³ Luis Soto, “Diagnósticos y Análisis de las Dinámicas Territoriales: POT Quetzaltenango,” *Gobierno de Guatemala: Secretaria de Planificación y Programación de la Presidencia -SEGEPLAN-* 2011, slide 3 of 55, Last Modified November 24, 2019 <https://es.slideshare.net/LuisSoto32/dx-xela-37738947>



Photo 6: Barreno, L. 2017. *Cristo Vive* (Christ is Alive).

Ten mountains and hills surround the city. Most of them are visible from central park: *Cerro Quemado* (the Burned Hill), *El Baúl*, *La Pedrera* (The Rocky Hill), *Cerro Candelaria*, and volcanoes *Siete Orejas* (seven ears) and Santa María. Christian symbols and churches dot these mountains and the city's highest landmarks: an evangelical church's message "*Cristo Vive*" (Christ is Alive) can be seen on the south side of *La Pedrera* hill (see photo 6); a large white cross top *El Baúl* hill to the east; and a Mormon church mounts the highest part of the historical centre. What is not visible from the city are the many Mayan altars hidden in these mountains and hills. The three ceremonies I attended during my research in Quetzaltenango were celebrated in la *Pedrera* hill.²⁴ According to that day's count, 59 altars surrounded the city. City representatives wanted to know where and how many altars there were to attract tourists. The two Ajq'ijab were more concerned with "protecting and improving the altars."

²⁴ Two of these ceremonies were exclusively for my study; for the other, I accompanied two Ajq'ijab and City officials as they surveyed altars for the Territorial Land Use Plan (*Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial* or POT) in August 2017.

The historical centre's buildings, houses and streets show the effects of time, natural calamities and an ever-increasing population. While there are no signs of improving city services and streets, new concrete and cement-brick houses and buildings are everywhere. Earthquakes are so common in Quetzaltenango that a tremor forced me to pause one conversation. Some of the older, bigger and more damaged structures include churches, colonial residences and schools where students take classes at their own risk.

The streets in all zones are full of potholes and some, mainly in zone 1, retain their colonial make-up with cobblestone streets. Citizens or volunteers patch the holes with cement blocks (*adoquín*) and asphalt when they can afford it; or stones and dirt when cannot. When it rains the water washes out garbage. The historic centre's colonial era sewage system causes floods in the low parts of zones 1 and 2. Black smog from cars, pick-up trucks and buses is everywhere. Pollution chokes the city. On Friday and Saturday nights the central park is used by makeshift bars, plus the bars in the historical centre. Due to the lack of public washrooms, bar patrons urinate against the walls and in the streets. The surroundings of the iconic Municipal theatre serve the same purpose. The smell is nauseating.

Zone 3 is a mix of twentieth century and modern buildings, broader-paved streets, the colorful and noisy markets *La Democracia* and *La Terminal*. American-style malls and several storey high hotels flourish here extending into zone 7. The public university is in zone 1 and all private universities are in zone 3. An impressive American Mormon Church (see photo 7), about 200 metres west of a Walmart store, features a golden angel playing a trumpet on top. It overlooks the city from the westernmost part of this zone.



Photo 7: Barreno, L. 2017. *Mormon Church*.

In the south-west side of the city, in the valley overlooking the impressive Santa Maria volcano, modern housing projects are being built. This is one of the valleys where the 1524 conquest battles took place. Despite its modernity, large constructions and malls, potholes, poor sewage and power systems and pollution also curse this zone.

More serious than all the natural and man-made adversities that affect people is daily crime. Extortion, shootings, robbing private buses and storeowners, and petty crime are all part of everyday life. Quetzaltenango, like other cities and townships, has no local police services controlled by city authorities. There is only a National Police force (*Policia Nacional Civil*), part of the Ministry of the Interior, which deals with the country's order and security. Its few members rotate from other parts of the country. Added to the local crime is the little trust that exist between the National Police and the population. Reaction to the pervasive fear of crime is expressed in various ways. When I went to the market, the cab driver told me “grab your backpack very tightly and make sure your money is in a safe place because pick pocketers are very astute.”

As a reaction to urban criminality, some *barrios* (neighborhoods) have vigilante style organizations whose members patrol their streets at night. They also hang banners with messages warning potential offenders with all types of consequences if the neighbors catch them (see photo 8). This vigilante-style approach has not deterred daily robberies of houses, businesses and individuals.



Photo 8: Barreno, L. 2017: *Neighbors Organized Against Crime*

Local spiritual guides, most of whom live in the historical centre or zone 1, and their places of prayer are not immune to such crimes. Six of this dissertation’s participants experienced robberies when going to do ceremonies in the mountains and hills surrounding the city. Altars were vandalized with implications for the ceremonies. As explained in my conversations with six of the affected Ajq’ijab they are afraid of going alone, and sometimes even in groups, to the altars. They have opted for creating their own home altars and perform the ceremonies there. As they explained further below, this change is out of necessity to avoid being victims of crime. Once more, the Ajq’ijab are adapting to change and “energy,” more than space, is becoming important in that change.

7.2 The Spiritual Guides: The Ajq'ijab'

The majority of the people who agreed to participate in this study are K'iche Maya from Quetzaltenango City, with the exception of two K'iche spiritual guides who are originally from small towns but now live in the city and a young Mam Maya who lives in his community. Ranging from the ages of 29 to 78 years old, thirteen people participated in this research. Nine of the eleven Ajq'ijab, including the 29-year-old Mam Maya, were trained following the traditional *costumbre* way and were guided by one or several older and experienced spiritual guides. Two of the younger males, Im Nijaib and Job Aj, completed their training in a “*comunidad*” (community). The other two contributors are non-Ajq'ijab'.

The spiritual guides either trained traditionally or through a group, received the Ajq'ij category. As proof of their status, they receive the *zut* (the head-covering cloth) and the *vara* or *tzite* (the K'iche bundle containing 260 red beans, representing the 260-days of the lunar calendar. The Mam Maya bundle contains 52 red beans) from their mentors. The two non-spiritual guides were Mr. Rigoberto Quemé Chay, former Mayor of Quetzaltenango (1996-2004) and Ixchel who considers herself a disciple but not an Ajq'ij yet.

Most of the men are university educated. One has a doctorate; two have Master's degrees; two have Licentiate (Bachelor) degrees; one is completing his university studies; and two are small business owners who went to university but did not complete their education. Quemé Chay is now a retired university professor. Although this is not a scientific survey, this small group of people demonstrate how Quetzaltenango Indigenous males typically have more opportunities in obtaining a formal education than females. Two of the women are weavers, one is a market vendor and one, with university education, works for the state.

Irrespective of their educational levels, economic status, age and gender, I approached each of them with the same level of respect and reverence the situation required. After the telephone call, I visited them. I presented the *ofrenda* (offering) to each of them. Although I had planned for non-structured 'intensive' interviews using a questionnaire, I adapted the ceremonial Ajq'ij's advice of not using paper and instead memorized most of the questions (see Annex “B”) when I was with the participants. As a

result, the following description (from 7.3 to 7.9) does not follow the same order as the questionnaire. For instance, before describing Maya spirituality, I instead articulate the reasons that influenced the respondent to become an Ajq'ij. Other topics evolved during the conversations. These topics are based on the importance they have for the participants about what is occurring to their belief system and about the space (the actual geographic setting) they live, and the places they pray.

I did not start the interview immediately after greeting them. The first part of the conversations was more about me than them. They wanted to know about my family in Canada and my past life in Quetzaltenango. Next, I explained the main reason of my visit. It was in that moment when, with offering in hand, I described the objectives of my study and the reasons for approaching them. This *costumbre* protocol created trust between the participants and me. All accepted the offering and after asking for their permission, I proceeded with the recording of the conversations.

Using Spanish, the language of communication for all of us, most participants told me their reasons for becoming spiritual guides. Responses varied and depended on whether or not they became involved during or after the armed conflict. The older Ajq'ijab' have been involved in the hidden practice and spread of Maya spirituality since the 1980s or before. For that reason, they kept their beliefs a secret from family members during the armed conflict. Similar to the “answerability” reasons described by Molesky-Poz (2009), their motives for becoming an Ajq'ij ranged from “curiosity,” health, family issues, dreams, need for spiritual aid, or to maintain a family tradition. However, in the post-war period, these old, traditional ways of becoming a spiritual guide have been challenged by a new-age path. In the ‘schools’ or ‘communities’ someone told one of the participants he had the “*don*” (the gift) to be a spiritual guide. However, Im Nijaib, a graduate in one of these communities, has not disclosed his newly acquired “*don*” to friends and family, fearing backlash or ridicule. These NGO Ajq'ijab are experiencing what the traditional Ajq'ijab have experienced for decades.

Quemé Chay says that in the 1970s Mayan ceremonies were rare, private practices in Quetzaltenango. Observing them provoked shock in him, as he was a devout Catholic. He noticed the spiritual leaders did not fully trust young Indigenous middle-class men like him: “When we began forming the *Tinamit* (The people or the town) political party the

Ajq'ijab' played an important role, but they did not fully trust us...as we were from the city, we were students and came from middle class families."²⁵ Secrecy, therefore, and fear of being ridiculed, mocked or even punished, have been part of being a traditional guide.

Following the traditional system, Ahkin was attracted to spirituality because of dreams he had as a child, but he could not tell anybody but his father. He noticed that his house had no Catholic images, as most Indigenous households of the time did. His parents did not celebrate Catholic festivities such as Christmas or Easter. In his youth, he wanted to be a "fortune-teller" (*adivino*) and to find out if the stories and legends people were sharing were true. A common story we both knew is the metamorphosis story of *el cadejo* (a trickster). It tells the story of a man who transformed himself into an animal to lure women. A second story he mentioned was *la mula sin cabeza* (the headless mule).²⁶ After sharing Indigenous folk stories he said, his father and one of his grandmothers first introduced him to Maya spirituality. In one occasion, his father took him to visit his grandparents' house and showed him a compartment hidden under a Catholic altar. There were several rocks in the chamber and his father said "[this is where] your grandfather comes to pray to the rocks." Ahkin credits his father for his "entering" the Maya spirituality. He lit his first candles in front of those rocks, one of which his father referred as "*Balam*" (Jaguar). His father asked him to keep everything secret, not even sharing it with his own brothers.

Ahkin eventually became an Ajq'ij and began practising in the 1970s. When we met in the mid-1980s, he was still not open to talking about it. The political situation in Guatemala was so intense, and tense, that people might act as spies (*orejas*) on their neighbors. He told me, "I was not afraid of telling you, I was ashamed."²⁷ That sense of shame is because in those days if a person was identified as a *brujo* (sorcerer, witch) he or she was socially ostracized.

Kieb Aj, who is originally from a small K'iche town, was driven to Maya spirituality because of health problems. In doing so, he risked his role as an acolyte in his community's Catholic church. He eventually left the Church because he claims all the

²⁵ Rigoberto Quemé Chay, interview by Leonzo Barreno, August 19, 2017, interview 6, transcript.

²⁶ I recall listening to and then passing those stories on to friends in the 1970s.

²⁷ Ahkin, interview 3.

priest taught the congregation was “how good the priest was and that our [Mayan] beliefs were witchcraft, satanic, a thing of the devil...and that was not true because I saw it [the Mayan ceremonies] so I left.”²⁸ Kieb Aj eventually left his community and now lives in Quetzaltenango.

Hun Aj was motivated by curiosity when, as a child, he saw his grandfather praying in the mountain. His grandfather was “giving an offering [to ask] for a good crop, for life, for a good health, for the family.” Later in life, Hun Aj realized that “something was lacking [in my life] and that was spirituality.”²⁹ Together with Ahkin, Hun Aj is one of the Ajq’ijab I approach the most when I visit Quetzaltenango. I met him in the early 1980s at a social event and then I realized he was an Ajq’ij when we both attended the same ceremony. Since becoming an Ajq’ij, Hun Aj remains one of the most active spiritual guides in the city. As a guest speaker in universities and other public events, he connects Maya spirituality with other social issues like the environment, children and youth.

After 45 years of studying and teaching about Maya culture, Oxib Aj decided to become an Ajq’ij recently. I met him in the early 1990s when he was living as a refugee in another Central American country. He is now a university professor in the local public university and has introduced, for first time in the university’s history, courses and programs on Maya culture.

The pattern among the older Ajq’ijab is that their conversion took time, in most cases months or even years. Some had to endure years of social ostracization and, in the case of Oxib Aj, “pay a heavy price.” That price is family members distancing from them or, as Kablajuj Tzikin told me, some are afraid of being associated with *brujos* (sorcerers or witches).

The women training is not different to that of their male colleagues. Nan Ixmucane and Kablajuj Tzikin became Ajq’ijab’ in the 1980s. Both learned from *Abuelo* (*Elder* or *Grandfather*) Gregorio Camacho. These women had a spiritual reason to seek help, but they also did it to alleviate their health problems. Grandfather Gregorio and *los otros Abuelos* (literally meaning “the other grandparents” but it is synonymous with Elders) helped them. They claim Maya spirituality changed their lives. “When I discovered

²⁸ Kieb Aj (pseudonym), interview by Leonzo Barreno, August 16, 2017, interview 2, transcript.

²⁹ Hun Aj (pseudonym), interview by Leonzo Barreno, August 16, 2017, interview 1, transcript.

[spirituality], it was something wonderful, it changed my life,” Nan Ixmucane said.³⁰ Kablajuj Tzikin experienced “many problems and failures in life” and she could not find help anywhere until she began “walking with the Elders. They helped me to see the world differently,” she said.³¹

When I asked about the subject of differential treatment, none of the women alleged discrimination either in the ceremonies or in the group gatherings and celebrations. However, they continue to be a minority in leadership positions. They do not lead any of the spiritual groups, traditional or non-government organization, operating in Quetzaltenango. Women are nevertheless now empowered by the cosmological basis of Maya spirituality and the complementary treatment of sexes in the creation stories - as makers of humanity. Kablajuj Tzikin told me:

Spirituality is not just for men. Women’s participation is part of the Maya Cosmovision itself. It is in the *Popol Wuh*. The women are there, they are the complement of men. This duality is like the earth, it is both matter and spirit; it is the two energies: the negative and the positive.³²

The four women, including the youngest, Ixchel, remember their teachers with admiration, gratitude and respect. Except for Nan Ixquic, they did not name a female mentor. The name mentioned the most was *Abuelo* Gregorio Camacho. Ixmucane, Kablajuj Tzikin and Ixchel credit him not only for being a teacher and a motivator, but for also providing them with the answers they were seeking when they visited and learned from him in the 1980s. Among those who have been practising since the 1980s, men earned their female peers’ respect to be leaders. This traditional way of becoming and being an Ajq’ij began to be challenged by non-government organizations called *comunidad* (community) or *escuela* (school) created after the Peace Agreement.

There are several differences between the traditionally-trained Ajq’ijab’ and the *comunidad* graduates. The first is the pathway in which they became spiritual guides. Young Im Nijaib says his initiation began as a staff member of a non-government organization; they call it *comunidad*. He was told to become an Ajq’ij because of his “many problems.” After being told he possessed it, he later discovered he had the ‘*don*’ (spiritual

³⁰ Nan Ixmucane (pseudonym), interview by Leonzo Barreno, August 22, 2017, interview 7, transcript.

³¹ Kablajuj Tzikin (pseudonym), interview by Leonzo Barreno, August 17, 2017, interview 4, transcript

³² Ibid.

gift). Job Aj had a similar story. Although he no longer is a *comunidad* member he has chosen to join the traditional Ajq'ijab' and unlike Im Nijaib he does ceremonies for his family and friends when requested. According to Im Nijaib, their training did not differ from that of the traditional Ajq'ijab'. The duration and the places they use for the training, Mayan altars, were the same. The traditional Ajq'ijab' began their training in an identical manner as Nan Ixmucane and Kablaluj Tzikin. Rather than being told that they had the “don” (gift), they approached an older spiritual guide for health or other reasons.

Another difference between the traditional and the NGO Ajq'ijab' is whom they evoke during the ceremonies. The traditional spiritual guides acknowledge the experienced *Abuelos* who taught them or scholars who have contributed in recovering the *Popol Wuh*. They remember their guides from Cobán, Quetzaltenango and Totonicapán. These mentors include Don Eusebio, Esteban Pop, Antonio Pop, Gregorio Camacho, Tino Zapeta, Carlos Escalante, Rolando Ixcot, Rigoberto Itzep, Pantaleón Bulux, Casimiro Sicajau and Domingo Xituy; and K'iche scholars Adrián Inés Chávez and Enrique Sam Colop. The names of these Ajq'ijab' and intellectuals are mentioned in ceremonies led by traditional practitioners. This writer has never attended a ceremony led by those who learned in ‘communities’ or ‘schools’ to know whether they mention the same names or the names of their trainers who taught them the ‘discourse.’ In an electronic message to the author on January 26, 2019, Im Nijaib wrote that they “thank the Ajq'ij who trains [them] and the collective’s “compradres and comadres [colleagues].” The *comunidad* Ajq'ijab', however, do not have the historical memory of the traditional Ajq'ijab' who remember the late spiritual leaders who kept the tradition alive.

The last difference between traditional and the *comunidad* Ajq'ijab' are the services and how often they provide those services to the community. To do ceremonies for them, people constantly approach older spiritual guides like Ahkin, Hun Aj, Kieb Aj, Kablajuj Tzikin, Ixmucane and Nan Ixquic. If they do not serve people their mentors reproach them. Kieb Aj said that after completing his nine-month apprenticeship he did not serve people immediately. He was reprimanded (*me cayó*) by his mentors and had to look for other spiritual guides to further his training and begin serving people.³³ Nan Ixquic also told me that the main advice the Elders teach is to be at the service of the collective: “To be Ajq'ij

³³ Kieb Aj, interview 2.

is a commitment with oneself and the community; this is volunteer service not to take advantage such as making money.”

That sense and obligation of service is different for the schools or *comunidad* graduates. For instance, Job Aj says people approach him because they want to know their *Nawal*, the day and symbol that they were born in the Chol Q’ij (the lunar, 260-day calendar). He acknowledges, people do not approach him often and the ceremonies he has led have been for family and close friends. Im Nijaib has never served others, except participating as a helper.

The spiritual guides of Quetzaltenango and Guatemala in general resisted religious and political control until the 1980s. They practiced their ceremonies clandestinely. Whereas the traditional Ajq’ijab are the main subjects of this study, the inclusion of two *comunidad* former members shows not only the survival of the pre-peace agreement spiritual guides but also the influence the agreement, especially the accord on the rights of Indigenous peoples, had on how to become an Ajq’ij in the 1990s. The Traditional Ajq’ijab’, who possess the experience, now share the same space with people who choose to become spiritual guides in the new *comunidades* or *escuelas*.

7.3 Maya spirituality or religion? Resilience after surviving colonialism

Before enquiring about the specific period when the Ajq’ijab left secrecy, I asked them to describe their belief system. I did not ask whether it is a religion or spirituality. I simply asked what Maya spirituality is. Both, traditional and new age Ajq’ijab, were very convinced of their answers, in stating that what they practice is not a religion. They share a general worldview of the cosmos, nature, life, energies and human beings. They differ, nonetheless, in how they decided to embrace Maya spirituality. They also diverge in how they refer to it, how they acquired the knowledge and skills, and if they are serving others when community members approach them. Quemé Chay, as explained further below, has a different view altogether than that of the spiritual guides.

Job Aj said, “Religions have a hierarchical structure, and within that structure there are well established norms, that from my point-of-view control people.” Religions are led by people who are “intermediaries between the believer and God. In [Maya] spirituality we do not have an intermediary because we have the possibility of communicating directly

with God and that breaks away from a hierarchical scheme.”³⁴ Hun Aj, after mentioning that Protestant Churches remain the harshest critics of Maya spirituality says, “We are not like churches. We don’t work for a fee.” In his view, they serve the community and their skills and their medicines, for example, to assist sick patients come from Mother Nature.

For Kieb Aj, their practice is also spiritual not religious. In his view, Catholic religion imposed the concept of sin on practices the Maya learned from their ancestors. Some Mayan practices were not negative but a matter of respect. This imposition of sin has resulted in a change of values. For instance, he explained, in the Maya way “a female was taught to hold her skirt tight and not walk over the legs of a man. That is not a sin, but different because men and women have different energies.”³⁵ He also mentioned how people in general lost respect for their Elders and for nature. He found respect for Elders when he attended Mayan ceremonies and decided to leave the Catholic Church.

Kablajuj Tzikin chose Maya spirituality over Catholicism. She was a member of the Christian Family Movement, a Catholic association. However, she was unhappy in this Catholic group; consequently, she began attending Mayan ceremonies. She realized that religion and spirituality were two different things. In the Mayan spiritual ceremonies, she found “lots of support and comradery from peers and Elders...I found peace and tranquility in my heart.”³⁶ In the 1980s, she attended ceremonies without telling her family. When I interviewed her, she spoke openly while one of her daughters was listening to the conversation.

One of the main questions I made sure to ask was what Maya spirituality meant to each of them. One participant, Ojeb Aj, foresaw that each Ajq’ij would provide me with a different viewpoint of what Maya spirituality means. He informed me “each *Abuelo* [Elder] will give you a different concept depending of his or her relationship with humanity... and with nature.”³⁷ During the interviews, I experienced the truth in his statement.

The Ajq’ijab’ views about Maya spirituality are as follows. Nan Ixquic explained: “It is a way of life, of being in contact with the stars, in contact with the energies of the grandmother moon, father sun; to live with the energies of our [deceased] parents and

³⁴ Job Aj, interview 5.

³⁵ Kieb Aj, interview 2.

³⁶ Kablajuj Tzikin, interview 4.

³⁷ Ojeb Aj (pseudonym), interview by Leonzo Barreno, August 26, 2017, interview 10, transcript.

grandparents.”³⁸ For Hun Aj, a 67 years old, former journalist and now a small-business owner it is *Nawalism*: “It is to live life in balance because life shows us that there is light and darkness, rain and drought, life and death...sometimes we are up and sometimes down, there is youth and old-age, health and illness.”³⁹ He cites the *Popol Wuh*. It describes how, after three attempts, humanity was created. What this means, he told me, is that “we are not perfect; we have to work to achieve success.” Furthermore, to achieve stability and success in life one must be in balance with our other self, one’s *Nawal*.

Ahkin, at 78 years old, was the oldest participant. He says, “it is the sum of energies in the body...Maya spirituality is life.”⁴⁰ Oxib Aj, who holds a PhD, has been an Ajq’ij for 18 years. He said, Maya spirituality “is the deep relationship of the self and a deep bond with the universe...It is the self-acknowledgement of our unique place in the galaxy...which produces an ethical behaviour fundamental to live in peace and celebrate life.”⁴¹

According to 29-year-old Mam Maya and university student Hijo del Agua, the youngest of all traditional Ajq’ijab, Maya spirituality is “like a serpent that moves continuously up and down.” In his experience, spirituality is transmitted from generation to generation and has strengthened his people and his community’s identity. Maya spirituality “is no longer a spiritual celebration but a political expression” he says. His great-grandfather worked in the construction of a tunnel (*túnel de Zunil*), near Quetzaltenango, during the dictatorship of Jorge Ubico (1930-1944). Small-town and rural Indigenous people were forced to provide free labor to the state. In that period, the workers bought “copal and candles” to do a ceremony and asked for protection to build the tunnel. In Hijo del Agua’s view that was not only a spiritual expression but also a political act and a community decision.⁴² Hijo del Agua performs ceremonies for his people in the nearby mountains of Mam Maya territory.

The description given by the NGO Ajq’ijab’ is very similar and is what they learned in their *comunidad*. For 56-year-old Job Aj,⁴³ who has been a spiritual guide for 17 years,

³⁸ Nan Ixquic (pseudonym), interview by Leonzo Barreno, August 28, 2017, interview 12, transcript.

³⁹ Hun Aj, interview 1.

⁴⁰ Ahkin, interview 3.

⁴¹ Oxib Aj (pseudonym), interview by Leonzo Barreno, August 26, 2017, interview 11, transcript.

⁴² Hijo del Agua (pseudonym), interview by Leonzo Barreno, August 23, 2017, interview 9, transcript.

⁴³ Job Aj (pseudonym), interview by Leonzo Barreno, August 19, 2017, interview 5, transcript.

and for 38-year-old Im Nijaib, who has been an Ajq'ij for five-years,⁴⁴ Maya spirituality is a “tri-dimensional relationship of the cosmos, nature and human beings.” For them, they believe Maya spirituality is not a religion and should not be called a religion because it has no institutional structure, they charge no fees, and is not hierarchical in Quetzaltenango.

What both sides, the traditional and NGO Ajq'ijab', called spirituality, Rigoberto Quemé Chay described as religion.⁴⁵ He said that to call it spirituality is more a “political term to differentiate it from western religions...However, I think, the Mayan civilization did have a religion with moral principles, philosophy, ethics. [It was] institutional, it had a ritual level.” Just like other societies, the Maya “had a beginning when individuals and groups came together and created rules to live in community.”⁴⁶ Once in community they interpreted their world and developed a relationship with that world and with the universe. As most scholars, he did not claim to know when Maya society or their religion began.

Quemé Chay, a top Indigenous academic, proposed three levels for the classic and post-classic Maya religion. He said, “At the highest level were the values, principles, philosophy and morality. The cadres were the great thinkers, people whose job was to scrutinize the universe.” These people, he says, “disappeared because of Church persecution, the annihilation, and the genocide against the intellectual class, against the documents [the burning of books and codices], the culture and the Maya science.”⁴⁷ The intermediate group were the early “spiritual guides, or Kamalbe, or Ajq'ijab. They possessed average knowledge. They were also persecuted and sometimes had to ally with the [Spanish] system to survive...Many were used to dominate their own people... They were the first to embrace Catholicism.” In the last group he places the contemporary Ajq'ijab' who conduct the “rituals.” In his opinion, “these people possess little, if anything, of the intermediate group's principles. The majority do not have the philosophical principles, cosmogonic, ethics, and moral values which were the pillars of the Maya religion.”⁴⁸ In his opinion, the current Ajq'ijab, from both the traditional and *comunidad*,

⁴⁴ Im Nijaib (pseudonym), interview by Leonzo Barreno, August 23, 2017, interview 8, transcript.

⁴⁵ Quemé Chay, interview 6.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

have learned *el discurso* (the discourse) and the ritual part of Maya spirituality but not its history or philosophy.

Quemé Chay's explanation is about how Maya religion used to be in past. It mirrors the academic works of the Autonomous University of Chiapas (1985), Alberto Ruz (2000) and Victor Racancoj (2006) cited in the first part of this dissertation. Literature showed how Maya religion was a central component of both classic and post-classic period and during the Spanish conquest when the colonizer attempted to destroy it by imposing Catholicism. What he acknowledges is that the rituals survived colonialism and the recent Civil War. What most scholars lack in their description are the actual participation in ceremonies and interviews with the Ajq'ijab'.

As their answers illustrate, the traditional spiritual guides were the human force behind the colonial and neo-colonial survival of Maya spirituality in Quetzaltenango. As Quemé Chay states, during the Spanish conquest, those at the top of the Maya religious hierarchical structure were persecuted and eventually decimated. The main places of pray were destroyed. He also said that those with knowledge of the rituals survived to this day. Practising in caves was a survival strategy. Colonialism and the recent Civil War forced the Quetzaltenango Ajq'ijab' to keep the ceremonial and spiritual part in secrecy in those hidden places. In this colonial and neo-colonial resistance process, the Maya priesthood hierarchy got flatten.

The teachings, principles, and values of Maya spirituality remained and passed orally until the late 1980s. The Quetzaltenango Ajq'ijab' became spiritual guides, kept practising the ceremonies and passing their teachings to a few dedicated learners under the duress of colonial rule and the recent armed conflict. When the Civil War reached its more violent period in the 1980s, the Quetzaltenango Ajq'ijab' were loosely unified. I recall that they knew each other and occasionally met during ceremonies but were not organized in groups. Though secret, the ceremonies became joyous events to see each other. I recalled each other addressing as "*comadre*" or "*compadre*" (religious or costumbre colleagues) or "*hermana*" and "*hermano*" (sister and brother). These terms connote a sense of extended kinship. When in-group or several of them were present, they helped each other to build the mound for the sacred fire. However, each Ajq'ij was on his or her own when they went

alone to the mountains. Each built his or her ceremonial fire. Their responses reflect how each understood and connected with the *Ajaw*.

7.4 Maya spirituality during the armed conflict: Quetzaltenango as incubator to survive and defy fear

During the Civil War, especially in the 1980s, as described by Frank and Wheaton (1984), Manz (1988), Sanford (2003), Huet (2008), Konefal (2010), REHMI and the United Nations Historical Clarification Commission (cited in Barreno, 2011), and Early (2012) the army ruled with an iron fist carrying-out massacres in the Departamentos of El Quiché, Huehuetenango, Chimaltenango, Sololá and Las Verapaces. In the city of Quetzaltenango as a means to cause fear in the population, the military control was through selective killings, disappearances and espionage. Except for a few battles, the city did not experience the same level of state-sponsored violence. When I asked the question about the status of Maya spirituality in the 1980s most Ajq'ijab' referred to that particular decade as *el conflicto armado* (armed conflict). They spoke extensively and emotionally about the topic regardless of whether they were traditional or NGO trained guides. For some of the older participants this was a very personal issue as some were intimidated or forced out of their communities. Others, long before they decided to become spiritual guides, went into exile as they lost mentors, relatives and friends. Those who left Guatemala returned to the country to build a new life and in the process pursue spirituality.

Ironically, the absence of high-intensity violence allowed the survival, nourishment and growth of Maya spirituality in the city and the initiation and conversion of more people. Spiritual guides from other Mayan areas went to Quetzaltenango to share their knowledge with the city's Ajq'ijab'. Local spiritual guides returned the visits and went to other Guatemalan regions to learn from other Mayan people. As they explained, not everyone had the same experience during the armed conflict. Quetzaltenango represented a relatively safe place for the organic spiritual work to take place and to practice and pass on Maya spirituality. It was also a city where the Indigenous population was divided by social class and Indigenous urban-rural discrimination.

For Ahkin, Quetzaltenango was spared due to the high loss of identity among urban K'iche: "We have lost much of our identity as Indigenous people...our community

consciousness...this is the result of introducing [Western] education which killed our language.” He further explains that many Indigenous residents of Quetzaltenango did not know, nor did they care, that the people in El Quiché were killed. “Not the youth nor the adults were interested or got involved [in the armed struggle].” By contrast, he said, some local professionals and university students were killed because of their “progressive thinking.”⁴⁹

Kablajuj Tzikin remembers the fear the army provoked in people. She traveled with other Ajq’ijab’ to Cobán (the capital city of northern Alta Verapaz) in the 1980s. They celebrated ceremonies among the Kekchí Maya.⁵⁰ Once in Cobán, people advised them to sleep on the floor in case “[the army] would shoot at the houses.” Kekchí widows told stories to her of how the army either “killed or abducted their husbands.” These Kekchí people, she told me, together with the people of El Quiché suffered the most as “entire families were killed.”⁵¹ According to the eldest of the female spiritual leaders, those were “difficult times as the government did not agree with our beliefs.”⁵² Despite their fear as violence spread through other parts of Guatemala, all spiritual guides continued their secret ceremonies at mountain altars located near the city. Their continued practice eventually influenced other sectors of society.

Military repression and the revolutionary discourse of the public university encouraged a few Quetzaltenango K’iche students, to join the guerrilla forces. One of them recalled his time in the mountains and told me the reasons to become a *guerrillero* (guerrilla fighter). Eventually, he left Guatemala. He lived in exile in Mexico and the United States before returning home.⁵³ Other Indigenous youth had a different fate. Kablajuj Tzikin recalls Indigenous leaders killed or disappeared. She remembers Juan de Dios Cotí, an Indigenous university student leader, captured by the army and never seen again.⁵⁴ Although, those events frightened Quetzaltenango citizens, she says most of the violence happened in other places.

⁴⁹ Ahkin narrative resembles Velasquez class description of Quetzaltenango Indigenous residents.

⁵⁰ Kablajuj Tzikin, interview 4.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ixmucane, interview by Leonzo Barreno, August 22, 2017, interview 7, transcript.

⁵³ Ojeb Aj, interview 10.

⁵⁴ Kablajuj Tzikin, interview 4.

Neo-colonialism and internalized colonialism, in the form of government curfews and social rejection, even from Indigenous peoples, forced spiritual guides like Ahkin to continue learning the ceremonies and keeping abreast of the social issues impacting Indigenous peoples in secret and hiding. He was aware of the Ajq'ijab's stigma as *brujos* (witches or sorcerers) who conducted witchcraft in caves. As a result, Im Nijaib and Ojeb Aj said young people like them were instructed by their parents to avoid and distrust the *brujos*. "I was taught to deny the existence of [Maya] spirituality and discriminate against those [the Ajq'ijab'] who use cloth on their heads [the symbol of being a spiritual guide]" said Im Nijaib.

This last expression was common among Quetzaltenango's Indigenous people. They associated *brujería* (witchcraft) with negative things or 'backward' rural or small-town people. Two small towns, Zunil and San Andres Xecul, near Quetzaltenango, were known for their Mayan altars. Family members told Ojeb Aj that San Andres Xecul was "the witches' university." The war forced people, even in those towns, to celebrate their ceremonies at night, he said. The army subjected people to "curfews, dry laws, and persecution." It is for that reason, according to Ojeb Aj, that the main Maya celebration or Maya New Year, the *Waxaquib Batz* (Eight Monkey or Eight Cosmic Threads), was never celebrated during the day.

Ahkin echoed what Ojeb Aj witnessed. He commented that Quetzaltenango's Indigenous peoples "did not admit that one befriended small-town peoples, or have friends from the rural areas, as if they were our enemies." Despite this urban-rural, Indigenous-to-Indigenous class discrimination he took advantage of the relative tranquility of the city to invite rural and small-town Indigenous people to his house. They talked about spirituality, "the Indigenous movement and what the church was doing [for the people]." Even priests and nuns working in small towns attended the meetings in Quetzaltenango, wearing Indigenous *trajes* (daily Indigenous clothing).⁵⁵

During the war, Quemé Chay was still influenced by colonialism and felt more affinity to Catholicism and western culture than to his own Indigenous culture: "Maryknoll priests influenced us, the alienated Indigenous youth who lived in cities and who did not speak our [Indigenous] language. The war impacted us in that way: as Indigenous Catholics

⁵⁵ Ahkin, interview 3.

and not as Indigenous people with our own religion.”⁵⁶ In those years, he was aware of the increasing military persecution of Catholic Action and foreign priests and, to some extent, against Mayan spiritual leaders.

For Ahkin, a long-time spiritual guide, the wartime experience was very personal and dangerous. He came from a poor family and this social status was his foundation to be an activist and a spiritual guide. Maya spirituality and teaching youth about social injustice became his life commitment. In his adolescence, when he was completing high school, he met Indigenous youth from Cobán and Huehuetenango. They invited him to join them, and together learning the social situation of their people: “We [as Indigenous peoples] live in extreme poverty” they told him.⁵⁷ He liked what his friends said about social issues and wanted to know more.

In the late 1970s, Ahkin traveled to Cobán, about 400 kilometres north of Quetzaltenango, and was introduced to Kekchí Maya leaders. While attending ceremonies he met members of the guerrilla group ORPA (People in Arms Revolutionary Organization) and the Indigenous led CUC (Peasants Unity Committee) who were recruiting Indigenous fighters in the Verapaces and El Quiché provinces. He told me that some, but not all, Kekchí Ajq’ijab’ advised the rebel forces about potential fighters. Regardless of their role in the war, and as Huet (2008) explained in Chapter 6, years later the army killed Kekchí spiritual leaders and their people even if they were not involved in the armed struggle. This situation did not deter Ahkin from learning the Kekchí approach to preparing and leading Mayan ceremonies. He was not only devoted to Maya spirituality and becoming an Ajq’ij but also committed to educate Quetzaltenango youth, myself included, about the reality of that historical moment.

Ahkin told me the Kekchí Elders knew of the dangers they and their disciples faced during the war. This led them to be “strict” with their teachings and to whom they taught. Ahkin, sometimes regretted staying on as a disciple. “I better give up,” he thought when his mentors made him, and three friends carry heavy bags over long distances. “I was sweating lots; I was hungry and thirsty because they didn’t feed us.” He thinks of those

⁵⁶ Quemé Chay, interview 6.

⁵⁷ Aj Kin, interview 3. Cobán is the capital city of Alta Verapaz and is in northern Guatemala. Huehuetenango province is located west of Quetzaltenango.

times as a process of “cleansing” (*limpiarnos*), testing to see if they were serious about becoming spiritual guides.⁵⁸ Although he feared the army, the dangers in traveling and the required discipline to become Ajq’ij he did not quit.

On his return to Quetzaltenango and by attending social events, Ahkin realized that other local K’iche youth were also performing Mayan ceremonies in secrecy. They invited him to join them. In the late 1970s, secrecy was necessary because the Civil War was entering its high-intensity level.

Oxib Aj explains the war reached its peak when General Efraín Ríos Montt became Head of State. Between 1981 and 1983, Ríos Montt planned and implemented military campaigns and promoted his own church (*Iglesia Del Verbo* or the Gospel Church).⁵⁹ Protestant churches expanded rapidly all over Guatemala. In Quetzaltenango, they are in every neighbourhood. Oxib Aj remembers the time Ríos Montt proclaimed himself “enlightened by God...and the continuation of King David.” During this period, the persecution of Indigenous communities intensified in north-west Guatemala. Oxib Aj explains that some of the tactics included using strategic hamlets and the Civil Patrols (PAC) to control and intimidate Indigenous peoples. These patrols attacked political enemies but also Maya spirituality.

Participants, including Quemé Chay, agreed that Guatemala’s military governments persecuted and even killed Ajq’ijab’ because they were allegedly a ‘bad influence’ on people, both as leaders and counsellors. Being a leader, they say, was a crime. Hun Aj remembers Catholic priests, mainly the Jesuits, suffered the same fate as Maya spiritual guides in the conflict areas. Nan Ixquic also remembers the persecution against her town’s Catholic Action leadership.

Kieb Aj was the target of the now disappeared *Guardia de Hacienda* (Ministry of Finance Guard). They took away his ceremony materials and even detained him.⁶⁰ He was shot and expelled from his house. He survived the shooting and continued practising Maya spirituality away from his community. For the armed forces “the ceremonies were witchcraft and thus forbidden,” he said. Quemé Chay told me that despite the killing and

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Oxib Aj, interview 11. General Efraín Ríos Montt, as I was writing this dissertation, passed away on April 1, 2018. He was 91 years old.

⁶⁰ Kieb Aj, interview 2.

persecution against Mayan spiritual leaders, most of them survived. That allowed them to fill the vacuum left by the Catholic priests.

The armed conflict experience was different in small towns near Quetzaltenango. Nan Ixquic recalls when army trucks entered her community at 1:00 or 2:00 a.m. to round-up young boys. After taking them to the city's army barracks, they trained them as soldiers and sent them to war. To escape army recruitment and abuse, her parents sent her and her brothers to live in larger towns and cities. She ended up living in San Andres Xecul, Totonicapán, known for its Mayan altars, and finally settled in Quetzaltenango.⁶¹

Nan Ixquic told me, "in the first place, our leaders were persecuted because they gave us advice and they were labelled guerrillas, subversives... They were killed or disappeared."⁶² In her opinion, 'underground' ceremonies met two objectives for the spiritual guides: first, to save their lives and; second, to protect their male children – the army's main target. That was one of the reasons for the secret continuation of Maya spirituality. Due to that situation, none of the participants nor this writer, recall public ceremonies during the war.

Hijo del Agua, Im Nijaib, and Ixchel were children or teenagers during the 1980s. Ojeb Aj was a youth in that decade and was living a period of conflicted identity. He liked "heavy metal" and had inclinations toward "Satanism." Despite a troubled youth, he went to university. He then decided to go to *la montaña* (in the jargon of the time it meant, literally, to go to the mountains to join a rebel group). Hijo del Agua, then a child, recalls the time guerrillas entered his town in 1991 to give a speech to a gathering of people. He said his town "suffered a lot" of military repression because many males joined the guerrilla forces and because local individuals produced illegal alcohol. Both acts led the armed forces to repress his people. State authoritarianism led to a counter-attack against the *Guardia de Hacienda* near the town, resulting in the death of 12 guards. He does not know if it was the guerrillas or some other group who ambushed *La Guardia*. To this day, there is no police presence in his town, despite several attempts to make the town accept them. Im Nijaib, meanwhile, through his work had the opportunity to meet several Ajq'ijab. They told him stories of the war, the persecution and the racism they suffered.

⁶¹ Nan Ixkik, interview 12.

⁶² Ibid.

Different to what Bastos and Camus (1996) claimed, which I explained in Chapter 6, about the early efforts to end the war in Guatemala, Oxib Aj told me that those efforts began after Rios Montt was overthrown in 1983. A National Constitutional Assembly was formed in 1984. The national congress began discussions about Guatemala's status as multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-cultural society. While congress did not reach a consensus, Article 66 of the new National Constitution recognized Indigenous rights - including recognition of Mayan languages and Maya spirituality.⁶³ For Job Aj, this was the beginning of a "formal democracy" signifying "the resurgence of Maya spirituality, which continued on the 1990s and has become one of the pillars of the culture."⁶⁴ Quemé Chay remembers that Indigenous participation in those years became visible after the 1991 Continental gathering; the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Rigoberta Menchú; the United Nations Declaration on the Decade of Indigenous Peoples;⁶⁵ the return of Guatemalan refugees from Mexico; and the subsequent return to civilian lives by rebel groups after the peace agreement was signed.

By the war's end, Catholic Action was decimated, and the priests abandoned their liberation theology. Quemé Chay explained that the discourse of the "Revolutionary God, the people's God...was abandoned by the church which went back to its hard-core conservatism." Regarding the survival of the Mayan spiritual guides, he said that they survived because "they did not have a public [political] life and were not using religion for liberation principles or for people to know their reality or [achieve] a realisation about colonialism."⁶⁶

Quemé Chay's analysis contradicts Ahkin's account because the latter not only became an Ajq'ij he also organized meetings and visits amongst Ajq'ijab during the armed conflict. As he explains below, the meetings were not just about Maya spirituality. Other topics included what was happening in the other parts of Guatemala (i.e., the ongoing human rights abuses).

⁶³ Oxib Aj, interview 11. Ironically, the peace agreement resembles much of what was already in the constitution.

⁶⁴ Job Aj, interview 5.

⁶⁵ Quemé Chay, interview 6.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

During the armed conflict, censure and prohibition of group meetings was common, but a few local and visiting Ajq'ijab, mostly organized by Ahkin, used the relative peace in the city to discuss spiritual and political matters in secret gatherings. Quetzaltenango was an incubator for Maya spirituality. Ahkin told me several Ajq'ijab came to visit him and he went to other parts of Indigenous Guatemala to meet people and invite people to come to Quetzaltenango. Father Andres Garcia, the priest of the San Andres Xecul parish, was far from being an inquisitor. He visited Quetzaltenango in the 1980s to join local spiritual guides and visiting people from El Quiché and las Verapaces. - Nan Ixquic also remembers Father Andres because he conducted his mass in K'iche. - At this time the "Xela [Quetzaltenango] Ajq'ijab were very few."⁶⁷ In this decade Ixmucane, Kablajuj Tzikin, Hun Aj and Kieb Aj made the decision to become spiritual guides. In between decades (1980s-1990s), they experienced a dramatic change.

By the early 1990s, an emerging form of Maya cultural revival began to take shape. In October 1991, there was a Maya ceremony in Quetzaltenango.⁶⁸ As Bastos and Camus (1996) indicated, this was part of the second "500 Years of Indigenous and Popular Resistance Continental Campaign." According to Quemé Chay and Oxib Aj, a radical young Aymara native, Evo Morales, of Bolivia, as well as Indigenous and leftist leaders from across the Americas, including Canada, attended this event. Quemé Chay recalls that he was still going through an identity crisis (from being Protestant, to Catholic to Atheist) when the gathering took place. What he remembers was the Canadian First Nations and South American Indigenous influence amongst his culturalist colleagues.

Local Indigenous leaders realized that, if they were going to enter politics, they also needed "cultural strengthening." However, the gathering was not what they expected. He said, "there was no cultural vindication regarding Maya religion...Spirituality was not even [discussed]...Identity in those days was understood as the Indigenous pageant, the *Umial Tinamit*, the *costumbre* (sic), the *trajes*, and somewhat the [Maya] religion." As a result, he recalls, "the Indigenous movement split from the right and left wings of Ladino politics"

⁶⁷ Ahkin, interview 3.

⁶⁸ Warren (1998, 33) said that delegates included 250 people from fifty-one ethnic groups; 125 guests and 362 Latin American and European observers; 30,000 community activists, "many of whom were impoverished rural women who did not participate in the congress" who marched in support of the Left. This is the same gathering criticized by Demetrio Cojtí. In his view, the Ladino Left used the Indigenous *clasitas*.

soon after the conclusion of the gathering. The Indigenous political party (*Comité Cívico*) Xel-Ju, and one of the gathering hosts, “was not inclined to getting involved in the broad Indigenous struggle.”⁶⁹ As a member of the Council of Guatemala’s Mayan Organizations (COMG) Xel-Ju did not take part in the last street demonstration. One of the few leaders who stayed with the Left was Rigoberta Menchú, he said.

A second public Maya ceremony took place a few months later, in early 1992, during the local extension of the San Carlos University Students Union’s *Huelga de Dolores* (The annual Our Lady of Sorrows Strike). This seven-week festival uses satire to ridicule and criticize public figures. In addition, it runs alongside the Catholic *Cuaresma* (Lent). Job Aj explained that perhaps without much in-depth knowledge of Maya spirituality from the student leaders this Maya ceremony followed the “revolutionary thinking of the San Carlos University of the time against a monistic state.” They used it as a public expression of their Indigenous political agenda and to assert Indigenous presence in the university. Job Aj remembers the student activists giving bumper stickers to local drivers, as proof of their contribution to the strike. The stickers came with a printed Maya calendar. This student action spearheaded more university participation in anti-government protests.⁷⁰

Kablajuj Tzikin and Hun Aj remember the university students’ ceremony but emphasize Mayan ceremonies were practiced in secret long before that decade. Nevertheless, Hun Aj said, the first ‘above-ground’ ceremonies in 1991 and 1992 were a

Breathe of life for everyone, for all the Ajq’ijab, because from then on, we became interested in knowing more about [what spiritual leaders in] Chimaltenango, Huehuetenango and Mazatenango were doing, so we accepted the interrelationship between peoples.⁷¹

Fear of the state began to dissipate. However, until the first years of the 1990s, the names of Ajq’ijab’ who led ceremonies were still unknown. Neither Bastos and Camus nor my interviewees mentioned the names of the spiritual guides who led those ceremonies.

⁶⁹ Quemé Chay, interview 6.

⁷⁰ Job Aj, interview 5.

⁷¹ Ahkin, interview 3. The first ceremony took place in October 1991 during the Second Gathering of the Continent’s Indigenous Peoples.

After being an incubator, Quetzaltenango became a place of growth for Mayan spiritual guides. Nan Ixquic, Oxib Aj and Ojeb Aj ended up or returned from exile to Quetzaltenango and became spiritual leaders. The early negotiations to achieve peace allowed them and thousands more to return to Guatemala. Younger spiritual guides such as Ojeb Aj, Job Aj, Im Nijaib and others, joined Ahkin, Kablajuj Tzikin, Ixmucane, Nan Ixmucane, Kieb Aj and Hun Aj, who were practising Mayan ceremonies before or since that decade in the city. Ojeb Aj, the former guerrilla fighter, argues, “Hundreds, if not thousands, of Ajq’ijab were trained in Quetzaltenango” and are now practising all over Guatemala.⁷² The peace negotiations were an empowering factor that changed the practice of Maya spirituality at different levels. The city was a safe place for Maya spirituality to flourish; at least until a new social threat emerged after the peace process.

7.5 “Icing on the cake” and “light at the end of the tunnel”: The 1990s juncture

Bastos and Camus (1996), Montejo (2004), Stern (2005), Hart (2008), and Molesky-Poz (2009) agree that the Maya spiritual guides abandoned secrecy in the 1990s. In doing so, the knowledge and items (the fire, the prayers, the counting of time, the bundle and the head-covering cloth) they hid and used during colonization became more exposed to the outside world in the 1990s. As described by Bastos and Camus (1996), before and during the Quetzaltenango Continental Gathering, Mayan ceremonies were held in 1990 and 1991 as a spiritual preamble to the planning and the opening of the event. The meeting resulted in the temporary split between popular Indigenous organizations (i.e., the classists) and the cultural Maya movement. One of the main resolutions of that left-dominated gathering was the call for government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) to end the war and to initiate the peace negotiations. With the peace negotiations underway and more than 100 civil society organizations participating, Indigenous negotiators unified in an effort to participate and to assert Indigenous rights in the final document.

⁷² Cook and Offit (2013: xvii) found that young Momostecan spiritual leaders were trained in the “Quetzaltenango School.” It is worth noting that no other Ajq’ij made this claim of “hundreds, if not thousands...” of people being trained in Quetzaltenango by one single spiritual guide.

As the focus of this dissertation, the spiritual leaders explained that it was the peace process between the guerrilla forces and the Guatemalan government, more so than the counter-celebrations of the 500 years discovery of the Americas that allowed them to overcome the fear they felt during the war. The former continues to have useful importance for spiritual guides. Even if they were not direct participants in the talks, and their belief system was unknown or misunderstood by negotiators, in their view, they became visible to the outside world; they were able to communicate with other spiritual leaders; and now celebrate the achievements of the 1996 Peace Agreement. They elaborated on their responses to explain the large numbers of people who were trained as spiritual guides. They further expressed their concern about the creation of the *escuelas* and *comunidades* now teaching Maya spirituality; the intergenerational conflict between traditional, and NGO trained spiritual guides and their fear about the commodification of their ceremonies.

According to Im Nijaib, the *Mesas Paritarias* (Joint Commissions) were created by civil society organizations during the peace negotiations to involve Indigenous leaders, bring forward Indigenous rights and include those rights in the final accord. He emphasised, “the Peace Agreement exposed Guatemala as it truly is culturally diverse.”⁷³ Above all, he said, “Indigenous peoples overcame fear and accepted our condition as Indigenous peoples, as citizens under the law who can demand rights...Our identity was strengthened.”

Im Nijaib says that Maya spirituality was not well known, understood nor well defined by the Indigenous experts and leaders or by other members of the joint commissions. He said that the initial discussions focused on “whether it was a religion, spirituality or witchcraft.”⁷⁴ He explained that the Indigenous negotiators, most of them academics, had to consult with spiritual leaders about what they thought their belief system was. Quemé Chay, a direct participant in the negotiations, said: “In 1992 we were afraid of talking about Maya spirituality because we did not understand it; our Catholic devotion was heavy on us.”⁷⁵ This last statement explains how disconnected the Indigenous culturalists and the classists were from Maya spirituality.

⁷³ Im Nijaib, interview 8.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Quemé Chay, interview 6.

Once in the peace negotiations, Quemé Chay said, “We made the mistake of using [Maya] religion as something distinctive even if it was not articulated among us as a people and we did not understand it.” He was referring to the days Indigenous negotiators like him and Cojtí were discussing what rights ought to be included in the accord specific to Indigenous peoples. He admits the inclusion of Maya spirituality in the Peace Agreement, was the “icing on the cake” (*guinda en el pastel*) but not because of the spiritual guides organized participation in the negotiations. Maya spirituality was added to the Indigenous rights accord without understanding it and without spiritual guides’ leadership.

From the Quetzaltenango Ajq’ijab’ point of view, including Maya spirituality in the Peace Agreement, as the agreement became institutionalized, was not a mistake but “a light at the end of the tunnel.”⁷⁶ After hundreds of years of secret counter-hegemonic resistance and living in fear, they welcomed the right to practise spirituality but also value other rights achieved. Hun Aj says “I am glad I lived to experience those times [the armed conflict], because before we did not have the right for cultural-bilingual education. Now there are cultural bilingual teachers.” Hun Aj also recalls something Bastos and Camus (1997) mention: the creation of the *Academia de Lenguas Mayas* (ALMG) or the Mayan Languages Academy, which still operates in Guatemala City working on the standardization of Mayan languages.

Hun Aj and Ahkin explained that communication between spiritual leaders became more fluid as they could travel and visit each other. It allowed for the discussion of many other topics; and they were allowed access to their sacred places. By sacred places, Hun Aj refers to ancient cities like Gumarcaaj (former capital of the K’iche), Iximche (last Kaqchiquel capital), Kaminal Juyu (near Guatemala City), Abaj Takalik (classic Maya settlement in the south coast) and the classic city-state of Tikal in northern Guatemala. Unfortunately, Hun Aj told me, “The Elders did not see and are not enjoying what we are enjoying now.” During the war, it was near impossible to visit these places as they are in located in regions where the war was fought at high intensity levels. For instance, Gumarcaaj is in El Quiché Department, Iximche in Chimaltenango, Abaj Takalik in the south-coast and Tikal in el Petén where guerrilla groups were active and where the army carried out massacres. Once the peace negotiations were underway, these places became accessible to

⁷⁶ Hun Aj, interview 1.

spiritual guides. For the time being, according to Huh Aj, the government still controls those sites. His hope is for Indigenous people to manage them in the future.

Not all the participants agree with the process, nor the outcome of the peace negotiations. Hijo del Agua told me that Elders (Mam Maya) from his town were never consulted. As a result, he said, the Peace Agreement's effects were "to mechanize and automatize our minds," encouraging the Maya to accept whatever the agreement's advocates said. It is worth noting that the Indigenous negotiators were mostly urban university academics like Demetrio Cojtí, as stated by Bastos,⁷⁷ and Quemé Chay.

With the agreement signed and the rights known a national Pan-Maya culturalist "boom" followed. Soon, "many people wanted to become an Ajq'ij...at the end of the 1990s young people who were 21 or 22 years old were receiving their *vara* [the bundle accrediting them as Ajq'ij]." ⁷⁸ Quemé Chay told me that international cooperation sparked the interest of many who belonged to different Indigenous organizations and now wanted to become Ajq'ijab'. As a result, he added, "many became five-star hotel Ajq'ijab, to do ceremonies in [hotel] halls, in public events in front of the colonial authorities."⁷⁹

Quetzaltenango was not an exception to this new phenomenon. The cultural boom was not part of my initial questions, but after it was mentioned I asked other participants about it. At that point in the conversations, I decided to ask if what Garret Cook and Offit (2013) described as a "pyramidal scheme" used by young Momostecans who became spiritual guides in the "Quetzaltenango School" existed in the city. None of the spiritual guides who I asked this question knew about such a system. What some of them mentioned was the creation and operation of the "new age" youth who had organized themselves into non-government organizations (NGOs) called *comunidad* and *escuela* (described in 7.2). According to Im Nijaib, these groups function as non-government agencies to raise funds and manage them for various projects. While their members include long-time practitioners, the leaders or "*Kamalbes*" (guides) are university-educated youth. After Im

⁷⁷ See page 139.

⁷⁸ Oxib Aj, interview 11.

⁷⁹ Quemé Chay, interview 6. This is the time when some of the local NGO *comunidad* or *escuela* were created. As explained by Im Nijaib, these NGOs depend on international cooperation for their community and cultural projects. See next page.

Nijaib training in one of these *comunidades*, the director told him he was not at the same “cosmic level” as him, the leader, and thus could not oversee the *comunidad*.

In Quetzaltenango there are at least three ‘schools’ or ‘communities.’⁸⁰ Im Nijaib explained that dissent within one of those groups forced members to leave and create their own groups or join others. The split resulted in resentment and competition among former colleagues.⁸¹ Hijo del Agua said that these *comunidades* or *escuelas* have a commercial purpose: to charge money for the teachings and to target tourists and neo-Indigenous or mestizo who are searching for an identity through spirituality.⁸² He continues to oppose the creation of these groups in his Mam Maya town.

Cultural growth has also led to the commodification of Maya spirituality.⁸³ As part of the *costumbre*, a spiritual guide receives a gift before and/or after the ceremony. Sometimes, when the solicitor can afford it, that gift is monetary. As described by Molesky-Poz (2009) in Chapter 2, receiving money is not the main purpose of being an Ajq’ij. Charging set amounts for a ceremony or for training a new spiritual guide, when mentioned by the participants, was new to me.

The use of ceremonies for personal gain was interpreted differently, rejected by most, but not all, spiritual guides. According to Oxib Aj, the number of those who charge is “declining.” However, others challenged his version. Since the peace agreement was signed, Hijo del Agua told me, spiritual teachings have become a business; the rituals became a commodity. Im Nijaib met a colleague who charges Q2, 000.00 to Q3, 000.00 (\$330.00-\$420.00 CAN) for her services “depending on the request.”⁸⁴ Nan Ixquic received a request from a foreigner who wanted to be an Ajq’ij. He told her that another Quetzaltenango spiritual guide whom he approached first, was charging Q25,000.00 (\$4,250.00 CAN) for the training.⁸⁵ Ixchel, who has been involved in ceremonies for 30 years, does not agree in using their belief system for profit. She thinks people who become

⁸⁰ Im Nijaib, interview 8.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Hijo del Agua, interview 9.

⁸³ Oxib Aj, interview 11.

⁸⁴ Im Nijaib, interview 8.

⁸⁵ Nan Ixkik, interview 12.

Ajq'ij to make money “do not carry the true spirituality within them.” Even worse, people trust and consult them.⁸⁶

Quemé Chay provided his own analysis of using Maya spirituality for profit purposes. He said, the unrestricted use of the word “spiritualism” might be due to the lack of a religious institutional structure. He added, “We (sic) are not organized like the Protestants who are regionally and nationally organized.”⁸⁷ Instead, some entrepreneurial spiritual guides have opted for the commercial side of their practice. They use self-promotional radio ads announcing “Come to me, I am Ajq'ij and I will deal with any evils bothering you, I will cure your illnesses, I can predict your future...”⁸⁸ Ojeb Aj told me this situation has led to competition even at some rural altars, where people line-up to see a spiritual leader who charges for his services. Im Nijaib and Job Aj confirmed the existence of radio ads but as they asserted previously Maya spirituality should not be structured like a religion and should not be treated like a commodity and commercialized.

In the same markets where I bought the materials for the ceremonies and the ofrendas for participants, one can find bottles containing “magic potions” to obtain riches or love, to stop gossip (*tapa boca*), or attract customers to one’s businesses (see photo 9).



Photo 9: Barreno, L. 2017. *Magic Potions: Money, Business and Love.*

⁸⁶ Ixchel (Pseudonym), interview by Leonzo Barreno, August 29, 2017, interview 13, transcript.

⁸⁷ Quemé Chay, interview 6.

⁸⁸ Ibid. Five other Ajq'ijab' confirmed these radio ads.

Hijo del Agua said the commercialization of these products “has changed spirituality.”⁸⁹ For Im Nijaib, the potions are there because there is a demand for them, “everybody [the vendors] sells them.”⁹⁰ Don Pedro Ixchop (cited in Morales Sic, 2007) observed the use of new substances in Mayan ceremonies in other parts of Guatemala; therefore, the use of potions or other products are representations of these changing times.

Hijo del Agua thinks this commercialization is part of globalization as products made in Mexico and China are used in the ceremonies. The ceremonies themselves are now a commodity. All of this “has an economic and not a spiritual objective that truly responds to people’s needs.” Quemé Chay told me this misrepresentation of Maya spirituality, or religion as he calls it, does more damage than good to Maya people.

Hun Aj disagrees with those offering their services over the radio and the internet. He says, “We have to be vigilant and stop the loudmouths, the [spiritual] merchants, and those who take advantage of the role their community gives them, to take over the spiritual ceremonies.”⁹¹ Obtaining money to teach Maya spirituality has led some to focus more on the ritual, the practical part of it, rather than its core and substantial elements. All, including the youth, except Kieb Aj, opposed the charging of fees. He told me “This is normal [to charge a fee], because one cannot tell people charge or not charge. That is up to them.”

People approach them to bless an event, or for help with health problems or family issues, or to improve their economic situation (as most, not all, Indigenous people live in poverty). The issue of poverty came up when I asked in what way Maya spirituality contributes, or not, to improving people’s social situation. Job Aj responded that the “contribution is minimal because the Ajq’ij is also poor; therefore, all he or she can do is to give advice.”⁹² He also said other religions keep people poor by promoting spiritual wealth but do not change people’s social standards.

Ahkin has a different explanation. He argued that “[some] Ajq’ijab’ made the wrong decision when they started to charge people for their services. They became wealthy. Why? Because people were in dire economic need or were seeking [spiritual] help for their

⁸⁹ Hijo del Agua, interview 9.

⁹⁰ Im Nijaib, interview 8.

⁹¹ Hun Aj, interview 1.

⁹² Job Aj, interview 5.

business.”⁹³ Im Nijaib, from a NGO perspective, has a similar view. He attributes this change to “human weakness.” He knows NIGO colleagues who have the *don* (the gift) “but along the way they found that they could make a living [out of the teachings and the rituals] and could not separate the spiritual with what is a technical matter.” These cases mostly happen in the city’s NGO communities where, as Im Nijaib explains, “the leader, who created the group, monopolizes its leadership and representation.... When the benefits stay with the individual or his family the whole concept of spirituality is distorted.” For Ahkin this defines the rural/urban difference between Ajq’ijab’. While in Quetzaltenango being an Ajq’ij is an individual decision and individual work, in rural areas, spiritual leaders still pass their knowledge to their children and serve people in the traditional way. Ahkin said

Although the children, at the beginning, do not do their father and grandfather’s spiritual work, they assist them. The wife prepares meals for her husband. He usually suffers of hunger for serving the people. But his wife and his daughters, perhaps in secret, are learning and suddenly one realizes they know the teachings. That is something that does not happen here [in the city].⁹⁴

Kieb Aj claims he understands why some city Ajq’ijab’ charge but, he admits, “Others are doing business with it [spirituality].” He agrees with colleagues charging modest amounts but disagrees with those who are using their status as Ajq’ijab’ for-profit purposes by setting fees for ceremonies and training others. In his view, this had led some colleagues to become “individualists” who compete with other Ajq’ijab’. He added, “We have become afraid of the other and one thinks he may steal from us...we are selfish.”⁹⁵

Job Aj knows that doing ceremonies takes time and resources for which it is reasonable to charge people. However, he also thinks, “poverty is a structural problem. Most Ajq’ijab’ are poor,” he says. Politicians of all stripes, ethnicities and religions, he argues, are the worst exploiters of Maya spirituality in Guatemala. To reach power, “anything can be sold...spirituality is a commodity for a politician.”⁹⁶

Beginning in the 1990s, Maya culture has co-existed with Capitalism and globalization more than ever before. The traditional Ajq’ijab acknowledge that reality, but also believe that this is just another matter they must overcome, as money was not the main

⁹³ Ahkin, interview 3.

⁹⁴ Ahkin, interview 3.

⁹⁵ Kieb Aj, interview 2.

⁹⁶ Job Aj, interview 5.

drive to become spiritual guides. They acknowledge the role political leaders and academics, even if they did not comprehend it, played in including Indigenous rights in the Peace Agreement, especially the right to practice Maya spirituality. In Hun Aj's view the more fundamental component was the practice of the spirituality in the mountains, in the rivers, in the lakes, where we asked [the Creator] to restore the rights that were for a long time denied to us.

Although this dissertation is not about the metaphysical powers attributed to Maya spirituality, this writer observed the reverence and the way participants spoke about the power of prayer. As mentioned in the prologue, in the 1980s I observed how some of the spiritual guides prayed for the repression against our people to end. In hindsight, this political expression compelled me to attend Mayan ceremonies while I continued my student activism. In the following decade, with the peace process under way, they overcame fear and began dealing with an increasing demand for services. This study addresses the growth of their practise and how has resulted in more people becoming Ajq'ijab' and more people requesting ceremonies. The demand has led newer spiritual guides to charge for their services. The current debate amongst them is about the traditional "gifting" and setting fees to conduct ceremonies. The majority of spiritual guides, from both the traditional and NGO groups, I interviewed preferred to accept only whatever people can give them. They overcame the capitalist enticement of using spirituality for their own gain.

7.6 Resistance, imitation, and tokenism

Syncretism was a form of Maya resistance strategy to complete Christian assimilation. When I first attended the Mayan ceremonies in the 1980s syncretism was very much part of them. Traditional and the *escuela* or *comunidad* Ajq'ijab', however, have begun noticing imitations of other religions by new spiritual leaders and the cooptation of Mayan symbols and rituals by politicians of all ideological and ethnic backgrounds who use them for token purposes.

Guillermo Cook (1997), Garret W. Cook (2000), Greg Grandin (2007) and John Early (2012) agree that Maya spirituality survived by using syncretism as a veil to preserve the ancient beliefs and traditions. The spiritual leaders who were practising before and during the armed conflict's most violent period (late 1970s early 1980s) remember their

mentors or colleagues using Catholic signs and prayers during their rituals. As some of them explained, doing so was a form of resisting the army's persecution and questioning. It was also an enduring expression of how they had maintained their culture for five centuries. Since the signing of the Peace Agreement, they remarked, things have improved for them as individuals and their practice. The public understanding of their beliefs has also improved. Most of them no longer use Catholic prayers in their ceremonies. Instead, they learned, and some have mastered, the use of the 260-day calendar and the deities mentioned in the *Popol Wuh*.

Ahkin recalls that in the 1970s the calendar was not used as it is now. Before the calendar was re-introduced in Quetzaltenango, the Ajq'ij "responsibility was to talk to nature, to the beginning of life, to the universe, and the earth."⁹⁷ Kablajuj Tzikin agrees with Ahkin. This observation confirms what I remember from the 1980s: some were beginning to use the calendar; most were simply praying to the elements or to Catholic saints. In addition, the fires were smaller and the materials less colorful and less in quantity. This was the time when the secret cultural resistance was still ongoing. That resistance allowed Catholic prayers in Mayan ceremonies. Syncretism in belief and practise was very common. I do not recall a time when an Ajq'ij reproached a colleague for mentioning Catholic saints.

Nan Ixxik's guide was an *Abuela* (female Elder). She told me she used the Catholic Sign of the Cross and recited the *Our Father* and *Hail Mary* prayers in her teachings and ceremonies. She also noticed that her parish priest was not opposed to using Mayan values during mass nor was he opposed to practising Mayan ceremonies inside the church. She witnessed Padre Tomas Garcia, the San Andres Xecul priest during the armed conflict, celebrated his mass in K'iche. "He welcomed the Ajq'ijab [to the church], he blessed their candles and copal...He then joined the Mayan ceremonies."⁹⁸ Father Garcia sang in K'iche during his mass and, according to her, some Ajq'ijab copied that modality in their ceremonies.

Nan Ixquic's narrative reflected what was happening in the 1980s when priests like Padre Garcia was both allowing the use of his Church for spiritual guides to conduct

⁹⁷ Ahkin, interview 3.

⁹⁸ Nan Ixxik, interview 12.

ceremonies and then joining them in Mayan ceremonies and gatherings. As Ahkin told me, Padre Garcia attended some of the Quetzaltenango meetings. This cultural exchange and empowering syncretism influenced Nan Ixquic to become a spiritual guide and not to be afraid of the Church's threat of eternal condemnation. Even more, unlike what I observed in the 1980s about the city's Indigenous residents discriminating rural and small-town Indigenous people, she is now approached by some of these residents to do ceremonies for them. Unlike most Quetzaltenango's Indigenous citizens, she speaks fluent K'iche.

One of Nan Ixkik's mentors was K'iche scholar Enrique Sam Colop. He taught her that the Ajq'ijab' adopted Catholic prayers, singing, and saints as a veil to continue with their own practice. He told her that, when the inquisition arrived in Guatemala, the Ajq'ijab' pretended to be converted when they were visited by the Spanish Crown representatives. As soon as the inquisitors left, they continued praying to their Maya deities.⁹⁹ She became an Ajq'ij after the Peace Agreement, following the traditional protocols.

The cultural "boom" resulted in hundreds, perhaps thousands of people from all over Guatemala becoming Ajq'ijab as Ojeb Aj argues.¹⁰⁰ It also resulted in some newer spiritual guides copying what other religions do and how they use their symbols. Hijo del Agua told me that at Lake Chicabal, the sacred lake of the Mam Maya mentioned by Secaira (2008), there were only two altars on the north side of the lake as part of his people's cosmology. Now there are 20 altars around the lake, and each altar has the name of a Maya calendar symbol but in the K'iche order. This K'iche imposition imitates the Catholic names given to towns and more specifically to Indigenous towns around Lake Atitlan in the Sololá Department. When I asked him about the naming of towns around Lake Atitlan after Catholic disciples and saints, he responded, "*claro, claro*" (exactly, exactly).¹⁰¹ In other words, the 20 K'iche *Nawal* names in the calendar, replaced the Mam names for hills and mountains. The K'iche influence does not stop in simply naming places. As the threat posed to the Mam Maya spiritual guides by Christian cultural imperialism, Hijo del Agua

⁹⁹ Ibid. The late Sam Colop was a K'iche scholar very critical of colonization (cited by Guillermo Cook, 1997).

¹⁰⁰ Ojeb Aj's statement is implausible as there are no ways, at least by this study, to verify that "thousands" of people received training from one single Quetzaltenango Ajq'ij. This is likely an exaggeration intended to emphasize the significance of this "boom."

¹⁰¹ Hijo del Agua, interview 9.

argues there is an attempt to standardize spiritual practices by following K'iche standards which is led by some K'iche Ajq'ijab.

The strong K'iche influence is also occurring in Mam Mayan ceremonies. Hijo del Agua explained that some of the K'iche proposed changes include: "We all have to do the same invocation, have the same bundle [*tzite*, the K'iche bundle], our way to do the ceremonies [has to be the same]." The effects can be observed in the Mam Maya spiritual guides' contents of their *tzite*. In the old days (*antiguamente*), he argues, the Mam used 52 red beans in each of their two *tzites* but now some are using bundles with 260 beans, the K'iche way. He recalls Mam elders' rituals did not mention the 20 *Nawalib'* as the K'iche do. Now it is common to see Mam spiritual guides do ceremonies K'iche style. A second change, unrelated to K'iche influence but indicative of the present state of post-traditional flux, is the replacement of the *tzite* with poker cards. At the end, he asks himself, "What is spirituality? ... Because now the poker cards are regularly used in detriment of the bundle... There is a mechanization of spirituality."

Another thing that has changed is the use and quantity of materials. Kablajuj Tzikin agrees with Ahkin, Ojeb Aj and Hijo del Agua that before the 1990s the materials for a ceremony included pom, candles and ocote only. Things changed in that decade. Bigger and colorful became 'better' (*mejor*). That seems to be the trend when it comes to the quantity of materials. A former guerrilla fighter turned Ajq'ij told me how impressed he was when he went to do a ceremony in the Ixcán, El Quiché region. He was asked to bring some money for the materials. He was ready to spend Q300.00 (\$50.00 CAN) or more, as it is done in Quetzaltenango, but only ended up paying Q14.00 (\$2.50 CAN) for what people use in that region.¹⁰² According to Ojeb Aj and Hijo del Agua, this difference in volume and money has resulted in some Indigenous practitioners discriminating against others who do ceremonies with "ocote, copal candles and *guaro* (alcohol) only." Ojeb Aj was impressed about the Ixcán peoples' humility to do their rather small ceremony, which for him contrasted with what has become common in Quetzaltenango: expensive and bigger ceremonies.

Another practice imitated by new-age spiritual guides are the ceremonies to deal with negative omens. Ahkin said people who do these ceremonies (the equivalent of 'bad

¹⁰² Ojeb Aj, interview 10.

medicine’) against people do exist. In the Mayan mystic beliefs, they are not called Ajq’ij but Aj’itz. This explanation coincides with Xic Escalante Villagrán (2017) who places the Aj’itz at the highest level of training. Ahkin has observed them and said their ceremonies require lots of concentration and “one ends up tired for working all night.” According to him, the Aj’itz does not place the materials in a circular but horizontal shape. However, even these ceremonies are being replaced, he says. New spiritual guides who have chosen the negative path now call their practice, in Spanish, “*ceremonia negra*” (black magic ceremony).¹⁰³ Two female spiritual guides told me that they have witnessed young Aj’itz invoking ‘Lucifer’ and using books from other cultures. Ahkin said that some people who became Aj’itz to make money achieved their goal, but “they died in terrible circumstances (*una muerte re mal*).” He also said members of their family may ‘pay’ for using Maya spirituality for monetary purposes. He said, “They are not clear minded, they charge money and, in their prayers, ask for big things that have no place in a ceremony.”

Another novelty is that ‘graduates’ of the NGO communities now have the “responsibility” to teach others how to become an Ajq’ij. Although Im Nijaib did not pay for his training or the “*don*” (the spiritual gift), because he was also an employee of the NGO, he can now teach new members. Ahkin, the 78-year old Ajq’ij, does not agree with this new method. The disagreement, between the two currents, reached its highest expression on December 2012.

The largest Maya ceremony, or ceremonies, in modern Quetzaltenango’s history was December 21, 2012. In the Western world, this date was identified with the ‘end of the world’ Maya prophecy. This ‘fateful’ date brought an international interest in Maya spirituality. I recall giving several media interviews informing people that their understanding of that date was misinformed.¹⁰⁴ I based my responses and presentation from what I learned from Ahkin and Hun Aj during my visits to Quetzaltenango before 2012. They both told me that the “end of the world” was a “North American invention” and they were not teaching anything about it. In one media interview, I recall saying that this was

¹⁰³ Ahkin, interview 3.

¹⁰⁴ Vanda Schmoekel, “It All will be OK: A patient Mayan explains the World isn’t ending,” *The Prairie Dog*, (Archive 2009-2012) Last modified February 10, 2019 <http://www.prairedogmag.com/archive/?id=1471>

“fear mongering” and there was no basis for people to be scared. I credited my mentors for what I said.

Obviously, there was no such end of the world but simply the end of the long-count (5,200 solar years) calendar and the beginning of a new one. Known as the Oxlajuj Baktun (Thirteen times 400), the occasion was broadcasted by a local radio station. I listened from Canada over the internet. This event was also not part of my original questions and only came up in the conversation with Im Nijaib. He said, there were more than 30 ceremonies going at the same time in Quetzaltenango’s central park. However, its relevance is not that it was a massive public event. Not noticeable to the public eye was the absence of the traditional Ajq’ijab’. NGO trained guides led these public ceremonies. A rupture was evident, but it did not mean the replacement of the traditional Ajq’ijab, at least not at that precise date.

The Oxlajuj Baktun’s government sponsored celebrations showed the extent of tokenism, using the enthusiasm of young people. The organizer was a young Ajq’ij herself, the regional director of a national government commission. This government funded one-time ritual was not well received by the traditional Ajq’ijab’ or Elders (*Abuelos*) who did not to attend. Im Nijaib told me that the 30 or so young practitioners “knew that the Elders were not coming.” When some people asked them about the Elders Im Nijaib and his colleagues responded, “We don’t know their whereabouts.” He said:

We deserve the benefit of the doubt because we believe it was important to be there and if there were any attacks [against the traditional Ajq’ijab], obviously the ones to suffer the consequences [was us] and maybe it was a way to protect them [the Elders].

There were no attacks, nor did it result in unifying the youth and the traditional Elders. One indication of this separation is that traditional Ajq’ijab did not lead the ceremonies. The *Abuelos* who did not attend the December 2012 public ceremonies provided me with different explanations for avoiding such a publicized event. Kieb Aj was very critical of performing massive public ceremonies:

I was invited, but I had my reservations because how is it possible to have a ceremony in the middle of the street... Where are our values? The ceremony is not a thing to exhibit. There is a special place to do ceremony... I made that mistake in the past [1995, during a teachers’ demonstration], but after analyzing it I cannot do public ceremonies because people laugh, they make fun of it, they do not respect it,

they say it is witchcraft. Consequently, the energies become weak. The Creator may accept the ceremony, but I still think that this [the park, the streets] was not the proper venue.¹⁰⁵

Other Ajq'ijab told me they went incognito. One said, "I went with my family, but I did not participate in any of the ceremonies." Another told me he observed the young Ajq'ijab wearing all sorts of decorations the *Abuelos* do not wear. The traditional Ajq'ijab wear the head-covering *zut* and use the bundle only. The *zut* is a large, traditionally weaved cloth given to the new graduates, alongside the bundle, when they complete their training.

The enthusiasm of the 2012 organiser led her to organize other events that, according to Im Nijaib, were not compatible with the government's objectives towards Indigenous peoples. Eventually, she lost her job after she organized a network against racism. As Morales Sic (2007) found, an Ajq'ij employed by the government cannot challenge the authority of his or her employer.

Using the services of an Ajq'ij, whether NGO trained or traditional, for token or political purposes was not new in 2012. Quemé Chay recalled how prominent Ajq'ijab', from other parts of Guatemala, were used by national presidents, politicians and members of the oligarchy to do ceremonies to open a mine, to even give the *vara* (the bundle) to Álvaro Colón, former president of Guatemala. Even he, as Quetzaltenango's two-term mayor (1996-2004), performed a 'Maya ceremony' in one of his trips to Europe, as requested by a German donor. "I found some candles and did a ceremony to show our cultural weaknesses," he said. Quemé Chay had to fake the ceremony because he was not an Ajq'ij. This time coincides when international cooperation poured into Guatemala to support community development projects.

Quemé Chay was not the only person using Mayan ceremonies for political or economic reasons. Kablajuj Tzikin told me that former President Colón's wife (Sandra Torres de Colón) also received the bundle after completing her training as an Ajq'ij. Morales Sic (2007) mentioned that former president Colón received the bundle before his wife. These actions did not fit well with Kablajuj Tzikin. She adds, "To feel important, they use us. They sponsor a ceremony then forget about everything [their promises]." Not just Ladino politicians or businessmen use Mayan spiritual leaders, Indigenous politicians

¹⁰⁵ Kieb Aj, interview 2, 2017.

do too. They have their ‘own’ Ajq’ij. In doing so, Indigenous politicians of various parties seek to gain political positions as Mayan representatives using Maya spirituality. For Ixchel, this is a continuation of colonialism rather than listening to Indigenous opinions on national matters. For her, Indigenous leaders who use spirituality for political purposes are still colonized.

In the efforts to free Mayan ceremonies of Christian influences some Quetzaltenango Ajq’ijab’ began imitating other religions by naming places using K’iche Mayan deities in non-K’iche territories, calling the calendar symbols “*Nawals*,” and others introduced non-Mayan items, like cards and potions to the ceremonies. Even the Ajq’ij nemesis work, the Aj’itz or the one who does bad omens, had been impacted by such imitations and referring to it as black magic and invoking Lucifer. In this juncture and growth, Maya spirituality continues to be used for token purposes by politicians of all ideologies and ethnicities.

While the traditional guides oppose this symbolic use of their belief system for political purposes, they have opted for retreating from and not taking part in those events. The *comunidad* guides think it is important to assert Maya identity rights by continuing the practice of spirituality in public events. In this tug-of-war Maya spirituality continues to evolve and adapting to changing times.

7.7 Perseverance through diversity

Although the term witch (*brujo* for males and *bruja* for females) is still used to denigrate a spiritual guide, Ixchel and Kablajuj Tzikin explained that it is less widespread now than before the peace process.¹⁰⁶ What remains is the stereotype that these people possess magical powers to realize a petitioner’s wish. Indigenous youth, politicians and now some Ladino approach a local Ajq’ij for the most trivial concerns, from requesting to win the local Indigenous beauty pageant, to winning elections and to solve personal or community problems. There is no magic, however. *How* the Ajq’ijab’ transmit the words and ideas to the petitioner creates the mystical aura of the ceremony.

¹⁰⁶ Ixchel, interview 13; Kablajuj Tzikin, interview 4.

The annual *Umial Tinamit Re She-Lajuj-Noj* (Daughter of Xelaju), an Indigenous beauty and intellectual pageant contest, takes place every year. Former dictator General Jorge Ubico created this event in the 1940s. It is one of the few Indigenous participation in Guatemala's celebration of the 1821 independence from Spain. During the *Umial Tinamit* event young Indigenous women can show their talents which include speaking in public, traditional dancing, cultural and political knowledge. These young women are under the coaching of young men. During these competitions, some local Ajq'ijab', in a secret way, play a *costumbre* role. The young male leaders and women candidates approach a local Ajq'ij to perform ceremonies to prepare, 'protect,' and ask for the female candidates to be successful. The role of the Ajq'ij in these events is a contentious issue, as many don't agree with the use of ceremonies for 'folkloric' (token) purposes.

The competing groups approach a local Indigenous intellectual to write speeches for the young Indigenous women competing for the title. It is now common to ask a spiritual guide to write the speech and conduct a ceremony for their candidate. Some ask the Ajq'ij to 'guarantee' them the win. Spiritual leaders have different opinions about such requests. Kieb Aj says this event is now called "traditional" when really is not. "It is *folklorismo*" (tokenism) he says. "We are all responsible when we participate in it and make fun of the Maya calendar. The calendar is not a horoscope, it is sacred." He has positive comments for youth who

Do their best to thank the Creator, the mother earth, the cosmos and to request the best for their candidate. I believe that is what they should ask not that she [the candidate] win at any cost. If that were the case, I would not allow myself to take part in something like that.¹⁰⁷

Ahkin, who is one of the most petitioned by young people told me: "The youth want me to guarantee them the triumph [*el triunfo* of the beauty pageant], but I cannot promise them that." He is patient with youth because "they have an immediate need and although they do not understand the ceremonial aspect when they request things like that, I cannot tell them because [I hope] some of them are going to continue with the ceremonies."¹⁰⁸ Ahkin's life commitment, since I met him, has been to attract youth to Maya spirituality.

¹⁰⁷ Kieb Aj, interview 2.

¹⁰⁸ Ahkin, interview 3.

He means that if he closes his door to youth they may not come back. He is not the only Ajq'ij approached during Quetzaltenango's Independence fair days.

The youth use their best to convince other Ajq'ijab' to celebrate ceremonies for them but only when competing in this contest. Hun Aj does not comply with their requests, he said, "I have never allowed myself to participate in these events because I will not take the wisdom of my Elders to the dump." Instead, he congratulates the youth for their interest when they visit him and encourages them, sarcastically, to come back in October, when the local fair is over.¹⁰⁹ One of the Ajq'ijab' I talked wrote the speech for the 2017 winner and showed it to me. The speech, besides encouraging youth not to abandon their traditions, was a harsh criticism of Indigenous scholars.

Requests for winning something is not just associated to youth groups. There are Indigenous and Ladino people who are convinced Maya spirituality "gives them protection" Ahkin said. They think the more ceremonies they do, the closer they are to the fire, the more convinced they become that they can overcome obstacles or "enemies" in their lives. This conviction has led politicians, government and non-government agencies to have their own Ajq'ij who performs ceremonies to advance their own cause, not a community cause.

Amid the popular belief that they possess special powers, spiritual guides want to attract youth to their belief system. However, none, including those who belong to schools or communities, said anything about being magicians or claimed metaphysical powers to attract people. Some claimed to have the "energy" or, in the case of Im Nijaib and Job Aj, the "*don*" (the gift of doing ceremony). Ahkin told me that it is in *the how*, the message of the ceremony that is important: "Is how we elaborate on the energies, so that people and the children don't despair when they listen to us. Spirituality is a set of energies, strengths, ideas and thoughts held by the person who is involved spiritually."¹¹⁰

The next step is "to instill those ideas in people's minds. If the ceremony is done properly and the *Nawalib'* are handled well and make people believe, just like our ancestors believed, then [spirituality] will rise above the group stage."¹¹¹ He laments that those

¹⁰⁹ Hun Aj, interview 1.

¹¹⁰ Ahkin, interview 3.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

“secrets,” the how’s of the mind are not properly done. Nowadays, a person asks for a ceremony and the next morning it is performed. No matter how big they are these ceremonies “have no effect.” In other words, a ceremony must be performed when the petition fits into the calendar symbol. For instance, some symbols are favorable in health requests, while others like *Tzi* (dog, justice) are propitious for justice issues. In his view, people must also know each other first, to know where the petitioner lives and works, even where he sleeps. “That is what needs to be taught to an apprentice, since childhood, but not force [the teachings] otherwise it will be lost.”¹¹²

Echoing Kieb Aj, Ahkin said that competition amongst Ajq’ijab’ is now common and based on who is better or knows more. He laments that there is no interest in doing in-depth research, of knowing what the strengths and weakness of the practice are. Among the young Ajq’ijab who belong to schools and communities, as Im Nijaib said, that is part of their dynamic; research is part of what they do. Nan Ixmucane told me that she appreciates the youth who study, investigate, and then share that knowledge with them: “They gave us a class in Maya epigraphy. At first, I did not understand anything but in my second time, I learned a bit more. Last week they taught us Mayan numbers.”¹¹³ Among the youth, however, not all are into learning from Elders.

Newer spiritual guides are claiming to have the skills to do “black magic.” However, Ahkin asks “if they truly think they can do magic, why do they not use their powers against those such as the president and his ministers, who oppress the people?”¹¹⁴ This inward question, like Ticum’s (2017) criticism of those who “lie and deceit” others, is a critique of those who claim to possess’ magic powers to influence or change things. At the same time, he is worried that the changes are affecting the traditional knowledge. He said, “We are losing the ceremonies on how to do the [cosmological] monkey dance and the flying tree-pole dance.” Further, he added:

We [the elders] have become lazy. We do not read anymore. There are people who don’t even know what this shameless government is doing, of what is happening in the world, of the current world crisis. We Ajq’ijab’ lost the authority to say, ‘let’s meet with the community, or let’s meet with the Quetzaltenango elite’ but they [traditional and older spiritual guides] don’t want to do it.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Nan Ixmucane, interview 7.

¹¹⁴ Ahkin, interview 3.

Although Ahkin's words are of anguish and despair towards his colleagues he does not lose hope in young people who follow the traditional ways. One of the things positively affecting both the traditional and new-age Ajq'ijab' is the public perception of Maya spirituality.

Im Nijaib, Job Aj and Quemé Chay agree that showing what the ceremonies are all about dispels the notion of witchcraft or magic. Quemé Chay mentions one public ritual that took place in the early hours of August 4, 2017. He observed Indigenous youth leading the ceremony. He noticed Ladinos would stop and observe closer than other Indigenous people.¹¹⁵ The following example (see Box 1) of such ceremony, its media coverage, and the subsequent comments illustrate that the public perception towards Maya spirituality is changing.

My knowledge of Quetzaltenango's ethnic composition indicates that Sosa and all those who replied to his racist comment are not K'iche Maya, but Ladino. Most of the comments indicate that these Ladino, like those classmates who supported me in the 1980s, can be the mediators, as Hale (2007) calls them, between their ethnic group and Indigenous peoples. It is not magic that is changing Indigenous and non-Indigenous views of Maya spirituality. As Ahkin explained, it is how they conduct the ceremonies and how they communicate their teachings to people. The older and traditional Ajq'ijab' prefer not to perform public ceremonies, the younger ones who do perform publicly are exposed to ridicule and racist comments as well as positive observations from K'iche Maya and Ladino as box 1 shows.

¹¹⁵ Stereo 100, Last modified December 29, 2018
<https://es-la.facebook.com/Stereo100Xela/videos/1588061451225480/>

Box 1: A Public Maya Ceremony and the Ladino Views

The August 4th ceremony celebrated the International Day of Indigenous Peoples. The event took place in the façade of the municipal theater, an iconic nineteenth-century building. A local radio station, on its website, reported the lead news as “Maya ceremony is celebrated in façade of Municipal Theater.” The description was brief: “[those celebrating] asked Nawal Noj to give wisdom to the [national] president, [the Quetzaltenango] Mayor, and new [Departamento] governor.” The ceremony was held in the early hours, but at 11:45 a.m., the article had 4,900 views, 19 shares and 178 likes. By 8:00 p.m., it had 9,800 views. One of the first and most commented users, Fito Sosa, wrote “We are not stupid (*babosos*) you dirty Maya [the Ajq’ij]. Your ancestors are witches who practiced divination and that is condemned by the Holy Scriptures.”¹¹⁶

The first response, by Juan Manuel Fuentes, to Sosa was “Witches’... [?] In case you did not know, the Maya culture was one of the most advanced during its time (sic). The best example is that they have their own numerical system; they had advanced knowledge of astronomy. That is not “divination.”¹¹⁷ The second response, by Guayo Solares, stated “Fito is a racist. Jesus Christ taught us to respect everybody and that is something you must learn. Let’s now see your violent answers to justify your inconsistency.”¹¹⁸ Edwin Loarca wrote, “You are a sloppy daydreamer (*pobre iluso*). You should start reading something about the Maya civilization. In that way, you will be able to comment. Don’t be a prey of your own ignorance.”¹¹⁹ Finally, Fernanda Rivera Murillo wrote, “Give him [Sosa] a zero. I am Christian, and one has to be an ignorant to devalue [Mayan] traditions.”¹²⁰ Sosa did not respond to his critics.

7.8 Political leadership as a possibility; education as a bridge

Confirming what Morales Sic (2007) found in his study, Oxib Aj told me that currently, government departments dealing with Indigenous issues and non-government organizations (NGOs) formed by Indigenous people either have an Ajq’ij as part of their

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

personnel or approach them to perform ceremonies for all kinds of occasions. The City of Quetzaltenango (*la municipalidad*) is no exception but not at same level. On January 28, 2018 when the former mayor of Quetzaltenango, Mr. Luis Grijalva, inaugurated the city's 24 rural mayors (*alcaldes comunitarios*), the activities opened with a Maya ceremony outside the iconic, Greek-styled municipal theatre.¹²¹ Like other national and local events that is the only role they play: to perform a ceremony to “bless” the event. This is what most participants call “folklorismo” (tokenism). The ceremony, however, takes place outside. There is no role for the Ajq'ijab' inside the theater (see photo 10).



Photo 10: Barreno, L., 20017, *Quetzaltenango Municipal Theater*.

None of the Quetzaltenango Ajq'ijab' I interviewed is a political leader nor were they advisors to the city authorities. In Quetzaltenango, immediate economic needs supersede political participation. This lack of political voice and decision making in city politics contrasts to what is happening at the rural level. Unlike rural spiritual guides the city Ajq'ijab' have not achieved community relevance - much less so at the national level.

The rural spiritual leaders are gaining community leadership roles, not because people voted for them in the western way. Instead, according to Quemé Chay, people now

¹²¹ Municipalidad de Quetzaltenango, página oficial en Facebook. In <https://www.facebook.com/405670849462565/photos/pcb.1959801887382779/1959801704049464/?type=3&theater>

use the ancestral “community consultation” to approach them. They continue using the traditional way of seeking guidance from their Elders. When external forces such as the state, municipal authority or political party threaten the community, he said, “The community becomes one as a defence mechanism.” Other threats include the mining industry. People react when they face expropriation and eviction. These threats and the community reaction, including the community consultations, have become part of the townships’ and rural Ajq’ijab’ discourse.

For Quemé Chay, rural community consultations are a “slap in the face for those of us who participated in the political arena.”¹²² He believes the peace process instilled this decision-making approach in communities. In his view, the modern use of the term “community consultations” is something Indigenous politicians, like him, and activists, achieved during the post-war years and the peace negotiations. He laments how Indigenous politicians were unable to capitalize on this achievement. They now see the Ajq’ijab’ and young people building on what they created. Communities simply mixed a modern term, community consultations, with the traditional way of making decisions. Indigenous peace negotiators were a temporary movement in the long-term battle to gain Indigenous rights.

In the 1990s, several national and international events showed Indigenous issues taking a prominent role in Guatemala. Quemé Chay remembers two main things taking place that decade: the community consultations and Indigenous individuals working for the state. Quoting Charles Hale, he told me that Indigenous civil servants were coopted by the government. He said,

We followed the theory of entering the state to learn from within, however, the state transformed us, all of us, and we all failed. There is not a single national Indigenous leader who served in the state and learned how to dominate it. The state dominated us. It absorbed us.¹²³

They became bureaucrats with no decision-making powers. Spiritual leaders are filling this Indigenous political vacuum in the rural areas. He acknowledged that their people to defend the land, the territory and their resources approach them: “They are at the forefront of the struggle.” The rural Ajq’ijab’ are now the spokespeople because “people

¹²² Quemé Chay, interview 6.

¹²³ Ibid.

approach them.” The first thing they do is “to perform a ceremony for mother earth because she feeds us.” They took over the discourse of defending the land and territory.

The rural leadership, however, does not spread to the national level or international Indigenous rights arena. Quemé Chay argues, “They don’t have a clear [ideology] in the political struggle.” The rural Ajq’ijab’ remain committed to their communities. International law is foreign to them. He explained, “If one asks them about the ILO 169 [International Labour Organization Convention 169 regarding Indigenous rights] they don’t know anything.”¹²⁴ Participating in national politics is of no immediate concern. “If one asks them about participating in or governing the state, they don’t want to do it...they are diverse and very fragmented.”¹²⁵ He thinks Indigenous peoples still suffer the effects of colonization and that is reflected in how the Ajq’ijab’ are divided at the local and national levels.

There is a gap between the spiritual guides with headquarters in Guatemala City, as found by Morales Sic (2007), and the Quetzaltenango and rural Ajq’ijab’. In Hun Aj’s opinion the rural Ajq’ijab’ are trusted more than governors, mayors and congressional representatives because, he argues, “they [the rural Ajq’ijab] are not elected but are approached by their people because [they believe] the Creator elected him or her, to be there to serve the community.”¹²⁶ As Morales Sic indicated, spiritual guides who receive government support or who work for it cannot contradict their employer to serve their communities. This was the case of the young female Ajq’ij, who organized the 2012 ceremonies and then fired.

Oxib Aj is optimistic about the role one or more national organizations can play to benefit Indigenous people’s needs. He thinks that, other than serving people on an individual or group basis, the non-government affiliated Ajq’ijab’ can influence national policies when they are organized. In 2017, a group of them attempted to put pressure on members of congress to recognize Indigenous law but soon realized how corruption prevails in congress. Oxib Aj said,

In their manifesto, they said ‘we withdraw from the negotiations with government, because we cannot negotiate with corrupt congressmen... We will wait until we can

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Hun Aj, interview 1.

talk with honorable people. We have been waiting 500 years. We can wait four or five more years.¹²⁷

This shows how heterogeneous the spiritual guides are at the national level. Those who do not receive government support do have collective goals in their activities.

The last thing the Ajq'ijab' and Quemé Chay linked is the role Quetzaltenango can play in the Maya's social and cultural resurgence, using spirituality. There is not a single pre-colonial "pyramid, building or temple [in Quetzaltenango], because everything was destroyed." Nevertheless, Oxib argues the K'iche name of the city, She-Lajuj-Noj, indicates that the city, as per its *Nawal* Noj (wisdom or intelligence), was targeted for destruction by conquering forces. Why? Because the "university (sic) that educated all of Mesoamerica with Maya knowledge [was in this city]." The re-construction of that knowledge, Oxib Aj told me, "has to start here." Indeed, the local extension of the national public university, San Carlos University, after 493 years of conquest, introduced and now offers the course in "Maya Cosmology" as a required course in the Master of Social Anthropology.¹²⁸

For Quemé Chay, the first thing to do is to "recover the principles, philosophy and whatever is implied in the Maya worldview of the universe and society because that is the fundamental path of humanity and not just for Indigenous people." Both Oxib Aj and Quemé Chay agree that religious dogmas will not help in this task. Therefore, the Maya must "free ourselves of any dogmatic [belief]." In the practical aspect of this renaissance, Im Nijaib proposes the young Ajq'ijab' approach the *Abuelos*, the traditional Ajq'ijab', and talk to them. He told me "we need to listen to them, and they need to listen to the youth. We need the spiritual framework. I also believe we must insist that [Maya] spirituality is a right. Nobody will respect us if we don't talk about it." Nan Ixmucane sees value in the new communities and schools as they invite her and other *Abuelos*. The young Ajq'ijab', because of their research and teaching skills, teach them the history, meaning and ways of writing glyphs. This shows that the *Abuelos* are welcome for their knowledge of the rituals, language and age. In return, some *Abuelos* are beginning to attend these collectives

¹²⁷ Oxib Aj, interview 11.

¹²⁸ Centro Universitario de Occidente (CUNOC), San Carlos University of Guatemala (USAC), "Departamento de Estudios de Posgrado -CUNOC-, Last modified February 10, 2019 <http://www.postgrados.cunoc.edu.gt/carpeta/carreras2019/Antropologia%20Social.pdf>

because, after years of hiding, they can finally express to others who they are without fear of reprisal. “We are not afraid anymore,” Kablajuj Tzikin told me.

7.9 Paradoxes of survival and a space shift: War and peace; state violence and common crime; space and energy

Indigenous peace negotiators like Quemé Chay did not know much about Maya spirituality or “the “icing on the cake.” He claims that not him, not the government or guerrilla representatives understood it. Yet, it was the end of a 36-year Civil War that showed that Mayan religious beliefs were not extinct. Secret counter-hegemony succeeded. Except for a few, not all, ‘national’ organizations that work closely with the government (Morales Sic, 2007) traditional spiritual guides and their practices are not at the center of a national movement. Those affiliated with government have no decision-making powers nor can they influence policy-making. While the Quetzaltenango spiritual guides, like other Indigenous leaders, did not end up taking national leadership roles the situation changes at the small community level where they play pivotal roles. In the city, like other citizens they are prey to the mundane realities of a failed democracy, which ironically, is changing the place of prayer after 500 years of practising in caves.

Although the four guerrilla organizations are now defunct, a former guerrilla fighter now Ajq’ij told me, “the armed struggle” is not recognized today. The civil war is almost a forgotten event in a forgotten era. It is not part of the education system or the universities. True, he says, “there were no ceremonies in the mountains [during the war] but to survive we had to keep the fire on, otherwise we would die of cold...In the *Cakchiquel Annals*, fire has been important for humanity’s survival.” He uses the metaphor of fire to keep warm in the mountains with the ceremonial fires that continued burning during the armed conflict.

Oxib Aj added that “to reach the quality [of life] we are now enjoying had a horrific cost: many died, many spiritual guides were tortured.” Oxib Aj echoes what Ahkin told me about the Kekchí Ajq’ijab killed by the army. Those deaths and the military massacres remained in the collective consciousness of the Indigenous and popular movements. Oxib Aj said the 1992 university students’ public Maya ceremony was to remind students and the public of the cruelty of the war. By then the “peace negotiations were on and soon

coming to their end.” Coincidentally, other events were taking place in the 1990s: Rigoberta Menchú obtained the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, which brought attention to the plight of Indigenous peoples; the United Nations Decade of Indigenous Peoples meant financial aid to education, culture and even spiritual projects, and; the counter celebrations to the ‘discovery’ of the Americas.

In Oxib Aj’s view, these national and international events influenced the national government and the oligarchy. They “had to tolerate [the Indigenous events] because of the international support and because of the Identity and Rights of the Indigenous Peoples Accord, which brought forward the spiritual rights.”¹²⁹ Ojeb Aj added that of all the accords reached in the final Peace Agreement, most are not mentioned. They were not fully achieved nor materialized but the one accord specific to the right of Indigenous people remains the most important because it allowed the Ajq’ij to bring ceremonies to the public sphere.¹³⁰ As Hale mentioned in Chapter 6, the Peace Agreement included the right for people to practise Mayan spiritual beliefs. The “icing on the cake” was not simply an ornament in the accord. The Ajq’ijab’ celebrated something others only knew by name. For two decades, Maya spirituality grew nationally, and Quetzaltenango was no exception.

In 2017, more than any other time, except that “fear” they felt in the 1980s, I noticed the fear of going and practising in the mountains. This time, however, it is not fear of the army nor even society, but common and organized crime. Oxib Aj says that during the armed conflict the state had “a monopoly of violence.” Like him, the older participants have a direct recollection of the *conflicto armado*, and the younger generation know about it by talking to Elders. Times have changed, and in Oxib’s view, state-organized violence was replaced by petty and organized crime. The state’s laws are no deterrent to daily delinquency.¹³¹

The state cannot regulate how to deal with groups that organize their own forms of violence, he said. Nan Ixquic, Oxib and Ixchel agree in the way, even if petty, organized crime works in the outskirts of Quetzaltenango. When robbers see a spiritual leader, alone or with other people, walking towards a hill looking for an altar to do a ceremony they

¹²⁹ Oxib Aj, interview 11.

¹³⁰ Ojeb Aj, interview 10.

¹³¹ Oxib Aj, interview 11.

follow them. The altars are hidden in nearby hills and volcanoes, away from the public eye and that exposes the Ajq'ijab' to become a prey to thieves. Nan Ixquic and Ixchel became very emotional when discussing this issue, as they were victims of it. Nan Ixquic said, repeatedly, that they do not carry much money with them, and yet whatever they carry is stolen from them. Ixchel is now afraid of going to even the most sacred places near Quetzaltenango like the Juan Noj altar (see photo 11) located in the hill Cerro Quemado where unknown men have followed them. Six of the people I visited experienced robberies.



Photo 11: Barreno, L., August 2017, *Juan Noj Altar, Cerro Quemado*.

When I hosted two ceremonies for this project, an Ajq'ij brought his machete for protection. I also brought one (see photo 12). Any noise was reason enough to look around. Oxib Aj told me Ajq'ijab' have died victims of these crimes, but “the state is not worried about that and even though this is a state problem and a municipal problem. We are far from solving this situation.”¹³² Going to the mountains is now a risk. There are no police officers patrolling the rural roads much less around the Mayan altars.

¹³² Ibid.

Photo 12: Barreno, L. 2017.
A Machete for Self-Defence.



Whether organized or not, common crime has led spiritual guides to create or use home altars for their ceremonies. Ironically, the participant with the oldest altar was Quemé Chay. Although he is not an Ajq'ij he maintains the family altar clean and well kept; I observed candles, flowers as well as Catholic and Mayan symbols around it. Four Ajq'ijab had newer altars. Oxib Aj said this paradox has given the spiritual guides a sense of security and recognition among their neighbors. The result is tolerance because neighbors can see, “in flesh and bone,” an Ajq'ij doing ceremonies at home. “We have turned familiar something that was considered a thing of the past and turned the past into something familiar. As a result, there is happiness when ceremonies are done at home,” he says.

Space and place (as a geographic setting) are important to Indigenous ceremonies but, as I found in this dissertation, they are as important as “energy.” Ixchel told me people went to the mountains because of the energy of the altars located there. Although it will take time for their home altars to get that energy, she is confident they will achieve it by “giving offerings in the same place ... we feel our place [home altar] has energy because we have been offering here for a few years.” Ixchel is not an Ajq'ij yet, but like Hun Aj who believed in prayer to end the war, she believes in the power of prayer to give energy to their home altars. Five traditional Ajq'ijab' have now altars in their homes to resolve a cultural and social need. This change is one of this dissertation's main findings as it demonstrates how people adapt to adverse and changing circumstances. During colonialism, they abandoned the cities for fear of the colonizer and the Catholic Church.

Now they are returning home. Maya spirituality, most of the Ajq'ijab explained, is a continuous not a static belief. They are adapting to that continuity.

Conclusion

The Quetzaltenango Ajq'ijab', like their counterparts in other Guatemalan regions, endured centuries of colonial and neo-colonial cultural oppression including state terrorism in the 1980s. Contesting hegemony of the dominant economic, political and religious groups was not a frontal confrontation. Instead, they passed their knowledge and skills to others in secret. Maya spiritualism survived by keeping itself secret. Quetzaltenango provided one space from which the Ajq'ijab' of the 1980s could resist neo-colonialism, much as the Ajq'ijab' had in the past. New challenges, internal and external, defied their counter-hegemonic struggle.

Despite unplanned urban growth, some city homes, the nearby hills, mountains and volcanoes provided spaces to nurture the growth of Mayan ceremonies. Today 59 altars, as told to me by two Ajq'ijab', surround Quetzaltenango, most located in the mountains south and west of the city. The 36-year Civil War did not damage the city's buildings and altars. However, local progressive residents and practitioners of Maya spirituality remember the psychological and low-intensity warfare of the late 1970s and through the 1980s. Nonetheless, people like Ahkin, Hun Aj, Kieb Aj, Kablajuj Tzikin and Nan Ixquic found ways to learn from Kekchí and K'iche Maya spiritual guides. In turn, they used the relative peace of the city and their altars to pass along their knowledge and skills to others. They defied the curfews and repression of the times.

The city is home to some of Guatemala's leading Indigenous intellectuals. Professionals such as Oxib Aj recall the war atrocities, the first attempts to end the war and the constitutional recognition of Indigenous people's rights in 1984. Similarly, Mr. Rigoberto Quemé Chay, a top Indigenous intellectual and a politician, took part in the peace negotiations. He recalled the 1996 Peace Agreement. It set the context by legitimizing Mayan cultural practices 'from above.' As examined by Hale in Chapter 4, Quemé Chay and his colleagues negotiated these reforms and then accepted by the oligarchy. However, local change 'from below' drove unprecedented growth in the number of new spiritual

guides all over Guatemala. Many received training in Quetzaltenango. Most, but not all, traditional Ajq'ijab' welcomed and supported the Peace Agreement.

The post-war evolution of Maya spirituality resulted in new challenges. The spiritual guides are a diverse group, not unified in a single front or association. For instance, NGO groups offer modern alternatives to Ajq'ijab' teachings; some charge fees for ceremonies; others are used as tokens during cultural and political events. This multiplicity of viewing and using Maya spirituality has resulted in a contemporary conflict between those who support the new modalities and those who oppose them. Despite these differences, scholar Quemé Chay and Oxib Aj have confidence the traditional and the *comunidad* Ajq'ijab' can come together for a common good. During my time in Quetzaltenango, there was no formal mechanism to bring these sides together.

Presently, neither the traditional nor the *comunidad* Ajq'ijab use their status as spiritual guides to vie for local or national political leadership. On the one hand, the traditional Ajq'ijab' teachings are based on their life experiences and mastery of the *Popol Wuh* and the 260-day calendar. They prefer to stay within the boundaries of their belief system to demonstrate cultural and political resistance but not in public. On the other hand, some of the younger Ajq'ijab', both traditional (Hijo del Agua) and *comunidad* members (Im Nijaib and Job Aj), see Maya spirituality as an extension of their identity and ancestral practice. The *comunidad* spiritual guides also support the public ceremonies to assert their rights, as established in the Peace Agreement and National Constitution. As stated by Quemé Chay, in small communities, the Ajq'ijab' are now approached by their people to lead them in their struggles against the government, foreign companies or other forms of intrusion.

Regardless of their cultural or political aspirations, all participants face a growing modern phenomenon: urban and rural crime. It is not that crime did not exist before. It simply has become more frequent, more 'organized' and increasingly targeting spiritual guides and their altars. It is clear that this time, it is neither the state nor the church persecuting or attacking the Ajq'ijab'. Most Quetzaltenango residents face the same thing: crime as the consequence of a failed state. Since the state lacks effective mechanisms to deal with urban and rural crime, people have to deal with it on their own.

The Ajq'ijab's measures to deal with threats to their personal safety range from carrying sticks and machetes when they go to the altars to changing the spiritual venues. They are not totally abandoning the rural altars. They are simply avoiding danger. The threat of physical attack is particularly acute if they go alone or if they oppose robberies. The deeper conflict is how to build the sacred 'energy' in their makeshift home-altars as they had kindled over the last 500 years in the 59 altars surrounding the city. History is ironic. Colonial violence forced the Ajq'ijab' out of Quetzaltenango. Now, petty crime is forcing them to return.

Chapter 8: Analysis and Conclusion

As described in this dissertation's prologue, Mayan ceremonies at Quetzaltenango in the 1980s took place in secluded, rural places - away from the public eye. Invitations to attend were person to person. Very few people attended. Participants upheld the secrecy to avoid ridicule, social rejection, and public shaming. Recalling my research question, this counter-hegemonic struggle was transformed after five centuries of ethno-religious and political repression. Using the peace process as the historical juncture, Mayan ceremonial leaders abandoned secrecy in the early 1990s and began to celebrate publicly, which resulted in new members and new challenges.

The historical chapters of this dissertation demonstrate how Maya religion was central to the various Mayan periods. Religion was not separated from other social institutions. The modern decipherment of Mayan codes unlocked pre-classical and classical Maya history and achievements. Coe equated these findings with space exploration and the discovery of the human genetic code. Yet, he was puzzled: how the Maya became a “‘folk-culture’ with little or no voice in their own destiny.”¹ Although his emphasis was negative, Coe also found that after twenty-five centuries the Maya can “still give the correct day in the 260-day-count [Lunar calendar or Chol Q’ij].”² This aspect was often a blind spot for Guatemalan colonial and contemporary scholars. What these scholars overlooked was how the calendar and other mnemonic instruments endured as devices of education and cultural resistance even during the 1980s genocide.

This study's main question was resolved by the findings of José Morales Sic, Thomas Hart, Victor Montejo and most especially Jean Molesky-Poz.³ They demonstrated that the Maya Ajq'ijab came out of secrecy in various parts of the country during the 1990s.

¹ Michael D. Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2012 [1992]), 47.

² *Ibid.* 61.

³ José Roberto Morales Sic, *Religión y Política: El proceso de institucionalización de la espiritualidad en el movimiento maya guatemalteco* (Guatemala: FLACSO), 2007; Victor Montejo, “Mayan Ways of Knowing: Modern Mayans and the Elders” in *A Will to Survive: Indigenous Essays on the Politics of Culture, Language and Identity*, Stephen Greymorning, ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2004), 154-170; Thomas Hart, *The Ancient Spirituality of Modern Maya* ([Albuquerque]: University of New Mexico Press), 2008; Jean Molesky-Poz, *Contemporary Maya Spirituality: The Ancient Ways Are Not Lost* (Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 2009).

This resurgence was part of the continental “500 years of resistance” movement protesting Columbus’ ‘discovery’ of the Americas and intensified by Guatemala’s peace process.

As discussed, the survival of Maya spirituality was a long and tortuous matter. Since conquest a continuous hegemonic effort was made to destroy the Maya worldview and collective identity or at least frame it in opposition to the presumptive superiority of Christianity and the Spanish and then Criollo colonial order. Lacking any other explanations, Maya spirituality was labeled “evil,” “pagan” and “foolish.” The “doctrine” of their sacred book, the *Popol Wuh*, was targeted to destroy the old religion.⁴ While Catholic and then protestant hegemony did not succeed in eradicating Mayan spirituality, the latter now finds itself dealing with internal dilemmas.

This writer argues that the 1990s cultural renaissance was a historical juncture that resulted in individuals, but not the Indigenous masses, becoming spiritual guides and for different purposes. Borrowing Florencia Mallon’s observation of public intellectuals, I applied it to the traditional and *comunidad* trained Ajq’ijab. She wrote that public intellectuals “...can take the work of “counter-hegemonic heroes.”” These heroes create new possibilities in community life and press for the recognition of local struggles in wider political affairs. The opposite can also occur. They can be “enforcers” who normalize state-centric politics and prejudices in local affairs.”⁵ As Morales Sic demonstrated, the early irregular appearances of the Mayan ceremonies led to an institutional growth resulting in various national Ajq’ijab’ groups serving different interests, including the national government. “Heroes,” or those who continue with the traditional ceremonies, “enforcers,” those coopted by the national government, and, as some scholars argue, the “entrepreneurs” are part of this new reality. While this writer did not locate a Quetzaltenango Ajq’ij serving the government, in this historical moment I met “heroes” and knew of the existence of “entrepreneurs” co-existing in the same place and space. For the traditional Ajq’ijab the “struggle,” to bring respect and acceptance of their belief system, continues. Such struggle

⁴ Cited in Nestor Quiroa, “Missionary exegesis of the Popol Vuh: Maya K’iche’ Cultural and Religious Continuity in Colonial and Contemporary Highland Guatemala.” University of Chicago, 2013 <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.cyber.usask.ca/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=b7a3a8e4-b005-4faa-9d3e-4cd050114ec4%40sessionmgr4005&vid=1&hid=4207>, 77.

⁵ Cited in Warren, *Indigenous Movements and their Critics*, 26.

is anchored in a five millennia culture and civilization, and five centuries of counter-hegemonic struggle.

Through literature reviews and interviews, this dissertation's findings reject the colonial and neo-colonial notion that Ajq'ijab' ceremonies invoked the "devil," as Fuentes y Guzmán wrote.⁶ Rather their purpose was to maintain and honor the Maya pantheon. To fill the gaps left by other scholars, I met, socialized and prayed with nine traditional Ajq'ijab'. I also met two *comunidad* trained Ajq'ijab' and two non-spiritual leaders. These thirteen participants shared with me their personal views about Maya spirituality. They narrated their experiences during the 1980s Guatemalan dystopia when Quetzaltenango was a relatively safe place for the resurgence of Maya spirituality. They described the cultural renaissance of the 1990s; the diversity of opinions about commodification and political cooptation of their ceremonies; the emergence of a new system to train spiritual guides; their role in city and national politics; and, how their places of pray are again being transformed by external forces. Survival and change are common themes in this continuity.

8.1. Historical counter-hegemony: The Ajq'ijab' survived colonization and neo-colonization

This project of Indigenous counter-hegemonic resistance and renewal followed a long and winding path. Resistance began when the K'iche captain, Tecum, and his troops performed the last Indigenous recorded pre-colonization Maya ceremony: they offered their blood to the Creator by piercing themselves before facing the invaders.⁷ In 1524, they experienced how fire could be used for other purposes; their national leaders were burned alive and their crops burned when they opposed colonial rule. Key to cultural domination was Fray Diego Landa's burning of books. Thousands of burned documents meant the loss of thousands of years of intellectual achievements. The four surviving codices are only a miniscule demonstration of the Maya epistemology.

When colonization began in Guatemala in the early 16th century, the Ajq'ijab' assumed a subaltern position within the hegemony of European settler capitalism and

⁶ Ibid. 212.

⁷ Cited in Robert Carmack, *Quichean Civilization: The Ethnohistoric, Ethnographic, and Archaeological Sources*. (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), 302.

Catholicism (later reinforced by American evangelical sects). Under the ‘legal’ rules of the *Requirimiento*, the *Encomienda*, and the *Repartimiento*, Catholicism was an ideological mechanism to control Indigenous people. Missionaries and the occupying administration worked together to erase the ancient religion from people’s minds. As stated by Martha Few, in the late 1600s, Indigenous women healers and midwives were accused and punished for practicing ‘sorcery’ in the colonial city of Antigua Guatemala.⁸ During the same period, Fray Francisco Ximenez wrote how important “the burning fire [their beliefs]” was to the “infidels.”⁹ In the 1690s, Fuentes y Guzmán ordered the destruction of Mayan stone figures representing animals and humans. His actions juxtaposed two very different paradigms. On the one hand, he was a devoted Catholic and colonial political leader. These roles led him to eliminate ‘pagan’ and ‘idolatrous’ icons from ‘his’ land. This was the paradigm of colonial-Christianity in action. On the other hand, he wrote about people’s “grief” after they observed how metal tools shattered their deities’ stone representations.¹⁰ In Martínez Peláez’s analysis of Fuentes y Guzman’s *La Recordación Florida*, he chronicles that paganism was still alive, and the colonizer wanted it eradicated.¹¹ In other words, 170 years after conquest, cultural and political hegemony was not working.¹² Further, Carmack described the appearance of a series of calendars at Quetzaltenango in 1722. “Educated” Indians gave the calendars to priest Larraz in 1770.¹³ Those who were supposed to be assimilated had not yet forgotten the old teachings. From grief to resilience and reassertion, this is the paradigm of the Maya’s anti-colonial and counter-hegemonic struggles.

To consolidate colonial rule, the Spaniards attempted to break the link between the classical Maya and the colonial era’s Indigenous population. To their dismay, this link between past and present proved strong. The intellectual and moral authority granted to the Mayan spiritual leaders over millennia could not be easily or completely extinguished.

⁸ Martha Few, *Women who Live Evil Lives: Gender, Religion, and the Politics of Power in Colonial Guatemala* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010), 77, 82, 84, 95, 99.

⁹ Cited in Quiroa, “Missionary exegesis of the Popol Vuh,” 77.

¹⁰ Severo Martínez, Peláez, *La Patria del Criollo* (Mexico: Ediciones en Marcha, 1994), 210.

¹¹ Cited in Martínez Peláez, *La Patria del Criollo*, 205-17.

¹² Martínez Peláez, *La Patria del Criollo*, 209-10.

¹³ Carmack, *Quichean Civilization*, 167.

It wasn't until the late 1900s that Guatemalan scholarly interest in the Ajq'ijab' emerged although in a decidedly neo-colonial manner. As this work has shown, their practice was still observed from a Catholic or Marxist view. Examples include Falla's description of converted Indigenous people tossing the sacred bundle's content into places associated with 'evil.'¹⁴ Falla also called Maya spirituality "reprehensible." Conversion to Catholicism, in his view, was a "liberation from oppression [Maya spirituality]."¹⁵ Marxist scholar Martínez Peláez did not spare Indigenous "pagan" practices and Catholic beliefs in Satan, by calling both "religious fantasies."¹⁶ I argue that these religious and academic views of Maya spirituality represented a risk to those who venture to continue with its practice.

Several scholars answered some central questions posed by this study, but one question remained unanswered. How had the Ajq'ijab' operated as organic intellectuals of the Maya tradition, clandestinely contesting cultural domination by avoiding the public eye, the colonial authorities, and the urban areas? The answer was found in what Guatemalan academics ignored, but foreign scholars began to study. These scholars offered a different view of the Ajq'ijab' and the mnemonics they use. For instance, this writer had never seen the original, or copy of the Mayan calendars, the *Chol Q'ij* (lunar calendar) and the Ab (solar calendar) printed in the Dresden Codex, until I received a copy of the book *Los Codices Mayas* (1985) in Chiapas, Mexico in the early 2000s.

Using the *Popol Wuh*, these scholars began to examine the modern Ajq'ijab's link to classic and post-classic ceremonies. For instance, when the first K'iche forefathers prayed hoping for the sun to appear on the horizon when they reached the highlands¹⁷ is a case in point. The materials identified in that ceremony and invoking the four sides of the universe continue to be used by the modern Ajq'ijab. Dennis Tedlock findings included pottery pieces where he found the mystical twins, Hun Ahpu and Ixbalanque, and the Lords of Xibalba printed in them.¹⁸ I argue that the publications of various *Popol Wuh* versions,

¹⁴ Ricardo Falla, *Quiché Rebelde: Religious Conversion, Politics and Ethnic Identity in Guatemala* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001), 119, 166.

¹⁵ Ibid. 218.

¹⁶ Ibid. 212.

¹⁷ Jean Molesky-Poz, *Contemporary Maya Spirituality: The Ancient Ways Are Not Lost* (Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 2009), 160.

¹⁸ Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Definite Edition of the Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1996), 90-1, 154-57.

the 260-day calendar and the new ‘discoveries’ validate what the Ajq’ijab, for centuries, were kept alive through oral tradition and the continuation of their ceremonies.

Foreign scholars also focused on Ajq’ijab’ and *costumbristas*’ strategies to secure their belief system. Garret Cook found the use of the calendar and the *costumbre* (to prepare people for the traditional dances) in Momostenango.¹⁹ He associated Momostenango’s Catholic religious activities and the town itself to the *Popol Wuh*.²⁰ Classic Maya beliefs hid in Catholic practices. Through the *cofradías*, the K’iche Maya camouflaged their beliefs within the Catholic festivals and confronted the Catholic Action in the 1950s when the latter wanted to get rid of their ceremonies inside the Momostenango church.²¹ Catholic *cofradías* proved to be key in protecting la *costumbre* and the Ajq’ijab’s work. *Costumbristas* relied on the Ajq’ijab as much as the Ajq’ijab relied on the *costumbristas*. Ceremonies began to be studied.

A foreign scholar also witnessed that state terrorism, including the 1980s genocide, did not prevent people from celebrating Mayan ceremonies. Huet witnessed how the Kekchí people, besides celebrating Catholic mass, used whatever materials they could find in the jungles to practice the *mayejak* (Maya ceremony) with *pom*, while hiding from the Guatemalan army.²² Forster also found how “Mayan religion regained new strength” in the midst of war and racial hate from the Guatemalan army and its allies.²³ This study demonstrated that the attacks against the liberation theologians within the Catholic Church and Maya spirituality during the Civil War drove the growth of Protestant sects. While tens of thousands of people were slaughtered or persecuted, these sects grew all over Guatemala. This aggressive neo-colonial hegemonic project combined religion and American capitalist values.

Protestant and Mormon Church buildings now rival the Catholic cathedrals of the colonial era. These three religions continue to compete for souls in the Guatemalan market. The main clientele continues to be the millions of Indigenous and Ladino people. However,

¹⁹ Garrett W. Cook, *Renewing the Maya World: Expressive Culture in a Highland Town* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 203.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Carmack, *Rebels of Highland Guatemala*, 239-40.

²² Alfonso Huet, *Nos Salvó la Sagrada Selva* (Cobán, Alta Verapaz: ADICI Wakliiqo, 2008), 153.

²³ Cindy Forster, *La Revolución Indígena y Campesina en Guatemala, 1970 a 2000: “Ver un día que nuestra raza maya fuera levantada”* (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, 2012), 57. My translation.

this study illustrated that this inter-denominational competition also makes Christian cultural hegemony increasingly fragile, fractured and vulnerable. Under conditions of open inter-denominational rivalry, religious beliefs have increasingly become a choice. The anti-colonial character of the Maya cultural and spiritual alternatives, even if vulnerable to internal divisions, pose a resurgent challenge to a divided Christianity. The resilient Ajq'ijab' had to re-learn how to negotiate and compete in this new religious market. Where the Vatican spiritual monopoly once dominated the Maya or compelled a negotiated submission, that monopoly power was now broken.

This study demonstrated that another key factor in the Maya resurgence was political. The country is dominated by a small *Criollo* oligarchy that sees Ladinos and Indigenous peoples as inferior to them.²⁴ Casaús Arzú's hegemonic study and Arturo Taracena's analysis of the *Criollo* domination of Guatemala described how *Criollo* families use the "blood ideology" to dominate the Maya and Ladino - by keeping them separated.²⁵ The Civil War exposed the extent of the *Criollo* oligarchy and the army leaders' use of violence to retain their political hegemony. The 1981-1983 genocide was comparable to the conquest era. Fire, again, was used to burn people alive, scorched their communities and crops and set places of teaching and worship on fire.

Ironically, soon after the 1983 overthrow of Rios Montt by another military dictator, Indigenous people's cultural rights were first constitutionally recognized in 1984; and then again as part of the 1996 Peace Agreement (but within the parameters established by Guatemalan dominant groups, as Charles Hale contends).²⁶ In neither period was the *Criollo* hegemony at risk as most rights dealt more with cultural issues than meaningful social transformations. Nevertheless, Maya spirituality, as part of the 1995 Indigenous Rights Accord, was included in the 1996 accords. The Ajq'ijab' seized the opportunity to come out of secrecy. They began to communicate with each other freely. That historical

²⁴ Marta Elena Casaús Arzú, *Guatemala: linaje y racismo* (Guatemala: F & G Editores, 2007), 5.

²⁵ Greg Grandin, *La sangre de Guatemala: Raza y nación en Quetzaltenango 1750-1954* (Guatemala: Ciudad Universitaria, 2007), 122; Arturo Taracena Arriola, "From Assimilation to Segregation: Guatemala, 1800-1944," Part II- Racialization in the State in the Long Nineteenth Century. In *Histories of Race and Racism: The Andes and Mesoamerica from Colonial Times to the Present*, ed. Laura Moskowit (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 111.

²⁶ Charles Hale, *Más que un indio: Ambivalencia racial y multiculturalismo neoliberal en Guatemala* (Guatemala City: AVANSCO, 2007), 97;

moment resulted in the creation of thriving National Indigenous spiritual organizations in the 1990s when state violence or persecution was no longer a threat.

This opening did not lead to the unification of spiritual guides. As this study has also demonstrated, civilian governments hired a few Ajq'ijab' after the war. One of the few Indigenous scholars who wrote on the subject, Morales Sic found Mayan organizations still have difficulties in converting their Indigenous staff to Mayan spiritual beliefs. This shows the cultural disunity that currently exist among the Ajq'ijab and 'national' organizations headquartered in Guatemala City. It also shows that neither hegemonic nor counter-hegemonic blocs are unified. That was not the case at Quetzaltenango in the 1980s when the war was ongoing and the Ajq'ijab still practiced in secrecy. Their unity was required to protect all who participated in ceremonies. New forms of capitalism, politics and social realities now challenge the organic unity enforced by state surveillance and fear of social rejection.

8.2. Change and continuity of Maya spirituality: Tradition, transition, and paradoxes

The main difference between Christian and Mayan religions is that the former made the unknown divine whereas the Maya religion made the known sacred. It made science sacred. The sun, moon, the earth and their produce became sacred. Thus, the memory of their mystical heroes and historical leaders became sacred; the ancient cities, mountains, rivers and lakes became sacred; the corn became sacred.²⁷

This dissertation has attempted to explain the structural changes resulting from historical, religious and political factors and how these shaped the resurgent celebrations of Maya identity. Contemporary Quetzaltenango spiritual guides are experiencing and adapting to that change. Using the Indigenous methodology *la costumbre*, I approached people whose lives revolve around learning and teaching the core values of Maya spirituality. *La costumbre*, borrowing from Kovach, validated the existence, voices and lived experiences “of those once excluded.” This dissertation identified four leading forces in that experience: overcoming fear; resistance to cooptation and commodification; resistance to the ill effects of technology on cultural practices; and opting for an urban alternative to evade rural crime.

²⁷ Rigoberto Quemé Chay, interview by Leonzo Barreno, August 19, 2017, interview 6, transcript.

Most of this study participants confirmed that the negotiations leading to the 1996 Peace Agreement encouraged them to leave secrecy behind and be less fearful of the state. This corroborates Hart, Molesky-Poz and Hale's studies. Recognition of Indigenous peoples and their rights in a multicultural Guatemala gave the spiritual guides a respite. Ironically, their beliefs were not central to the fight for human rights negotiated during Guatemala's peace process. Adding Mayan spiritual practices in the final document was more an ornament (*guinda en el pastel*) than a thoughtfully considered inclusion. However, most traditional and young spiritual guides agree that the final document, particularly the accord about Indigenous rights, was "the light at the end of the tunnel." It freed them from the fear they and their predecessors had felt for centuries. This was the key opening and catalyst for the popular Maya resurgence. The negotiations and agreement signing eliminated the reason to be secretive.

Except Hijo del Agua, most Ajq'ijab credit the Peace Agreement for Maya spirituality's renaissance. Certainly, a cultural boom followed. However, this study found that new contradictions also appeared. Ceremonies now entered Quetzaltenango's public sphere. Rituals became common at different cultural and political events. They were often used as political tokens and their practice was routinely commodified. These new realities are very different from what the traditional Ajq'ijab lived in the 1980s.

A key finding of this study is that Quetzaltenango's spiritual guides, through their gatherings and mutual support, have regained a confidence I did not see in the 1980s. When Kablajuj Tzikin said, "We are no longer afraid" I realized they were neither afraid of the state nor their relatives and neighbors knowing they are Ajq'ijab. Moreover, while their experiences show a diversity of opinions about what Maya spirituality is, they all agreed that their beliefs are spiritual not religious. According to them, this is "a way of life." Theirs is a local struggle to reassert the continuity of their beliefs and keeping the historical memory alive. However, they are also aware of the cultural challenges from within. For instance, the *Abuelos'* historical memory of the armed conflict was strong. They recalled the fear and anxiety they felt during the war. Although the army intimidated or attacked a few of them most took precautions such as practicing at rural altars after dark or before dawn. They knew that mentors and colleagues from other regions met tragic ends at the hands of the army. They also value their past colleagues' struggles for keeping the tradition

alive. When the older *Abuelos* recalled those times, I noticed how emotional they became. Ironically, most of them decided to become Ajq'ijab during that time.

My findings suggest that the historical experience of fear is not shared by the *comunidad* trained Ajq'ijab. While the traditional Ajq'ijab's organic work is anchored in experience and long-term goals, the *comunidad* Ajq'ijab pursue more immediate objectives. This is an effect of the 1990s cultural renaissance. In particular, it reflects the arrival of NGOs that challenge the Elders' methods of training followers, assembling and given the *tzite* (the bundle); preserving mnemonic values; serving people; and even the types of services spiritual guides can provide. One of the main differences between the *Abuelos* and the *comunidad* spiritual guides is that the latter became Ajq'ijab after the war and did not necessarily follow *la costumbre*. Im Nijaib acknowledges he and other young colleagues do not have the historical and traditional knowledge the *Abuelos* have. Clearly, the differences between the older and the younger spiritual guides are collective memory of fear and their experience in community service. Moreover, this results in different practices and simmering some tension in their relationship.

The interviews also revealed that not everything is confrontational between traditional and the younger guides. Affinities exist between them. The *comunidad*, or NGOs,' strength is that some of their members are university educated. They know the rights of Indigenous people; they have acquired scholarly knowledge previously not available to most traditional Ajq'ijab. As cases cited here have shown, the young guides have also experienced their own internal conflicts over whether to pursue new age or more traditional paths. Most *Abuelos* hope the youth will return to the ancient traditions by following the *costumbre* not NGO approaches. However, this dissertation cannot predict how this intergenerational conflict might be resolved.

Economic, political, technological and social forces continue to transform twenty-first century Maya spirituality in Quetzaltenango. In this new reality, capitalism and Maya culture exist in a contradictory tension. In the 1990s cultural renaissance the ceremonies became a commodity for a few, including some Quetzaltenango spiritual guides.²⁸ The

²⁸ I found this phenomenon in the literature and fieldwork of this study. Cook and Offit found young Momostenango spiritual guides, trained in Quetzaltenango, to profit from Maya spirituality, use a pyramid system.

Abuelos are critical of many aspects of the boom in Maya spirituality, including the selling of their beliefs and the use of rituals for folkloric and political purposes. One common complaint from both older and newer Ajq'ijab is that other colleagues are not necessarily using the ceremonies to sustain traditional knowledge, but to profit. They see the potential distortion that may result from the cooptation or commodification of their rituals. The phenomenon of charging for service has resulted in an impasse between most traditional Ajq'ijab and those who support collecting fees.

Added to the commercialization of ceremonies, technology and globalization represent newer challenges. This study has outlined how radio and internet ads illustrate the increasing use of for-profit rituals. Emulating Christian tele-evangelists, *espiritistas* (spiritists) broadcast promises to “cure illnesses,” provide “safe passage to the United States,” or grant “luck in love and business affairs.”²⁹ The use of potions, cards and non-traditional items made in Mexico or China are now making it into the ceremonies. Even the NGO trained Ajq'ijab do not agree with these items. However, they agreed that if Indigenous people sell them in the local markets it is because there is a demand for them. This financial contradiction, between for-profit models and traditional service prevents Quetzaltenango's spiritual guides from unification. It is a division exacerbated by the new technologies and global reach of contemporary capitalism.

Although some *Abuelos* participated in the first 1990s public ceremonies, they are now retreating. Even if there is no state or established religious persecution the *Abuelos* think that public spaces, such as parks and streets, are not sufficiently sacred venues for traditional ceremonies. In their view, these places have no ‘energy.’ Yet, ceremonies at the front doors of the Municipal Theatre in 2017 and 2018 show that some Ajq'ijab respond to requests to celebrate ceremonies there. I argue, and borrowing from Hale's analysis of the Peace Agreement, this is how far local neo-liberal multiculturalism allows them to go.

Finally, in the history of this city, state repression and social rejection forced the Ajq'ijab to practice in the mountains. However, this study documented that after five centuries of training new organic cadres and practicing in rural areas, common crime is forcing the Quetzaltenango's spiritual guides to return to the city. The paradox is that for centuries they were not allowed to practice in public spaces. While some hid their altars in

²⁹ Quemé Chay, interview 6; Im Nijaib, interview 8.

the back of their houses or under a Catholic altar, most ceremonies evaded the public eye. Nowadays, it is not government forces intimidating or following the Ajq'ijab. Now petty criminals assault and rob them on their way to, from and at the altars.

In this evolving context, they are moving their place of prayer. In fact, as I observed, some already did. For them, the importance of space hinges on the importance of “energy.” In their view, the more they build the fire and pray in their home altars the more energy such places will build. Added to this choice, neighbors, including Ladino people, are becoming more accepting of the practice and its practitioners.³⁰ While some traditional Ajq'ijab mentioned the word hope (*esperanza*) when referring to the continuation of their religion, Ojeb Aj said that it would take a lot more counter-hegemonic work to make it relevant to young people.

The Maya ancient priesthood with its hierarchical structure and social role, no longer exists in Guatemala. Recalling Green's stairwell metaphor, in the cultural and religious interaction, Maya people were at the lower part of the stairwell. Colonial and neo-colonial hegemonic campaigns had a profound impact eroding the main pillars of that religion. Mayan religious leaders are no longer the main advisors to the political leaders – though some were coopted by the neo-liberal state- as they were in the classical and post-classical periods. Much less are they in charge of society's religious education. Nor are they at the forefront of cosmological and mathematical discoveries anymore. Their capacity to write documents using classical characters and symbols has not been recovered. Similarly, the ability to build cities and temples following the position of the stars and according to the environment are still a thing of the past, at least for now. The devastation was, nonetheless, incomplete. Not even the 1981-1983 genocide was capable of destroying Mayan spirituality amongst Mayan activists. While the genocide did not affect Quetzaltenango in the same way it affected El Quiché, the Ajq'ijab' found ways to pass their knowledge to others. Their organic practice and teachings survived colonialism, Catholic and Protestant hegemony, and the recent Civil War. The 1990s peace process gave the traditional spiritual leaders a much-needed relief, but it also resulted in new changes, challenges and concerns. As demonstrated, what continues in Quetzaltenango is a

³⁰ (see Box 1: *A Public Maya Ceremony and the Ladino Views*)

traditional non-hierarchical, rather flattened, organization of traditional Ajq'ijab. The youth led NGOs are a new hierarchical phenomenon that needs further examination.³¹ Studies by foreign scholars and this study have demonstrated that Mayan ceremonies continue to honor the cosmos, the Maya pantheon, and use the Maya calendar for various purposes. Most importantly, colonization and the genocide did not destroy the Maya identity, culture and desire for a better life. Irrespective of the internal changes and contradictions, spirituality (or breathing) continues to play a central role in the resurgence of a stronger pan-Mayan nationhood.

³¹ The same can be said of the espiristas. Examination of the nemesis of the Ajq'ij, the Aj'itz, was not included here. Out of respect for their role in Maya culture, and because I am not familiar with the protocols to approach them, I opted for not including them in this study.

Appendix “A”: Glossary

Ab’	The 365-day Maya calendar. Together with the Chol Q’ij, or the 260-day calendar, it is illustrated in the Madrid Codex. <i>Haab</i> in the Yucatec Maya dialect.
Ajaw	The Creator.
Aj’itz (or Aj-itz)	The contrary of the Ajq’ij. His or her ceremonies are to perform bad omens against others.
Ajq’ij (or Aj-Kij)	Maya priest or Sun priest. Also known as Time-Keepers. Collectively they now prefer the name spiritual guides. <i>Ahkin</i> in the Yucatec dialect.
Ajq’ijab’	The plural of Ajq’ij.
Alom-K’ajolom, Tz’akol-Bitol	Male and female divine intermediaries between the creator and the Ajq’ijab (Time-Keepers or spiritual guides) Ixmucane and Ixpiyacoc to create humanity.
Alta Verapaz	Northern province of Guatemala. Most of its inhabitants are Kekchí Maya.
Alvarado, Pedro	Spanish conqueror of the territory of present-day Guatemala in 1524.
Avilish(or Avilix)	One of the patron deities given to the K’ichean Confederation when they left Tulan (present-day Tulan de Allende, Mexico), former capital of the Toltec people.
Brujo/bruja	Sorcerer or witch. This is the most common term to denigrate the Ajq’ij. Also called <i>Zahorin</i> or <i>shaman</i> .
Cacique	Headman of a lineage or chief.
Chol Q’ij	The Maya 260-day calendar and the main calendar used by the Ajq’ijab. <i>Tzolkin</i> in Yucatec Maya.
Clasista	Classist. Someone who analyzes society from a class perspective. Indigenous <i>clasistas</i> supported and joined the guerrilla struggle during the Civil War.
Cofradía	Indigenous Catholic groups organized to honour a Catholic saint. Ladino and urban Indigenous groups call their Catholic organizations <i>hermandades</i> (brotherhoods or sisterhoods).

Convite	Modern Ladino/Indigenous dances mimicking traditional Indigenous dances. Dancers use Halloween like costumes.
Copal	Pine resin. Together with pom and ocote they are the materials used by the mystical beings Balam Kitze, Balam Akab, Mahucutah, and Iki Balam to do the first ceremony to pray to Venus and the sun. Also, to honor Tohil, Awilish and Jacawitz. These materials, widely used in Mayan ceremonies, are sold in Indigenous markets.
Costumbre	The custom. In each Indigenous canton, town, or city the <i>Costumbre</i> varies but usually it involves a series of Indigenous steps, protocols, ceremonies, and actions before, during and after a traditional, social or religious event. Mostly used by Indigenous Catholic followers known as <i>costumbristas</i> and by traditionalists.
Criollo	Creoles. Spaniards born in Guatemala. According to Marta Elena Casaús Arzú they dominate Guatemala's politics and the economy.
Culaja	The Mam Maya name of the city they lost to the K'iche in the 1200s. The K'iche renamed it She-Lajuj-Noj and the Nahua renamed it Quetzaltenango (the Quetzal's wall) in 1524.
Culturalist	or Mayanist. Someone who analyzes society from a cultural or race point of view. Mayanists did not fully support the Civil War as for them the Left, led by Ladino, was another form of colonialism. The Left Ladino's critique is that the Mayanist are elitists who do not represent the large mass of Indigenous peoples.
El Quiché	One of Guatemala's provinces. Most of its inhabitants are K'iche but the Ixil and other Mayan groups also inhabit it. Most of the 1980s massacres and genocide took place in this province.
Encomienda	To entrust or to grant. In Guatemala Indigenous lands and people were distributed to conquistadors for their exploitation.
Gumarcaaj	The last K'iche capital city. Also known by the Nahua name of Uatlán.

Hun Batz and Hun Chowen	One Monkey and One Artisan are the first set of twins fathered by Hun Hun Ahpu and his wife Ixbaquialo. Both were converted in monkeys by their younger brothers Hun Ahpu and Ixbalanque. They represent the planet Mars. Batz (monkey and cosmological thread) is one of the symbols of the divinatory calendar <i>Chol Q'ij</i> . According to Denis Tedlock, their defeat and the defeat of Zipacna and Earthquake, by the twins, signal the appearance of Venus in the east or dawn of life. The sun had not appeared yet.
Hun Ahpu	One Hunter. Conceived by Ixquic, after her hand was spat by Hun Hun Ahpu skull's saliva. With the help of various animals Hun Ahpu and his twin brother, Ixbalanque, recovered their father's ball game equipment. They challenged the lords of Xibalba (the underworld) to a ball game. After surviving tricks and ill intentions from the lords of Xibalba, the twins were victorious. Hun Ahpu represents the young sun. Ahpu is one of the symbols of the <i>Chol Q'ij</i> (the Maya 260-day calendar). He represents the new sun. Jun Ajpu in Spanish.
Hun Hun Ahpu	Twice a Hunter. He lost his battles to the Lords of Xibalba. His ball game equipment was kept in Xibalba and his skull was hanged in a calabash tree. He represents the old sun. Jun Jun Ajpu in Spanish.
Ixbalanque	Twin to Hun Ahpu. Together they fought the Lords of Xibalba. He represents the full moon and his mother, Ixquic, the other phases of the moon.
Ixmucane	A mystical Ajq'ij. She is Ixpiyacoc's wife, Hun Ahpu's mother and grandmother to the twins Hun Ahpu and Ixbalanque. She is also the mother-in-law to Ixquic. Both, her and Ixpiyacoc are the Ajq'ijab (Time-keeper or spiritual guides) consulted by the divine intermediaries to create the first four human couples. She began the ceremonial tradition of burning incense before the corn, to evoke Hun Ahpu and Ixbalanque.
Ixpiyacoc	Ixmucane's husband and Hun Hun Ahpu's father. He is a matchmaker. Together with Ixmucane, they were older than the gods who asked them to create life on earth, including humanity.

Ixquic	She is the daughter of one of the Xibalba lords. She visits the calabash tree where the Xibalba lords hanged Hun Hun Ahpu's skull. The skull's saliva, spat in her hand, impregnates her. She gave life to twins Hun Ahpu and Ixbalanque. She represents the moon.
Jacawitz	One of the three patron deities given to the K'iche and then given to the Nijaib lineage or family of Momostenango.
Kaqchiquel	The second group of the K'ichean confederation and main rivals of the K'iche during the pre-colonial war.
K'iche or Quiché	The main group of the K'ichean Maya. They left the lowlands, travelled to Tulan in today's central Mexico and then travelled to the highlands of current day Guatemalan.
K'uku'matz	Also, Q'uqumatz or Feathered serpent. It is the highest deity in K'iche Maya religion. Kukulcan in classic Maya and Quetzalcoatl in Toltec and Mexica (Aztec).
Lienzo	Cotton canvas used by the Nahua to record historical events or agreements.
Mam Maya	Inhabited the Guatemalan highlands before the K'ichean invasion around 1200 A.D.
Momostenango	One of the main K'iche citadels. It means "the place of altars." This municipality is now part of the Totonicapán province (Departamento).
Nawal	One's other self. A protector, usually in the form of an animal. Now is associated with a symbol of the Chol Q'ij (260 days calendar). Plural is Nawalib.'
Oreja	Literally means ear. A folk code word given to civilian spies or informers of the army during the Civil War.
<i>Popol Wuh</i>	The sacred book of the Maya. It is believed it was written in the same format as the surviving codices. For Prudence M. Rice the book began to be written 5,000 years ago. The original book is lost. Fray Francisco Ximenez transcribed a version given to him by K'iche Mayan who had learned

Spanish. The Ximenez version is housed in the Newberry Library in Chicago. Other versions, such as Recinos, Chavez, and Dennis Tedlock, are transcriptions of Ximenez. *Popol Wuj* and *Pop Wuj* (from the Chavez version) are used in K'iche and Spanish.

Qik'ab	He ruled the K'ichean confederation from 1425 until his death in 1475. After his passing the K'iche and Cakchiquel were at war for almost 50 years.
Repartimiento	Replaced the Encomienda and implemented in 1542. Exploitation was replaced to work, for free, for one week out of four for a Spaniard.
Requirimiento	The requirement. It was a document, copied from the Muslim tradition and read to Indigenous peoples, in Latin, during conquest to surrender and pledge obedience to the Spanish king or be warred upon.
She-Lajuj-Noj	Present-day Quetzaltenango. In K'iche it means "Under the Ten Wisdoms." The K'iche took this city from the Mam Maya around 1200 AC. It was given to the Cauec lineage or family. In 1524, it was the main K'iche city to be conquered by the Nahua and Spanish forces.
Tekum Uman	Grandson of Qik'ab. Tekum led the K'iche troops in the 1524 Quetzaltenango battles against the Nahua and Spanish troops.
Tohil	The main Cabawil or patron deity given to the K'icheans when they departed Tulan. Given to the Cauec lineage of Quetzaltenango. It is in their journey that the sun, in the form of a person, rises. Because of its heat, this sun bakes everything including the three Cabawil, into stone. Tohil commands the K'icheans to take prisoners and sacrifice them to him. The other tribes warred the K'ichean and wanted to destroy Tohil, Awilish and Jacawitz. Tojil in K'iche.
Tulan	Located in present Tulan de Allende, Hidalgo, Mexico. It was the capital city of the Toltec and where the K'iche immigrated after leaving the Yucatan peninsula. Because the <i>Popol Wuh</i> mention "Tulan Zuyua, Seven Caves, Seven Canyons," Dennis Tedlock says that it may also refer to Teotihuacan.

Tz'ite	The bundle containing either 260 or 365 red beans representing the Chol Q'ij and the Ab' (260 and 365-day calendars). The Ajq'ij (spiritual guide) uses these bundles, mostly the one containing the 260 beans in his or her ceremonies. The Mam Maya use 52 tz'ite beans in their bundles.
Tz'ite beans	<i>(Erithrina coralloderendro)</i> , or red beans, are the main element in the <i>Tz'ite</i> bundles. The beans grow in a tree called <i>pito</i> . Those who complete their training as Ajq'ij (spiritual guide) receive a <i>Tz'ite</i> bundle.
Waxajib B'atz	Eight Monkey or Eight Cosmic Thread is the main celebration in the Chol Q'ij (260-day calendar). Takes place every 260 days. Also known as Maya New Year.
Xibalba	or Shibalba. The Mayan underworld. In some Mayan cities, like Gumarcaaj, it is represented in a subterranean location (i.e., under the city' game court). Twelve mystical lords inhabit Xibalba. They defeated Hun Hun Ahpu and his brother Seven Ahpu. However, the twins Hun Ahpu and Ixbalanque defeated them. The final battle with the twins was when Venus made its appearance in the West, representing death. The sun had not appeared yet.

HEGEMONY AND RESISTANCE: CONTINUITY OF MAYA SPIRITUALITY

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW GUIDE – This guide will be memorized by main investigator. The main objective is for Time-Keepers to express their experiences in the place and time they remember without interruption. The guide’s only purpose is to have an order but Time-Keepers may change such order or add more themes. Their lived experiences will lead to create a grounded theory central to my methodology.

Interview Check List:

Go over consent form	Yes _____ No _____
Name (pseudonym) of Participant	
Age	
Gender	
Years as a Time-Keeper or	
Occupation in home country	

1. Maya Spirituality

- 1.1. In your opinion, what is Maya Spirituality?
- 1.2. Can you explain the differences between Mayan spirituality and Western religions?
- 1.3. In your opinion is Maya spirituality a challenge or alternative to other religions?

2. Becoming a Time-Keeper

- 2.1. What made you decide to become a Time-Keeper?
- 2.2. What was involved in your training and how long did it take?
- 2.3. Was there any cost associated in becoming a Time-Keeper?
- 2.4. What did you receive when you completed your training?

3. Serving as a Time-Keeper

- 3.1. What do you remember of your first days as a Time-Keeper? (for examples the people you served and where?)
- 3.2. What was and is involved in requesting your services?

- 3.3. Do you accept all requests or are there times when you cannot lead a ceremony?
- 3.4. Are the requests a one-time ceremony or can they be multiple ceremonies?

4. Comparison between the 1980s and the 1990s

- 4.1. What do you remember about the social and political situation of the 1980s and what changes happened in the country in the 1990s?
- 4.2. Was there any difference in celebrating Mayan ceremonies in both decades and after?
- 4.3. Authors Thomas Hart, Jean Molesky-Poz and Victor Montejo say that the peace talks and the “500 Years of Resistance” movement influenced Time-Keepers to begin celebrating ceremonies publicly? What is your opinion about that statement?
- 4.4. What were the determinants that made Time-Keepers to celebrate ceremonies publicly?
- 4.5. What were the benefits/challenges for Time-Keepers when they began celebrating ceremonies publicly?

5. Time-Keepers and Pan-Mayanism in contemporary times

- 5.1. Are you as a Time-Keeper, or others, participating in revitalizing Mayan cultural rights?
- 5.2. Are you participating in the struggles/movements to improve the social conditions of Maya people?
- 5.3. Are you participating in the political movements of the moment such as recognizing Indigenous rights constitutionally?
- 5.4. Do you know if other Time-Keepers are participating in any or all those issues?
- 5.5. Is there any other Mayan issue in which Mayan Time-Keepers are participating?

6. **Conclusion:** Is there anything else you would like to add about the cultural, social, political, and religious reality of Mayan people?

SPANISH

HEGEMONIA Y RESISTENCIA: CONTINUIDAD DE LA ESPIRITUALIDAD MAYA

Guía de entrevista INDIVIDUAL – esta guía será memorizado por el investigador principal. El objetivo es que los Sacerdote Mayas expresen sus experiencias en el lugar y momento que recuerden. El propósito técnico de la guía es tener un orden, pero los entrevistados podrán cambiar tal orden o añadir más temas. Las experiencias vividas por los Sacerdotes Mayas nos llevarán a crear una teoría fundamentada.

Lista de verificación de entrevista:

Tomar tiempo para el formulario de consentimiento	Si _____ No_____
Nombre (seudónimo) del participante	
Edad	
Genero	
Años sirviendo como Sacerdote Maya	
¿Ocupación o profesión?	

1. Espiritualidad Maya

1.1 ¿En su opinión, que es la Espiritualidad Maya?

1.2 ¿Es la espiritualidad Maya diferente a las religiones occidentales?

1.3¿Es la espiritualidad Maya un reto o alternativa a otras religiones?

2. De cómo ser un Sacerdote Maya

2.1 ¿Qué influyo en Ud. y decidir convertirse en un Sacerdote Maya?

2.2 ¿Qué cosas o que incluía su formación y cuánto demoró?

2.3 ¿Qué obtuvo cuando terminó su entrenamiento?

3 Sirviendo como un Sacerdote Maya

3.1 ¿Qué recuerda de sus primeros días como Sacerdote Maya? (¿por ejemplo, la gente a la que sirvió y dónde?)

3.2 ¿Qué es lo incluye en solicitar sus servicios?

3.3 ¿Acepta todas las peticiones o hay veces cuando no puede conducir una ceremonia?

3.4 ¿Son las peticiones para una sola o pueden ser varias ceremonias?

4 Comparación entre las décadas de 1980 y 1990

4.1 ¿Puede Ud. comparar la situación social y política entre las décadas de 1980 y 1990 en el país?

4.2 ¿Recuerda si hubo alguna diferencia en la celebración de ceremonias Mayas en esas dos décadas y después?

4.3 ¿Algunos autores (Molesky-Poz, Hart y Montejo) dicen que las conversaciones de paz y el movimiento de "500 años de resistencia" influyeron en los Sacerdotes Mayas para comenzar a celebrar las ceremonias públicamente? ¿Cuál es tu opinión acerca de esa declaración?

4.4 Recuerda Ud. ¿si hubo otros determinantes que influyeron en los Sacerdotes Mayas a celebrar ceremonias públicamente?

4.5 ¿Recuerda cuando sucedió ese cambio y por qué razones?

4.6 ¿Cuáles fueron los beneficios y retos para los Sacerdotes Mayas al convertirse en figuras públicas?

5 Sacerdotes Mayas y el Pan-Mayanismo contemporáneo

5.1 Esta Ud., como Sacerdote Maya, ¿participando en la preservación de los derechos culturales Mayas?

5.2 ¿Está usted participando en las luchas/movimientos para mejorar las condiciones sociales del pueblo Maya?

5.3 ¿Está usted participando en los movimientos políticos del momento tales como reconocimiento de los derechos indígenas constitucionalmente?

5.4 ¿Sabe usted si otros Sacerdotes Mayas están participando en alguna o todas estas situaciones?

5.5 ¿Hay otros temas sociales en el que participan los Sacerdotes Mayas?

6 **Conclusión:** ¿Hay algún otro tema que le gustaría añadir sobre la realidad cultural, social, política y religiosa del pueblo Maya?

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