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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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Summary

This study is a part of the broader research project *Time in Intercultural Context*, which is directed by Prof. Dr. Maarten E.R.G.N. Jansen (Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden University, The Netherlands), which has received funding through an Advanced Grant from the European Research Council in the context of the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) under grant agreement n° 295434.

This work, titled *Time, History and Ritual in a K'iche' Community: Contemporary Maya Calendar Knowledge and Practices in the Highlands of Guatemala*, analyzes ritual practices and knowledge related to the Mesoamerican calendar with the aim of contributing to the understanding of the use and conceptualization of this calendar system in the contemporary K'iche' community of Momostenango, in the Highlands of Guatemala. A total of thirteen months of fieldwork was conducted. The research presented here discusses the indigenous calendar system, forms of synergy between the Christian and the Highland Guatemalan calendar, the indigenous perception of history and continuity in time-related symbolism. The dissertation is organized into five chapters and five additional appendices.

The researcher argues that the social role of cultural anthropologists and archaeologists is to contribute to the ongoing process of cultural healing and spiritual recovery of the peoples that suffer(ed) from colonization and oppression. This study therefore places an emphasis on cultural continuity and approaches the continuation of Maya calendar practices as a possible tool for restoring breaks in social memory, which are caused by colonization. During the fieldwork, the researcher collaborated with the Momostenango-based cultural regeneration organization *Takiliben May: Misión Maya Wajshakib' Batz*, led by the local ritual specialist don Rigoberto Itzep Chanchavac with whom he shared similar research interests and aims.

The analysis of ritual practices is an essential step in exploring cultural continuation. For this analysis, the researcher borrows the concepts of self-referential and canonical messages developed in the *magnum opus* of Roy Rappaport (1999), to explore the role of the perception and conceptualization of time in the construction of identity and in the formation of a community on the short-term and long-term. Additionally, this research leans on Carlos Severi's (1996) theory of ritual memory – a form of memory in which historical experiences are embedded in ritual practices. The work of Tim Ingold (2011), specifically his ideas regarding the dwelling perspective and the production of meaning through interaction in a constantly changing environment, plays a central role in the approach to cultural interaction and transformation. Finally, to identify lines of cultural continuity, the researcher follows the theoretical and methodological approach of post-colonial hermeneutics (Jansen & Pérez Jiménez, 2011), which enables the researcher to make careful analogies between contemporary practices and ancient pictography and representations.

The first part of the dissertation includes the chapters I, II, and III, and deals with the cyclical perception of time. Chapter I explores the current use of the 260-day count and the social role of the calendar specialists in the community of Momostenango. This chapter contains an elaborate discussion of the perception of the calendar days, the role they play in daily life, and their participation in the creation of life. Furthermore, this chapter argues that rituals performed according to the *trecena* cycle – an important thirteen-day cycle also known from precolonial Mesoamerican manuscripts – promote a decentralization of spatial and religious power.

Chapter II explores the relationship between time and authority, and argues that the hierarchical structure of time is duplicated in the social

organization of the community of Momostenango. The perception of the *Mam* (“the year bearer”) and the welcoming ceremonies for the new cycle of 365 days play a central role in this chapter. Furthermore, this chapter analyzes the continuation of a five-day partition, which was previously thought to be out of use since the Colonial Period but, as the researcher shows, is still used in contemporary ceremonial discourses. Research on this topic suggests new possible readings of the postclassic and colonial almanacs in which similar partitions can be found.

Chapter III examines the intersection between seasonality and celebrations by discussing several seasonal cycles – such as cycles of the wind, the rain, animal behavior, agriculture, and the sun – and important feasts in the Highlands of Guatemala. Apart from a general overview of important feasts, this chapter contains five case studies based on fieldwork in Calcehtok (on the peninsula of Yucatán), Momostenango, Amatitlán, and Chichicastenango. It is argued here that Catholic feasts mark important stages in the Highland seasonal cycle and that these feasts guide human behavior related to agriculture. Furthermore, as the timing of these feasts coincide with the names of periods of 20 days, so-called *veintenas*, that are mentioned in colonial sources dealing with the Highland calendar, it is argued that the cycle of Christian feasts – although introduced by European colonizers – is, after a period of 500 years, a product of synergy in which it forms part of both the Catholic liturgical calendar and the Highland Guatemala Maya calendar.

The second part of the dissertation includes the chapters IV and V, and investigates the linear perception of time in the Highlands of Guatemala by focusing on the *baile de la culebra*, a ritual dance that is strongly related to the rainy season. Chapter IV documents the history, costumes, and terminology of the dance and provides an overview of where and when the dance is performed. Furthermore, this chapter contains an elaborate description of the performance of the dance in Momostenango on the fourth Friday of Lent and at the end of Holy Week and Easter. Applying the concept of ritual memory, it argues that historical experiences are embedded in the performance of the dance across the Highlands of Guatemala. It is argued that the dance incorporates the specific historical processes that each individual

town went through, and, as such, strengthens community identity.

Chapter V uses post-colonial hermeneutics to identify possible lines of cultural continuity in the symbolism of the *baile de la culebra* by comparing the dance’s thematic unit with pre-colonial iconography and colonial sources. It is suggested here that these possible symbolic continuities convey cultural values that have been important in the past and continue to be important in contemporary contexts. Furthermore, it is suggested that the protagonist of the dance is possibly a variant of the pan-Mesoamerican complex of Mother Goddesses and that her name might be related to a day name of the K’iche’ Maya calendar. Finally, it is argued that this dance is a petition for rain and fertility and that the communities where this dance takes place have a shared responsibility to ensure rainfall by performing this dance throughout the rainy season.

Finally, Appendix A contains a transcription and translation of a ceremonial discourse expressed by don Rigoberto Itzep Chanchavac. Appendix B discusses the characteristics of each of the days of the K’iche’ calendar and Appendix C gives an overview of the mnemonic expressions related to each of the days of the Momostecan calendar. The movement of blood, a specialized divination technique, is documented in appendix D, and Appendix E contains the transcription of an oral narrative about Tzijolaj, a divine image in Chichicastenango.

Throughout this dissertation it is argued that time is an authority which directs human behavior in a cyclical manner through the landscape on a local and regional scale. Time is related to morality and cultural values, and a shared perception of time contributes to the cohesion of the community as it recreates and reaffirms the identity of its members by reiterating their shared social conventions and history. Finally, the conjunction of time and ritual provides a tool to overcome the rupture caused by death and to transmit messages from generation to generation over a long span of time.