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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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III. Seasonality and Celebrations

For writing this chapter, I am greatly indebted to don Rigoberto Itzep Chanchavac, doña María Hernández Ajanel, Gregorio Itzep, don José Angel Xeloj, doña María Theresa López, don José Arturo Cabrera Aguilar, Marleny Tzicap, Carlos Pérez Acabal, Irma Hernández Ajanel, and don Ricardo Zárate Guix for the knowledge that they shared with me. Errors that might appear in the contents of this chapter are my fault alone. In case such errors or any misrepresentations appear, I would like to apologize beforehand to the communities that are mentioned in this chapter.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the relationship between seasonality and religious celebrations in the Highlands of Guatemala. In the previous two chapters it was noted that both the *chol q'ij* and the 365-day calendar shift in relation to the astronomical solar year. As such, the *chol q'ij* and the *junab' q'ij* move also in relation to the seasonal cycles. However, as most people in the Maya communities of the Highlands of Guatemala are dependent on subsistence farming, gradual changes in the environment caused by seasonal cycles are very important for timing agricultural activities. This chapter explores the relationship between ritual celebrations in the Highlands of Guatemala and important stages in seasonal cycles. Following Rappaport (1999, pp. 177-179), I suggest that ritual moments punctuate these gradual changes, and thus mark separate time periods. Throughout this chapter, I will examine how ritual celebrations separate periods in the seasonal cycle and guide human activity by giving meaning to the preceding and the succeeding period.

Many of the ritual celebrations that are discussed in this chapter form part of the Catholic liturgical calendar. Because the Gregorian calendar is a solar calendar, specific cyclical astronomical events related to the sun and specific meteorological phenomena generated by the movement of the earth around the sun, tend to occur around the same date each year. Catholic Holy Days tend to coincide therefore with the same seasonal events each year. As they were introduced by Europeans, these Catholic celebrations are often left out of the discussion on the Maya calendar. However, in this chapter I argue that the cycle of (Catholic) feasts or celebrations is an integrated part of the Maya calendar and that the timing of important festivals or Holy Days in the Highlands of Guatemala coincides with stages in the agricultural cycle that have likely been present and important since prehispanic times.

In Chapter I, I already remarked on Burkitt's observation that most donations in the church of Momostenango were made on days considered important from the Momostecan K'iche' perception of time rather than on important days in the European liturgical calendar (Weeks et al., 2009, pp. 173-175). Ruth Bunzel (1952, pp. 412-423) also noted that there are few celebrations that are referred to as *ladino* festivals, for example Virgen de la Concepción (15th November) or the Celebration of the Nation (15-17 September), implying that they are not important for the K'iche' people of Chichicastenango. Similarly, in the Ch'orti' area, Wisdom (1961, p. 511) emphasizes that the festivals of the *ladino* population go unnoticed or are ignored by the indigenous people. In a similar vein, Fray Vicente Hernández Spine, the priest of Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan, wrote in 1854 that:

> *[s]o punctually do they observe these days of their calendar, that whereas the Sundays and Solemn fiestas of our religion find the church empty, on the good days of their almanac they are crowded with worshippers who burn*

> *incense, filling the pavement with candles and chanting the responses. With these Catholic appearances they have long deceived the parish curates who did not understand their language and could not note the impious mingling of Christian names with those of the spirits and names of their ancient priests, as appears in the adjoined invocation and literal translation* (Weeks et al., 2009, p. 161).

As Fray Vicente Hernández Spine points out, the churches tend to be full of people on *days that the indigenous communities relate to and consider important*. Days to which the indigenous population cannot relate are largely ignored, whether these are important for the European Catholic Church or not. In other words, people only come to the church on a moment that is ritually meaningful for them.

Because most people in the highland communities tend to their own milpa and grow their staple crops, besides holding separate jobs, the main emphasis in this chapter is placed on the cycle of agricultural activity in Maya communities. Times are changing fast and daily and basic human activities change as well. New time cycles are rapidly introduced and taking important roles such as, for example, the cycle of tourism, an important income for many people today in Guatemala. However, most members of Maya communities continue to grow their own staple crops. Taking into consideration the importance of the *milpa* for the survival of a family, I expect that the most important and elaborate festivities in the Highlands of Guatemala relate to significant and meaningful moments in the cycle of the milpa.

To understand the importance of the religious festivities in the Highlands of Guatemala it is crucial to contextualize my experiences in Momostenango with other examples from highland Maya communities. In the first section of the chapter that discusses seasonal cycles in combination with religious celebrations, I will regionally contextualize the seasonality and activities in Momostenango by comparing my experiences with other studies. Ruth Bunzel (1952) and Charles Wisdom (1961) quite explicitly established a relation between Catholic celebrations and agricultural cycles, and they figure therefore prominently in the following contextualization of the ritual cycle. I do not expect, however, that each community marks the transition from one period to the next on the exact same date: apart from slight differences in climates, each community has gone through specific changes and historical process which have led to community-specific festivals and commemoration calendars in the astronomical year. Neither is it necessary that the ritual is Catholic, the ritual for the community might also be non-Catholic because there is usually no distinction perceived between the two. Furthermore, each community might emphasize specific Holy Days to which they relate or for saints that they identify more with, while other Catholic events might be less represented in that specific community. Finally, it should be also kept in mind that ritual moments might shift depending on the region and environmental particularities. For example, La Farge (1994, p. 158) documents that in Santa Eulalia rituals take place in April to mark the end the period of frost and to ensure maize's growth. In the regions of Momostenango and Quetzaltenango, while frost occurs occasionally, it is so sporadic that rituals to propitiate the end the period of frost are not carried out.

The second part of this chapter discusses five case studies of religious celebrations in which I have participated and explores how they mark time and separate periods. In this second part I discuss seasonal celebrations in a broad region, including: Calcehtok in Yucatan, Mexico, for the burning of the zacate; Momostenango in the department of Totonicapán for Holy Week; Amatitlán in the department of Guatemala for the Holy Cross; Again Momostenango for the feast of Santiago; and finally Chichicastenango in the department of El Quiché during the winter solstice. I explore how these celebrations are related to the agricultural cycle. I have taken a broad regional approach for two reasons: (1) to show that the relation between important communal celebrations and agriculture is shared over an extensive region; (2) because not every community can organize a big celebration every couple of days due to the costs and the energy needed for these events.

SEASONALITY IN THE MAYA AREA

Seasonal and agricultural cycles in Momostenango are similar to those of other parts in the Highlands of Guatemala and Chiapas, Mexico[48]. Furthermore, although the climate is notably different, there are many similarities with the cyclical environmental patterns of the Lowlands of Yucatan and Chiapas, especially those related to the beginning of the rainy season and activities on the land (Redfield & Villa Rojas, 1964 [1934]; Tozzer, 1907). The similarity in seasonal phenomena experienced over the widespread region of Maya communities is determined by their location on the globe and the relative movement of the sun and the earth (Hidalgo, Amador, Alfaro, & Quesada, 2013).

The movement of the earth around the sun is an oval route, which takes slightly more than 365 days (the exact duration is 365.242 days). Because the earth axis is slightly tilted, the northern hemisphere stands closer to the sun from mid-March until mid-September while the southern hemisphere stands closer to the sun from mid-September until the end of March. On two moments, 21st of December and 21st of June, the earth stands closest to the sun. These are the solstices. On the 21st of December the sun stands straight above the tropic of Capricorn in the southern hemisphere while on the 21st of June it stands straight above the tropic of Cancer in the northern hemisphere. Due to the movement of the earth around the sun, the sun rises and sets in different points in the horizon throughout the year. On 21st of December, the sun rises and sets at the southernmost point at the horizon, while on 21st of June the sun rises and sets at the northernmost point.

The most noticeable change during the period between the solstices, *uk'ex ub'e* in K'iche' ("the change of his road/path"), is that when sun moves from south to north on the horizon (December to June), the daylight gets longer in the northern hemisphere, while when the sun moves from north to south (June-December), the duration of daylight diminishes every day. In Momostenango, these phenomena are called *nim u-paq'ij* ("great is the inside of the day") and *ch'utin u-paq'ij* ("small is the inside of the day"), respectively. Twice a year, the sun reaches the middle point between the two extremes at the horizon: the equinox or in K'iche' *uk'ex ri b'e ri iq'* ("the change of the road of the moon"). On these days, around 21st of March and 21st of September, the duration of day and night is exactly the same. While equinoxes and solstices occur at the same time around the world, the zenith passage of the sun, *nik'aj q'ij* ("half day") is dependent on the region and can only occur in the tropics. Differently from solstices and equinoxes, which are best noticed at sunrise or sunset at the horizon, the zenith passage is experienced at midday when it can be clearly observed that the sun casts no shadow.

The movement of the earth around the sun causes ocean water to alternatively freeze and melt at the poles, which, together with the corresponding heating and cooling of the northern and southern hemisphere leads to a phenomenon known as the Inter-Tropical Convergence Zone (ITZC) (Hidalgo *et al*., 2013). The ITCZ is a band of rain- and thunderclouds that circles the globe more or less around the equator. The ITCZ is created by Hadley circulations (Figure 44): at the moment when sun stands straight above a region (the zenith passage), ocean water vaporizes and move upwards from the ocean surface, causing warm winds towards the center of the ITCZ and the formation of heavy clouds (Schneider, Bischoff, & Haug, 2014, p. 47). These clouds are led towards the north or south of the ITCZ, where they cool down and cause heavy rains in the region between the tropics of Capricorn and Cancer ("the tropics") (Schneider et al., 2014, p. 47). As the earth turns around the sun, the zenith position of the sun relative to the earth moves from the tropic of Cancer to the tropic of Capricorn and back. In Guatemala, the first occurrence of the zenith passage is between the 29th of April and the 2nd of May and the second is around 5th of August, while the sun is moving from north to south. The ITCZ follows this movement and shifts respectively between 9°N and 2°N on the North American continent[49] (Schneider et al., 2014, p. 45), causing what is known as the dry season (November-April), during which the sky is usually sunny and clear, and the rainy season (May-October), during which the sky is constantly clouded.

48 See Bunzel (1952, pp. 48-53); Earle (1986, pp. 159-160); La Farge (1994); Tax (1964a, pp. 126-129); Termer (1957); Tozzer (1907, p. 51); Vogt (1970, pp. 49-90); Wagley (1949, pp. 90-121); Wisdom (1961, pp. 60-86, 488-513).

49 The movement of the ITCZ is different in each area due to varying presence of bodies of water or land (Schneider *et al*., 2014, p. 45).

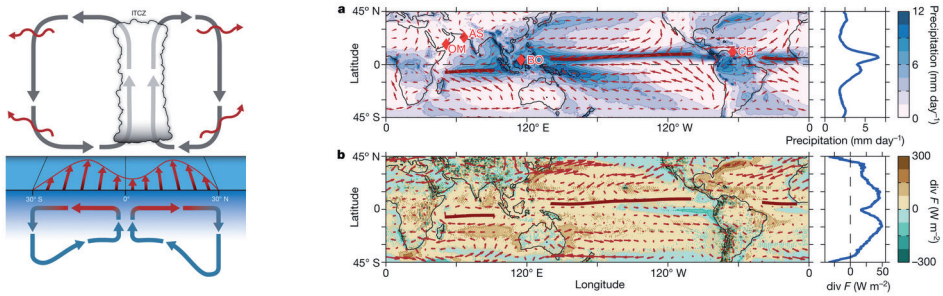

Figure 44. A schematic overview of Hadley circulations and an approximation of the ITCZ by Schneider *et al*. (2014).

The movement of the earth around the sun leads to similar phenomena regarding rain, winds, sun, and temperature in the region between the equator and the tropic of Cancer in the northern hemisphere. Although regional differences appear due to topography and the rain might arrive late or early in a region according to its the distance from the equator, seasonal cycles follow in general lines a similar pattern. The ITCZ leads therefore to a particular timing of human activities that is characteristic for the tropical region in the northern hemisphere. Spain, the country that introduced Christianity in Mesoamerica, lies in the same hemisphere, but the climate is significantly different, given that it lies north of the tropic of Cancer. Therefore, communal rituals that are tied to seasonal changes and mark specific time periods in the Highlands of Guatemala have been likely meaningful moments since before the arrival of the Spaniards.

The following part of this chapter discusses two topics. The first topic contextualizes seasonal cycles in Momostenango within the extensive ethnographic literature on the topic to show that the same patterns are shared over a wide area. In these seasonal cycles I have included the cycle of the wind, animals, rain, the sun and agriculture as well as cycles of human activities. The second topic discusses the celebrations that coincide with important seasonal moments. The aim of the following section is to argue that the intersection of distinct cycles of time create meaningful moments of commemoration that mark time periods and guide social activities (cf. Rappaport, 1999). The separation of periods of time occurs through private or public ritual practices performed in the parish church, at the public altars or at the house altar. As a consequence, human activities themselves generate a sense of time that is primarily felt on an experiential level (cf. Ingold, 2011).

THE DRY AND COLD PERIOD

Seasonal Characteristics

The agricultural cycle never exactly repeats in each community. The height, humidity, temperature, type of soil and micro-climate influence agricultural tasks and thus the timing of agricultural events. Within the municipality of Momostenango, for example, there are high and cold regions where only maize, beans, and squash can be planted, but there are also warmer and lower plots where coffee and bananas are grown. These factors may not only influence the moment of sowing, but can also determine how many harvests can be obtained each year. However, in Momostenango, as in the majority of communities in the Highlands of Guatemala, there is only one agricultural cycle, which runs from roughly the end of April or beginning of May until mid-November or beginning of December.

The end of December marks usually the end of harvest, although in some areas in the Highlands of Guatemala, the harvest may extend well into January or February (Vogt, 1970; Wagley, 1949, p. 52). Mid-January, February, March and April are

the driest months of the year (Figure 45). After all *mazorcas* are taken to the house, the *milpa* can be cleaned. Activities are carried out depending on one's preference. Some prefer to clean the *milpa* completely, taking away all the weeds and preparing the grooves on the field for the next period of sowing. Others cut the remaining corn plants and put them in the existing grooves, where they are left to dry (Bunzel, 1952, pp. 46-48; Redfield & Villa Rojas, 1964 [1934], p. 132; Tax, 1964a, p. 127; Tozzer, 1907, p. 51; Vogt, 1970, p. 51). It is usual to place some earth on the cut plants, however, so that they fertilize the ground and the wind does not carry them away. Once that the grooves are prepared for the next period of sowing, the milpa is left to rest. Those who do not live next to their fields, bring their organic garbage and ashes from the fireplace weekly there to fertilize the grounds. Don Rigoberto told me that when he was young, his parents made a fertilizer by mixing fallen leaves, lime, ashes and human urine.

In some part of Momostenango, such as the aldeas of *Los Cipreses* and *Tierra Colorada*, sowing begins earlier in the year than in the rest of the community. The soil in these aldeas is moister and enables an early period of sowing. Harvest, however, occurs at the same time as in the rest of Momostenango. So, in these two aldeas it is necessary to have the milpa ready for the next period of planting right after harvest.

During the months January to March, there is hardly any rainfall. Rivers have less water or have become dry during this period. As the period running from mid-January to April is the driest period of the year, work can be done that cannot be done when it rains. This time of the year is used for adjusting the huts on the *milpa*, to repair paths in the community or to do other maintenance work around the field and the house (Figure 46). Furthermore, January and February are the best months to buy new furniture or other household items[50] or to construct a new house. In some areas where the ground is exhausted, a new milpa is prepared by cutting the bushes during these months.

50 Tozzer (1907, pp. 106, 117-150) mentions that among the Lacandones in Chiapas, items that are important to the community, such as ceramic incense burners, are renewed during February and March. After the renewal has been finished, the milpa can be prepared.

The period that runs from the end of November until the end of January is characterized by cold winds, especially around the December solstice. While the night and early morning can be very cold, during the day temperatures rise considerably, because the sky is clear. Momostecan weavers always make sure to have enough ponchos ready for this period, as sales of the typical garment usually rise when the cold strikes. At the end of January, rough and cold winds blow daily, announcing a warmer period.

Figure 45. The milpa in the beginning of February 2014. The corn stalks have been left on the ground to dry.

Figure 46. Making adjustments to the roof of the hut that stands at the milpa in February 2014. Because of the dry weather during this period of the year, the complete roof can be taken off.

Celebrations

In December, the most important festivities of Momostenango are the Holy Day of the *Virgen de la Inmaculada Concepción* (8th of December), during which only a minor procession takes place, and Christmas. The first is conceived as a preparation to the latter, which marks the end of the harvest. Christmas night is anticipated nine days before: during the nine evenings prior to the birth of Christ, the images of Saint Joseph and the Virgin Mary stay overnight in different houses where visitors come to pray. An important Mass is held at night on 24th of December. On 25th of December, several images of the baby Jesus are passed from house to house, an event known as *recorrido del niño*, from eight o'clock in the morning until eight o'clock at night. The presence of the baby in the houses brings a special blessing. Usually the babies are not left long at the same house as they try to visit as many houses as possible on a day.

Although Christmas celebrations are important in Chichicastenango as well, they are overshadowed by the Patron Saint feast of Santo Tomás. As Bunzel (1952, p. 50) mentions, the festival of Santo Tomás – celebrated on the day of the winter solstice, see below – marks marks the end of harvest season. This is similar to Christmas in Momostenango. The same occurs in the Ch'orti' area (Wisdom, 1961, p. 501).

The first of January is the moment that the indigenous authorities of Momostenango, in the four *barrios* and the fourteen *aldeas* change (see Chapter II). This is the usual date to change authority in most indigenous communities in Guatemala and the south of Mexico (La Farge, 1994, p. 197; Siegel, 1941, pp. 71-74; Vogt, 1970, p. 79; Wagley, 1949, p. 109). The next Holy Day that is widely celebrated in Guatemala and beyond is that of the Black Christ of Esquipulas, on 15th of January. On this date, people go on pilgrimage to Esquipulas, in the eastern part of Guatemala, near the border with Honduras, during which they make offerings at the sacred mining tunnels and at the sacred *piedra de los compadres* ("the stone of the godfathers"). In Momostenango, the *Cristo negro de Esquipulas* is the Patron Saint of barrio Pa Tz'ite, which is not celebrated on the usual 15th of January, but on 30th and 31st of January, which coincides with the Nadir passage of the sun.

The Nadir passage occurs when the sun is at the Zenith on the diametrical opposite side of the globe. As such, the nadir passage also occurs twice a year: around the 9th of November and around the 29th of January. As nadir passage is not observable at the horizon and it is not measured with any device, nobody that I have spoken with was aware of the astronomical event. However, its effects are noticeable meteorologically, because around the moment of the first nadir passage the clouds of the ITCZ have disappeared completely from the Guatemalan Highlands, coinciding thus with the end of the rainy season and the beginning of the harvest period. Meteorological effects of the second nadir passage are not as strongly experienced as the first: mostly noticeable are the easing down of the cold winds and the gradually warming up of the weather.

The following Holy Day that is widely celebrated in Guatemala is that of the *Virgen de la Candelaria* on 2nd of February. The primary place for this celebration is in Chiantla, in the department of Huehuetenango, where people from all over the country come to visit. It is widely known that the church of Chiantla is built on top of a sacred precolonial structure, which is, according to local experts, the reason for the interregional recognition of this celebration in Guatemala. The Holy Day is also celebrated in Rancho Candelaria, on the road between San Francisco el Alto and Momostenango.

The festivity of the Virgen de la Candelaria in Chiantla used to be for Momostenango the moment that the communal rain petitions began. Beginning on 2nd of February and running through the dry months of March, April and May, special Masses were organized to petition rain. These used to be performed by the *Ajq'ijab' rech tinamit*, the calendar priest for the town. The first petition used to be performed on 2nd of February in Chiantla, the second ceremony took place on the day Ajpu (preferably 8 Ajpu) at a place called Kajb'alch'uy at a sacred altar named Ajpu, the third petition was in the center of Momostenango on the sacred hill Paklom, and finally the last petition was during a special Mass in the *calvario* at the cemetery of Momostenango. Today, however, the *Ajq'ijab' rech tinamit* are criticized for not performing these rain petitions anymore[51] and for thus being one of the reasons for the late arrival of rain each year.

51 The exact reason for not performing these rain petitions anymore is not clear to me.

In the month of February, the *pa job'* takes place on an adequate day Kej or might be extended on the following day Q'anil (see Chapter II). *Pa job'* is the moment that the indigenous authority of Momostenango, whose members had taken their burden in January, passes by and asks for a five-quetzal support from each family to buy candles in Antigua. These candles are the year supply of candles for the Catholic Church and are brought on Holy Tuesday by the community in a long procession from the entrance of the town to the Catholic Church, while also passing through the town hall and the office of the indigenous authority.

Carnival, which can fall on the 1st of February at the earliest and on the 9th of March at the latest, is mostly celebrated by children. On this day school children make the park and main plaza unsafe as they gather here and throw eggs and flour on people who pass by. Whereas during the year any kind of food is treated with much respect, this is the only moment when it is wasted. In 2014, there was no running water for three weeks and, because of a heavy drought, rivers only carried little water, as well. Although this made it extremely difficult to wash oneself or one's clothes, it did not deter children from completely dirtying their clothes and hair while celebrating Carnival.

THE PREPARATION OF THE MILPA AND SOWING

Seasonal Characteristics

Around the beginning of March, slightly before the equinox, the cold period gradually comes to an end and a warmer period begins, during which there is not much wind or storm, lasting from mid-March until the beginning of May. In this period, temperatures in the Highlands can reach 25 degrees Celsius during the day and stay around 18 degrees at night. The temperature does not drop at night as it does in December and it is not necessary to cover against the cold as much as before.

March and April are the months in which the milpas are readied for sowing. This involves the clearing of the weeds, inspection of the grooves, and sometimes the burning of *zacate*. On fieldwork, I noticed the differences between the burning of the *zacate*, the dried corn stalks and weeds, in Yucatan (2013), where this is practiced abundantly, and in Momostenango (2014, 2015, 2016), where this is not common. Today in Momostenango, the burning of the *zacate* is often seen as a damaging activity that contributes to loss of fertility because the ashes are taken away by the wind. Furthermore, only few people know how to control a fire. After many incidents in which fire spread out of the fields into residential areas, most people have stopped burning the *zacate*.

In Yucatán and other regions where the burning of the *zacate* does take place, the timing is crucial: if one waits too long, the first rains may moisten the *zacate* and as a result there will be fewer ashes to fertilize the milpa, which could again affect the harvest negatively (Redfield & Villa Rojas, 1964 [1934], p. 132; Tozzer, 1907, p. 51). The timing often coincides with specific dates of the liturgical year. In the Ch'orti' region, for example, the period for burning the zacate is set between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday (Wisdom, 1961, p. 415) and in Yucatán the burning takes place shortly before the Day of the Holy Cross (Figure 49). In general, this is done in the warm and dry period that runs from mid-March until the zenith passage of the sun, around the very end of April.

In Momostenango, the sowing of the milpas takes place around the end of April or beginning of May after the first rains have fallen. In general, the milpas can be planted after a couple of heavy rains have penetrated the earth and moistened it. According to several specialists in the Momostenango area, the moisty earth prevents the birds from stealing the seeds, protects the seeds against drying, and makes the planting and digging easier. The exact moment of planting is usually set in accordance with days of the *chol q'ij*, the rain, moon phases, and the week. Choosing a day for planting depends on the person, but the best days for planting in Momostenango are generally the days Q'anil, Imox or Aj in the K'iche' calendar, in combination with a waxing moon and a Monday or Tuesday in the week calendar, after the first two heavy rain showers close to moment of the sun's zenith passage. The seeds that will be planted are always selected on a day Q'anil, a couple of days before the planting day. Carlos Pérez Acabal explains about the selection of seeds:

Figure 47. The milpa arranged in the hills is ready for planting.

Figure 48. Sowing in Momostenango on the 27th of April 2015.

Figure 49. Sowing on the peninsula of Yucatán on the 3rd of May 2013.

> *Since a long time, since the time of our grandfathers-our fathers, we preserve our corn seeds. The seeds that we conserve are special seeds. The seeds that we sow are selected ones. But a lot of people have the tradition to do it [to conserve them] in different ways or through a different process. In our case, we have seen that our ancestors, our grandfathers, our fathers, conserved the seeds one to three days before sowing in a container with water with the aim to make it easier for the seeds to sprout* – Carlos Pérez Acabal, 24th of August 2016.

During my fieldwork in 2015, I participated on Monday 27th of April 2015 (on the *chol q'ij* day 3 No'j) with Carlos in the planting of don Rigoberto's milpa (Figure 47 and Figure 48). Because don Rigoberto would join me to the Netherlands for a short visit to the Leiden University, we had to plant before the first rain had fallen. According to don Rigoberto, the heat that had been affecting the town in the preceding couple of days was an indication that the dry season was at its end and that rain would fall quickly. Three days later, the first heavy rain fell. Although the day No'j is not the preferred day in the *chol q'ij* for planting, it was the best option at the moment due to the waxing moon, the coincidence with a Monday, and the zenith passage, and also because other preparations were planned for the rest of the days that we would spend in Guatemala before leaving for the Netherlands. A divinatory consultation with his *tz'ite* seed indicated that this was a good day for planting.

Sowing activities require specific prescriptions and behavior. On the day of sowing one can only consume white atol with *suchile* (the pit of the zapote) and *kuchun* and *pol ik'* (sauce of black beans). This atol is usually prepared the day before the planting by the wife of the *milpa* owner. Drinking coffee on this day is forbidden as it would result in *mazorcas* turning into dust. Sexual abstinence of three days is also required before the day of planting.

The seeds that we planted on the milpa of don Rigoberto were maize, red bean (*kiaq kinaq'*), black bean (*q'eq kinaq'*), and squash (*achuitle*). Carlos and I worked together, each taking on a single groove. First, we made one hole by scraping the loose earth

until we reached a harder humid layer which we loosened by chopping it softly. After, we threw the seeds in the earth and covered them with about ten centimeter of earth after which we proceeded to make another hole about half a meter away. Exactly six maize seeds were dropped in every hole, usually accompanied by one or two bean and *achuitle* seeds. Each maize stalk gives one *mazorca*[52] (only very fertile ground it will grow two *mazorcas*), so each hole would be good for six *mazorcas*. If the seeds are planted too close to each other, crops will turn out small.

Celebrations

From February until the end of March, roughly during the period marked by Carnival and Lent in the Highlands of Guatemala, attention is concentrated on the selection of seeds that will be sown in the next period. For example, in Chichicastenango, the *bendición del maíz* takes place from mid-January until the beginning of March. During this period, the Tzijolaj (an important image with divine powers; see appendix E) is brought to the *aldeas* of Chichicastenango. At the religious centers of these *aldeas* people come to receive the blessing of the Tzijolaj and to regenerate the corn. On Sundays, the Tzijolaj returns back to Chichicastenango in a procession. In Momostenango, the blessing of the seeds takes place on a later moment in the dry season, a couple of weeks prior to planting. This is celebrated both in the Catholic Church in the center of the town, and at the house altars on the day Q'anil.

The period of Lent extends between Carnival and Holy Week. The Cristo Acapetagua[53], an image of the crucified Christ, figures prominently in the ceremonies during this period and is commemorated on Fridays (Figure 50). On the first and second Friday of Lent, he is commemorated in the *aldeas* Tierra Blanca, Tzanjón, and Pizal, which venerate Cristo Acapetagua as patron. The third Friday of Lent, he is commemorated in Chuijoyan and the fourth Friday of Lent is celebrated in both Momostenango and the *aldea* Patzuk. Finally, on the fifth Friday, he is

Figure 50. The image of Cristo Acapetagua in the *calvario* of Momostenango.

commemorated again in Chuijoyan. On the sixth Friday of Lent, a ubiquitous commemoration of Cristo Acapetagua takes place.

On each Friday of Lent, the *via crucis* take place in Momostenango. These processions, which commemorate the passion of Christ, integrate the entire town as on each Friday the procession starts in a different part of town and leads towards the main church in the center. The first procession starts at the sport fields of *barrio* Pa Tz'ite, the second leaves from the *barrio* Santa Ana, the third starts at the exit towards *aldea* Tierra Colorada, the fourth *via crucis* begins at the *calvario* at the cemetery of Momostenango, the fifth leaves from Santa Isabel, and finally the sixth begins near the entrance of Barranquito, at the border of town. Finally, on Good Friday the last *via crucis* takes place. Community members take up the burden of organizing the *via*

52 Spanish for "maize cob".

53 *Acapetagua* is a term from the Nauatl language (*acapetlahua*), which can be translated as "Owner of the Reed Mat". The term Mat (Pop in ancient Maya) may be understood as an index of rulership. Possibly this is a reference to the divine power of Christ.

crucis in their barrios and aldeas. On an adequate day during Lent, the members of the cofradías of Momostenango wash the clothes worn by the Saints. The preferred days are 9 Ajmak, 7 Ajmak, or 10 Ajmak, because Ajmak is an appropriate day for pardoning sins. The clean clothes will be changed during Holy Week so that the Saints start the year fresh and all sins have been washed away.

As discussed above, the period of Carnival and Lent is the season for preparing the *milpa*. Holy Week and Easter, of which the date may vary between the 22nd of March and the 25th of April, marks the beginning of the period of finalizing the fields and preparing for the arrival of rain. The death and resurrection of Christ coincide with the ending of the dry period and the beginning of the period of sowing, which will lead to new life on the milpa. In the section of case studies in this chapter, I will discuss how Holy Week in Momostenango separates two periods of time and gives meaning to them. In those regions where the *zacate* on the milpa is burned, this is usually done around Holy Week (Redfield & Villa Rojas, 1964 [1934], pp. 132-133; Tozzer, 1907, p. 161; Wisdom, 1961, p. 514). Prior to this event, special rituals are performed to ask the wind for its help in burning the field, but against the uncontrolled spreading of fire (Redfield & Villa Rojas, 1964 [1934], p. 132; Wagley, 1941, p. 32).

The day Q'anil is the best moment to select the seeds for planting the *milpa* and to perform a protection ceremony for the seeds, which takes place twenty days before sowing. The day 8 Q'anil of the 260-day count is the day that commemorates the *milpa* and the seeds of the *milpa*. However, as this day shifts in relation to the astronomical year, it may fall at any moment in the agricultural cycle. Therefore, previous to planting, another day Q'anil is chosen which will substitute the day 8 Q'anil of the 260-day count at the right moment in the astronomical year. The day 8 Q'anil is therefore celebrated twice in the year: (1.) on the day 8 Q'anil in the *chol q'ij*, and (2.) prior to planting in the astronomical year.

THE RAINY SEASON

Seasonal Characteristics

Rainfall truly arrives around the time of the zenith passage, in the end of April or the beginning of May. As the sun stands straight above the ground, the periods surrounding the zenith passages are characterized by extreme heat, drought, and lack of wind. The water that vaporizes from the ocean moves towards the ITCZ, creating usually a clear sky at the place where the zenith passage takes place. After this period of heat, the rain starts slowly: in the beginning of May a light rain may fall for one or two hours in the afternoon, while the rest of the day remains dry. Sometimes the rain lasts several hours. The last five years have been extremely difficult as the rainy season arrived later each year, while still ending at the beginning of November. The rain period is thus shorter, resulting in smaller harvests and worries for future food supply.

However, by the end of April there is a palpable expectation for heavy rains to arrive. These bring new life to the *milpa* but they are also considered dangerous. The rainy season is a period in which inundations, floods and hurricanes might cause damage in and around the community. Heavy rains can destroy the same maize plants that they nourish. In Momostenango, a phenomenon called *uwaja'*[54] ("el cresciente" or "the crescent one") occurs with the first rain, or at any moment when heavy rain falls. Doña María Hernández explained me that the water from the rain will cause the rivers to swell up and that the waves become a dangerous snake that can devour humans. If you look at the river, it will grab you and you will die. This phenomenon is also known in other towns of Guatemala. For example, among the Ch'orti' near the border with Honduras, the sudden flooding of rivers is caused by the *chicchanes*[55], giant snakes, that run down from the hills (Wisdom, 1961, p. 446).

Animals and insects, in particular, are very clear indicators of rain. One of the main indications of the soon-to-arrive rainy season is the appearance

54 *Uwaja'* derives from *U-wach-ja'*, "his face of the water".

55 Spanish: "serpiente rey"; Ch'orti': "Ah tcix tcan" (Wisdom, 1961, p. 444). The chicchan is a huge version of a normal snake. Sometimes it has the upper body of a man and the lower body of a plumed serpent. Some tell that the chicchan is an enormous man that presents himself as a big snake in front of people. Some people say he has four horns on his head, two big golden horns on the front, and two smaller ones on the back. The female version, known as "Chicchán de la gran agua", is a woman on the upper part and fish on the lower part of her body. But in general, the chicchanes are perceived as big snakes (Wisdom, 1961, p. 444).

of a specific type of beetle, known in K'iche' known as *malin*. This large beetle can be seen flying around ten to five days before the first rain. Additionally, a night prior to the first rain, *zompopos*[56] (flying ants) make their first appearance[57]. Large quantities of these insects are drawn to the light, fall down, and leave their wings behind. In the first few weeks after the rainy season has started, zompopos keep on appearing. Another announcer of the rain is the flea. A week prior to the first rain, fleas begin to spread, especially at night, when they crawl in the bed covers to reproduce. According to doña María Hernández, extreme drought and heat prior to the rain makes the fleas come out of the earth and announce the rain. As soon as the rain falls, fleas disappear.

Several birds indicate that the rain is coming. For example, the migration of Swainson's hawks called *Torol jab'* ("openers of rain") is an indication of the beginning of rainy season, as already noted by Barbara Tedlock[58] (1992, pp. 186-187). The hawks fly south right before the beginning of rainy season. At the beginning of the dry season, they are to be seen again as they fly back north. Another bird that announces the rain, but does not migrate, is the *Ti'a tzi* ("Police"). This bird announces when the rain is about to fall by singing loudly, as if it has water in his throat and makes bubbles. Throughout the entire rainy season, the *Ti'a tzi* is the announcer of the arrival of the water and of the growing *b'ulb'ux*, the wells, which will swell up because of the rain.

Frogs, and serpents in particular, are noticed more often after a rainfall. The frogs are especially noticed during the night, when their croaking sound can be heard. Whereas during the dry season serpents remain close to wells and other sources of water, in the rainy season they can be seen anywhere. Serpents appear especially in October, when the rain can continue for days. During this period, a red snake, called *kiaq b'elej*, is most commonly seen.

Maize plants start sprouting roughly fifteen days after sowing (Figure 51). If not all maize seeds sprout, the milpa will be planted again twenty days after the first sowing on those spots where seeds failed to sprout. The first planting is done with a shovel but the replanting is done with a digging stick so that the sprouting corn is not destroyed. Forty days after sowing, if rainfall is abundant, the *milpa* has grown and needs to be cleaned of the weed. During this first stage of the *milpa*, there is a high concern for the damage caused by small animals that eat the sprouting plants, hungry after a long season of drought.

Figure 51. Sprouting corn plants on the 10th of May 2015, thirteen days after planting.

The sprouting of maize plants cause ants to appear, which can possibly damage the crops. Chemicals are used today in the early stages of the plant growth to keep these insects away. Chickens and turkeys are also carefully watched as they often pick the planted seeds from the *milpa*. At night, rats may eat the maize plants. When the maize has grown into a young *elote*, the squirrels become a danger for the harvest. As one squirrel can eat up to six elotes per day, they can cause much damage to the field. Once the corn has fully grown, however, there are not many animals that threaten the harvest.

A second cleaning of the weed of the milpa takes place twenty days after the first cleaning. As such, weeding usually takes place on the same day of planting in the K'iche' calendar, but with a different number. During the second weeding, the small hills on the milpa are heightened, so that the maize plants

56 Fray Francisco Ximénez (1967, p. 127) also mentions in his *Historia Natural del Reino de Guatemala*, written in 1722, that the zompopos appear every year in May when the first heavy rainfall has started.

57 According to several narrations, ants or flying ants were involved in bringing the first maize from Paxil to the humans, thus becoming announcers for the planting season (see Valladares, 1989, pp. 28-30; Wagley, 1941, p. 20).

58 Tedlock (1992, pp. 186-187) calls the migration of Swainson's hawks torol *k'älaj* ("openers of rainy season") when they pass in April, and torol *sak'ij* ("openers of dry season") when they migrate in October.

Figure 52. Corn stalks thrown down by the wind.

stand more stable. After July, the corn stalks have usually grown so high that weed cannot affect them badly. After July, therefore, clearing becomes less a priority. Throughout this whole season of growth, there is a high concern for fertility, abundance, and protection against excessive rainfall, wind, and hail (Wagley, 1941, p. 39).

From June onwards, rains become more intense. While in the morning there is usually a clear blue sky, around midday the sky has already clouded over, followed by intense rain showers that last more or less from 2 or 3 o'clock in the afternoon until late in the evening. In July, when the oceans are warmed up by the constant sun, the hurricane season starts. From June until October the rain is sometimes accompanied by strong winds that can damage the *milpa*. Carlos Pérez Acabal from Momostenango told me while we were planting the *milpa* in 2015, that during strong storms a powerful being passes over the *milpa*, leaving behind a track of broken maize reeds (Figure 52). When one goes the next day to the *milpa*, one can see its path through the field. According to don José Angel Xeloj, this is *Usanta'il kaqiq'* (Storm God) who passes as the whirlwind over the *milpa*. Don Rigoberto mentions that the wind that passes over the *milpa* is Juan No'j, the Wind-aspect of K'iche' calendar day 1 No'j:

> *About the one that breaks the maize… well, we have learned that there is this personage called Juan No'j… It would be the day No'j that passes around visiting and checking the milpa, and for some reason something does not appeal to him: he might not sense the offerings, there are no offerings for him. So he leaves and he pushes his way through the milpa, which breaks the milpa* – Don Rigoberto Itzep Chanchavac, 10th of August 2016.

At another moment, he explained more characteristics of Juan No'j to me: he is a little, old, fat man dressed in old clothes. He visits the houses when men are not around and starts bothering the women, trying to seduce them and have intercourse with them. When the woman rejects him or when the husband throws him out of the house, he goes angrily to their *milpa*. With both arms open, he walks through the *milpa* and throws it down. It seems that Juan No'j is the embodied aspect of the wind and of the *chol q'ij* day 1 No'j ("Wisdom"). During ceremonies for the protection of the *milpa*, it is usual to ask for the winds not to destroy the *milpa*. As don Rigoberto explains, it is important to leave offerings and commemorate the wind, 1 No'j, so that he will not pass over the *milpa*.

Similarly, in Chichicastenango one of the saints that figures "prominently in agricultural ritual is Santiago. Here, as in Spain, he is the patron of horses, who tramples the corn. As destroyer of the *milpa* he is vaguely identified with Jurakán, the god of tempest, who has been baptized under the name of Manuel Lorenzo"[59] (Bunzel, 1952, p. 57). In the Ch'orti' area, the wind gods bring the clouds up to the sky where chaacs ("rain gods") can break it. Just as Santiago in Chichicastenango, they ride on horses (Wisdom, 1961, pp. 448-449). As in Momostenango, if no offerings are made to the wind gods, they might destroy the young plants by whipping them with a hard wind (Wisdom, 1961, p. 449). The wind gods are also the ones that give first breath to the new born, and take the last breath of air of the ones who die. The forces of wind and water are therefore delicate in that they are both givers and takers of life.

Celebrations

The first of May is in Momostenango the day of San Felipe, the *Ajtz'ib'* of the Patron Saint Santiago. On this day both San Felipe and Santiago are taken around town in procession. On 1st of May it is usual in Momostenango to raise a cross in the center of the *milpa*. This cross or *takalib'al* protects the maize plants against the wind that might throw them over during the rainy season, Juan No'j (1 No'j). Two days later, on 3rd of May, is the day of the Holy Cross[60]. This day is the day of the entombed Christ, the *señor Santa Cruz*, who lies in the *calvario* of Momostenango. As the festivity for San Felipe has just passed, however, there is no big celebration on the day of the Holy Cross in Momostenango. Both celebrations are timed around the important moment of the sun's zenith passage and the arrival of the rain. This is also the day of the masons, who raise crosses on their constructions. Furthermore, the day of the Holy Cross is the day of the water in Momostenango:

> *Here in Momostenango, the custom is that the 3rd of May is the day of the water. The day of the water is the day that God is thanked. God is thanked for the water and, above all, for the necessary attention for this sacred liquid […] On this day, on the 3rd of May, the day of the Holy Cross, Mass is organized in the church […] Those who have springs on their territories can bring their offerings: flowers or candles. And they can thank God for the springs or for practically any place where there is drinkable water* – Carlos Pérez Acabal, 24th of August 2016.

The 3rd of May marks the zenith passage of the sun[61] in the Gregorian calendar and this is generally the proper day for rain petitions in the Maya area and in Mesoamerica in general[62]. Sometimes it is celebrated slightly before the zenith passage such as for example among the Ch'orti' of Jocotán, in the department of Chiquimula, who petition rain on the feast of San Marcos, the 25th of April, and perform a ceremony for sowing on the 11th of May (Wisdom, 1961, p. 493). In the case studies below, I discuss in more details how the day of the Holy Cross celebrates the change in seasons.

Forty days after Holy Week is the Feast of the Ascension. This is only celebrated within the family, by eating and sharing *pan mojado*, a special dish

59 Juraqan (*jun raqan* means "one is his foot"), as it can be understood from the Popol Vuh, is storm deity that can cause both bad and good. He is a creator god but can be destructive when people do not acknowledge him. The English word hurricane likely derives from *jun raqan*, although other suggestions for a Taino origin have been made (Keegan & Carlson, 2008, p. 10).

60 See for comparison with the importance of this celebration in Mixtec culture the dissertations of Liana Ivette Jiménez Osorio and Emmanuel Posselt Santoy (forthcoming).

61 The zenith passage usually occurs in Guatemala between the 29th of April and the 3rd of May.

62 See Broda (2001); Bunzel (1952, p. 418); La Farge (1994, p. 158); Redfield and Villa Rojas (1964 [1934], p. 134); Siegel (1941, p. 73); Termer (1957, pp. 150, 181); Villela (1997).

of bread soaked in sugar cane liquid. There is no procession or any other big festivity related to the ascension of Christ. The moment is important, however, as by now both the maize plant and the weeds have grown. As the seeds are usually planted shortly after Holy Week (depending how early or late Holy Week falls in the year), the ascension of Christ marks the period of the first weeding, around 40 days after planting.

Corpus Christi, which takes place between 23rd of May and the 25th of June, is celebrated in Momostenango with a minor procession, differently from the rest of the Maya area where it is widely celebrated (Wagley, 1949, pp. 119-121). At this moment, the maize has recently sprouted with the first rain, which is cause of great celebrations (Bunzel, 1952, p. 50). As one of the specialists that Ruth Bunzel worked with states: "on the day of Corpus Christi there are ceremonies in the hills, for the dead and for Our Lord in Calvario, to give thanks for the *siembras* already in the earth" (Bunzel, 1952, p. 57). Corpus Christi is celebrated twenty days after the ascension of Christ and sixty days after Holy Week, and follows thus the agricultural cycle of planting and weeding. In Momostenango, Corpus Christi marks the second moment of weeding and the hilling of the milpa, sixty days after planting. The celebration of the Eucharist possibly mirrors the perception of the maize as a living being, which sacrifices itself to provide life for the humans. The minor celebration of the Sacred Heart of Christ in *aldea* Los Cipreses follows a week after Corpus Christi.

Although not celebrated in Momostenango, the feast of San Juan, on the 24th of June, falls closely together with the summer solstice of the northern hemisphere, when the sun rises and sets at the most northern point at the horizon, and is greatly celebrated throughout the Highlands (Bunzel, 1952, p. 418; Vogt, 1970, p. 79; Wisdom, 1961, pp. 504-505). Bunzel (1952, p. 57) states that on this day similar ceremonies as on the 3rd of May and Corpus Christi are performed at sacred places in the hills. People give thanks to the earth and especially thank for the lambs (Bunzel, 1952, p. 418).

THE CANÍCULA AND THE SECOND PERIOD OF RAIN

Seasonal Characteristics

The second zenith passage in August marks the beginning of a second heatwave in Guatemala. This is often referred to as the "summer in the winter"[63], the *canicula*, or *saq q'ij* in K'iche', "white sun" or "clear day". As the sun stands straight above the ground again, it produces similar conditions to the first zenith passage. The period of heat and drought that follows the second zenith passage usually lasts for twenty days. If the drought lasts longer, as it has occurred more frequently in the past few years, crops are destroyed and entire families are left without food. During my fieldwork in 2016 the *canícula* persisted for almost two months, which caused a lot worries for the harvest in Momostenango. Therefore, the *canícula* can be, if it extends too long, a dangerous period.

By mid-August the *canícula* has normally passed. Although the sun is on its way northward, it continues to warm up the oceans, causing destructive weather. Hurricane season starts usually around the end of May but it intensifies from mid-August onwards when the high temperatures of the water in the ocean cause quick evaporation, resulting in hurricanes and tropical storms. Given the tilt on the earth's axis, hurricanes move westward in the northern hemisphere. This causes the months of September and October to be extremely wet and stormy, which is very good for the *milpas* (Figure 53 and Figure 54). On the other hand, this creates concerns regarding one's own safety and that of the milpa.

According to Maria Hernández Ajanel of Momostenango, earthquakes are more common during rainy season. Maria Teresa López of Concepción Chiquirichapa agrees: due to the heavy rainfall Mother Earth needs to accommodate herself more often and moves around, causing earthquakes. Similarly, in the Ch'orti' region earthquakes are related to water, as they are caused by the chicchanes, the water snakes, which move inside the mountains and hills (Wisdom, 1961, p. 446).

63 The rainy season is often called "the winter period" because the sun is blocked by the rain clouds. In dry season is often called "summer" because there is a clear sky and the sun can heat up the surface of the earth.

Figure 53. The marzorcas around the end of August.

Figure 54. By the end of August, the corn stalks have reached their maximum height.

In Momostenango, thunderstorms during rainy season are caused by San Miguel Árcangel, who chases a dragon and tries to kill it. The light reflecting on his slashing sword whenever he hits the dragon causes lightning directed to earth. The sounds of the thunder are provoked by the saint flying over the clouds while chasing the dragon. When lightning hits a tree or a house, it is a sign that the dragon has entered the place. A candle can be lit to stay safe during heavy thunderstorms:

> *It is very much recommended to light a candle in the house when heavy rain and storm begins, because it is very dark! And bad things like the darkness. While if you light a candle, it will not enter [your house]. San Miguel Arcangel is hunting the dragon. He follows it! If it enters in the house he will hit it with lightning. But when there is light, the dragon will not come it. It goes away, outside. It will go in the woods* – Don José Angel Xeloj, 17th of August 2016.

Redfield and Villa Rojas (1964 [1934], p. 115) and Wisdom (1961, pp. 447-450) have given elaborate descriptions of the perception of rain among Lowland Yucatec and in Highland Ch'orti' peoples. Both describe how four Chaacs[64] live in the sky and are responsible for the rain to fall. In the Ch'orti' area the *chicchanes* are responsible for vaporizing the water while the four Chaacs in both regions break the clouds with their axe or machete creating lightning and bringing rain (Redfield & Villa

64 Wisdom (1961, p. 447) writes about "*hombres trabajadores*" (working men). Although he does not document the Ch'orti' name, it is reasonable to assume that he is referring to the *Chaacs* as in most Maya languages the word chaac means 'work' or, depending on the prefix, 'worker'.

Rojas, 1964 [1934], p. 115; Wisdom, 1961, p. 447). Similar to Momostenango, in the Ch'orti' region the lightning is a punishment from the Chaacs, who try to kill *chicchanes*, the water snakes, with it. In Yucatan, Redfield and Villa Rojas describe that each of the chaacs "holds a gourd vessel containing the waters of the rain" (1964 [1934], p. 116). San Miguel Arcangel leads the Chaacs and has here the role of guiding the Chaacs in the sky to ensure rain fall.

In Momostenango, as in many other regions (Tax, 1964a, p. 129; Wagley, 1941, pp. 28-30), the end of September and beginning of October are famous for the harvest of *elotes* (green *mazorcas*). This period of harvest is usually a very celebrated moment, because the first maize is tasted and the time of major harvest is approaching (Wagley, 1941, p. 39). This moment, which marks the completion of the agricultural cycle, is celebrated in Momostenango with a special *atol de elote* and tortillas made from the *elotes*.

Celebrations

The feast of Santiago is the patron saint feast of Momostenango. Whereas this feast is important in many communities and it is usually celebrated on 24th of July, in Momostenango the feast takes place from 30th of July until 1st of August (see below). In Momostenango this day is related to the wind and the procreative and destructive powers of Santiago (Cook, 2000, p. 24). Hurricane season is becoming heavier at this moment. The celebration of this Patron Saint feast in Momostenango is explored in more detail below in the section of case studies.

Wisdom (1961, p. 505) mentions that the feast of Santiago is regarded in the Ch'orti' area as an important moment as it coincides with the maturing of the maize and beans. Also, in Chichicastenango ceremonies are performed at shrines in the mountains and petitions are made to protect the cornfields, at a moment in which the corn has already flowered (Bunzel, 1952, p. 58). Among the *Mam* speakers of Santiago Chimaltenango, this day is important because it coincides with the flowering of the maize fields of the first harvest (Wagley, 1941, p. 29). Furthermore, this day "is to ask pardon of Santiago that the *milpa* may not be blown down by the wind. On the other hand, we ask horses of Santiago, and ask pardon of him that the bat may not eat the horses, and that we may not fall into the hands of thieves at night" (Bunzel, 1952, p. 58).

The period around mid-August is widely celebrated in the Highlands of Guatemala. Around this moment, the second zenith passage of the sun occurs that marks the end of the *canícula*. The expectation and concern over the end of this short dry season trigger a cycle of the celebrations. The Assumption of Mary on 15th of August, for example, is celebrated in many towns in Guatemala (Bunzel, 1952, pp. 169-171; Wisdom, 1961, p. 510). While the period of mid-August is not celebrated in Momostenango, the town of San Bartolo Aguas Calientes and the *aldea* Pologua celebrate the feast of Bartolomé el Apostel from 21st until 24th of August and the feast of San Antonio de Padua from the 24th until the 27th of August, respectively. For those who live in Momostenango, both celebrations mark of the period of intense rainfall:

> *It is difficult… that is the situation… and the lack of rain is what is harming us most. There just isn't any! And there is so much heat these days… For example, the celebration in San Bartolo during these days is the time of the rain: the entire day it should rain! The entire day rain, the entire day and night… But now it isn't* – Carlos Pérez Acabal, 24th of August 2016

The feast of Pologua celebrates the patron San Antonio de Padua, whose image is usually kept in the church of Momostenango. The image of San Antonio is that of a small child, and was found in the 16th of 17th century in a cave near Momostenango (Cook, 2000, p. 64). The small image of San Antonio, that in the church of Momostenango stands next to Santiago, is also called *el niño dios*. The image leaves the church ten days before the feast, on 14th of August when the feast of Santiago finishes, and the cofradía brings it to the altar of Alajsab'al, dedicated to San Antonio de Padua, where people come to make offerings. After a few days, the indigenous authority of *aldea* Santa Ana brings the image to their *aldea*, where it remains for a couple of days. After a few days the indigenous authority of Chininab'e brings the image to their place, and finally the indigenous authority of Pologua comes to Chininab'e and brings San Antonio de Padua to Pologua, where it will remain

for only four days. When the feast of Pologua is over, the saint visits first Cholajab' and again Alajsab'al, before finally returing to Momostenango on 30th of August. According to Cook (2000, pp. 64-72), the ceremonies that take place throughout are related to the earth and fertility. I think that these ceremonies are also forms of rain petitions, which have to be continued throughout the rainy season to ensure rain:

> *Well, often, the lack of continuity of, in this case the petitions [is the reason for the lack of rain]. When it starts to rain one forgets to continue the petition. It is a problem because I think that it is necessary to continue. It is necessary to give continuity to the petitions* – Carlos Pérez Acabal, 24th of August 2016.

In the Ch'orti' area, maize ripens from mid-July or the first of August (Wisdom, 1961, p. 501). Among the Tzotzil, the feast of San Lorenzo (August 10th) marks the period when most of the heavy work on the milpa is done. After this celebration, there is no more weeding and there is plenty of fresh corn and fruit for consumption (Vogt, 1970, p. 89). In Santiago Chimaltenango, in the department of Huehuetenango, the period running from the feast of Santiago (July 24th) until the 9th of August is celebrated with the performance of the *baile del torito* (Wagley, 1949, pp. 105-107), while in other communities this is done for the commemoration of the Assumption of Mary, the 15th of August (Bunzel, 1952, pp. 51-53; Earle, 1986, p. 159).

The end of August and the month of September and October are characterized by strong winds, rain and hurricanes to which fully-grown maize stalks are especially vulnerable. During this period, it is therefore very important to petition protection against rain and wind (Wagley, 1941, p. 39). On 29th of September in Totonicapán San Miguel Arcangel is celebrated as the patron saint. As he is also the patron of thunderstorms, offerings and prayers are made to him so that he protects the houses and *milpas*. In Momostenango the day of San Miguel Arcangel is not publically celebrated, but protection ceremonies are made on a personal account. The whirlwinds mentioned earlier can destroy the elotes that are usually ripe around mid-September and the squirrels might eat the harvest. The Ajq'ijab' and Chuchqajawib' of Momostenango perform many ceremonies at family altars around this time of the year:

> *We have our milpa, but hopefully no wind comes. We hope that the water will not bring hurricanes, or that it will bring whirlwinds; we hope that the worms and the chickens do not harm our milpa; we hope that the squirrel and the opossum do no throw over our milpa* – Don José Angel Xeloj, 15th of August 2016

In September, the first elotes are usually ripe. There is no specific communal celebration for this in Momostenango. However, it is customary to bring a basket of the first harvest to Santiago and San Felipe, to thank them for the crops. These offerings are left for a time in the church, after which they are divided among the poor people of Momostenango, who do not have a *milpa* or whose harvest failed. In other places, around mid-September the celebration of elotes takes place (Wagley, 1941, p. 43; Wisdom, 1961, p. 501). The harvest of elotes is usually celebrated with special food and drinks, just as the harvest of the frijoles, the chilacoyotes, and squash (Redfield & Villa Rojas, 1964 [1934], p. 143).

Finally, October is characterized by the commemoration of the Virgen del Rosario. The most important day for this commemoration is 7th of October. However, the entire month is dedicated to her: every day, novenas are held during which one prays in the main church from five until six or seven o'clock in the afternoon. The Virgen del Rosario coincides with the final stage of the milpa during which the last protection of the maize plants is needed as they are now fully grown but need to mature. Harvest can still fail during this month.

THE TIME OF HARVEST

Seasonal Characteristics

Between September and November, depending on the region, the *mazorcas* mature. During this time the *milpa* is carefully watched to protect it from squirrels and other rodents (Tax, 1964a, p. 129; Wisdom, 1961, pp. 67-68). During this time, full-grown maize stalks are more vulnerable to the wind, as well. In contrast

to other regions, in Momostenango the cornstalks are not bent[65] after the *mazorcas* have ripened. In 2014, Guatemala was hit by extreme drought during what should have been the rainy season. As a result, the *milpa* needed more time to mature with the late rains and the harvest also occurred later. The *milpa* was harvested that year in Momostenango around the 9th of December.

The timing of harvest depends on the region. For example, harvest in Momostenango usually takes place during the month of November and the end of December, while in the Lowlands of Chiapas the cornfields are ready for harvest in October (Vogt, 1970, p. 51). The first beans are usually ready for harvest in the beginning of October, but the harvest might be extended until December (Bunzel, 1952, pp. 51-53; Wisdom, 1961, p. 62). In Momostenango, black beans, chilecayote, and maize are usually ready for harvest at the same time, between the beginning of November and mid-December, although some people might harvest them in October already.

Rainfall begins to diminish by the end of October and, finally, around the time of the nadir passage of the sun in the beginning of November, rain has stopped completely. This is also the moment when temperatures drop in the Highlands of Guatemala. At night especially, thick blankets are needed to stay warm, as cold winds tend to enter the house.

Celebrations

Among most Maya communities, All Saints Day marks the end of the rainy season (Redfield & Villa Rojas, 1964 [1934], p. 203; Vogt, 1970, p. 52; Wisdom, 1961, p. 69). Whereas in most regions the ancestors are commemorated on 2nd of November, in Momostenango this only occurs on 1st of November. The 1st of November is the equivalent in the Gregorian year of the *chol q'ij* day 8 Ajpu, which is the day for the ancestors. In Momostenango it is usual to place food for the ancestors on the house altar. The door of the patio is left open so that the ancestors will be able to enter the house. The ancestors are embodied by bees, which on this day can be seen finding their way to the food only to disappear soon afterwards. Furthermore, it is usual to visit the ancestors at their graves beginning early in the morning, and spend the day with them:

> *On this day everybody will gather there at the cemetery to visit the deceased ones, their relatives that have already passed away. They bring them flowers, candles, and often it is the custom to bring some food so that they come down to eat at the tombs of those that have already passed away. According to our belief it is like a way of sharing with them. The form of celebrating might even include music*
> – Carlos Pérez Acabal, 24th of August 2016.

Whereas the rainy season has now officially ended, the maize needs time to dry. The second week of November, the *mazorcas* are ready for harvest. This moment coincides with the nadir passage of the sun, which cannot be astronomically observed but can be experienced by meteorological changes such as the clearer skies and colder winds. In Momostenango, the period of harvest is marked by the patron saint feast of *barrio* Santa Isabel that takes place on 19th of November, followed by the patron saint feast of *barrio* Santa Catarina, which commemorates Santa Catarina de Alejandría on 23rd, 24th and 25th of November. During these festivities, the history and origin of Momostenango is commemorated, when the Patron Saint of the town, Santiago Mayor, and his *Ajtz'ib'*, San Felipe, return to Pueblo Viejo, the old location of Momostenango[66] where Santiago Mayor appeared for the first time:

> *That is where the village began, there in* Pueblo Viejo. *But they say that Santiago Apóstel did not want to stay there, and he came here, to stay here at the place [of Momostenango]. They came to bring him back and they put him there again. And the next day he appeared here at sunrise. So that is when it was decided to make the town here*
> – Don José Angel Xeloj, 25th of August 2016

Generally, in Guatemala harvest takes place between All Saints and Santo Tomás, which marks

65 In other communities the cornstalks are bent prior to harvest so that the corn cobs can begin to dry already and so that no moister, which may cause rotting of the corn, will remain in the leaves.

66 The place where he lived is known as his "old house", which according to some specialists, was an ancient church.

the winter solstice on the 21st of December (K'iche': *uk'ex ub'e*) (Bunzel, 1952, p. 53; Wisdom, 1961, p. 501). In Chichicastenango, the feast of San Martín, "the vegetative aspect of the earth" (Bunzel, 1952, p. 57), is celebrated at the mountain shrines on the 11th of November and marks the moment of harvest.

After harvest, when all *mazorcas* are collected, it is usual to perform a thanksgiving ceremony, which varies in each household. Usually after harvest, the *mazorcas* are left on a heap in the house. An Ajq'ij, ritual specialist, may come to perform a ceremony for thanking or the family may light a candle on the house altar or in the church to give thanks for the harvest. Others attend a special Mass in the Catholic Church. Whatever form is favored for thanking, it is customary to be conscious and grateful about the harvest that has been given. Another moment in the year to commemorate human dependency on the earth and nature is on the day of the seeds, 8 Q'anil (see Chapter I). For devote Catholics, it is common to bring a basket with freshly harvested *mazorcas* to the local parish priest.

CASE STUDIES

The following section discusses some of the ritual celebrations that take place on dates set by the astronomical or Gregorian calendar. The goal of this discussion is to elaborate on the celebrations and to analyze how these rituals separate one time period from another, and how they thus guide behavior. The focus is on the separation of agricultural periods, as tending to the fields still remains one of the most important cycles.

The discussion follows a loose chronological order. As the timing of Holy Week depends on the cycle of the moon it can take place before and after the burning of the dried plants on the *milpa* (around March and beginning of April). However, I discuss the ritual for burning the *zacate* first, followed by the celebration of Holy Week, the day of the Holy Cross, the Feast of Santiago, and the Solstice in December. Because not every single community can organize a big festival for each scheduled celebration, it is to be expected that only some are celebrated in any given location. Therefore, I discuss the celebrations as they are carried out in different towns that I was able to visit. In chronological order these are: Calcehtok in Yucatan, Mexico, for the burning of the zacate; Momostenango in the department of Totonicapán for Holy Week; Amatitlán in the department of Guatemala for Holy Cross; Again Momostenango for Santiago; and finally Chichicastenango in the department of El Quiché during the winter solstice.

Figure 55. The caves of Calcehtok.

Figure 56. The *chaltun* serving as an altar in the cave of Calcehtok during the ritual for the burning of the fields.

The Ritual de la Quema

On 5th of May 2013, during a short fieldwork on the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico, I participated in the *ritual de la quema* in the caves of Calcehtok, also known as the caves of Xpukil (Figure 55). This ritual was performed by *maestro* Miguel, *j-men* (priest) from Calcehtok, in order to ask protection and guidance

Figure 57. Maestro Miguel performing the ritual for the burning of the zacate.

during the burning of the dried plants on the *milpa*. The hot temperatures and lack of wind indicated that the rain would arrive soon. Most people had already performed a *ritual de la quema* and were already planting the milpas since 3rd of May. However, today many people do not continue to plant on 3rd of May, but rather choose a day that suits them best by taking into consideration other commitments (e.g. work schedules, Protestant rules, and meteorological cycles). Therefore, it was still possible to perform the ritual for those who had not burned their fields yet, while at the same time protection for the entire community was also petitioned. It was asked for the plants to be burned, but for the fire not to spread dangerously. Fertility and good crops were also petitioned in the prayers.

Today the caves of Calcehtok are a minor tourist attraction. However, the place is sacred for many people in the communities surrounding it. Archaeological remains such as potsherds and building stones are scattered on the floor of the caves and suggest that this has been a sacred place for a long time (Bonor Villarejo, 1987). At the entrance of the caves stand the remains of an ancient wall. One of the guides at the entrance told that around eighty *chaltuns* (artificial cavities made to collect water) have been documented in the caves[67]. Maestro Miguel used one of the ancient *chaltuns* as an altar for the ritual.

The *ritual de la quema* took place in one of the largest rooms of the caves, known as *la capilla* ('the chapel') because of the high circular ceiling. In the center of the room was a round flat rock, enclosed by low rocks and stones, on which the *chaltun* stood (Figure 56). The most important feature in the *capilla* was a stalagmite which was said to represent an image of the Virgin Mary. According to the oral narratives, when the first Spaniards entered the cave, they placed a statue of the Holy Virgin next to the entrance of *la capilla*. Over time, the water dripping on the Virgin converted her in a stalagmite, which still stands there today. The altar was directed towards the Virgin and maestro Miguel was facing her directly most of the time. According to maestro Miguel, this cave had been the last refuge of an important Yucatec priest when the Spaniards arrived. Rather than collaborating with the Spaniards, he refused to live without freedom, and decided to enter the cave of Calcehtok and take his own life.

67 A *chaltun* (*chal* = water; *tun* = stone) collects sacred water that drips down from the stalactites that is eventually used in rituals such as the petition for rain (Redfield & Villa Rojas, 1964 [1934], p. 139).

Maestro Miguel was assisted by his younger brother in preparing an altar with many offerings on the *chaltun*. During the ceremony, maestro Miguel knelt and chanted loudly in Yucatec to the divine beings. He petitioned guidance and help in the coming period. After the chanting, the participants had to come one by one to the platform for a ritual cleansing with incense and to share a drink with the divine beings to whom they offered the drink[68]. As the divine beings invoked during the ceremony are ambivalent, each participant and the assistant had to be cleansed of any negativity.

Maestro Miguel also drank the same beverages and chanted again after the participants had joined the cleansing and drinking. He sang and poured on the ground some *xtabentun* behind the altar. He then smoked a cigarette and blew the smoke in half a circle through the room, starting at his left and ending at his right side. Finally, he knelt down again and resumed chanting (Figure 57). To close the ritual, Miguel took some sips of *xtabentun*, which he spat around in the same manner as he did with the cigarette smoke.

For those who had participated and the communities that they belonged to, the ceremony marked the moment to burn the land and fertilize it. It signaled that the dry season was ending and that rain was arriving. By commemorating the divine beings such as the wind, the j-men guided the community to prepare for rain by burning the fields, selecting the seeds, and planting. The period devoted to the preparation of the *surcos* and reparation of the houses was now over.

Holy Week

Holy Week is a ritual moment, which emphasizes the concerns for the fertility of the *milpa* in a broad region. In the Ch'orti' region, for example, the period from Domingo de Ramos until Domingo de Pascua marks the burning of the *zacate* just discussed (Wisdom, 1961, p. 514). This is the preparatory, fertilizing step before sowing, which takes place in that region on 3rd of May. Also in Momostenango the concern for fertility of the field before planting can also be noted during Holy Week. Chapter V discusses how specific symbolism that appears during Holy Week relates to fertility and rebirth. In the short section here, however, I confine myself to discussing a very explicit relation between Holy Week and fertility.

On the night from Holy Thursday to Good Friday, many people of the community of Momostenango work together to make large, colorful sawdust carpets over which the Holy Week procession will pass on Good Friday. On Friday afternoon, as soon as the carriages with Jesus and Mary have passed over the carpets, people hurry to collect the sawdust in plastic bags and bottles (Figure 58 and Figure 59). The bed of sawdust over which the deceased body of Jesus Christ is carried on Good Friday afternoon has received a special blessing, which will enhance the fertility of the milpa and bring abundance to the field. The sacrifice and death of Christ endows the sawdust with fertility and the sawdust is taken to the *milpa*, where it will provide an abundant harvest.

A similar relation between the death and subsequent resurrection of Jesus Christ and fertility has been documented in Chichicastenango:

> *There is a belief that if one wishes to have the best ayotes and chilacayotes, one should take a handful of each kind of seed and place them under a table, and on the table place a glass of white honey. And one uses this honey during Holy Week. The whole family drinks this honey, and one must do this on Holy Thursday in the night, and on the morning of Good Friday. And when one goes to see the procession in the afternoon (on Good Friday), one takes these seeds with one wrapped in a napkin. And whenever they put down Christ to rest in the course of the procession one takes out these seeds, wrapped in the napkin, and places them under the table on which they place Our Lord for His rest. And one does this as often as Our Lord rests throughout the whole course of the procession. When one returns, one puts these seeds aside carefully until the time of planting, and then one plants them. The belief is that in putting the seeds under the honey the ayotes and chilacayotes will turn out fruitful; for there are many heads of people around Our Lord, and so the fruit of the ayotes and chilacayotes will also be many* (Bunzel, 1952, p. 55).

68 The first drink was a full cup of *pozol* with honey and the second drink was water mixed with three spoons of cacao. The third drink was a full cup of *xtabentun*, a sweet liquor made of honey.

Figure 58. The procession of Good Friday which takes the Holy Sepulchre through Momostenango.

Figure 59. After the Holy Sepulchre has passed, the sawdust is collected and taken to the milpa.

The timing and symbolism of Holy Week in the Gregorian calendar is meaningful for the agricultural calendar of Mesoamerica[69]: the arrival of the rain is soon to take place and the timing of the rebirth of Christ announces the rebirth of the maize on the field. An oral narrative from Chichicastenango, documented by Sol Tax in the 1930s, is very explicit on the relation between the sacrifice of Christ and the rebirth of the milpa. A short excerpt of the narrative:

> *Finally they came to the spot, and they crucified Jesus. While nailed to the cross, Jesus miraculously turned around completely, exposing his back, and from his back came maize -white, yellow, and black- and beans and potatoes and all the other food plants. Then Jesus died. Jesus was buried. But three days later, a little before 3 A.M. (when the roosters crow) Jesus was resur-rected and he went to heaven. There was a large stone over his grave, and Jesus stood on it and with one foot "took off" for heaven. There remained his footprint on the stone* (Tax, 1949, p. 127).

According to La Farge:

> *I suspect that the [commemoration of the] death and the resurrection [of Christ], which arrive at the time that approximately corresponds with the period between sowing and the first sprouting of the corn, is affected by a more ancient rite* (La Farge, 1994, p. 124; translation mine).

In many towns in the Highlands of Guatemala it is tradition to display an image of Judas Iscariot on public places during Holy Week (Bunzel, 1952, pp. 223-224, 414; La Farge, 1994, pp. 120-125; Siegel, 1941, pp. 71-74; Termer, 1957, p. 229). This life-size puppet is often conflated with San Simón and Maximón, Highland Maya deity-saints, although the role of the Judas image during Holy Week is very much the same as in orthodox Christian communities (Carabott, 2011, p. 13; Liata, 2007, p. 163; Sidneva, 2012, p. 267).

From Holy Wednesday until Good Friday, the life-size puppet of Judas is placed in front of the Catholic Church of Momostenango. Since 2015, however, a second similar image is placed at the top of the stairs of the Calvario at the cemetery (Figure 61). This image is called by different names, such as Maximón or San Simón, but for many he represents Judas, the traitor of Jesus. In front of him is a table with a variety of objects: old rubbish, pills, and fruits (Figure 60). Just like the well-known San Simón and Maximón from Santiago Atitlán, he likes to smoke cigarettes and cigars, and one can offer *quetzales* or cigarettes to him. He remains on these public places, assisted by cofradía members, until 3 o'clock in the afternoon on Good Friday, when it is taken to the cofradía house. Here they undress him until only the dry bunchgrass that forms the body is left, and this is finally burned. Bits of the ashes are

Figure 60. Judas is a white man who wears a tie, suit and sombrero. He is seated under a few branches that the cofradía of San Simon has placed here to represent a tree. He carries a mask of a white person with a moustache and blue eyes, and has a whip and a red towel.

69 See Chapter V for a detailed discussion of the synergy of Christian and Mesoamerican symbolism in Holy Week.

Figure 61. Judas or San Simon sitting at the top of the stairs of the *calvario* at the cemetery of Momostenango.

carried to the *milpas* where it, just as the sawdust, enhances fertility. Garrett Cook (2000, p. 183) has interpreted the image as a K'iche' vegetation deity and suggests that burning him marks the moment of transition from a dry period to a period of new life.

Another important ceremony in Momostenango immediately following Holy Week is the blessing of the water. While 3rd of May is the day of the water, Easter Sunday is the day to bless the water (*agua bendita*). On this day, those who want to receive the blessing bring water, either spring or tap, to the church. According to doña María Hernández Ajanel, the blessing of the water used to take place on Holy Saturday but was changed to Easter Sunday at the end of the 20th century. During a large part of the past century this event took take place at the fountain in the Mercado Número Uno in the center of Momostenango. Each of the four *barrios* of Momostenango would form separate lines while the Catholic priest blessed each container of water. The indigenous authorities of the four *barrios* guided the ceremony and carried whips to control any pushing, fighting, or other disorderly conducts. Today one can bring his water to the church before Mass on Easter Sunday. The priest blesses the water and after Mass, one can pick up the *agua bendita*.

The *agua bendita* is usually kept at the house altar and it is used in case someone falls sick. The water is also left at the graves of the ancestors and is sprinkled at the corners of the *milpa* for protection and fertility. As has been suggested before (Bunzel, 1952, p. 224), the blessing of the water might be related to the arrival of the rain.

In Chapter V the relationship between Holy Week and pre-Columbian symbolism will be discussed in more detail. However, here it is already possible to conclude that Holy Week marks the final preparation of the *milpa*. These activities include, similar to the previously discussed *ritual de la quema*, the burning of the *zacate* or the fertilizing of the land. Furthermore, it prepares the community mentally for the coming

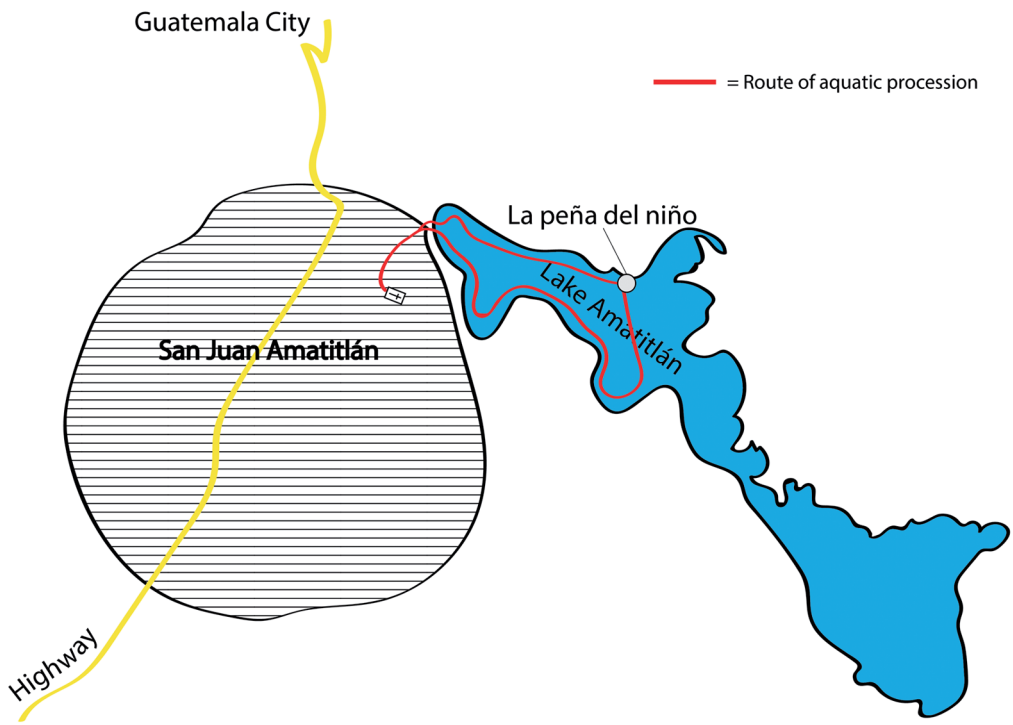

Figure 62. Route of the boat on the lake of Amatitlán.

period of rain and emphasizes their dependency on it. As such, in the period following Holy Week the community keeps alert for cloud formation and the arrival of rain, which enables sowing.

The Day of the Holy Cross

On 3rd of May 2015 I joined in the festivities of the Day of the Holy Cross in Amatitlán. Although the Patron Saint is San Juan the Baptist, commemorated on the 24th of June, one of the major religious celebrations of the town is for the *Niño Christo* on 3rd of May, the day of the Holy Cross. Many visitors from Guatemala, Mexico, Honduras and El Salvador come on pilgrimage to Amatitlán beginning on 25th of April until 4th of May. In 2016, around 15.000 visitors were expected according to the national newspaper *La Prensa Libre*. As discussed above, the day of the Holy Cross marks in a broad area the zenith passage and the arrival of rain. The case of Amatitlán is a peculiar one, as this is celebrated in an industrialized area, only twenty-five kilometers south of Guatemala City where today not many people live from subsistence farming. The celebration was, however, originally celebrated in the 17th century by Pokomam-speaking people in the area (De Fuentes y Guzmán, 1882, libro 17, capítulo XIV). While societal composition has greatly changed over the centuries, the celebration continued as a reminder of the past.

The festivities in Amatitlán last around a week and mainly center around the Mass for the Niño Dios and related market sales. From 1st until the 3rd of May, the Niño Dios is accompanied by the *niños visitantes*, divine images of children from neighboring communities. On third of May, an image of Niño Dios is taken out in a long procession that continues as an aquatic procession in the lake of Amatitlán. The image that is taken on the aquatic procession is known as the *Zarquito*. The original image remains in the church for several reasons:

Figure 63. The carriage on which the *Zarquito* was brought to the shores of Lake Amatitlán.

Figure 64. The *Zarquito* is brought to the boat for the aquatic procession.

fear that the original Niño Dios might be stolen[70], the original Niño Dios is too heavy for transport, and, finally if the original *Niño Dios* was taken in the aquatic procession, many people who come on pilgrimage to Amatitlán would not be able to see the divine image.

According to oral narratives, the little boy is the owner and guardian of the lake of Amatitlán (Deleon Melendez, 1980). He was found on a rock that emerged from the deepest part of the lake by fishermen, who saw a light coming from this point. They decided to bring the image to their town. The veneration of the image of a boy at the lake of Amatitlán was already mentioned by historian Fuentes y Guzmán at the end of the 17th century. He mentions that in the town of Pampichí or Pampichín, which is currently the *aldea* Belén of Amatitlán, the *santo niño de Belem* was venerated (De Fuentes y Guzmán, 1882, libro 17, capítulo XIV). As the image's popularity grew, it was transferred by boat to Amatitlán on 3rd of May 1789, where and when the festivities take place today.

The procession of the Niño Dios starts after Mass on 3rd of May at the Church of San Juan in the center of Amatitlán. In 2015, the *Zarquito* was carried on a heavy wooden construction, on which two lions dragged a carriage with the *Zarquito* on top of it (Figure 63). Behind the wooden construction followed a music band. The procession moved through town over the carpets made of flowers, sawdust and pine needles to reach the shores of Lake Amatitlán, where it stopped in front of the docks. The Catholic priest lifted the image and showed it to the people who had gathered at the shore, and then transfered the *Zarquito* to a richly decorated boat, where he stood on the top of the roof of a small house that had been built for the occasion (Figure 64).

At 12 o'clock the boat starts its aquatic procession along the coast (Figure 62 and Figure 65) along with a retinue of five *lanchas* 'boats'. Right behind the boat of the little boy Jesus, is the boat with the music band. Following the shore of the lake, they go to the southeastern tip of the first bay of the lake, where the town Pampichí or Pampichín, currently known as Belen, lies. This is where the boy was first venerated before he was moved to Amatitlan. When they reach the southeastern tip of the lake, the aquatic procession sets course directly to the sacred rock where the little boy was discovered, in a place called *la silla del niño*, the boy's chair. *La silla*, also known as the *peña del niño,* the boy's rock, is a conspicuous rock formation at the northeastern part of the lake (Figure 66). During the day *lanchas* full of visitors come to see the boy at his rock. At six o´clock, the image is put on the boat again and taken to the shores of Amatitlán, where the procession continues on land towards the church where it arrives around 11 o´clock at night.

While the *Zarquito* is at the *peña*, pilgrims visit the church, which faces west towards the massive

70 The image of Niño Dios was indeed stolen once in 1964. However, within a month the image was returned to the town.

Figure 65. The boat carrying the *Zarquito* is followed by a boat with musicians and several boats with visitors.

Figure 66. The rock of the *Niño Dios*. The image will remain here until six o'clock.

volcano Agua. The image of the boy Jesus can be found at the altar in the apse of the church, facing the exit and the volcano Agua. The boy stands in a niche, roughly 8 meters above the ground, surrounded by an image of Saint Joseph and the Virgin Mary. The *Niño Dios* stands with his left foot on a skull and with his right foot on the world. Behind him stands a wooden cross. The niche is placed within a larger painting that represent the sun surrounded by clouds and angels. One by one, visitors walk up the stairs built for the occasion, covered with a brown cloth and decorated with plants right in front of the boy (Figure 67). At the top of this construction, which seems to represent a mountain, visitors pray to the Niño Dios.

While in many communities the 3rd of May marks the moment when the elders go up to the mountain tops to petition rain, this practice is recreated on a smaller scale in the church of Amatitlán. The visitors climb symbolically up the mountain, which mimics the volcano Agua, to make petitions to the little boy Jesus, who is placed as the center of the sun. The fact that the boy stands in the center of the sun is important because, as discussed above, 3rd of May can be taken to commemorate the fixed day of the sun's zenith passage. The altarpiece that mimics the volcano opposite of the church is very similar to the altarpiece of Santiago Atitlán that symbolizes the sacred volcano San Pedro at whose sides a young and an old ritual specialist climb for the petition of rain (Christenson, 2001b, pp. 9, 72-82). Similar to Amatitlán, the church in Santiago Atitlán faces directly the sacred volcano.

The relationship of the festivity and water is very clear in Amatitlán as the aquatic procession to the *peña del niño* in the lake is a crucial part of the celebrations. Local historian Manuel Guerra suggests that "probably the veneration of the *Niño de Amatitlán* replaced the prehispanic cult dedicated to the tutelary spirit or the *nawal* of the lake"[71]. Recent archaeological excavations have found prehispanic aquatic depositional offerings at Lake Amatitlán, which might indicate a long continuation in the perception of the lake as sacred (Deleon Melendez, 1980, p. 8; Mata Amado, 1999).

Figure 67. Inside the parish church of San Juan Amatitlán the visitors climb symbolically up a hill towards the image of the *Niño Dios*.

These observations suggest that the celebration of 3rd of May in Amatitlán mirrors rain petition rituals that take place on this date over a larger area. However, the religious celebration in Amatitlán is never mentioned as a rain petition ceremony. I suggest that due to the industrialization since the 19th century, subsistence farming and thus the dependency on rain, have become less important in the region. Whereas the date and symbolic ritual practices have continued to be repeated, the main concerns have changed: petitions for rain might have changed for petitions regarding the concerns of a more industrialized society, such as, for example, petitions for jobs, health, and protection against violence. Those who visit and do have a *milpa*, however, will certainly mention their concerns regarding the year's rain and harvest. So, while the celebration used to mark the beginning of a period of rain, with all its related activities and concerns, the ritual moment continues today as a moment to petition for other aspects that are important in a drastically changed environment.

71 *Prensa Libre*, 2nd of May 2004, republished in the *Prensa Libre* on the 2nd of May 2016: http://www.prensalibre.com/hemeroteca/el-dueo-del-lago Accessed on the 11th of November 2016, translation mine.

The Patron Saint Feast of Santiago

Cook and Offit, have previously investigated and documented the patron saint feast of Momostenango in detail (Cook, 2000, pp. 107-141; Cook & Offit, 2008b). Therefore, I restrict myself here to shortly summarizing the main public events I witnessed in 2016 and to discuss on how this feast separates periods of time.

The festival for Santiago Mayor officially begins on the 24th of July and ends on the 13th of August. The main days of the feast are the 30th of July until the 1st of August. The feast is preceded by the feast for Santiago Menor in the town of San Cristóbal Totonicapán on the 25th and 26th of July. Preparations of the feast of Momostenango, however, take place long before the actual event. One of the preparations is the raising of a pole for the *baile del venado*. Cook (2000, pp. 107-118) identified the raised pole as an *axis mundi* around which the festivities for the patron saint take place.

During the feast for Santiago Mayor distinct religious events involving the patron saint are organized by the *Cofradía* of Santiago and by the parish church of Santiago (Figure 68). Furthermore, dances form a substantial part of the festivities. Cook and Offit (2008b) documented in detail the *baile de la conquista* in Momostenango in 2007. Shortly after they documented it, the organizer of the dance passed away and since then it has not been performed again. The dances that were performed in 2016 were: the *baile de los mexicanos* (also known as *los vaqueros*), *los convites*, and a special variant of the *baile del venado*. The *baile del venado* tells about an old couple, Pedro and Catalina, who help a group of Spaniards in a deer hunt (Cook & Offit, 2008b, pp. 81-84). In 2016, however, there were no Spanish personages in the dance and the storyline was very hard to follow (Figure 70).

In Momostenango, the *baile del venado* is accompanied by an event that takes place on the raised pole located in front of the façade of the church. While the *baile del venado* continues on the ground, a dancer dressed as monkey or tiger enters the left tower of the church and climbs on its top from the opening at the church bell. He crosses the front of the façade to the other tower and climbs on the roof of the church. In the middle of the roof he embraces the cross for a while, after which he

Figure 68. Santiago Mayor is taken out of the church for a procession. Santiago holds a sword in his hand and his *Ajtz'ib'*, San Felipe, holds the bible.

continues over the roof to the viewer's left. He climbs up the wooden pole, which is attached to the church, and balances on it for a minute, leaning with his belly on the pole and spreading both his hands and arms (Figure 69). He then slowly glides down the rope that hangs from the top of the pole to the center of the square, where don Benancio Sambrocio[72] is playing the marimba. While gliding on the rope they move to show their agility as monkeys and tigers (Figure 71).

The timing of the raising of the *axis mundi* in the center of Momostenango coincides with the second zenith passage. In the case of Momostenango, due to the zenith passage of the sun the raised pole will cast no shadow in the days around 4th of August. The pole is erected on 22nd of July at noon (Cook, 2000, p. 109), the hour of the day suggests that the position of the sun is indeed important in relation to the pole. Cook (2000, p. 24) already suggested that the celebration of Santiago in Momostenango marks the period of hurricanes. He rightly mentions that around this time the hurricane season intensifies and that the maize plants have grown and are therefore more vulnerable to the heavy winds. Furthermore, during my fieldwork I noticed that around the feast of Santiago worries regarding the duration of the *canícula* grow and private prayers or ceremonies for rain, which

72 Don Benancio Sambrocio is the same musician as in the *baile de la culebra* (Chapter IV & V).

Figure 69. A dancer balances with his entire body on the top of the raised pole before he begins his descent.

should arrive around mid-August, increase. While there is a clear coincidence in the timing of zenith passage of the sun and the raising of the pole for the feast of Santiago, just as I will discuss later about the celebration in Chichicastenango, none of the specialists that I worked mentioned a relationship with the zenith passage. As I will discuss for the feast of Chichicastenango, the raising may be related to older astronomical calendars or sun calendars which are not recognized as such anymore but still continue because of their canonical role in ritual practices.

The Solstice

The patron feast of Santo Tomás in Chichicastenango is famous in the Highlands of Guatemala. From all regions people visit to participate in the celebration. I joined the festivities when I visited Chichicastenango in 2014. Although the festival starts on 16th of December, the main public activities, such as the *baile de los toritos* and *palo volador*, take place from the 18th until the 22nd of December. The principal day of the celebration is the 21st of December, the day of Saint Thomas. Although the feast is well known, it has been the subject of only two major ethnographic studies at the beginning of the 20th century (Bunzel, 1952; Termer, 1957). The celebrations of Todos Santos and Santo Tomás are the biggest and most religious events of the town, which mark the beginning and the end respectively of the period of harvest in Chichicastenango (Bunzel, 1952, pp. 46-48; Termer, 1957, p. 237).

Termer (1957, p. 237) was the first to notice that the elaborate celebration of Santo Tomás takes place exactly during the winter solstice and he suggested that this might be a continuation of prehispanic Maya traditions. Although there is much to discuss about the activities during the feast, I will limit myself to the relation between the feast and the winter solstice. I will do so by focusing mainly on the event of the *palo volador*, a ritual activity in which dancers climb on top of a pole and descend while tied to ropes (Figure 72). This event is a widespread practice in Mesoamerica, where it takes place on different dates throughout

Figure 70. The *Baile del venado* is performed at the central square of Momostenango.

Figure 71. One of the dancers hangs on a rope above the public and performs tricks.

Figure 72. The monkeys swirl down from the *palo volador*. The *calvario* can be seen in the background. Photo taken at the top of the stairs of the church of Santo Tomás Chichicastenango.

Figure 73. Close-up of the *Tzijolaj*. The image is richly decorated with coins and underneath the horse hangs a ball with fire crackers which is lit during the festivities.

the year[73] (De Fuentes y Guzmán, 1882, Tomo II Libro XVI Capítulo V). The *palo volador* is very likely of pre-Columbian origin (Nájera Coronado, 2008). Today the patron feast is celebrated more elaborately once every two years. Therefore, only once every two years the *palo volador* takes place. I had carefully planned my visit to coincide with the feast of Chichicastenango in 2014.

All cofradías in Chichicastenango participate in the feast of Santo Tomás by holding daily processions from early in the morning until late at night. Images of San Sebastian, San José, and Santo Tomás figure prominently and always accompany these processions. *Tzijolaj,* a sacred image of a horse with a horseman on top (see appendix E), is also very prominent in the feast. Carried and danced around by one of the cofradía members, he presides over each important event. Because he is the patron of firework, he often carries a ball of firecrackers that are eventually lit on the stairs of the church. One of the most sacred events of the feast occurs when *Tzijolaj* is attached to a rope and dances from the base of the *palo volador* to the top of the church of Santo Tomás while the firecrackers explode (Bunzel, 1952, p. 207; Termer, 1957, p. 236). He is the messenger of the people in charge of delivering their prayers to the sky.

Several dances are organized around the *palo volador*. The *baile de los toritos* consists of a mimicked bullfight in which the torero dies rather

73 The disappearance of the dance in Guatemala is possibly related to its prohibition in some communities in the 1920s due to fatal accidents (Termer, 1957, p. 223). According to Termer, the dance was sometimes still performed in the 1920s in Nahualá. Until 1917, it was performed in Santa María Chiquimula, in Chiché it was performed until 1919, and around Totonicapán and Quetzaltenango it was performed a little longer (Termer, 1957, p. 223). For an extensive overview of the performance of the *palo volador* in Mesoamerica see Nájera Coronado (2008).

Figure 74. The *Tzijolaj* goes from the base of the *palo volador* up towards the roof of the church and back again. Photo taken from the top of the main church in Chichicastenango.

than the bull. The *baile del tzijolaj* is the dance in which a cofradía member dances with the sacred image. The *baile de los sargentos* or *Ajib'* (reeds) is a dance in which those who are responsible for the firework (the *sargentos*) dance in a circle in front of the church with bundles of reed, to which firework is attached. After this dance, the reeds are one by one fired in the air. Additionally, the usual *convite* dance takes place during the feast, during which men and women cross dress, taking one another's role.

The *palo volador* is one of the most characteristic events of the feast in Chichicastenango. Preparations of the dance begin already in February (Bunzel, 1952, p. 424). Just as in the *baile de la culebra* (see Chapter IV and V), it is necessary to perform ritual preparations. The tree that is used for the dance is cut in October and carried to the center of Chichicastenango twenty days before the beginning of the feast (Bunzel, 1952, p. 424; Termer, 1957, p. 225). The cutting of the tree involves ceremonies similar to those discussed for the *baile de la culebra* in Chapter V. Offerings are left in the hole where the cut tree would be planted.

In 2014, the firework construction and the large amount of people on the plaza on Sunday, 20th of December, did not allow the dancers to slide down the pole and a smaller performance was therefore only performed right underneath the pole. The music could not be heard, either, because of three competing *zarabandas* that dominated the plaza. The dance was not performed on Monday the 21st of December, either, as the dancers failed to arrive. So eventually only on Thursday, Friday and Saturday the dance was performed in and around the pole and related ceremonies.

The dance starts in the morning and lasts until around four o'clock in the afternoon, with a break between twelve and one o'clock. Right before the dance begins, two dancers bring in the ladder to climb up the pole. This ladder is taken away when the

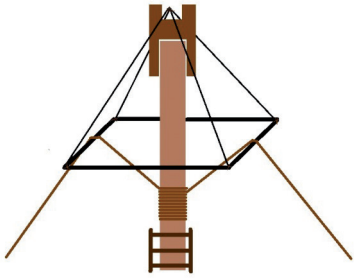

Figure 75. Reconstruction of the wooden construction on the top of the *palo volador*.

Figure 76. This photo is taken at 08:23 in the morning on December 20st 2014. The lowest ladder is placed at the pole at the moment that the shadow cast by the church disappears from the ladder above it.

dance has ended so that nobody climbs the pole when the dancers are not present. When musician begins to play marimba music, the dancers begin the dance. In the *baile del palo volador* of Chichicastenango, six performers dance underneath the pole in the center of the town. On top of the pole is a square wooden construction from which two long ropes hang, which can turn around (Figure 75). Two of the dancers are dressed as jaguars[74] while four are dressed as monkeys. During the dance, one of the participants climbs up the pole and rolls up the ropes around the wooden construction. Once done, a second dancer climbs up. They attach themselves to the ropes and slowly swirl down the pole in a counterclockwise direction. The music that accompanies the dance is played on the marimba.

74 Neither Bunzel nor Termer mentions dancers in a jaguar costume, which may indicate that this costume was introduced after 1934.

One of the jaguar costumes was yellow with black spots, while the other was orange with stripes. One of the monkeys, the dance leader, carried a whip in his hands. He had 45 years of experience in the dance and was the father of the dancer impersonating the yellow jaguar, who had been participating for 18 years. All costumes are elaborately decorated with mirrors that reflect the light of the sun creating a blinding effect on the spectators, especially when the monkeys go up the stairs placed on the east side of the pole mirroring the rising sun. When the dancers turn spirally downwards, the lightning created by flashing mirrors all over the bodies of the dancers is reflected to the public.

It is widely known in Chichicastenango that the *palo volador* represents the passage of time around a central point or *axis mundi*. According to the Yellow Jaguar, the square construction on top of the pole is related to the four cardinal directions. He explained to me that the central point where the four wooden bars join and are attached to each other represents the center of the world. Ajq'ij Miguel Chan from Chichicastenango adds that, as the cardinal directions are related to the year bearers, the counterclockwise turning of the four directions represents the movement of time.

The 21st of December is an important moment in time as this is when the sun rises and sets in the southernmost point in the horizon. From this moment on, the sun will move again to the north. This is shortest day of the year and it also marks the beginning of the coldest period of the year when cold winds sweep through the highlands. From this moment onwards, seen from the surface of the earth, the sun moves again towards the northern direction during the following six months, and the days will grow in length again. Furthermore, the winter solstice is an indicator that the rainy and harvest seasons are completely over and dry-season activities can begin in Chichicastenango.

The beginning of the dance is marked by the church's shadow falling on the pole. I noticed that on the morning of 19th and 20th of December, the shadow of the church cast on the plaza by the rising sun stood directly in line with the pole of the *palo volador*. This was best observed from the stairs of the church. The first monkey dancer climbed up the pole while the pole was still in the shadow, but

Figure 77. All three photos are taken on 20st of December. Photo A: the first dancer climbs the pole and roles up the ropes at 08:30 in the morning. Photo B: the second dancer climbs up at 08:51, when the ropes are completely wound up. C. The dancers start to descent at 08:55. While the dancers swirl down for the first time in the morning, the shadow of the church of Santo Tomás withdraws from the ladder that is attached to the palo volador.

as he rolled the ropes upward around the pole, the shadow gradually moved away from the pole. Once both monkey dancers began to descend from the pole, the shadow was almost completely gone. Once they touched the ground, the pole was already in the sun. The progressive disappearance of the shadow can easily be observed from the square because of the wooden ladder placed on the pole towards the church. The wooden ladder marks the gradual rising of the sun in distinct and countable steps.

On Figure 76 it can be seen that as soon as the dancers arrive to the central square, the lowest part of the wooden ladder (the piece that is taken away to prevent people from climbing the pole during the night) is brought to the *palo volador* right at the moment that the shadow cast by the church leaves the ladder above it. As such, the placement of the ladder enables a "count down" of the moment of the sunrise behind the church, measurable in countable steps of the ladder. The placement of the ladder takes place at 08:15 in the morning. The first dancer climbs at 08:30, when the shadow has lowered two steps (Figure 77). The second one climbs at 08:50, when

Figure 78. Photo was taken on 20st of December. During the descent of the dancers, the shadow of the church has dropped several steps. The shadow has almost completely disappeared from the ladder as the dancers arrive back on the ground at 08:58 in the morning.

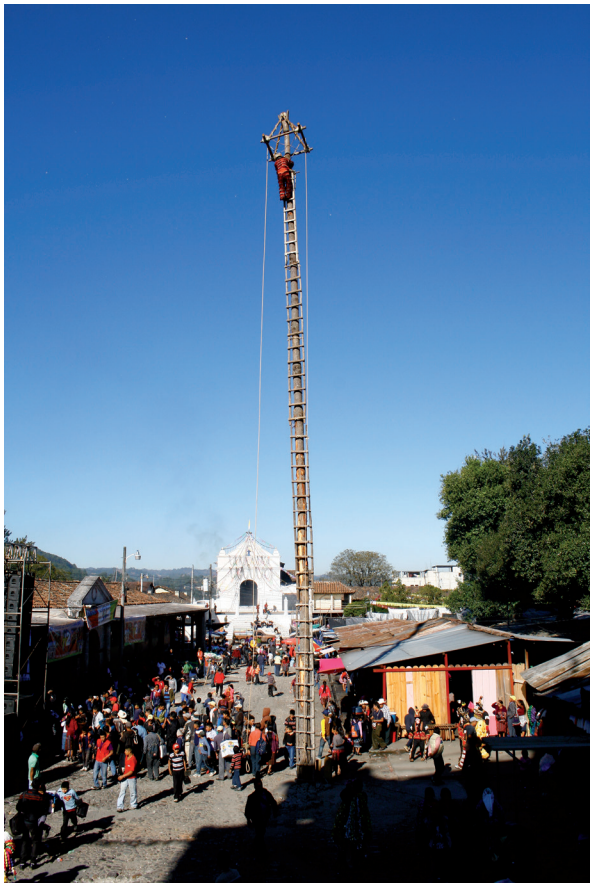

Figure 79. At 09:01 in the morning, the second dancer climbs up in the pole to wind up the ropes for a second time and the shadow of the church disappears completely from the ladder of the *palo volador*.

the shadow has lowered five and a half steps. Both then start descending at 08:55, when the shadow has dropped eight and a half steps. Finally, they reach the ground at 08:58, when the shadow has dropped ten steps and only two are left in the shadow (Figure 78). At 09:01, the shadow has left the pole completely and the next dancer climbs up, rolling the rope and repeating the ceremony (Figure 79).

The shadow the church cast on the pole is characteristic for this time of the year only. At any other moment the shadow would have been somewhere else as the sun would have been further to the north. In the reconstruction below, I mapped the center of Chichicastenango in relation to time. While I was careful to reproduce the measures based on photographs, what really matters is the relative position between the palo volador and the church. It should therefore not be taken as a cm precise reconstruction. I used photos I took on the 20th of December to place the *palo volador* at the location where the church was casting the shadow at the exact moment that the photos were taken. The reconstruction is a model to show how the rising sun moves throughout the year and how the shadows of the church are cast on the plaza as a result of its movement.

In the model it can be seen that the only period that the shadow of the right wall and tower of the church (from frontal view) stands in line with the *palo volador* is at the time of the winter solstice (Figure 80). As the sun moves to the north after 21st of December, the shadow of the church moves to the south on the other side. The turning point will be eventually reached on summer solstice, which is celebrated in Chichicastenango with a big feast for San Juan on 24th of June (Bunzel, 1952, pp. 46-48). As such, the sun, the church, and the *palo volador* form a sun clock. The shadow, moving through the steps of the ladder, counts down and marks the sunrise behind the church of Santo Tomás at an extreme position of the sun at the horizon, marking an important moment in time. It is reasonable to assume this, as the pole is related to the passage of time in the form of year bearers and cardinal directions swirling counterclockwise around a central point (Figure 81).

Due to the cyclical movement of the sun during the year and during the day, the sun will rise each year on the day of the winter solstice at the same hour. Therefore, the timing of the dance, which may have been marked by the disappearance of the shadow, is now indicated by the clock: it is not necessary anymore to look at the pole to decide when to start, as the time is set on the watch. The timing of the dance has probably continued because it is a canonical part of the respected tradition which the ancestors started. I did not have the opportunity to discuss my observations with any of the participants or organizers of the dance during my fieldwork.

The first round on the *palo volador* thus coincides with the rising of the sun at the horizon behind the church of Chichicastenango. Both on 19th and 20th of December, as soon as the first dancers touched the ground and the shadow left the pole, a procession of the cofrades of Chichicastenango passed between the *palo volador* and the church. In both cases

Figure 80. Photo A: shadow on the pole on 20th of December 2014 at 08:57. Photo B: shadow on the pole on 20th of December 2014 using ©SketchUp.

they were accompanied by Tzijolaj. On the 19th, they came from the north side of the plaza moving south. On the 20th, they came again from the north but this time they went inside the church and came out again while carrying three colorful carriages decorated with mirrors and feathers. These were then taken in processions to the cofradía houses of San Sebastian, San José and Santo Tomás to pick up the saints at their respective cofradía houses and to bring them back to the church. The disappearance of the shadow of the pole coincided with the moment on which the three saints were taken in a procession through town by the cofrades.

In sum, it is clear that the *palo volador* marks an important moment in time. Not only are the four sides of the wooden construction at the top the related to the four cardinal directions and year bearers, the pole in itself functions as a solar clock in combination with the church of Chichicastenango. The timing of sunrise coincides with the first dance of the *palo volador* and also marks the beginning of the processions. Everybody

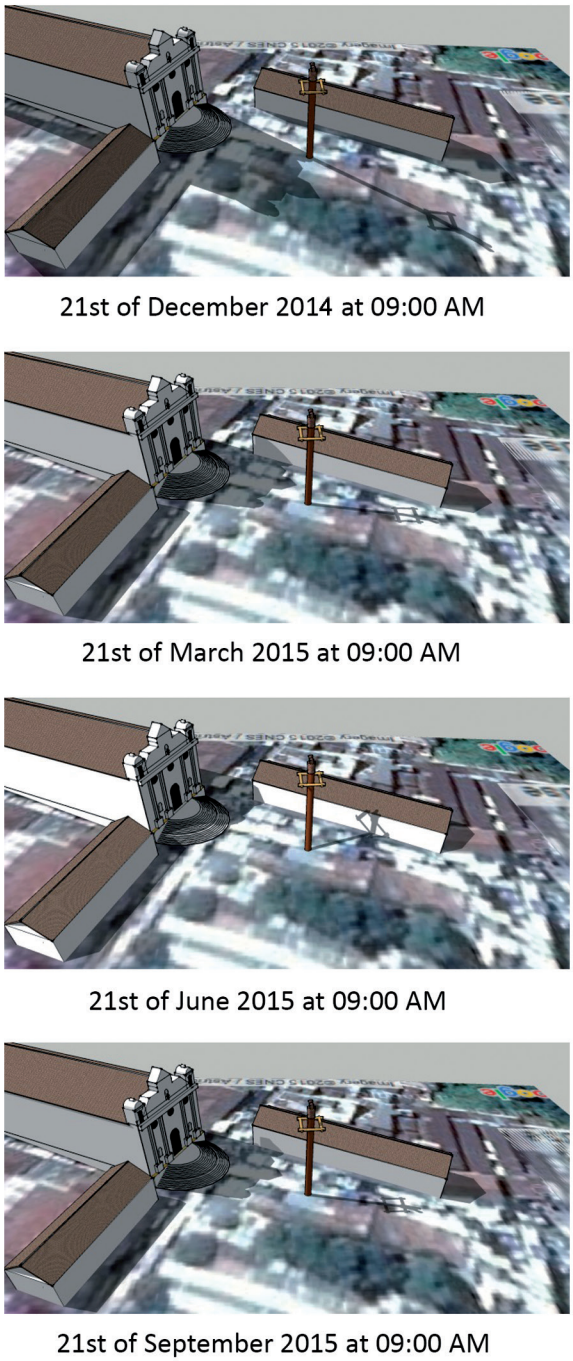

Figure 81. Because of the movement of the sun in relation to the landscape, the shadow cast by the church shifts throughout the year, making the shadow that is cast on the 21st of December a unique event.

Figure 82. A hole in the ground was found at the archaeological site of Iximche' in the Highlands of Guatemala. According to local Ajq'ijab', a pole placed in this hole in combination with the surrounding architecture used to serve as a device for determining the equinox of March.

in Chichicastenango is aware that underneath the church lies a platform of a Maya temple, which dates from the Precolonial era. This, in combination with pole holes at the center of archaeological places, makes one wonder if these forms of time measuring were present as well in ancient times (Figure 82). On the other hand, the solar clock in Chichicastenango calls to mind the sun dial at the center of the Saint Peter's square in the Vatican, Rome, where the shadow of a massive obelisk marks the solstices and equinoxes thoughout the solar year. It is therefore also possible that the *palo volador*, though operating in a slightly different way, is an adaptation and recreation of the sun dial at the Saint Peter's square – the center of Catholic power – and, if so, it may show an attempt to equate European cosmovision in the Highlands of Guatemala. However, further research on the history of solar clocks in Mesoamerica and the exchange of knowledge regarding these forms of time reckoning during the Colonial and Independent Period is needed before any conclusive statements can be made.

A CYCLE OF FEASTS

In the previous chapter, I already briefly discussed the cycle of *veintenas* in the colonial 365-day count and pointed out that the names coincide with stages in the agricultural cycle. Diego de Landa (1966, Chapter XXXIX-XLI) mentions that in relation to the *veintena* cycle specific feasts were celebrated. Such a relationship between agricultural celebrations and specific *veintenas* has similarly been documented in Central Mexico (De Sahagún, 1950-1978, Book II, Chapter I-XXXIIX; Duran, 1967, Historia..., Tomo II, El calendario antiguo). However, as the *veintenas* seem to have been fixed in the 365-day count, the timing of the *veintenas* shifted gradually in relation to the solar year, the latter which, as discussed above, regulates meteorological and agricultural phenomena. This means that after 80 years, the timing of a *veintena* has shifted already twenty days in relation to the seasonal phenomena of the solar year. Therefore, if specific agricultural rites were fixed in the *veintenas* that carried the name of that specific agricultural stage, the ritual activities would quickly be displaced in relation to the time periods that they marked. This would lead, for example, to a celebration for sowing at the time of harvest.

It is therefore unlikely that the ritual celebrations that marked and divided seasonal periods and their relative activities were fixed in the *veintena* cycle. The Italian researcher Boturini (1746, pp. 57-59) proposed already in the 18th century that the astronomical cycle in prehispanic Central Mexico may have been a cycle, additional to the 260-day and 265-day count, for setting ritual performances. Continuing on this idea, Anders, Jansen, and Reyes García (1993, pp. 61-65) have proposed that the cycle of festivities may have been based on agricultural phenomena. I suggest that it is possible that in the Maya region a similar cycle of ritual celebrations independent of the 365-day count or *veintenas* formed a significant part of the Maya calendar.

I argue that the celebrations that mark and separate today distinct periods in the Highland, often fixed in the Christian liturgical calendar, should be understood as such a cycle of feast. As I have shown throughout this chapter, the intersection of meteorological phenomena (such as rain, drought, the winds, the *canícula*, frost and heat), agricultural phenomena (such as sprouting of seeds, hilling of the milpa, harvest, the cleaning of the milpa, and the selection of seeds), and astronomical phenomena (such as the equinoxes, zenith passages and solstices of the sun) is the basis for timing important celebrations in the Highlands in the Guatemala. I have not been able to document the active practice of astronomical observations in the Highlands and specialists have not mentioned the direct relationship between celebrations that coincide with astronomical phenomena neither. However, I think that the observation of astronomical events has been replaced by the Gregorian calendar: astronomical events tend to occur around the same Gregorian date every year, which makes the actual practice of astronomical observations unnecessary. As I have shown in the case of Chichicastenango, however, remnants of the old practice of astronomical observations are still kept in the canonical part of religious celebrations.

As I have shown in this chapter, the actual timing of a specific ritual celebration may differ per community, which indicates that the feast cycle is flexible and easily adaptable according to the affordances and necessities of each community. Furthermore, not every community is able to perform a huge celebration for each moment on which seasonal phenomena intersect, as these celebrations require a lot of energy, money, food and attention. Therefore, most celebrations in a community are celebrated on small scale, while only several events are celebrated abundantly. As such, different communities elaborate on different feasts. The division of elaborate feasts among the communities of the Highlands of Guatemala has two main effects: (1.) the communities share the burden of performing elaborate feasts, and (2.) visiting the feasts of other communities leads to an integration of the Highlands of Guatemala on a regional level. As such, the movement of elaborate ritual celebrations through the communities of the Highlands of Guatemala forms a calendar cycle, comparable to the *trecena* cycle of Momostenango (see Chapter I), during which members of different communities move through the landscape. The feast cycle has the same effect on a regional scale as the *trecena* cycle has on a local scale: the integration of the Highlands of Guatemala and a decentralization of space.

CLIMATE CHANGE

The cycles of the environment in the Highlands of Guatemala, which have been discussed in this chapter, are changing. These changes are not only experienced in the Highlands; they seem to be a structural phenomenon of climate change and ecological degradation (Juarez, 2002). In Momostenango the lack of rain has been the cause of much concern:

> *And the harvest now, Paul, it is very limited. It is not like it used to be. I remember that before, the mazorcas that grew at my father's milpa were huge, now they are like this small […] It is because of the climate and because of the chemical fertilizer. Before it used to be all-natural fertilizer… My father had cows and bulls, and he put the manure on the milpa. [The future will be] much more complicated, much more difficult. If we are suffering already now, I can already imagine how we will be in another ten or fifteen years from now. For example, with my father we used to harvest* ayotes *and we would get these huge* ayotes. *Enormous! And peas and green beans! And now we do not get any of that […] It is so difficult… what happens is that the milpa does not give (fruits) anymore. Before, it did give a lot! I remember that my older sister, María, she would sell baskets full of green beans. And now? Nothing! Nothing. And she would also sell the peas, but now there is nothing anymore […] Yes, it is difficult, that is how the situation is now… and the lack of rain is something that is also causing us even more suffering: there is just no rain. And there is so much heat these days. For example, the celebration that takes place in San Bartolo these days is the time of the rain: it should rain the entire day!* – Irma Hernández Ajanel, 24th of August 2016

A recent study (Hidalgo et al., 2013) predicts that if climate change continues in the same line, Central America will be dramatically affected. Estimations are that severe drought will increase in the period from 2050-2099 (Hidalgo et al., 2013, pp. 108-110). The lower part of Central America (Panama, Costa Rica, Honduras, and a part of El Salvador) will experience a decrease in precipitation of 5% to 10% while northern Central America (Belize, Guatemala and a part of El Salvador) will experience a drop in the amount of precipitation of 10% to 30% (Hidalgo et al., 2013, pp. 108-110). Apart from the decrease in rain, more extreme weather patterns will be experienced in Central America. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warns:

> *Many impacts of climate change will be realised as the result of a change in the frequency of occurrence of extreme weather events such as windstorms, tornados, hail, heatwaves, gales, heavy precipitation or extreme temperatures over a few hours to several days* (IPCC, 2007, p. 605).

The region from Central Mexico up to Costa Rica is extremely vulnerable for the effects of climate change. ICCP mentions that especially "Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, children and women living in poverty" (IPCC, 2014, p. 1516) are the most vulnerable groups exposed to the effects of climate change. The most food insecure country by percentage of the population in Central America is Guatemala (30.4%), and this amount has been increasing in the last years (IFAD, WFP, & FAO, 2012). Furthermore, there is a great concern regarding the lives of subsistence farmers:

> *In terms of food security,* a significant number of smallholders and subsistence farmers may be particularly vulnerable to climate change in the short term, and their adaptation options may be more limited. *Of particular concern are farmers in Central America, where drying trends have been reported, and in the poorer regions of the Andes* (IPCC, 2007, p. 605; emphasis mine).

The proposed adaptation models suggest that "[g]enetic advances and suitable soil and technological management may induce an increase in some crops' yield despite unfavorable future climate conditions" (IPCC, 2014, p. 1530). Agricultural companies are indeed already waiting to sell their genetically modified organisms (GMO's) in Guatemala (Grandia, 2014, p. 97; Klepek, 2011, p. 573). It seems therefore that climate change will push subsistence farmers into a new economic system. In this new system they would need to buy the patented seeds of a company. In order to buy the seeds, they are forced to make profit, which contrasts strongly to the traditional form of subsistence farming. The structural transformation of the rural economy will probably also include a strong increase of migration to urban regions as the rural marginalized zones do not have enough available work to provide food (IFAD et al., 2012, p. 35).

In sum, climate change will have a dramatic effect on the lives of the indigenous and local communities in the Highlands of Guatemala. Economic systems and climate change are pushing the indigenous communities and local populations into a marginalized chokehold, where the options are very limited. The indigenous diaspora will probably increase during this century and those who remain in their community might see themselves forced to change to genetically modified seeds and to participate in the global neo-liberal economic system and the spiritual relationship with the earth will therefore likely change.