

# **Guatemala's Maya Resurgence Movement: History, Memory, and the Reconfiguration of Power**

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In early 2013, a Guatemalan court tried ex-president, General Efraín Ríos Montt, for genocide and crimes against humanity committed during the country's 36-year civil war. The conviction of the former dictator in May 2013 offered Guatemalans only a fleeting glimpse of justice, as the country's highest court reversed his conviction a mere ten days later.

Though Ríos Montt's presidency ended thirty years ago, it alienated many Maya communities from their history and indigenous identities. This paper argues that Maya communities use cultural resurgence movements to empower themselves against political oppression and confront political obstacles. Today, the Maya resurgence movement helps some Maya to strive to recapture practices lost during the civil war and to connect to their indigenous past. By seeking to connect with their history, the Maya resurgence movement affords some members of Guatemala's Maya community to redefine themselves in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For some, participation in the Maya resurgence movement serves as one of the only available means of empowerment in the country's increasingly oppressive social hierarchy. The reversal of ex-President Ríos Montt's conviction, however, presented the Maya with yet another obstacle in their longstanding fight for equality. While many political and social factors continue to block the success of the Maya resurgence movement nationally, this paper examines how involvement in local activist projects helps the Maya to rewrite their history and redefine their indigenous identity

following more than 500 years of oppression. This paper uses as a case study my collaborative ethnographic research in the Q'eqchi'-Maya town of San Juan Chamelco, Guatemala. Since 2006, my indigenous collaborators and I have worked in various ways to help Chamelqueños participating in existing resurgence projects connect to their past by collecting narratives and archival documents about the town's history. First, this paper summarizes the significant challenges the Maya have faced during the last 450 years. Next, it examines the origins of the Maya resurgence movement. Finally, it explores the efforts of activists in the Q'eqchi'-Maya community of San Juan Chamelco, Guatemala, to empower its residents through historical understanding. By examining the Maya resurgence movement as a source of power for the Maya, this paper explores how indigenous Guatemalans seek to reconfigure regional power dynamics today.

### **Maya Identity: Past and Present**

The Maya, one of Latin America's largest indigenous groups, share a history that is filled with accomplishment and splendor, tragedy and darkness. From 250-900 AD, the ancient Maya experienced their cultural florescence, building grand city-states and massive empires throughout the region that we know today as Mesoamerica. The ancient Maya were extremely technologically advanced, possessing the mathematical concept of "zero" and transporting heavy materials over long-distances without the use of the wheel (Sharer 1994, Coe 2011). In addition to their advanced mathematics and architecture, the ancient Maya had a deep understanding of astronomy, and build their cities to align with important astronomical events (Aveni 2001). They also had a rich and complex system of hieroglyphic writing, which they used to record important historical events. The religious system of the ancient Maya centered on the worship of the spirits of nature, including

the sun god, moon goddess, and corn god, through blood sacrifice. Maya culture flourished in the lowlands of Southern Mexico until between 900-1000AD, when natural disaster struck, forcing the Maya to abandon their large cities and return to life as farmers in small villages. Intertribal warfare also played a significant role in the decline of the ancient Maya culture, as battles over resources and trade-routes undermined the foundations of their society.

The Spanish conquest in the mid-1500s presented one of the first significant challenge to Maya identity. The indigenous population of the region, which was more than 1,000,000 inhabitants during the Pre-Columbian era, shrank to a mere fraction of its previous size, due to armed conflict and the spread of European diseases (Townsend 2003). After invading several Maya groups in Mexico, Spanish conqueror Pedro de Alvarado left Mexico with his forces in 1532, heading south into what is today Guatemala. The Spaniards forcefully took control of Western Guatemala, starting with the K'iche region, defeating the indigenous groups by early 1524 and conquering the Tzuutujil Maya and later the Kaqchikel.

I will focus here on the effects of the conquest in the area today known as Alta Verapaz, since that is the region on which this paper will focus. Despite their military victories in the area, the Spaniards shied away from the region known as Tezulutlán, or “Land of War,” which later became Alta Verapaz, since the area was renowned for its valiant warriors and hostile peoples (Wilk 1991; King 1974). In 1542, however, Dominican friars founded the region’s first Spanish settlement. They immediately implemented a system of *reducciones*, resettling local indigenous peoples out of their homelands and into various regions, and founding the contemporary towns of San Pedro Carcha, and San Juan Chamelco, among others, in 1543 (Gómez 1984).

Throughout the colonial period, the Verapaces were involved in the Spanish system of

reducciones. The Dominicans maintained control over the region throughout the colonial era, and worked converting the indigenous peoples to Catholicism, establishing churches and *ermitas*, ‘neighborhood shrines’, throughout the region. Following the independence of Guatemala from Spain in 1821, European immigrants began to flock to Alta Verapaz to cultivate several important crops for export, including sugar, coffee, and cardamom (King 1974). This influx of foreigners changed the region, both socially and economically. By the 1860s, Germans settled the area, beginning to grow coffee for exportation (Henn 1996:267; Díaz 1996:49). Since commercial coffee growing produced a strong demand for laborers, the Germans forced many indigenous peoples from throughout the region to work for them, provoking indigenous uprisings against harsh working conditions (King 1974). The situation worsened at the end of the nineteenth century when Guatemalan president Justo Rufino Barrios implemented a law which sold not only the lands belonging to indigenous people to the German coffee growers, but also the indigenous peoples themselves who lived on the land to work as slaves. “The government sold the land alienated from Indian communities to the German planters, and made Indians resident on the land subject to the finquero” (King 1974:31). As the Q’eqchi’ and other indigenous groups were forced to work as laborers on these coffee plantations, many abandoned the agricultural practices on which they had subsisted for generations for wage, or often wage-less, labor. This long history of exploitation has alienated the Q’eqchi’, among other Maya groups, from their culture and history, and left them disempowered.

More than a hundred years later, the Guatemalan civil war presented another substantial challenge the status of the Maya community in the Guatemalan republic. In 1954, a CIA-backed coup overthrew the democratically-elected government of Guatemalan president Jacobo Árbenz, ending the period that Guatemalans today identify as the Ten Years of Spring. In 1944, Árbenz

had led a coup that successfully overthrew the repressive dictator, Jorge Ubico, who regarded the Maya and all rural *campesinos* as obstacles impeding the country's modernization (Way 2012). Throughout his 14 year presidency, Ubico had seized the agricultural land from the Maya to force them to adopt a more "modern" and industrial way of life.

Known as the October Revolution, the 1944 movement to overthrow Ubico espoused freedom and equality for all. In 1950, Árbenz was elected president of Guatemala in free and democratic elections. He launched a series of social programs, designed to help Guatemala's poor and indigenous population regain the rights they had lost during the preceding centuries. Among the most controversial changes he introduced was his radical agrarian reform legislation, Decree 900. Árbenz's administration forced the United Fruit Company to sell the government more than four hundred thousand acres of unused agricultural land. Though the United Fruit Company received a sum of \$1.25 million dollars for their land, the value that they had declared on their taxes, the payment was significantly lower than the market value for the land (Lovell 2010). Enraged by this act, the United Fruit Company solicited assistance from the United States government, who deemed Árbenz a threat to national security and orchestrated several coups to attempt to remove him from power. On June 27 of 1954, Árbenz resigned following the implementation of a covert CIA operation, PBSUCCESS. The six years that followed was a time of instability in Guatemala, as military governments led the country and insecurity prevailed.

Following these six years of insecurity, the Guatemalan Civil War officially began on November 13, 1960, when a group of radical students led a failed coup against the government. During the next thirty-six years, fear and terror reigned throughout the country, as the army tried to suppress indigenous opposition. They feared indigenous empowerment, and backed targeted Maya communities for public displays of their indigenous culture. Entire villages were massacred,

and people were disappeared, tortured, and raped in the name of protecting national security. There were as many as 200,000 deaths throughout the country during the war (Carmack 1988, Perera 1995, Schirmer 1998, Lovell 2010, Adams and Smith 2011). The most brutal and notorious period was from 1982-1983, during the presidency of General Efraín Ríos Montt, who ordered the mass execution of Maya villages throughout the country.

Though the civil war ended eighteen years ago, its legacy still prevails in Guatemala today. There continues to exist great inequality between the Ladino and indigenous sectors of the Guatemalan population. Way (2012) argues that longstanding social barriers, like discrimination and alienation, have led to the continued fragmentation of Guatemalan society and serve as an impediment in the path towards peace. Way argues that, “The result of Guatemala’s development, beyond ever-escalating poverty, has been a widespread fragmentation” (Way 2012). He elaborates, “Fragmentation plays a major role in making Guatemala feel and function like a shattered place, a nation both broken and lost” (Way 2012: 182). Konefal (2010) likewise argues that Guatemala is a country of “two bloods”: Ladino and Maya. The latent tensions between the two groups have led to a lack of a national identity in Guatemala and the disenfranchisement of the Maya community in the national political landscape. The majority of Guatemala’s current-day population is indigenous; the majority of its politicians are not. The Maya have few opportunities for political advancement, with little representation in most political arenas. Today, the Maya resurgence movement, led by activists from throughout the country, provides one of the only ways for the Maya to find empowerment, and change longstanding power dynamics in the country.

### **Maya Activism in Guatemala**

Amid the widespread terror of Guatemala's military regimes in the 1980s, Maya activists from across the country together worked to found the Maya resurgence movement, which unifies Maya communities in the fight to protect their indigenous culture. In the early years of the movement, activists fought for the conservation of Mayan languages as a vehicle of Maya cultural identity, institutionalizing bilingual education throughout the country, establishing Guatemala's national Academia de Lenguas Mayas, 'Academy of Mayan Languages', and seeking political equality for the Maya communities marginalized by decades of state-sponsored terror.

Konefal (2010) and Adams (2009) document the emergence of the Maya resurgence movement. Konefal (2010) documents the involvement of the Catholic church in sparking Maya resurgence in Guatemala. Adams likewise writes about a group of Q'eqchi'-Maya men and women who pioneered a spiritual "*re-encuentro*," 'rediscovery', following their interactions with priests who followed the practices of liberation theology (Adams 2009). Antonio Pop Caal and Andrés Cuz Mucu were among the most first and most prominent leaders of this movement in the Guatemalan department of Alta Verapaz. In the late 1970s, while helping Belgian priest, Father Esteban Hasserjin, to write a Q'eqchi' dictionary in the community of San Juan Chamelco, they encountered the ideologies of liberation theology and a more open attitude towards indigenous religion. Adams (2009:35) writes, "Hasserjin encouraged the young Q'eqchi' to recover their spiritual practices." With the support and encouragement of Father Esteban, whose views on Maya resurgence differed tremendously from those of other priests working in the area, Cuz Mucu and Pop Caal became some of the first Mayan activists, leading several key initiatives in the revitalization and resurgence of Maya culture and language throughout Guatemala.

As Maya activism grew during the 1970s, Konefal states, it divided into two conflicting factions: groups fighting ethnic discrimination and those concerned with class-related struggles.

Though the groups shared a similar goal—to fight inequality—they had vastly different approaches. While the *clasista* movement fought to end class-based inequalities, the *culturalista* movement sought to redefine Maya identity. A leader of the culturalista movement, Antonio Pop Caal, published what Konefal deems “scathing” critiques of Guatemala’s Ladinos and argued against Ladino authority over the country’s indigenous population (Konefal 2010). Ladinos perpetuated inequalities against the Maya because they lacked a clear sense of their own identities (Konefal 2010). The *culturalista* focus on reclaiming Maya identity virtually excluded Ladino participation. In contrast, the *clasista* movement, inspired by the work of Severo Martínez Peláez (1970) and Marxist theory, argued that class struggles were the root of oppression. This group believed that ending class inequalities would help to eliminate ethnic discrimination. The clasista movement argued that, “focusing on differences between Mayas and Ladinos was, in fact, counterrevolutionary, since it would undermine a unity of the oppressed that was crucial to a successful revolution” (Konefal 2010). The differing perspectives of each movement caused a rift between them, until Guatemala’s 1976 earthquake, which killed 26,000 people, united activists for a common cause (Konefal 2010). Shortly after the earthquake, the Committee for Peasant Unity (CUC) became a unified movement against endemic poverty and oppression. Though some culturalista activists rejected this revolutionary movement, others “countered that only as a single nation could they defeat the state and create a new nation” (Konefal 2010:73).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the CUC and other revolutionary groups continued their fight to end poverty and for the rights of all Guatemalans. During the heightened violence of the 1980s, the CUC called for all Maya to join them in their battle for equality and to end oppression (Konefal 2010). The early 1980s saw the formation of new revolutionary groups like

the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) and the Revolutionary Organization of Peoples in Arms (ORPA) and smaller, Maya-led groups focused on ending ethnic oppression. In the early 1990s, “Mayanistas” fought for “culturally oriented demands,” like rights to use indigenous dress and speak indigenous languages (Konefal 2010: 168). When the process of negotiating peace began in 1994, activists from conflicting groups united to fight for indigenous rights (Konefal 2010). Konefal argues, however, that while they achieved a consensus on a draft of an Indigenous Rights Accord in the early 1990s, it generated little public support since their conflicting agendas led some Maya activists to oppose the referendum (Konefal 2010). Referencing the work of Kay Warren (2002), Konefal (2010:174-175) states:

The defeat of the Indigenous Rights referendum in 1999 can be explained in part by logistical problems and widespread political disillusionment. It is difficult not to conclude, however, that the limited rights the measure contained—mostly cultural issue championed by the Mayanistas—were not enough to win the solid support of more activist Mayas or get a majority to the polls.

Though the Maya resurgence movement has succeeded in creating space for indigenous voices to be heard and considered in Guatemala, tensions and conflicts within and beyond the community of Maya activists have impeded its strides towards peace and equality.

Today, many Maya intellectuals throughout Guatemala continue to lead their communities in the fight for equality and cultural preservation on a national and a community level (Fischer and Brown 1996; Asociación Maya Uk’u’x B’e 2005a, 2005b). Participants in the culturalista movement seek to recover elements of Maya identity lost during the civil war and the preceding centuries of oppression (Cojti’ Cuxil 1994, 1997, 2006). In doing so, they use historical narratives to generate a Maya identity that legitimizes their role in Guatemala’s political hierarchy. Smith

(1990:17) argues that this affirmation of Maya identity is a “visible repudiation of state attempts to create a national hegemonic culture.” In this respect, being Maya is not exclusively an ethnic designation, but is also a form of resistance.

Clendinnen (1987) states that in the colonial period the Maya used knowledge of their history to resist Spanish domination by linking the past to the present. Current participants in the Maya resurgence movement do the same. Maya communities use stories of indigenous heroes like Tecún Umán, Xhuan Q’anil (Montejo 2001, 2005), and Kaji Imox (Warren 1996) to promote Maya identity, by highlighting the core values of local life. Warren (1996, 1998) explores the process of rediscovery that a group of “Maya intellectuals” experienced while translating segments of the Annals of the Kaqchikels. The analysis allowed Maya scholars to reconstruct their personal and group identities through the legacy of the Maya past. “Culturalists are reviving the heroic imagery of Maya warriors in an attempt to deal with the passivity they see as one of the scars of Ladino racism and its language of inferiority for indigenous populations” (Warren 1996:100). Warren shows that the historical contextualization of Maya identity is the cornerstone of the Maya resurgence movement.

In San Juan Chamelco, a growing number of Q’eqchi’-Maya men and women today participate in Maya resurgence activities as a way to reconnect with themselves and empower themselves in Guatemala’s political and social hierarchy. They participate in Maya ritual *mayejak*, ‘petition’ ceremonies to ask for the blessing of the ancestral mountain spirits, *tzuultaq’a*, during harvest and planting season; plan cultural celebrations, like the celebration of historical figures; lobby for bilingual and intercultural education; and lead important movements within the community. For example, Don Andrés Cuz, a lifelong resident of Chamelco and one of the founders of the Maya Resurgence Movement in Alta Verapaz, has leads many cultural initiatives.

Serving today as the President of the Universidad Maya, ‘Maya University’ in Chamelco, Don Andrés has been instrumental in promoting the use of the Q’eqchi’ language in government and school offices; has taught groups of Chamelqueños how to practice the ceremonies of their ancestors, lost during centuries of oppression; hosts ritual ceremonies in his home; and is the leader of the Xmolam Aj Pop B’atz’, or “Aj Pop B’atz’ committee,” which organizes the annual celebration of town founder Aj Pop B’atz’. Like Andrés, many Chamelqueños play crucial roles in the fight to revitalize Q’eqchi’ culture, both in their homes and for cultural organizations. Since there the Maya have few opportunities for participation in the political arena, this serves as one of few opportunities for empowerment for Chamelqueños. To further explore the role of Maya resurgence efforts in empowering Chamelco’s residents, I now turn to my collaborative ethnographic fieldwork in Chamelco.

### **Fieldwork in San Juan Chamelco, Guatemala**

The municipality of San Juan Chamelco, Guatemala is the homeland of the Q’eqchi’-Maya and has been since the Pre-Columbian era (Las Casas 1927; Ximenez 1930; Tovilla 1960; Viana et al. 1962; Remesal 1966). Designated a *pueblo de indios*, ‘Indian town’, by the Spanish colonial government in the 1500s, Chamelco persisted as a semi-autonomous community throughout the colonial era, ruled by indigenous governors rather than Spanish ones. Today, local residents attribute their cultural “authenticity” to their relative independence throughout the colonial era. Though some armed conflicts took place in some of Chamelco’s rural areas, the town’s urban center remained relatively unscathed by the violence happening elsewhere in Guatemala. While they weren’t often the direct targets of state-sponsored violence, Chamelco’s indigenous population suffered many effects of the civil war, including alienation from their language and

culture, as the government actively pursued people who publicly demonstrated their Mayan heritage. Children no longer learned about their history in schools, and the community lost the connection that they once had with their indigenous past out of fear of persecution.

Chamelco's contemporary population consists of more than 50,000 residents (INE 2002), 98% of whom identify ethnically as Q'eqchi'-Maya. Chamelco is unique among other Maya towns in that community members unite in efforts to use their history to define their present. Q'eqchi' is still the primary language spoken locally, though many Chamelqueños living in the municipal center are fluent in Spanish and have pursued higher education. Chamelco remains off Guatemala's main tourist route, though it faces numerous challenges because of its incorporation into the global economy, ethnic discrimination, poverty, high crime rates, and political instability. While many Chamelqueños seek to reconnect with the history they lost during the 36 years of the Guatemalan civil war, there are few opportunities that allow them to do so.

Perhaps the biggest challenge many Chamelqueños face today is the introduction of new, conservative Evangelical Christian sects that further alienate many local residents from practicing indigenous rituals, partaking in local celebrations, and that teach acculturation to a more Western way of life. While the first Evangelical churches in Chamelco were founded in the 1920s, the number of Evangelical sects present in the region have grown exponentially in the last years. Members of some Evangelical churches, like the Iglesia Nazarena, 'Nazarean church', successfully blend elements of local Q'eqchi' practice with Catholic teachings (Adams 1999, 2001), however, members of others, like the Asamblea de Dios Nueva Vida, 'Assembly of God, New Life' church, do not. Instead, in accordance with church teachings, these parishioners chose to forgo Q'eqchi' practice and language, in favor of a more Christian lifestyle. The growing divide between Evangelical Chamelqueños and those community members who practice other religions

continues to present a significant obstacle to the way that the community interacts with and relates to their indigenous past.

Despite these obstacles, Chamelco continues to be a community where, as one Q'eqchi' activist told me during my 2014 fieldwork, "there is great linguistic and cultural purity, whether it's good or bad, but here it is." During my 10 years of fieldwork in Chamelco, I have observed that continuity with the indigenous past remains an important value for many Chamelqueños, despite historical and contemporary hurdles. The use of indigenous dress and language, participation in the national folkloric pageant system, the practice of indigenous rituals are some of the ways that community members strive to maintain a connection with their ancestors and with their indigenous past (Kistler 2010, 2014). Since beginning my fieldwork in the region in 2004, I have observed that a growing number of community members participate in both regional and national Maya resurgence activities, including meetings of the Academy of Mayan Languages, volunteer service to NGOs, leading important cultural festivals, and attending ritual ceremonies hosted by friends, families, and cultural organizations.

Among the most important points of cultural continuity for many Chamelqueños is the story of Aj Pop B'atz', Chamelco's sixteenth century founder and culture hero (Kistler 2010, Kistler 2013). People identify Aj Pop B'atz' as the "grandfather" of all Chamelqueños and

The life of Aj Pop B'atz', has been of great interest to scholars studying in the region. While the story of Aj Pop B'atz' has been part of Chamelco's oral tradition for centuries, its significance has decreased as younger generations fail to learn it as their ancestors did due to the brutality and oppression of the country's civil war. While Chamelco was protected from the persecution rampant elsewhere during the presidency of Romeo Lucas García, a native of Chamelco, the violent regimes

that followed forced many Chamelqueños to stop publicly sharing their cultural history or performing indigenous practice.

When I arrived in Chamelco for the first time in 2004, I was immediately struck by the prevalence of Aj Pop B'atz's presence, despite his death nearly 450 years ago. Leaving a popular touristic site in one of Chamelco's villages later that year, I spotted a sign naming the region, "The Land of Juan Matalb'atz'."<sup>1</sup> On the way back to town, I asked the taxi driver to explain the sign's meaning. As we wove through the mountains, he shared with me the story that has become a central focus of my research in Chamelco for the last ten years. In my later fieldwork with the Chamelco's Q'eqchi' marketers (Kistler 2014), I noted that the women frequently identified Juan Aj Pop B'atz' as their "grandfather" and the source of their power and prestige.

Since 2006, I have worked with a dedicated group of community members to investigate the story of Juan Aj Pop B'atz'. Collecting oral histories, colonial documents, and other data about his life and significance in contemporary Q'eqchi' culture, we have worked to develop a complete picture of the man who serves as a key figure in Q'eqchi' history and a symbol of Q'eqchi' identity and perseverance for many.

### **Aj Pop B'atz'**

In the early sixteenth century, as the Spanish forces sought to invade central Guatemala, a young Q'eqchi'-Maya leader named Aj Pop B'atz' had a vision that forever changed the course of local history. Born in the mountains surrounding the contemporary town of San Juan Chamelco, Alta Verapaz, Guatemala (Estrada 1979; Guerrero 2007), Aj Pop B'atz' was destined to be a great

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<sup>1</sup> For a reason that remains unknown despite our years of research on the subject, the Spaniards changed Aj Pop B'atz's name from its original form (Aj Pop B'atz'), to Juan Matalb'atz', perhaps in accordance with his Catholic baptism and conversion.

leader of the Q'eqchi' people, elders say. While little is known about his childhood, community members and scholars of the region alike state that Aj Pop B'atz' was chosen as leader of the Q'eqchi' when the Spaniards abducted the region's previous ruler in 1529 (Estrada 1979; Guerrero 2007; Kistler 2010). One community activist related that:

They say that he was 29 when he was elected cacique of the Verapaz region. They had to look for someone with [a strong] character, because the Spaniards were trying to enter through Baja Verapaz. So, that's how he was elected. And they didn't make a mistake, because he prepared the army, I think he was also in the army, and they had to face the Spaniards and so he gained a great deal of importance, not as history, but as someone who made history in our region.

A council of elders selected Aj Pop B'atz' to serve as the next leader of the Q'eqchi' community because he was strategic, possessed strength and intelligence, and was wise. Once leader, he began to prepare his army for the inevitable Spanish invasion. However, as he saw the destruction and devastation that the Spaniards wrought, he developed a different plan; he wouldn't engage in a military battle against the Spaniards, but rather welcome them to Chamelco in peace. Doing so, he reasoned, would protect his people from enslavement and death.

Aj Pop B'atz' welcomed three Dominican friars, Fray Luis Cancer, Fray Pedro de Angulo, and Fray Luis Cancer, to his home in the area of Chamelco that is today known as the San Luis neighborhood. After his initial meeting with the men, Aj Pop B'atz' accepted Catholic baptism in a nearby river, in efforts to develop his relationship with the Spaniards and protect his community (Resurrección document<sup>2</sup>; Estrada 1979; Kistler 2010). Impressed<sup>2</sup> by his actions, the friars invited

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<sup>2</sup> The Resurrección documents are copies of documents written in the colonial era that recount the story of Aj Pop B'atz' just as it is told today in oral histories. While each document originally belonged to Chamelco's cofradías, they belong today to local families.

Aj Pop B'atz' to travel with them to Spain to meet King Carlos V in 1544 (Estrada 1979; Guerrero 2007; Kistler 2010; Resurrección document). Aj Pop B'atz' made the long journey, first walking through caves under the earth's surface and then by travelling by boat with the men to Spain. With him, he took gifts of songbirds, quetzal feathers, and local textile. After a long and difficult journey, the men arrived at the King's palace at night and they lined the throne room with the gifts, in anticipation of their audience the following day. . In the morning, elders say, when the King awoke to the beautiful songs of the birds, he asked to meet the man who had brought him such magnificent gifts. However, when presented to the Spanish monarch, Aj Pop B'atz' refused to following Spanish custom, as many Chamelqueños related. "When the king of Spain told him to bow, [Aj Pop B'atz'] did not bow in front of the other King, it was that he couldn't bow in front of the other King, because he was also a King," one man said. In standing up to the Spanish king, Aj Pop B'atz' demonstrated his strength and power, as well as his willingness to cede his power, and that of his people, to the Spanish Crown. As a result, this refusal to observe court custom earned Aj Pop B'atz' a legendary place in Chamelco's history.

As Aj Pop B'atz' and his entourage set off on their return journey, King Carlos V gave them several gifts for Chamelco. Among these gifts were a gold flag, a jewel-encrusted monstrance, a metal cross, a goblet, and most famously, four bells for Chamelco's church. The men set off on their return journey. Arriving in Guatemala, the men struggled to bear the weight of the church bells while traversing the rugged terrain of the Guatemalan landscape. They stopped to rest one night in a village just outside of Chamelco, now known as Sa' Campana, or 'The Place of the Bell.' They left the bells on the ground overnight as they slept. When they awoke the following morning, the largest bell had disappeared, having sunk into the ground overnight. While

some people say that it sank because its sound was so strong and powerful that it would have deafened the region's residents, others say that it sank because of its weight. Residents of the village of Sa' Campana state that during harvest and planting seasons, the bell rings from within the ground.

When the men completed their journey back to Chamelco, Aj Pop B'atz' assisted the Spaniards in reorganizing Chamelco's neighborhoods. The Spaniards overseeing the development of Chamelco ordered Aj Pop B'atz' to build the town's first Catholic Church in the center of town. Chamelqueños state that he used his supernatural powers to build the church in one night, whistling the construction materials into place. Others say that he summoned the forest animals to help him with the construction. He hung the Spanish bells in the newly constructed church where they remain today.

On August 3, 1555, the Spanish King named Aj Pop B'atz' "Lifelong Governor" of the newly formed Verapaz region of Guatemala (Real Cédula of Chamelco). In doing so, he gave him absolute authority over the region for the rest of his life, an act to which Chamelqueños attribute their cultural authenticity today. Later in life, however, the Spaniards regretted this act, complaining that he couldn't govern well because he was an "Indian" and asking the king to impose a Spaniard to supervise him (AGCA A1.23 4575 No. 2 Folio 204). Community elders shared that the Spanish wanted to capture Aj Pop B'atz', threatened by his power. For this reason, Aj Pop B'atz' hid in a cave in the side of a sinkhole in the village of Chamil, where he died. Others, like my colleague Sebastian Si, share that he hid in the sinkhole for a different reason. "Possibly, he realized the error that he had made in accepting Christianity." One elder in Chamil told me that after his death, the villagers moved Aj Pop B'atz's body to a different cave, high in the mountains

overlooking the community. Both sites remain important ritual locations for community members today.

As I've argued elsewhere (Kistler 2010; Kistler 2013; Kistler under review), Aj Pop B'atz' is a symbol of Q'eqchi' value and identity for many Chamelqueños. One community member, shared, "Chamelco is very important, because of its leader. They say that he left his intelligence for our ancestors. This is why there are many students, many intelligent people [here]. Many people say it's because of him." A municipal official, Rubén Osorio, attributed Chamelco's cultural "purity" to Aj Pop B'atz's actions. "Our people remained pure, and for this reason, Chamelco is one of the municipalities of Alta Verapaz that has the most pure race." Chamelqueños attribute their adaptability and the perpetuation of Q'eqchi' culture in their community to his colonial actions. As Chamelqueños seek to integrate global practices into their indigenous lifestyles today, Aj Pop B'atz' serves as a model of how to embrace cultural change without sacrificing Q'eqchi' value. He also serves as a symbol of resistance, of Maya power, and of empowerment.

As one of the only indigenous leaders respected and recognized by the Spanish crown, he serves as a model of indigenous leadership for many Chamelqueños today. During my 2014 fieldwork in Chamelco, my collaborator Sebastian Si Pop and I gave a workshop about Aj Pop B'atz' for a team of teachers in the nearby town of San Pedro Carchá. I listened as Sebastian explained to Aj Pop B'atz's contemporary significance to the teachers. Aj Pop B'atz' presented the Q'eqchi' community with an example of how to lead, he said, and of the important values of Q'eqchi' culture. The story of Aj Pop B'atz' portrays him as a man who was wise, respectful, tolerant of other cultures, and most importantly, willing to sacrifice himself for his town. His dedication to the Q'eqchi' is something that many Chamelqueños admire, and aspire to have as well. For these reasons, Aj Pop B'atz' also serves a moral exemplar for Chamelqueños today.

## **The Aj Pop B'atz' Project**

During my 2005 fieldwork in Chamelco, I met with one of Chamelco's most well-known residents, Don Oscar Fernández, to discuss the role that Chamelco's history plays in defining its present and future. Oscar, famous locally for his ownership of the Rey Marcos caves, a popular tourist site, was a regular contributor to regional newspapers and magazines, publishing articles about Chamelco's history and traditions. Oscar proposed that we should invite community members to join us for a meeting to discuss the story of Aj Pop B'atz'. While some community members knew a little bit about his life, their knowledge was based on mythological accounts of the town founder, rather than historical evidence, he said. Oscar suggested that we could combine our perspectives to develop a holistic picture of Aj Pop B'atz's life. Our continued collaboration, he thought, could allow us the time to thoroughly investigate this important figure.

A few weeks later, in late August 2006, the Grupo Aj Pop B'atz' met for the first time in the living room of Oscar Fernandez's house. Those in attendance for our first meeting included retired schoolteacher, Otto Chaman; then-president of Guatemala's National Folkloric Committee, Carlos Leal; Oscar; and me. We talked that night about why we should investigate Aj Pop B'atz' and laid out an agenda for collecting information. My collaborators stated their interest in finding historical documentation to prove Aj Pop B'atz's existence: I sought ways to collect oral histories of his life from community members and explore his contemporary significance. We each brought different knowledge, skills, and qualifications to the table: while I had the time and funding necessary to dedicate myself fulltime to our research, my colleagues had the connections and knowledge we needed to succeed. Though our approach and interests did not always align, the

other members of the Grupo Aj Pop B'atz' and I worked have together diligently to develop a complete historical and cultural picture of Chamelco's great leader.

From 2006-2012, our group membership fluctuated, ranging between three and five members. While the group's original members were community elders, the group later expanded to include a younger Q'eqchi' artist and a former president of the Q'eqchi' branch of Guatemala's Academy of Mayan Languages, Sebastian Si. In a 2009 interview, I asked Sebastian to explain why he wanted to work together to investigate Aj Pop B'atz':

Well, because he also has an historical significance for us. And maybe the only way that we can first recognize and learn about history is to study it, and this allows us to reconstruct and construct the present. Because if we don't, we don't know about our history, we are very far away from many of the things that we want to be. For me, it is very important to know about this figure, know about his decisions, know about what he did, and later, well there is no doubt that he left us a lot

Sebastian also related that he was tired of anthropologists who came to Chamelco to conduct research on Q'eqchi' culture, never to be heard from again. He, and others, felt exploited by the fact that the researchers failed to share the results of their investigations with the community. He wouldn't work with anyone, he said, that would not to commit to returning to the community to present their completed projects. In 2006, our project gained momentum as we visited historical sites, viewed artifacts, met with former officials, and searched for archival records together. In 2009 and 2010, we dedicated ourselves to finding ways to give Aj Pop B'atz' his deserving place in Chamelco's historical discourse.

From our inception, we all shared the desire to seek ways to ensure that future generations of Chamelqueños could learn the story of Aj Pop B'atz' as their ancestors did. We saw the value

of our research as our ability to put the story of Aj Pop B'atz' in its historical context, since community members lamented the community's lack of knowledge about Aj Pop B'atz'. When I interviewed one of my collaborators, retired teacher Otto Chaman, about our collaborative work, he explained, "Look, Ashley, when we met, I felt very happy because I saw your desire to get to know Juan Aj Pop B'atz'." He elaborated:

This is my point of view, to have certainty about who he was, for example ... where did [Aj Pop B'atz'] come from, I never found it in any document ... so that is what intrigued me, when you came, when you talked to me, I thought now I have someone to help me, since one can't do this alone ... Of course, this has given me more strength to keep investigating [the story of Aj Pop B'atz'] because we have found out many things that we didn't know.

Since Aj Pop B'atz's story had become so mythologized, they argued, it was easy for community members to discount it. Finding historical evidence of Aj Pop B'atz' would allow community members to recognize his great accomplishments and celebrate their legacy as his descendants. Understanding this important part of their history would not only help them to relearn information lost during decades of state-sponsored oppression, but also to be empowered by the strength of their past.

During my 2009 fieldwork in Chamelco, members of the Grupo Aj Pop B'atz' and I tried to create a public space for discussions of Aj Pop B'atz'. In early August 2009, my collaborators and I petitioned the municipal government to establish an annual holiday honoring Aj Pop B'atz'. We proposed that August 3 of each year serve as his holiday, to commemorate the date on which he given his honorary title of "Lifelong Governor of the Verapaz region" by the Spanish crown

(Real Cédula of Chamelco). After a brief meeting with the mayor, we presented our proposal to the town council, who accepted it. Shortly after, one of my collaborators and I were named as directors of the first celebration, to be held on August 3, 2010.

After a great deal of planning and trials and tribulations, On August 3, 2010, 200 community members, including ritual leaders, representatives of government organizations, teachers, and activists, gathered in Chamelco's municipal hall for the Simposio Aj Pop B'atz'. The panel of experts we invited delivered four academic presentations about Aj Pop B'atz' to attendees: our emcees ensured that the presentations were presented in bilingual form so that all in attendance could understand. The event concluded with a speech from Chamelco's mayor, who, like many of the experts who spoke, reminded attendees that it was their responsibility to carry on the tradition that the inaugural celebration had started. The celebration was now wholly in the community's hands.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the mayor's poignant words, the event was less than a qualified success: due to bad weather and technical glitches, few things went off as planned. Nevertheless, it marked an important day for the community, who not only celebrated Aj Pop B'atz', but also the enduring legacy of Q'eqchi' history, for the first time in many years. Sebastian explained that importance of the celebration was not what transpired that day, he said, but rather what it meant for Chamelco's future: that the community honored its commitment to the August 3 holiday and to Aj Pop B'atz'. It was the start of a tradition and that is what mattered. The community did appropriate the celebration, and has celebrated it each year since with a variety of activities.

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<sup>3</sup> The community appropriated the holiday and planned a small scale celebration for the 2011 Aj Pop B'atz' Day. In 2012, the community planned a large-scale celebration, featuring both a Maya ritual ceremony and a Catholic Mass, a symposium, marimba music, traditional dances, a temporary museum of the gifts Aj Pop B'atz' brought back from Spain, and a sale of traditional foods. In 2013, they celebrated the holiday on a small-scale once again, with a Maya ritual ceremony in Chamelco's church plaza.

Having seen the children's interest in learning the story about Aj Pop B'atz', Sebastian and I turned our attention to another project: writing about Aj Pop B'atz' for Chamelco's schoolchildren. The idea for this project had come from a conversation I had in 2006 with a Q'eqchi' linguist and activist working in the regional offices Guatemala's bilingual education institute, DIGEBI, who suggested that teaching the story to children in a formal academic context would transform Aj Pop B'atz' from a mythological figure to an historical one. Sebastian explained the importance of this project. "Really, the moment that we stop knowing a historic person or process is in when education doesn't mention them, and that they are no longer taken into consideration in the curriculum. And that's where, obviously, children slowly stop knowing [them]."

Many of the conversations I had with friends, colleagues, and local officials throughout my many years of fieldwork in Chamelco echoed these ideas. Though my collaborators and I had shared our research with the community through oral presentations, presenting it in written form held greater significance, as the Maya have long emphasized writing as the key to preserving historical knowledge. During the Pre-Columbian and colonial eras, Maya elite recorded historical information on stele, lintels, ceramics, and books. While storytelling plays a crucial role in Maya cultural education (Montejo 2005), contemporary Maya communities view written documentation as important to legitimizing their historical identity in the larger framework of the Guatemalan state (Kistler 2010). While the Maya communities regard oral narratives as authentic histories, they recognize that national standards require written documentation to authenticate history. For this reason, my collaborators pushed for our initiatives to provide written documentation to authenticate oral history and enhance local revitalization movements.

In 2012, Sebastian and I worked together on our book project. We fine-tuned our manuscript, collaboratively deciding on the information we would include, the format we would use, and the message we would highlight throughout. We wrote the book, which is fully bilingual in Q'eqchi' and Spanish, for third to sixth grade students. We added a list of historical references at the end of the book, to assist those who were interested in continuing their own research on Aj Pop B'atz'. Sebastian translated the manuscript from Spanish into Q'eqchi'.

When I arrived in Chamelco on June 22, 2012 after a long journey with almost 500 copies of the book, I was excited to share our research in a concrete form with the community. Following our presentation of the book at the gala, Sebastian and I spend the next few weeks delivering the books to local schools and cultural institutions. After meeting with municipal officials to come up with a plan for distributing the books, we visited more than twenty community organizations, the municipal offices of nearby towns, seminaries, and government offices to donate copies. We presented our book before all of Chamelco's teachers during the municipal celebration of *Día del Maestro*, "Teacher's Day," and talked to the teachers about how to use the book with their students. Following the event, we distributed two copies of the book to the heads of each of Chamelco's seventy schools. Chamelco's municipal government hosted a press conference to announce their intention to include it in school curriculum.

Our visit to Chamelco's public library perhaps best reveals the significance of the book for Chamelqueños. Located in the town's municipal center beyond the Catholic church, Chamelco's public library is frequented by schoolchildren who are sent to research various projects for their classes. Since schools in Guatemala have very little economic support and most children come from families of lower socioeconomic standing, they go to the library to use the textbooks they need. Children gather in the library during afternoon hours to use its computers to type assignments

or access the Internet, or to complete homework assignments. I visited the library many times during my field research in Chamelco in search of historical resources about the town or the region. The librarians always reported that they had no information about the town's history to share with the schoolchildren or foreign researchers.

In June 2012, Sebastian and I visited Chamelco's municipal library to donate fifteen copies of the book. The librarian greeted us. She listened with great interest as we explained the reason for our visit and presented her with the copies of the book. She sat for a moment without speaking, with her head bowed. When she lifted her head a few moments later, I saw the reason for her hesitation: her eyes were brimming with tears. When she began to speak, she thanked us for our donation. When children came to the library to research Chamelco's history, she said, she had nothing to offer. Now, she said, she would be able to assist them in learning about their history. She could make a difference, she said. I left Guatemala in July 2012 feeling like we had made a difference, and contributed to the empowerment of the Q'eqchi' community, by helping them to relearn their history lost during the civil war.

In 2014, I returned to Chamelco for a month with the intention of assessing our project and the impact it had on Chamelco's revitalization efforts. It turned out to be more difficult than I expected: layers of bureaucracy stalled our work and made it hard to examine its true impact. Not only was school cancelled for two weeks in late June due to the town fair and several federal holidays, but municipal officials repeatedly cancelled our meetings or simply failed to show up. Over coffee and tamales one evening, Chamelco's mayor declared to me his lack of interest in preserving Chamelco's culture and tradition. "I don't want to spend municipal money on cultural celebrations. It should be spent on education and development projects," he said. While the mayor was right to advocate for municipal support of education and development, his rejection of cultural

celebrations was representative one of the biggest obstacles to Maya resurgence: the idea that tradition impedes progress in the country, an idea that began with the regime of dictator Jorge Ubico in the early 1900s (Way 2012).

In June 2014, Sebastian and I spent several weeks interviewing teachers, school authorities, municipal officials, and others in Chamelco about the impact of our project. While many teachers said that they had failed to use the book or didn't know about the Aj Pop B'atz' holiday, others shared a different opinion: the book provided much needed access to information about Maya history and culture. The texts provided to them by the Guatemalan government, they said, provided children with a look at foreign cultures, and not their own. In oral interviews and the surveys we administered to the groups of teachers with whom we worked, they stated that the Aj Pop B'atz' book was one of few available resources that taught children about their own history, to take pride in their Maya past, and about the values of indigenous culture. At an elementary school in the town center, a teacher told us that he read the book with his students each year, and even took them to see the statue of Aj Pop B'atz' in the center of town.

Likewise, one of Chamelco's school superintendents shared that a committee of teachers was planning the second annual Aj Pop B'atz' festival, to be held in August, commemorating the August 3 holiday. The festival would feature songs about Aj Pop B'atz', speeches, and the children would do drawings inspired by the historical figure. Through this activity, they sought celebrate the values of local culture. She invited us to present our work to the committee, to give them background on Aj Pop B'atz' himself. In the nearby town of San Pedro Carcha, the superintendent of one of the school districts shared with us that a young child had won a storytelling contest at his school after reading and memorizing our book. He invited us to give two training sessions to more than 60 teachers from his district, to educate them about Aj Pop B'atz' and about how to integrate

our book into their classes. Following this month of fieldwork, we felt that our project was having some effect, all be in a slow one.

During the last week of my fieldwork in Chamelco in June 2014, I attended a meeting at the home of activist Andrés Cuz, where several community members gathered to plan the 2014 Aj Pop B'atz' holiday. With or without municipal support, they said, they would hold the celebration. They shouldn't look at their work as just another cultural celebration, but rather as a rescue, said one woman. They needed to rescue this holiday, and the story of Aj Pop B'atz', and to honor the man who had made their town what it is. It was their duty to celebrate the day, she said, now that they had started the tradition. Not to continue, she said, was like leaving a homework assignment half-completed. The others present agreed with her sentiment, and the excitement built as the group made their commitment to celebrating the day not only this year, but in the future. I watched as they chose a name for the committee, made a budget for this year's celebration, and wrote letters to the mayor petitioning his support of their activity.

Despite our busy schedule and the flurry of activity of activists preparing for the 2014 Aj Pop B'atz' holiday and school festival, I was disappointed in what I perceived to be the lack of interest in the Aj Pop B'atz' project. I expressed this sentiment to Sebastian and several of my other collaborators during my June 2014 fieldwork. While some Chamelqueños had expressed that our work in establishing the holiday and writing and donating the children's book had contributed to local resurgence activities, others seemed unaware of our efforts. There was only a little improvement in local understanding of this important figure and his history. The lack of municipal support for cultural events, bureaucracy within Chamelco's schools, and latent discrimination of Maya culture had led to little integration of our work into school curriculum. Sebastian told me not to feel discouraged, that our project was a "long-term" process and that the fact that we had

seen a little improvement in cultural knowledge already pointed the inevitable success of our project. He recalled that it took Mayan activists more than twenty years to establish the Academy of Mayan Languages and implement mandatory bilingual education throughout the country. We could not truly measure our success until years down the road. It was assisting those who worked hard to revitalize Maya culture, he said, and that is what mattered.

Over breakfast one morning, local historian and medical doctor, Juan José Guerrero, a resident of Cobán who wrote numerous books about the history of Alta Verapaz, Guatemala, shared that he presented his most recent book about regional history, *De Castilla y Leon a Tezulutlán-Verapaz*, to an audience of more than 300 people in Cobán in 2007. Though his book provided community members with one of the only complete histories of their region, he doubted the impact it would have, knowing that such information take years to be utilized. Months later, he was shocked when the owner of a prominent local restaurant approached him to tell him how much she loved his book. She was so grateful to him for writing it, he said, as it had proved very valuable to her, he recalled. She suffered from serious insomnia, and on the nights that she couldn't sleep, she read the book and it put her to sleep. It had become a useful sleep aid. With a mischievous smile, he said that she was completely serious, and that her lack of appreciation of the historical materials he had provided was emblematic of the attitudes of many local residents, who, following years of alienation from their past, now had trouble embracing the opportunities to learn about it. Sharing this historical and cultural knowledge, he said, was crucial for those fighting to understand the Maya past and for Maya equality.

Despite the many challenges it faces, the Aj Pop B'atz' project provides an example of how some contemporary Maya turn to Maya resurgence to change the power dynamics that have oppressed their communities for centuries. Government bureaucracy, lingering discrimination

against the Maya, Evangelical Christianity, and the prevailing attitude that tradition impedes progress and development in the country continue to present obstacles to both the Maya resurgence movement and the Aj Pop B'atz' project. Nevertheless, through our ethnographic work in San Juan Chamelco, my collaborators and I have made some advances in connecting local activists and others interested in Q'eqchi' resurgence to the history lost through centuries of oppression and alienation.

To conclude, while the trial of Guatemala's former president Ríos Montt in Spring 2013 offered indigenous Guatemalans a chance to obtain the justice they had sought for years, the reversal of his conviction perpetuated the liminal status of the Maya and presented yet another obstacle in their fight for equality. The court's decision to postpone Ríos Montt's re-trial indefinitely left the future uncertain not only for the former dictator, but for all indigenous Guatemalans. The Maya remain all but powerless, with little representation or voice in the Guatemalan political arena, although the Maya resurgence movement provides one way for Guatemala's Maya to redefine regional power dynamics in the wake of the Ríos Montt trial. For participants of the Maya resurgence movement, connecting with the history lost during the civil war provides a particularly salient example of the ways that Maya communities seek empowerment. Through stories of historical heroes, Maya activists educate themselves, and their youth, about the core values of indigenous life. In San Juan Chamelco, stories of Aj Pop B'atz' remind residents about the principles that ground Q'eqchi' identity and about the strength and endurance of their indigenous legacy. During eight years of collaborative research, my collaborators and I have assisted local activists in relearning this history and promoting it in various ways in municipal and educational activities. Though not without obstacles that challenge its

success, our project has helped a core group of Chamelqueños to recapture the history, and people, they once lost, in an attempt to empower their future.

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## **Archival Documents**

Archivo General de Centroamérica

Expediente 39528 Libro 4575 Number 2 Folio 240

This article explores the social, economic, cultural and political issues bound up in two matters relating to the environment in the Sololá and Lake Atitlán region of the Guatemalan Mayan highlands in 2004–2005: the violent breakup of an anti-mine protest and the various reactions to a tropical storm that threatened the lake ecosystem. It views these events as part of a historical conjuncture and centers them in a larger discussion of Maya political activism, environmentalism and neoliberal development in Guatemala from the 1990s–mid-2010s. MDPI and ACS Style. Way, J.T. The Movement, the Mine and the Lake: New Forms of Maya Activism in Neoliberal Guatemala. *Humanities* 2016, 5, 56. AMA Style. Way JT. Introduction: maya archaeology and social memory. Memory is a social process of remembering and forgetting that is embedded in the materiality of existence (Hendon 2010: 1–2). advocates a view of archaeological sites as spaces where human dramas unfold, stages for the enactment of power and processes of social memory through the making, altering, and remaking of important places during the Late to Terminal Classic transition (A.D. 650-900) in southeastern Mesoamerica, and specifically the site of Las Canoas, Honduras. She argues that this making, altering, and remaking of places in the past reflect the dynamics of the manipulation of memory for political strategy. Social Memory and the Maya.