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Time, History and Ritual in a K'iche' Community: Contemporary Maya Calendar Knowledge and Practices in the Highlands of Guatemala

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Introduction

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Many indigenous peoples in Mexico and Central America share a system for time reckoning that is a basic characteristic of their cultures and defines Mesoamerica as a cultural area (Joyce, 2004, pp. 21-24). *Scholars consider that there are two time cycles that form the basis of the Mesoamerican calendar:* The first cycle is a count of 260 days, of which each day consists of a number and a patron deity (lord or lady). Although the exact names of the lords of the days differ depending on the language spoken, there are only twenty possible Day-Lords and thirteen possible Day-Numbers. The second cycle is that of 365 days, an approximation of the solar year, which in the prehispanic calendar was divided into eighteen periods of twenty days (*veintenas* in Spanish) plus a period of five days. The combination of the 260-day count and the 365-day count produces another cycle of approximately fifty-two years. The Mesoamerican calendar was not only a system for time-reckoning, but it also served divinatory purposes.

The earliest archaeological evidence of the use of this calendar system dates from around 500 BCE and is found on Monument 3 of San José Mogote in Oaxaca, Mexico (Marcus, 1976, p. 44). In later periods, Mesoamerican calendar glyphs are found on commemorative stelae throughout Mesoamerica and in the postclassic Aztec, Mixtec and Maya books. At the time of the Spanish invasion, the Mesoamerican calendar was omnipresent in the region ranging from Central Mexico to the south of Guatemala. Despite the processes of colonization and cultural interaction, which have severely reduced its presence over the last 500 years, the Mesoamerican calendar is still in use among several indigenous communities in Mesoamerica. In the Highlands of Guatemala, the calendar of the K'iche' Maya people—a regional variant of the Mesoamerican calendar – plays an important

role in decision making, divination, and ritual activity. This research explores the conceptualization of the calendar through ritual practice in the K'iche' community of Momostenango.

The count of the Mesoamerican calendar is kept by calendar specialists, who have the responsibility to perform specific rituals at certain moments. These specialists know how to interpret the mantic qualities of the Mesoamerican calendar and offer divination services to members of their community. Although the 260-day cycle and the 365-day cycle seemingly form two distinct elements of the Mesoamerican calendar, this research approaches the calendar as one system consisting of multiple entangled cycles. Apart from the basic 260- and 365-day count, there are several more time cycles – mostly astronomical, agricultural or meteorological cycles – experienced in Mesoamerican communities, but that are usually not taken into consideration when discussing the Mesoamerican calendar. However, they play an important role in the perception of time and in guiding social agency in a community. In this research I integrate all these cycles as part of the K'iche' calendar.

Just like the 260-day count and 365-day count, astronomical, agricultural, and meteorological cycles have been present from before Spanish conquest and their current role in daily life in Maya communities may contribute to a better understanding of the integral Maya calendar today and in the past. In my analysis, I also examine important Catholic celebrations as part of the Maya calendar. While scholars often present Catholic and Maya religious celebrations as separated events, *both calendars have in fact merged into one calendar through long historical processes of synergy.* Finally, the usual emphasis on the cycles of time itself in the Maya calendar leaves history out of the equation. In this research I reincorporate, therefore, history by analyzing the role of ritual memory and practice entangled in the calendar.

Ritual performances are communicative acts, set at moments in which multiple time cycles intersect and during which shared social conventions are reiterated (Rappaport, 1999). Therefore, ritual practice is taken as a point for departure for exploring the K'iche' Maya calendar. The main research question is: How is the Maya calendar conceptualized through ritual practices in the K'iche' community of Momostenango? In order to answer this question, several others need to be addressed, as well: How are the 260-day count and the 365-day count used by contemporary calendar specialists in the Highlands of Guatemala? How do meteorological, astronomical, and agricultural cycles guide social behavior? How does the calendar of Catholic celebrations form part of the K'iche' calendar complex? How does ritual narrate or transfer historical experience over generations? How does ritual practice give continuity to cultural values?

The research leading to the result presented here forms part of the project '*Time in Intercultural Context*', which is directed by Prof. Dr. Maarten E.R.G.N. Jansen (Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden University, The Netherlands), and which has received funding through an Advanced Grant from the European Research Council in the context of the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) under grant agreement n° 295434. The common objective of this research project is the documentation and analysis of the contemporary use of Mesoamerican calendars and their associated rituals and cosmology within their specific social and historical contexts.

The aims of this project, which directly relate to the overall objectives of the ERC research group *Time in Intercultural Context*, are: (1) to document the knowledge, ideas, practices and oral literature related to the K'iche' calendar based on thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in the Highlands of Guatemala; (2) to connect the resulting data and insights to already available historical information, which in turn will lead to a better grasp of the symbolic meaning and social function of time in Mesoamerican thought and culture; (3) to produce a comparative and theoretical analysis of the role of perceptions and conceptualizations of time in the construction of memory and identity, and of how these perceptions and conceptualizations are affected

by (and influence) long-term and intensive cultural interaction. The results will contribute significantly to our understanding of how ancient perceptions of time and related symbolic codes have survived dramatic colonial transformations and now function in an intercultural and globalizing context, interacting with Christian and modern Western concepts about time. In the framework of this project several other studies were written, such as that of Raúl Macuill Martínez on the rituals and religious specialists (*tlamatque*) in Nahua culture (2017) and that of Juan Carlos Reyes Gómez on the contemporary Ayuuk calendar (2017).

STATE OF RESEARCH

The Maya calendar of the Highlands of Guatemala has received significant scholarly attention in the twentieth century. The first ethnographers that documented the continuing use of the Maya calendar in the Highlands of Guatemala at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century focused on those elements of the calendar that can be identified in colonial and precolonial Maya sources (Burkitt, 1930-1931; Stoll, 1889, pp. 58-69). These studies combined archaeological, linguistic, historical and ethnographic research to identify those places where cultural continuity seemed strongest (Lehmann, 1911; Sapper, 1895, 1904). In the subsequent phase of Maya calendar research, ethnographers began to study specific towns and communities, focusing on regional differences. This resulted in in-depth studies of the Maya calendar in the Q'anjob'al town of Santa Eulalia (La Farge, 1947), the *Mam* town of Todos Santos (Oakes, 1951), the K'iche' towns of Chichicastenango and Momostenango (Bunzel, 1952; Schultze Jena, 1933), and the Ixil towns of Nebaj and Chajul (Lincoln, 1942). While these researchers focused on specific communities, the comparative ethnographic research of Franz Termer (1930) contributed greatly to the understanding of regional variety in the use of the Maya calendar.

By mid-century, continuing research on the Maya calendar showed that the system persisted in several communities in the Highlands of Guatemala, although with striking regional and local differences (Miles, 1948, pp. 13-33; 1952; Nash, 1957, p. 152).

Especially the use of the *veintenas* seemed to be inconsistent. During the twentieth century, much emphasis in ethnographic research was placed on documenting the actual use of the *veintenas* in the 365-day count, because of the interest in the possible existence of a leap year in the prehispanic count. As such, the *veintenas* were considered crucial for a scientific correlation of the prehispanic Maya calendar with the Gregorian calendar (Berlin, 1951, p. 158; Gossen, 1974; J. E. S. Thompson, 1960, pp. 303-310; Villa Rojas, 1988, pp. 146-149). However, while several colonial sources list the *veintena* periods with their names and correlate them to specific moments in the Gregorian year, ethnographic studies have not been able to find a consistent sequence of *veintena* periods in contemporary Highland Guatemalan communities. As I will show in this thesis, however, the sequence of *veintena* names in the Colonial period correspond to stages in seasonal cycles that continue to be ritually celebrated today.

Two major studies on the Maya calendar were finally carried out at the end of the 1970s by Barbara Tedlock (1982) and by Benjamin and Lore Colby (1981). During their fieldwork in Momostenango (1975-1979), Tedlock and her husband Dennis Tedlock¹ were trained by a local specialist to become calendar experts (B. Tedlock, 1982, p. 5). In her classic work on the Maya calendar, *Time and the Highland Maya*, she elaborately discusses the educational process of a calendar specialist and the pervasiveness of the Maya calendar in all aspects of Momostecan community life. One of her major contributions is the documentation of specific mnemonic expressions, that form the basis for the interpretation of the 260-day count in divinatory practices. Colby and Colby, on the other hand, apply the theory of “folk psychology” in their research on the Ixil calendar carried out in late 1960s and beginning 1970s. They take a cognitive approach on the intentionality and consciousness of Shas K’ow, a calendar specialist from the Ixil town of Nebaj, to examine the process of healing through divination (Colby & Colby, 1981). Regardless of the fact that Lincoln (1942, p. 103) had already noticed strong similarities with the K’iche’ calendar from

Momostenango, some scholars considered the Ixil calendar “in some respects the best preserved yet known among modern Maya” (Drucker, 1944, p. 540). Benjamin Colby (1976) argues elsewhere as well that the Ixil were “bypassed by the postclassic” and by many other events that led other regions to develop in a “modern” way. The perception of the Ixil region as a place where time has stood still was, however, quickly criticized by academics specialized in Maya research and other fields (Agar, 1982; Gossen, 1983). While Colby and Colby were able to document much information about the Ixil calendar, the genocide that took place in the Ixil region in the 1980s has led to severe ruptures in traditional knowledge.

Since the 1980s, no major ethnographic studies on the calendar of Highland Guatemala have been published. However, a contribution to the academic understanding of the colonial Highland Guatemala calendar system was made by Frauke Sachse, Christian Prager, and John Weeks (2009) who transcribed three colonial calendars, dating from 1685, 1722, and 1855, providing new insights in the continuation of the calendar during the Colonial period.

With the approach of 2012, which coincided with the end of the thirteenth *b’ak’tun cycle*², the Maya calendar received new scholarly and popular attention, giving rise to new syntheses on the subject, which nevertheless mostly focused on the ancient calendar system (L. P. García, Benito, Cuxil, & Cojtí, 2012; Helmke, 2012; Stuart, 2012). In 2012, almost any museum with a collection of Maya objects held an exposition on the matter. At the same time, the attention that the Maya people received was used as a platform to call for self-determination on the part of Maya organizations (Colectivo por la Revitalización de la Ciencia Maya, 2012; L. P. García et al., 2012; Montejo, 2003, 2005; Zapil Xivir, 2010). Unfortunately, anthropologists did not take this chance to engage directly with Maya daykeepers and ritual specialists, but limited themselves instead to studying Maya people’s perception of 2012 and their attempts to overcome the persisting colonial living conditions (Cru, 2015; Little, 2004; Macleod, 2013; Maxwell, 2012).

1 Dennis Tedlock (1996) worked during this period on a new translation of the Popol Vuh by reading it with native K’iche’ speakers and by making analogies between the Popol Vuh and contemporary K’iche’ beliefs and practices.

2 The *b’ak’tun cycle* is part of the prehispanic Long Count calendar, which was a tool to measure the elapsed days since the creation date 11th of August 3114 BC. A *b’ak’tun cycle* measured a duration of 144.000 days.

TIME, RITUAL, AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY

Ever since the early academic interest in understanding the ancient Maya calendar, ethnographic research among the contemporary Maya people has been primarily applied to archaeological research (Westphal, 1991, p. 151). From the early twentieth century until the beginning of the 1970s, indigenous communities were generally perceived as closed, isolated, and static entities, trapped in an unending earlier stage of time by traditional practices and beliefs (Macfarlane, 1977, pp. 631-634; Redfield, 1950; Redfield & Villa Rojas, 1964 [1934]; Stoll, 1889; Tozzer, 1907). The calendar systems that ethnographers encountered in Maya communities were therefore seen as “surviving fragments” – nuggets of unchanged cultural elements that could directly contribute to the reconstruction of the past (Burkitt, 1930-1931; La Farge, 1947; La Farge & Byers, 1931; Lincoln, 1942; Nash, 1957; Oakes, 1951; Vogt, 1970). The renowned Mesoamerican archaeologist J. Eric S. Thompson illustratively states about the contemporary Maya calendar:

[t]he Maya calendar of today is a pitiful survival. It is not unlike those many ecclesiastical buildings of colonial Middle America which have fallen into such a disrepair that now all that stands is some corner, used as a jail or as quarters for a detail of soldiers. A section of ornate balustrade, the stump of a wide-flung arch, or the mildewed stucco of some ornamental frame are clues to a glory that has departed. The structure of the Maya calendar remains, but the embellishments are no more (J. E. S. Thompson, 1960, p. 90).

The knowledge pertaining to the Maya culture is today indeed endangered and many traditions are no longer practiced or have been changed for new ones. I do not think that this process is restricted to modern times nor to the Maya region, as I see this as part of the global and constant “process of becoming” (Ingold, 2011). According to this approach, humans develop perceptual skills to discover meaning in their environment through constant interaction with other human beings (Ingold, 2011, p. 42). From

this perspective follows that there is no essential or “authentic” singular Maya calendar and each calendar form that can be encountered today in the Highlands of Guatemala is an outcome of ongoing processes of human interaction with the environment. With the term ‘environment’, I refer in this research to both human and non-human parts of the environment.

It must be pointed out, however, that the indigenous peoples³ in Guatemala live in a neo-colonial condition, in which racism, discrimination, and oppression (by the government) are experienced on a daily basis. In contrast to what has been declared in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN General Assembly, 2007, art. 3 & 4), ratified by the Guatemalan congress in 2007, the right to self-determination of the indigenous peoples in Guatemala has been consistently undermined (van de Sandt, 2009, p. 51). The natural resources of the indigenous peoples of Guatemala are altered through hydroelectric projects, mining activities, multinational companies, and pollution and contamination (Costanza, 2015, p. 277; Einbinder, 2011, pp. 70-83; Grandia, 2014; Pedersen, 2014). In many communities there is a realistic fear for forced migration and demonstrations are often repressed by state violence (Escobar, 2015; Vay, 2015, p. 13). Furthermore, as Human Rights Watch (2015) points out, human rights and environmental activists in Guatemala suffer continuously from threats, attacks, and assassinations. The colonial context in which the environment and cultures of the Highlands of Guatemala are forced to live, is comparable to the conditions that indigenous peoples all over the world live (Hall, Fenelon, & Champagne, 2009). Although cultural change is characteristic of the global process of becoming, in the Maya communities of the Highlands of Guatemala the directions of cultural change are often not based on free choice but on a primary need for survival.

In contrast to what was generally thought in the twentieth century, I understand the environment as something that is continuously under

³ According to the Guatemala's official political documents, the country's indigenous peoples are the Xinka people, the Garifuna people and the Maya people. The Maya people consists of twenty-one linguistic groups: K'iche', Q'eqchi', Kaqchikel, Mam, Poqomchi, Tz'utujil, Achí, Q'anjob'al, Ixil, Akatek, Jakalteq, Chuj, Poqomam, Ch'orti', Awakatek, Sakapultek, Sipakapa, Uspantek, Tektitek, Mopan, and Itza. Violation of indigenous rights extends to all indigenous peoples of Guatemala.

construction. Therefore, it takes a conscious effort to keep something the way it is, or as Rosemary Joyce states: “[w]hat we see today as a continuous tradition is actually the result of generations of practice by people working within the bounds of what they understood to be both possible and desirable” (Joyce, 2004, p. 4). In the case of years of cultural interaction, effortful actions are taken to translate, preserve, and adopt different concepts (Bhabha, 1994; Burke, 2009, pp. 55-60; Foucault, 1966, 1969). Continuity, in this sense, is not the same as changelessness (Joyce, 2004, p. 4). After a period of discontinuity – often caused by traumatic experiences, such as, in the case of the K’iche’ Maya, colonization or civil war – reconnection to past practices may occur. This reconnection is dependent on the affordance, need, and identification with past practice by a group of people. Discontinuity does therefore not exclude continuity. Continuity means keeping or preserving what is recognized as an important teaching or lesson for current and future generations. The conscious choice of preserving specific cultural values, based on a shared historical ethic, is thus made with the future in mind.

In the Guatemalan Highlands, it implies above all a lot of courage, sacrifice, and extreme effort to give continuity to the cultural values that were handed down by the ancestors. During the Armed Conflict in Guatemala, indigenous intellectuals realized that their culture was under threat and began to research and promote Maya culture within indigenous communities. These activities led to the formation of the pan-Maya movement, an indigenous grassroots movement that began to fight for the preservation and recognition of indigenous rights and plural Maya identities in Guatemala (Cojtí Cuxil, 1996; Warren, 1998). The emergence of the Maya movement is part of a global movement of indigenous peoples in the struggle for the recognition of their rights (Hall et al., 2009). In Guatemala, it has been supported by several indigenous scholars such as Adrián Inés Chávez (1979), Luis Enrique Sam Colop (1991), and Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil (1997) from the onset.

Many of the current local Maya cultural regeneration organizations⁴ in the Highlands of

Guatemala started around the 1980s, in the midst of the Armed Conflict (see Bastos & Camus, 2003). While academic ethnographic research on the Maya calendar has almost ceased after the last major publications by Barbara Tedlock (1982) and Benjamin Colby and Lore Colby (1981), local research and promotion of the Maya calendar by indigenous researchers has become increasingly important since then, while also becoming one of the main markers of Maya identity. On her return to Momostenango at the end of the 1980s, Barbara Tedlock mentions that “the priest-shamans of Momostenango took the unprecedented step of publishing a mimeographed Mayan calendar, titled *Rajil-b’al q’ij maya* (“Mayan day count”). Rigoberto Itzep Chanchavac was the official compiler of this impressively accurate document, which correlates the Gregorian calendar with the 260-day Mayan calendar” (B. Tedlock, 1992, p. 211). In an interview with don Rigoberto Itzep, he told me that the demand of his printed calendar grew quickly and that it was distributed to many communities all over Guatemala. Calendar specialists from other towns, such as for example don Miguel Sebastián Chan Juárez from Chichicastenango, followed don Rigoberto’s example and started to disseminate printed calendars in different communities at the end of the 1980s. Tedlock already noticed upon her return to Momostenango in 1989 that more people were present at the altars during the important celebration of the day 8 B’atz’ in Momostenango than in the 1970s, when she did her fieldwork. As it can be noticed today on ritual days like 8 B’atz’, the efforts of these specialists have resulted in a great awareness and recognition of the Maya calendar in Guatemala today⁵.

During my own research in Guatemala, I was fortunate to collaborate intensively with don Rigoberto’s cultural regeneration program *Takiliben May: Misión maya wajshakib batz’* (Maya mission 8 B’atz’). Don Rigoberto and I have built a close

is dead or in the process of dying (Smith, 2012, p. 109). I use the term “cultural regeneration” instead of “cultural revitalization” because I consider the rediscovery and the promotion of cultural knowledge an ongoing process.

⁵ See the recent study of Lars Frùhsorge (2010) for a detailed analysis of the effects of the colonization and the Civil War on the collective memory of the Maya people, and a discussion of the role of the Maya movement and cultural activists in the process of cultural regeneration in the Highlands of Guatemala.

⁴ The promotion of cultural traditions is in the academic literature usually referred to as “cultural revitalization”. This term connotes, however, that something

friendship and collaboration because we share the same interest and research goal. In his research activities, don Rigoberto investigates the Maya past by talking to elders, documenting oral histories, visiting archaeological sites, and critically reviewing recent and early twentieth-century ethnographic and archaeological publications⁶ with the intention to reincorporate those practices that he considers important⁷. The goal of his research is to overcome the damage and the destruction that have been caused by colonial processes of the last five hundred years and to restore the link between contemporary Maya communities and their heritage. For example, he magnificently blends sections of the Popol Vuh, the early colonial origin account of the K'iche' people that was first translated from the K'iche' by Charles E. Brasseur in 1861, in the extensive ritual discourses that he has been taught by his teachers and mentors. Doing so, he gives continuity to specific cultural values after a period of discontinuity.

6 The classic ethnographic and anthropological studies are widely available in Guatemala. The American-based *Yax Te' Press* and the Guatemalan *Cholsamaj Press* have recently published Spanish translations of the major studies in the field, with the goal to contribute to the Maya movement (among others: La Farge, 1994; Oakes, 2001; Sapper, Seler, & Termer, 1998; Siegel & Grolig, 1996; B. Tedlock, 2002). Spanish versions of early ethnographic works, translated for the *Seminario de integración social guatemalteco*, are also found at many second-hand book markets and stores (among others: Schultze Jena, 1954; Stoll, 1958; Tax, 1964a, 1964b; Termer, 1957; Wagley, 1957; Wisdom, 1961). This seminario was founded in the 1950s as an autonomous unit of the Guatemalan government with the goal of making foreign research data and methodologies accessible to Guatemalans (Whetten, 1958). The accessibility of these classic works has on the one hand enabled leading figures in the communities to reinstall traditions that were still remembered from the time of the grandparents and which were documented by early ethnographers. On the other hand, returning to the early ethnographic works has also resulted in the incorporation of early 20th century Western views of Highland Guatemalan traditions into contemporary traditional and ceremonial practice.

7 The process of overcoming the damage caused over the past 500 years is a slow and difficult road. A huge step in this process was made with the standardization of the Maya alphabet by the Academia de las Lenguas Mayas in the 1990s and beginning of the 21st century, which made it possible to produce educational books in different Maya languages. Currently, however, there are still many debates and disagreements between representatives from Maya communities, among which the debate on the Maya calendar. Differences in interpretation, beginning of counts, or timing of festivities have posed questions as to whether there should be a standardization of calendars and which community or ritual specialist keeps the supposed "original" count. This and other challenges are to be resolved in the coming years.

Similarly, in my approach, I follow Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2011, 181-216) who argue, from the perspective of post-colonial hermeneutics, that the role of anthropology and archaeology is to overcome the damages caused by colonialism, by contributing to the restoration of breaks in social memory (Jansen, 2012; Jansen & Pérez Jiménez, 2007; Lippert, 2006; Montejo, 2005; Pérez Jiménez, 2015). Enabling contemporary Maya communities to access archaeological and historical academic interpretations regarding their heritage, facilitates the process of healing and spiritual recovery after long periods of colonization and oppression (Smith, 2012, p. 117). Therefore, throughout my research I identify possible lines of cultural continuation or areas, in which a reconnection with the past may be possible in the future. To explore processes of continuity and discontinuity in visual representations, such as iconography and dance performances, I adopt the theoretical concept of "thematic units" – clusters of symbolic elements – which has been developed by Van der Loo (1987, pp. 9-26). In short, he argues that a careful diachronic and synchronic comparison of thematic units contributes to new interpretations regarding prehispanic iconography and to the identification of lines of cultural continuity⁸.

Considering that the Highland K'iche' culture forms part of the broader Mesoamerican cultural complex, I trace local lines of continuity (Highlands of Guatemala), regional lines of continuity (the Maya region), and Mesoamerican lines of continuity (the Mesoamerican cultural area). In what case and to which extent reconnection with the past may take place in the future is dependent on the affordance, need, and identification with the past practices by current Maya communities. I hope that my research may be a contribution to the process of cultural healing and recovery in the Highlands of Guatemala.

The analysis of ritual practices provides an essential clue for overcoming the broken link with the past. In this research I follow Roy Rappaport's definition of ritual as "the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers" (Rappaport, 1999, p. 24). He argues that rituals are intrinsically communicative acts constituted by the transmission

8 See Chapter V for a more detailed discussion on the comparison of thematic units.

and reception of two forms of entangled messages that are encoded in a shared symbolic system: the canonical and the self-referential message (Rappaport, 1999, pp. 52-53). These messages communicate the social conventions of a group of people. The canonical messages reinforce social conventions that were established by the ancestors and generally do not change over time. The self-referential messages, on the other hand, are affected by the current physical, psychic or social state of the participants themselves at the time of performance and can therefore be different in each ritual performance. Both messages influence each other, because over time self-referential messages can affect changes to the core of the canonical message, while canonical messages provide structure and control to the variation of self-referential messages (Rappaport, 1999, p. 58). The combination of self-referential and canonical messages updates social conventions shared by a community and provide, among others, guidelines for living with(in) a constantly changing environment. Canonical and self-referential messages constitute therefore the cultural values of a community.

The definition of a community used in this research is the one developed by McMillan and Chavis George (1986). They define a community as a group of people that shares a strong mutual feeling of belonging. The members have a feeling of being important within the group, they get satisfaction and see solutions for their necessities by being part of this community and have emotional ties within the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, pp. 6-7). This rather broad definition of a community overcomes the reductionist divide between territorial or geographic communities and relational communities, the latter being communities based on the “quality of character of human relationship, without reference to location” (Gusfield, 1975, p. xvi) such as profession or religion.

Ritual plays an especially important role in the conceptualization of time. Each individual has a personal experience of time, highly affected by emotions such as fear, hope, memory, and expectation (Durkheim, 1915; Rappaport, 1999, p. 172). As such, the personal experience alone cannot fully serve as a ground for temporal ordering in society. A shared sense of time is created through the interaction between humans and their environment

(Ingold, 2011; Munn, 1992, p. 116). This shared frame of reference regarding time is reiterated and strengthened by ritual performances (Rappaport, 1999, p. 177). In my research, the Maya calendars are, as such, a shared sense of time. The human being is surrounded by many entangled cycles of time, which, with the exception of some astronomical phenomena, generally do not occur in a countable and fixed manner but rather unfold gradually without a distinct break between one period and the next (Hubert, 1904). The intersection of different temporal cycles often defines the moment to perform a ritual and, as such, the ritual creates an interval between two perceived periods, distinguishing a preceding from a succeeding phase (Evans-Pritchard, 1939, 1940; Malinowski, 1927, pp. 210-211).

The symbolic contents of the ritual characterize durations of time and invest the distinguished periods (both the preceding and succeeding period) with specific meanings, proscribing thereby the activities that may or should take place during those periods (Hubert, 1904; Rappaport, 1999, p. 179). A calendar system therefore constitutes and is constituted by daily and ritual practices (Evans-Pritchard, 1940, p. 103; Mauss & Beuchat, 1968; Rappaport, 1999, p. 179). This is an important matter when discussing continuity in calendar systems of colonized peoples, as some cycles of time are difficult, if not impossible, to colonize. Regardless of the belief system, rain will appear and stop at specific moments, corn will grow according to seasonal cycles, and the sun will rise and set at specific locations at the horizon throughout the solar year.

I argue that although a colonizing culture may use its dominant position to force specific changes in ritual behavior, the timing of an event needs to coincide with a meaningful moment in the lives of the participants of a ritual. In the case of the Highlands of Guatemala, where most people live from subsistence farming, it is likely that ritual commemorations take place at important stages in the agricultural cycle. Similarly, the canonical aspect of ritual practice limits the extent to which the actual form of the ritual may change and the extent to which new practices may be accepted when introduced. In my research I therefore approach ritual performances as products of cultural synergy, in which not only the K'iche' people have incorporated Catholic aspects

over time but Catholic celebrations have adjusted to K'iche' perception of time. In order to understand the mechanisms of the K'iche' calendar, I explore not only ritual moments in the 260-day count and the 365-day count, but also in other temporal dimensions such as seasonal and agricultural cycles in relation to important Catholic celebrations.

Furthermore, although history and the future are important elements of linear time-reckoning, to my knowledge no Maya calendar study has yet looked into the relationship between the calendar and the perception of history. In my opinion, the focus on a purely cyclical perception of time reaffirms a long-lasting stereotype of Maya people as static and isolated. As Johannes Fabian has argued in his famous book *Time and the Other*, time is a political tool that serves to justify the colonization of “underdeveloped Others” by portraying them as living in a pre-modern and isolated world and denying them ‘coevalness’, defined as “a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse” (Fabian, 2002, p. 31). In contrast, the inclusion of history and views on the future in a globalizing world contributes to the creation of shared ‘coevalness’ between the researcher, the audience, and the people and culture investigated.

For the study of history from the perspective of the Momostecan K'iche' people, I follow the approach developed by Carlos Severi who, working on shamanic practices among the Kuna people of Panama, argues that traumatic historical events can be embedded in ritual in the form of “ritual memory” (1996, p. 23). Ritual memory, he argues, relates to a memory shared by a group while at the same time it is embodied individually during ritual, thereby bridging the present, the past, and the distant past (the latter also referred to in the academic discourse and Western narratives as “mythology”) (Severi, 1996, p. 23). Severi shows that, in the case of the Kuna, traumatic conflicts such as the invasion of the Americas by Europeans are incorporated in ritual and represented as a form of suffering (e.g. sickness, death, or pain), *because of the experienced necessity to preserve history* (Severi, 1996, p. 45). As historical memory is embedded in ritual, it is constantly updated and applied to the present situation of the

performance through interaction with self-referential messages. As such, ritual relates a historical account in a different form from narratives of the recent or distant past.

Ritual is, therefore, capable of incorporating new concerns that relate to experiences of past generations. As such, generational gaps between a lived experience and a recounted experience are overcome by the incorporation of communal traumatic experiences in ritual (Assmann, 2011, pp. 45-49). Doing so, ritual strengthens the social memory of a group and contributes to its identity formation (Connerton, 1989; Halbwachs, 1942, 1950). Furthermore, reiterating and remembering the suffering caused by colonization leads to a shared hope to overcome the colonial condition in the future (Severi, 1996, p. 45). However, the failure of scholars to recognize ritual memory and history embedded in memory has led to the idea that there is no indigenous history in the Americas (Severi, 1996, p. 20) and has contributed to the largely Eurocentric image of World History (Hobson, 2012; Kanth, 2009; Said, 2003).

CONTEXTUALIZATION OF FIELDWORK

I chose Momostenango⁹ (Figure 1 and Figure 2) as my main place for ethnographic fieldwork because earlier ethnographic works in the Highlands of Guatemala indicated that the K'iche' calendar was well preserved and very much practiced in the town (Bunzel, 1952, p. 285; Burkitt, 1930-1931; Schultze Jena, 1933; B. Tedlock, 1982; Weeks et al., 2009, pp. 162-175). Lincoln (1942, p. 114) mentioned even that in the 1930s some calendar specialists in the Ixil area had travelled to Momostenango to be trained and initiated. Furthermore, although Momostenango was affected by the prolonged Armed Conflict, the experience of violence and forced migration was limited in comparison to other regions of Guatemala. After the end of the armed conflict, Momostenango became therefore one of the centers from which Maya calendar was reintroduced into other regions of Guatemala.

⁹ The name Momostenango (Fortified Place of the Altars) is a Nahuatl name, while the K'iche' name for the town is Chuwa Tz'aq, Before the Shrine. This name also appears in the Popol Vuh (Christenson, 2007, p. 262).



Figure 1. Map of Guatemala and the location of fieldwork in the Highlands of Guatemala.



Figure 2. A map of the center of Momostenango.

The presented research is based on three major fieldwork periods, preceded by a short explorative fieldwork trip to Yucatan, Mexico, focusing on agricultural activities and ritual celebrations (April 29th to May 14th 2013). The first fieldwork in the Highlands of Guatemala took place in 2014, between January and May. During my stay, I focused on learning the basics of the K'iche' language, studying the 260-day count, and participating in ceremonies and rituals. The second fieldwork was carried out between December 2014 and May 2015. During this time, I took a six-week K'iche' language course, which greatly contributed to my further understanding of K'iche' culture. Also, the fieldwork addressed the synergy of Catholic and Maya religious celebrations. Furthermore, I assisted in the organization of the *baile de la culebra*, an important dance in Momostenango, which is discussed in Chapters IV and V. The last fieldwork period ran from July to September 2016. During this fieldwork I focused on checking the data I had previously collected and I also delved into the importance of meteorological changes throughout the year.

Decolonizing critiques have pointed out the unequal power relationships between anthropologists and “their objects” (Deloria, 1970, 1988; Fanon, 1952, 1961; Spivak, 1988) and recent studies have furthermore highlighted these unequal power relations during interviews (Al  x & Hammarstr  m, 2008; Kvale, 2006; V  h  sant  nen & Saarinen, 2012). Taking this into account, I did not conduct long recorded interviews until the last fieldwork season. Prior to the interviews, I took into account the local etiquette for becoming acquaintances and building a respectful and equal relationship. I participated in many agricultural or daily activities to understand the life rhythm of the local community. Finally, during the third and last fieldwork period, from July until September 2016, I focused on recording interviews. At that point all experts knew not only my research interests, but also my personality, background, and personal life, and in that context, it was easy to organize several interviews with the specialists that were closest to me.

During my fieldwork I worked closely with two ritual specialists from Momostenango, don Rigoberto Itzep and don Jos   Angel Xeloj, who approach and

practice their religion in very different ways. Don José Angel Xeloj is the son of Andrés Xiloj Peruch, the calendar specialist with whom Barbara Tedlock and Dennis Tedlock worked. He is Ajq'ij, a calendar specialist with social responsibilities within his family household. Don José Angel has a great knowledge of Christian celebrations and during his ceremonies he frequently addresses Catholic saints. According to don José Angel, there is no separation between the Catholicism and Maya religion. Don Rigoberto Itzep Chanchavac, on the other hand, is a Chuchqajaw, a calendar specialist with high responsibilities towards his lineage, and rejects any open Christian influence in Maya religion. Although he is respectful towards other religions, he promotes a form of Maya religion which is free of any obvious Christian influence. He also incorporates interpretations of the Popol Vuh in his prayers and discourses. During my fieldwork in Momostenango, I had my own room in the house of don Rigoberto and his wife, doña María Hernández Ajanel, and we had the ample opportunity to exchange ideas regarding Maya culture and the calendar. Furthermore, while staying in the house of don Rigoberto I could participate in activities that he organized with the *Takiliben May: Misión maya wajshakib batz'*.

The aim of *Takiliben May: Misión maya wajshakib batz'* is to raise awareness of the Maya heritage and to promote indigenous research in the community of Momostenango. Founded in 1984, the organization is maintained with the income that don Rigoberto makes with his consultations as Chuchqajaw and with sporadic donations by visitors (Figure 3). As the organization is completely dependent on local volunteers, the actual members tend to change over the years as new commitments arise and members have to relocate to find work. Together with his son Gregorio Itzep Ajanel, a knowledgeable K'iche' language teacher, don Rigoberto has organized in the past free K'iche' language classes and traditional dance courses for children. He has also been actively involved with local radio and television stations, where he has taught about Maya spirituality.

Every 260 days, on the day 8 B'atz', the *Takiliben May* organizes the "Expo Maya" in the center of Momostenango, a three-day exposition during which the volunteers of the organization

give workshops in K'iche' and pan-Maya traditions to local peoples, ranging from the production of cacao to astronomical observations (Figure 4 and Figure 5). Furthermore, don Rigoberto has taken it as his task to educate the community members about contamination and cleaning of the sacred altars in the town of Momostenango. Also, once every thirteen days, he is present from an early hour of the day at the entrance to the sacred altar of Paklom in the center of Momostenango to sell books that deal with Maya spirituality, including calendars and guidelines for ritual specialists that he wrote.

Collaboration with the *Takiliben May* enabled me to share my archaeological expertise with a local audience. In 2014, I was invited by don Rigoberto to an interview about cultural values, traditions, and modernity on the local radio station *La princesa Ixmukane*. Later that same year, I was again invited to an interview on the local Momostecan television channel, *Momovisión*, to discuss the topic of cultural continuity. In 2015, I was invited to participate in the Expo Maya event with a photo exhibition about Maya ceremonies and sacred places in the Highlands of Guatemala with the intention to show similarities in practice and beliefs over this entire area. In May 2015, don Rigoberto Itzep was invited to the Leiden University to join in the weekly meetings and seminars of the ERC-research team *Time in Intercultural Context*. In 2016, I taught to two classes on archaeology and historical research to high-school students working towards a teaching degree in Momostenango. Furthermore, aside from the *Takiliben May*, I participated in 2014 in the revitalization of the *Museo del Occidente*, a regional museum in the center of Quetzaltenango, led by the Guatemalan archaeologist Julio Cotom.

While Momostenango was my main place for fieldwork, I also travelled to other towns in the Highlands of Guatemala, the Coastal Lowlands, the Cuchumatanes mountain region, and the tropical Peten region. The goal of these short excursions was to compare observations in the use of the Maya calendar with Momostenango, to establish to what extent my observations on the perception of time could be generalized, by visiting different (linguistic) regions in the Maya area. I was very fortunate that don Rigoberto was able to join me on many of these explorative excursions; his rich knowledge of Maya



“Takiliben May”

MISION MAYA WAJSHAKIB BATZ’

3°. Av. “A” 6 -85, zona 3
Momostenango, Totonicapán
Guatemala




En el día 4 Batz (domingo 30 septiembre 1984)

En una reunión de 50 aj-ñijab se formo y se reconoció la formación de Takiliben May wajshakib Batz – Misión Maya.

Como única y legítima organización Religiosa maya que se preocupa y se propone a defender, rescatar y valorar la ESPIRITUALIDAD “MAYA de nuestros Pueblo Sholmumus (Momostenango) Nuestra Espiritualidad Maya Kiche se basa en tres principios FUNDAMENTALES QUE SON LOS SIGUIENTES:

1. *la pureza de la Espiritualidad Maya la purificación consiste sin la mezcolanza de otra Religión.*
2. *El Aj-ñij (Qij) debe practicar así.
Invocar a UKUSH KAJ UKUSH ULEU -KAJA – DIOS, LA MADRE TIERRA. LOS ABUELOS RI NAN TAT NUESTRA DESCENDIENTES GENEOLÓGICOS.*
3. *Invocación del Espíritu del calendario y todo lo que están inmersa en y manifiesto en el espacio Divino como los Nawales (Kabawil es) del agua, del aire, del fuego, Tojil, Ajpu Ishbal amñij, Ishkik, ishmukane y otros más todos estos conjuntos de fuerzas Sagradas son seres partes del “SER DE DIOS – AJAU. LA JERARQUÍA DIVINA.*

Y los nombres de los altares mayas.

Estos tres principios divinos debe de conocer el aj-ñij no dejarlos por un lado.

Estos tres principios de la Espiritualidad Maya estamos viendo que nuestra “FE” Maya Kiche dentro de un contexto Sagrado y Religioso no es solo una costumbre si no que es inspiración DIVINA Y CÓSMICA en la conciencia y en el corazón de nuestros abuelos y esto es lo que debemos de dejar a nuestros hijos y nietos.

Es necesario que el aj-ñij de hoy se debe de proponerse a formarse dentro de estos conocimientos Sagrados estas son las metas y objetivos de misión maya Wajshakib Batz: compartir y la superación del AJ-ñij mil gracias.

Figure 3. A copy of the act stating the foundation of the *Takiliben May: misión maya wajshakib batz’* on the 30th of September 1984.



Figure 4. Members of the *Takiliben May* in 2015, top left to right: don Flancio Cuxuc, don Luis Torres, don Florentino Xiloj, don Juan Velasques Pelico, don José Hernández Marroquín, don Rigoberto Itzep. Bottom left to right: Estela Hernández Vicente, Doña Julia Hernández Vicente, Doña María Hernández Ajanel, Yessica Cojuix Ajanel, Ralankil Abiyayala Itzep Hernández.



Figure 5. Book sale at the Maya Expo organized by the *Takiliben May* to promote the Maya culture on a local level.

history and local and regional difference together with his extensive network of contacts of leading ritual specialists enabled me to learn about each place in the limited time at my disposal.

STRUCTURE OF THIS RESEARCH

Chapter I explores¹⁰ the characteristics of the *chol q'ij*, the 260-day count. In this chapter I discuss the social role of the calendar specialists and the basic functioning of the calendar. In this chapter, I furthermore describe and analyze the interaction

¹⁰ This research presupposes a general knowledge of the linguistic, historical, and geographic knowledge of Momostenango and the Highlands of Guatemala. These have been described in detail by Tedlock (1982), Choi (2011), Carmack (1973, 1988), and Cook and Offit (Cook, 2000; Cook & Offit, 2008a, 2008b).

between Day-Numbers and Day-Lords in the K'iche' calendar of Momostenango and the way that they relate to the human being. An important part of the discussion of this chapter is the *trecena* cycle, a period of thirteen days that has not yet been given much scholarly attention. In my research I explore how ritual activities in different parts of the town of Momostenango follow a cycle related to the *trecena* and how this results in the decentralization of space and religious power.

Chapter II examines how notions of authority and responsibility are embedded in the perception of time. In this chapter I first discuss the 365-day count, the *junab' q'ij*, and the celebration of the New Year in the K'iche' calendar. Throughout this chapter I explore how the perceived authority of time is duplicated in the social organization of the community of Momostenango. Furthermore, I discuss here my research on the postclassic and colonial almanacs dealing with a five-day partition, a count still found in contemporary ceremonial discourses.

Chapter III deals with the intersection and celebration of multiple time cycles in the Highlands of Guatemala. Here I discuss how seasonal cycles, related to the wind, rain, animal behavior, agriculture, and the sun, guide human behavior throughout the region. I discuss the intersection of time and Catholic holidays to show that the most important celebrations in the Highlands of Guatemala mark and separate specific time periods related to agriculture and human behavior. I suggest that these celebrations should be understood as a cycle of festivities in the K'iche' calendar.

Chapter IV deals with a ritual dance called *el baile de la culebra*, the serpent dance, which is performed at important times in the agricultural cycles in different towns in the Highlands of Guatemala. Chapter IV discusses how the dance incorporates historical experiences specific to each town and how through the performance of the dance a communal history is reiterated. Chapter V continues on the topic of the *baile de la culebra* and traces the symbolic meaning of the dance by looking into prehispanic Mesoamerican symbolism. In this chapter, I discuss how symbolic elements embedded in the *baile de la culebra* promote specific cultural values and I make a first explorative analysis of possible prehispanic antecedents.