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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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Discussion

The intimate relationship between the K'iche' calendar and the landscape has been a recurrent theme in this study. The *trecena* cycle in Momostenango promotes the movement of ritual specialists throughout town, thereby decentralizing spatial and religious power. The ruling *Mam* and his *Ajtz'ib'* shift, in a similar manner, every year to a different cardinal direction where they are received by ritual specialists. As such, the town of Momostenango lies at the center of a ritualized space around which time turns. This same movement of time turning around a central axis can be found in Chichicastenango, where the circular movement of the dancers that swirl down the *palo volador* represents the passing of time. As I have pointed out elsewhere, however, ongoing processes of neo-colonization threaten to alter this social space and landscape irrevocably, which in turn will lead to a dramatic loss of ancestral knowledge in the Highlands of Guatemala (Van den Akker, 2017, 137-147).

Patron saint feasts and other religious celebrations also promote a ritual movement on both the local level, within each municipality, and the regional level throughout the Western Highlands of Guatemala. This cycle of festivities contributes to a regional cohesion as community members usually pay a visit to important feasts in neighboring towns or aldeas. Furthermore, in the case of specific ritual performances, such as the *baile de la culebra*, I have argued that the burden of performing the rituals over a period of roughly 260 days – from the preparation of the *milpa* until the beginning of the harvest season – is carried by several communities on a regional basis. Each community is responsible for continuing the dance according to the kind of performances, number of participants, and general resources it can afford and finds suitable.

Landscape is summoned in the ceremonial discourses expressed by the *Ajq'ijab'*. Addressing specific sacred places, geographical features, and towns during a ceremony situates the participants centrally in the landscape and reminds them of the extensive region to which they belong. These ceremonial discourses also invoke the ancestors by name and lineage, as well as other deceased people. This further contributes to situate the participants in time and history. Rituals performed at specific lineage altars in Momostenango contribute to the commemoration of the lineage ancestors and to the identity formation of the living members. On a larger scale, community altars in Momostenango serve the commemoration of communal ancestors. Rituals performed at lineage and community altars intertwined on specific days of the *chol q'ij* and strengthen the internal social cohesion of the community by emphasizing shared roots, cosmology, and social conventions.

The K'iche' calendar contributes to the formation of a community by bringing groups of people together at specific moments in time, by creating a shared frame of temporal reference, by synchronizing activities and by reinforcing the communal social conventions. Rituals that are set by the K'iche' calendar reiterate the shared roots of a community and, as such, contribute to emotional security and a sense of belonging.

Community altars are perceived as an authority, related to the Day-Numbers 1, 6, 8, and 9 of the *chol q'ij*. The altar related to the Day-Number 9 is the leading authority, the *presidente mundo*. Similarly, the first day of the year, the *Mam* or “Grandfather”, is an authority for the 365 days of the solar year. Each *Mam* has his own *Ajtz'ib'*, “Secretary”, who serves as his assistant. The *Mam* is a living being who, when the authority changes at

the arrival of the New Year in the K'iche' calendar, sits down with his successor to contemplate upon the past year and to give advice for the following year.

Each individual day is also guided by an authority of days, known as *Ajaw Job'*. This is formed by a group of five days, each representing a partition of fifty-two days of the *chol q'ij*. The leader of this authority of days is the actual day in the *chol q'ij* (e.g. on the day 9 Ix, the *Ajaw Job'* is led by the day 9 Ix). Each day that constitutes the authority of *Ajaw Job'* is alive and has a specific personality, the *wachaq'ij* (face of the day), and the combination of the five personalities influences the events of that day. Five-day partitions are also known from almanacs in prehispanic Maya manuscripts and colonial documents, but were considered lost. This research, however, documents the ongoing use of these "almanacs" in a ceremonial discourse. It has been suggested in this study that, in addition to the accepted interpretations of these almanacs as divinatory tables, colonial and prehispanic almanacs may have been also used as mnemonic tools for discursive performances (i.e. to produce extensive ceremonial discourses).

The hierarchical organization of time and space is duplicated in the social organization of Momostenango. The authority for indigenous affairs is the *auxiliatura*, whose members are chosen by the elders of the community and have the responsibility for the well-being of the indigenous population of the town for a year. Similar to the *Ajaw Job'*, the combination of the different personalities of the members of the *auxiliatura* will have a specific effect on the community for that year. The taking of office is a gradual process: after the initial selection, a period of training follows that coincides with New Year in the Gregorian calendar and leads to the initiation of the new authority. The previous *auxiliatura* members continue to train the new authority after the initiation until they are deemed completely independent and capable.

The change of authority is a gradual process that can be observed also in the perception of time. Each day seems to begin one day prior and to fade slowly the following day. This can be noted in ritual activities, which often begin the day prior and are finalized the day after the actual day. As one day gives rise to the next day, in ceremonial discourses the

day of the ritual performance is therefore addressed in a sequence that also mentions its preceding and succeeding day. The three days together represent the past, the present, and the future. Very important days, such as 8 B'atz' or the day of the *Mam*, start entering several days before the actual day.

The past, present, and future are considered an inseparable unity. In the house, the grandparents (the past), their children (the present), and the grandchildren (the future) live together. Similarly, in the *auxiliatura*, the elders and the former authority represent the past, the new *auxiliatura* is the present, and the younger community members are the future. Accordingly, the past guides the present, and the present paves the road for the future. A link between the three generations is crucial for the continuation of knowledge and cultural values related to the life of the community and the environment in a sustainable way.

I have argued that ritual practice is an important tool in maintaining the link between the past, present and future. In my discussion of the *baile de la culebra* I have shown how the dance bridges the gap between the ancestors and the present-day generations, by incorporating traumatic historical experiences in the ritual, and relating them to current social concerns within the community. As such, lived experiences of the ancestors are incorporated in the identity of the participant and serve as a lesson for the future. Each community where the dance is performed has incorporated its specific historical processes or emphasizes historical experiences that community members identify with. Altogether, the dance tells about the experience of the colonization at the hands of the Spaniards, physical punishment, sexual harassment, life on the plantations, feuds between towns and different linguistic groups, diseases, and resistance against oppression. All the dances transmit the experience of suffering inflicted by the Spaniards and emphasize the unequal power relations following the colonization. By pointing out a shared historical trauma, the dance contributes to a mutual identification among community members and emphasizes the shared hope of overcoming colonial oppression in the future.

The European invasion and subsequent colonization of the American continent has caused, however, severe tears in the link between the present

and the past of the indigenous peoples. I have argued that archaeologists and anthropologists have the social responsibility to contribute to the restoration of these links in collaboration with the indigenous communities, and to support the process of cultural healing and spiritual recovery. This research has traced several lines of continuation in practices in the hope to contribute to this process.

As this research has shown, cultural continuation is a dynamic process that involves conscious choices and effortful decisions regarding what practices are affordable and desirable to continue. The Ajq'ijab' (calendar specialists) have an active role in this process of continuation and in the transmission of cultural values, because they carry the social responsibility to guide the community in an ever-changing environment. I have furthermore explored how the Gregorian and Christian liturgical calendars have offered opportunities for continuity in the perception of time under oppressive circumstances. The Gregorian calendar has taken on mantic qualities in the Western Highlands of Guatemala that are similar to, but less extensive than, those of the *chol q'ij*.

Furthermore, important days in the *chol q'ij* find their counterpart in the Christian liturgical calendar. As I have pointed out, it is likely that the astronomical basis of the Gregorian year is the reason for the duplication of specific *chol q'ij* dates in the Christian liturgical calendar, because specific solar events and meteorological phenomena tend to occur around the same date in the Gregorian calendar each year. The day 8 Q'anil, the day to commemorate the milpa and to bless the seeds, is an illustrative case. As this is a *chol q'ij* day, it constantly shifts in relation to the astronomical, meteorological and agricultural year. At the same time, the day of 8 Q'anil is also celebrated at a moment that the community relates to in the solar year, which is prior to planting the milpa, giving rise to a duplication of the celebration of the day at two occasions. As both the *chol q'ij* and the agricultural cycle are native to the region, it is possible that the duplication of *chol q'ij* days in the solar year may even be a prehispanic phenomenon of the K'iche' calendar.

This research has shown that currently in the Highlands of Guatemala the different periods of agricultural and social activities are mainly

distinguished by Catholic celebrations. While the astronomical movement of the sun plays an important role in the determination of ritual moments, the use of the Gregorian calendar has replaced the actual observation of the movement of the sun. However, as I have shown in the discussion on the feast of Santo Tomás in Chichicastenango, in some instances solar clocks continue to play a role in the festive activities. I have therefore argued that celebrations in the Gregorian year should be considered part of the K'iche' calendar.

The timing of the Christian celebrations, which define periods of specific social activities in the agricultural calendar, coincides with the names of the *veintenas* documented in colonial sources. I have argued that repetitive celebrations based on the astronomical solar year form an additional cycle in the K'iche' calendar and that this cycle has, in comparison to the *chol q'ij* and *junab' q'ij*, not received much scholarly attention yet. Furthermore, I have suggested that in the prehispanic Maya calendar this cycle of celebrations may have worked independently of the 365-day count and the *veintena* cycle, which shift in relation to the astronomical solar year. In order to come to a better understanding of the precolonial *veintena* cycle of celebrations, future research should focus on the interaction that occurred in the Colonial period and on processes of synergy between the Christian and the K'iche' calendars.

Finally, this research has discussed the continuation of cultural values through symbolic performances that take place on ritual moments in the K'iche' calendar. The analysis of the *baile de la culebra* has shown that current symbolism of the dance finds strong parallels in prehispanic Maya and pan-Mesoamerican cosmology. I have argued that the female protagonist of the dance is the guardian of the earth and the patron of the cycle of life-death-life by controlling rain and the rivers. Suggesting that she is a local variant of the pan-Mesoamerican complex of Mother Goddesses, often associated to a specific day in the 260-day count, I have proposed to identify her by the name of 9 Kan in the *chol q'ij*.

Similarities in the symbolic configuration between the *baile de la culebra* and prehispanic Maya cases, such as a group of vessels representing the Snake Lady as well as Dresden Codex page

74, seem to suggest that an underlying canonical message continues to be important and valuable to contemporary Maya since ancient times. However, before any conclusions can be made it is necessary to conduct more in-depth research on the historical processes of change and continuity in the meaning of the cluster of symbolic elements that can be found in both the *baile de la culebra* and prehispanic iconography.

By taking the effortful decision to perform this dance throughout the rainy season, organizers of *baile de la culebra* from several communities in the Highlands of Guatemala transmit the cultural values embedded in it to the future generations. These cultural values emphasize the idea that everyone should be thankful to previous generations for their life and will in turn pass it on to the next generation. Furthermore, they stress that a human being is dependent on the forces of nature for its creation, survival, and death, and that damaging the environment will result not only in personal suffering, but also suffering for future generations.

The teachings transferred in the *baile de la culebra* and depicted in the ancient books and vases are not restricted to the Maya area. The cultural values and morals that have been discussed apply to social and environmental concerns in a globalizing world where increasing individualism goes hand in hand with severe changes in the environment. Moral changes have led to a dominant mindset wherein persons are disconnected from the past and the future, and separated from each other. The cultural values embedded in and expressed by the *baile de la culebra* teach us to think about ourselves as a bridge between the past and the future and to reflect on our position in the environment and in time.

Beyond the results of this study, there are still questions to be addressed in future research on the Maya calendar. I have not been able, for example, to extensively document astronomical knowledge because astronomical observations are no longer practiced in the town of Momostenango. As has been pointed out by archaeologists¹³⁰, however, astronomical events played an important role in prehispanic cosmology and some of this knowledge may still be kept by some specialists.

Furthermore, future investigations should explore the relationship between the *Ajaw Job'* and the colonial and prehispanic almanacs in further detail, as this may bring new insights in the prehispanic conceptualization of time and the use of ancient codices. Additionally, more research is needed on the cultural interaction in Colonial period Highland Guatemala, especially on the synergy between a regional cycle of ritual celebrations and the Christian liturgical calendar.

It should furthermore be explored in more detail how the calendrical elements relate to practices and beliefs in the cultural complex of Mesoamerica, to gain a deeper understanding of the differences in calendar use on the local, regional, and Mesoamerican scale. In general, future research should focus on the link between past and present practices with the aim to go beyond a mere reconstruction of the past, by enabling contemporary Maya people to restore and rediscover the broken ties of cultural memory.

¹³⁰ See the recent study of Manuel May Castillo (2014) for a review of the significance of astronomical events in prehispanic Maya cosmology.