

# Hechicería, Nagualism and Entierros in Nebaj

*A Study of Witchcraft Beliefs in a Guatemalan Village*



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*A Study of Witchcraft Beliefs in a Guatemalan Village*

**Bachelor Thesis Cultural Anthropology**

**Utrecht University**

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## **Photo 1**

The central photo shows the remnants of a hechicería witchcraft ceremony at a ritual site in Nebaj.

## **Photo 2**

The photo on the right side of the page shows the fabric of the 'corte' or skirt from the 'traje típico', or typical clothing, from the women in Nebaj

*All photos in this thesis are made by the author, except when indicated different.*

## **Preface**

From the beginning of my study at Utrecht University, we, my co-students and I, were informed about the possibility of performing fieldwork abroad. Especially the project of fieldwork in Guatemala was clearly communicated throughout our entire time as students. So, when it was ‘my time’ to start my final year as a bachelor student, I happily participated in the Guatemala project. Therefore I would like to express my gratitude to Utrecht University, and Marie-Louise Glebbeek for this opportunity.

During the entire bachelor study, but especially during the eight weeks of fieldwork I have learned very much. Not only have I learned about anthropology, and the accompanying fieldwork methods, I have had the chance to be introduced and immersed in the Guatemalan culture, or more specifically the Nebajense culture. During my stay in Nebaj, I have learned very much from my host-family. Maria, Domingo, Yacco, Romelia, Javier and Fernando, thank you for lovingly including me in your household, family and lives.

Of course my fieldwork would have never been accomplished without all the informants and friends in Nebaj, who have welcomed me hospitably and invested their time in helping me to gather my data. Many thank goes to everybody who has tried to be helpful in many ways possible. You probably did not realise, but you made me learn about your country and culture, but also about Dutch culture and about myself.

I could not have accomplished writing this thesis without the help, feedback and support of Floortje Toll, my supervisor. Thank you, Floortje, for your feedback and advice during the writing of my research design, thesis and in the field. And Gerdien Steenbeek, thank you for your advice and wise words during the visit.

Finally I would like to thank my friends and family. Laura; thank you for sharing our experiences, reflections and much laughter in Nebaj. John and Sylvia ,my parents, thanks for your unconditional support, advice and sometimes necessary uplifting words during my entire studies, and listening to my never-ending stories about my fieldwork and studies. At last much gratitude goes to everybody else who has supported me in any way.

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## Introduction

“Doña Toribia Cristales, was notorious and famous in Canton Barrios. Everybody feared the evils she had done to people who were deeply involved in bad practices or the evils she had done to others who had involved in smoking cigar and playing cards. She was so successful that she was surrounded by an aura of prestige and fame which had crossed the boundaries of the neighbourhood where she lived to far afield places, such as las Majadas y El Guarda del Golfo. People who lived close by and far away visited her with special requests, everlasting singles who were eagerly looking for a man, women who had been tricked and deceived and the correspondingly bad men all visited Doña Toribia Cristales. All services desperately needed the help of Toribia Nia<sup>1</sup>, who from her wooden and cardboard house managed a small office or ‘Consultorio’ ” (Gaitán 2012:153).

Doña Toribia Cristales is the main character in the story *La Bruja de Canton Barrios* or The Witch of Canton Barrios. The story is part of a collection of narratives from Guatemala, collected by Hector Gaitán in the book “*La Calle Donde tu Vives*”, which can be translated as The Street Where you Live<sup>2</sup>. This book is part of a series of eight books in total, which all contain stories about supernatural and mystical creatures and forces. The success of the narratives and books shows the national interest and conscious of supernatural powers and mystical stories in Nebaj. Mysterious creatures, ghosts and witches are a favourite topic in Guatemalan stories (Gaitán 2012:13-14).

In every community human condition is frail. Pain, illness, death and unjustness are examples of these frailties. Culturally prescribed explanations for these weak spots exist in every community. Those clarifications do not only give a reason for the weaknesses to appear, they also give them a meaning and a perception of being able to control them. The acceptance of the existence of frailties in a community occurs because of the meaning that is given to them. The meaning makes the frailties seen as supernatural, or part of something that is bigger than human life. Religion, as a coping skill, provides a supernatural power or creator, whose will is supreme. This supreme will and power is a culturally prescribed explanation for many frailties in many communities. As to be discussed further in this thesis; witchcraft will be considered to be a religion. There are many similarities in the ways to understand and research witchcraft and religion in anthropology. Also in the manifestations and use in local context witchcraft and religion do overlap often (Lehmann & Myers 2008) (Segal 2006).

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<sup>1</sup> *Nia* signifies a courtesy title for a woman; lady.

<sup>2</sup> Hector Gaitan first had a radio show called ‘*La Calle Donde tu Vives*’ where he narrated the stories, because of the huge success of the radio show, Gaitán compiled all stories into, in total, eight books of the series ‘*La Calle Donde tu Vives*’.

Witchcraft is recognized as an important system in understanding the entire world. It provides a means for its believers and practitioners to understand life and death and the idea of controlling or at least affecting the forces in life that shape material creation<sup>3</sup>. This anthropological thesis parts from a *processual* understanding of social action. Steward and Strathern (2004) describe this processual model as a model wherein witchcraft ideas are not seen as a set of cultural symbols, but as a mode of thought with influential impacts on actions. Witchcraft is interwoven in the daily lives of the people from Nebaj. Witchcraft influences the daily affairs of the community by being one of the modes of thought that shape behaviour.

This study is based on the research data that I have gathered during fieldwork in Guatemala. I have spent eight weeks in Santa Maria Nebaj<sup>4</sup>, which is a small village in the *altiplano*, or highlands, of Guatemala<sup>5</sup>. The village is part of the *Ixil* triangle, which exists of three villages; San Juan Cotzal, San Gaspar Chajul and Santa Maria Nebaj. Guatemala exists of 22 regions and the *Ixil* triangle is located in the *Quiché* region of Guatemala. Nebaj<sup>6</sup> is located in a valley, at 1900 meters altitude, surrounded by the Cuchumatán Mountains. Santa Maria Nebaj is a village where almost the entire population is indigenous, and where the people identify themselves as *Ixil Mayas*.

The posed main question that will be answered in this study is “*What is the impact of witchcraft on social relations in Santa Maria Nebaj in Guatemala, and how does witchcraft relate to other existing religious beliefs in the community?*” According to Steward and Strathern (2004) witchcraft has far reaching influences on social and community life; in forms of accusations, gossips, rumours and prosecutions of accused witches.

Even though the study of religion and witchcraft is one of the traditional anthropological topics, there is not much information about witchcraft beliefs in Guatemala, and nothing about witchcraft in Nebaj. Witchcraft and its accompanying concepts have been, and still are, a popular topic for anthropological studies in Africa. Most anthropological studies in Nebaj and the *Ixil* region have focused on the *Ixil* language and culture. In

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<sup>3</sup> The shaping of material creation is a term used by Bailey (2006) to describe the creation of the earth, nature and human beings. Witchcraft is said to be used to influence or shape material creation, for instance “*in certain circumstances, magicians claim that their rites can elevate them to a higher state of consciousness, allowing them to perceive occult aspects of nature or enter into communion with preternatural or supernatural entities*” (Bailey 2006:2).

<sup>4</sup> Santa Maria Nebaj will also be referred to as Nebaj.

<sup>5</sup> Appendix 1 contains a map on the exact location of Nebaj in Guatemala.

<sup>6</sup> Appendix 2 contains maps of the village of Nebaj.

Guatemala a civil war has raged from 1960 until 1996. During this civil war, genocide took place under the rule of General Efraín Ríos Montt. In the Ixil triangle the genocide caused many victims and therefore the trauma and memory that resulted from the genocide are an often researched topic.

Because of the remote location of Nebaj, in the difficult traversable Cuchumatán Mountains in Guatemala, outsiders hardly visit the area and almost the entire population in the region is indigenous. These factors make the research on witchcraft, as a traditional and old aspect of the indigenous culture, very interesting. The study of witchcraft in the community of Nebaj is a useful contribution to the already existing theory on the region and region and on the already existing literature on witchcraft. The social relevance of this thesis is the contribution to the understanding of the social consequences of alleged witchcraft manifestations and beliefs on a community level.

The research for this thesis has been performed by using qualitative research methods, which are traditional and typical for anthropological studies. The methods that I have used regularly are participant-observation and different kinds of interviews and conversation. I have observed some witchcraft rituals performed by a *curandero* or witchdoctor and conducted many interviews with villagers. The informants belonged from different social groups in the community. The people were men and women, with different ages and belonged to different religious congregations. The similarities between all informants was the fact that they all identified themselves as being indigenous and that they were all living in Santa Maria Nebaj. Every quote and all the information used in this thesis is shared by my informants. Whenever necessary, I have translated the data from Spanish to English. In this study, pseudonyms of the informants will be used, to guarantee their anonymity<sup>7</sup>.

The main question will be answered by first giving a conceptual approach of studying witchcraft anthropologically. Subsequently the position of witchcraft in the religious anthropological framework will be discussed. Thereafter the role and function of witchcraft on a community level will finish the theoretical chapter on witchcraft, religion and community. Succeeding this framework, the empirical data that I have gathered during the fieldwork in Nebaj will be presented, accompanied by an analysis of the theory that is adjusted on the empirical data. The empirical chapters will start with a historical overview of religious beliefs in Nebaj, followed by the current religious situation and development over time. The chapter hereafter contains the empirical findings of the types of witchcraft, which

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<sup>7</sup> Appendix 3 contains a methodological accountability about the research.

will be followed by an analysis of the understandings of good and evil in witchcraft beliefs in Nebaj. The last empirical chapter describes the role of witchcraft in Nebaj, analysing its function and effects. Concluding the empirical analysis, a conclusion will be given, answering the main and sub questions. Following the conclusion a discussion is given. Ending this thesis, four appendixes are included. The first and second appendixes give maps of Guatemala and Nebaj, the third appendix contains a description of the methodological approach that is used and the ultimate appendix is a summary of the thesis in Spanish.



**Photo 3**

*Parque central, or central park in Nebaj, with the catholic church at the end of the square.*

# **1. Witchcraft, Religion and Community**

## **1.1. Researching Witchcraft and Conceptual Approach**

There is an inherent contradistinction in the study of witchcraft. Since witchcraft is very abstract and the existence is debatable, researching this topic is difficult. In anthropological studies, witchcraft has however been a classical and often studied topic.

The first study, worth mentioning, on witchcraft was from Sir Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard. In his ethnography ‘Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande, Evans-Pritchard meant to show how witchcraft functioned as a means to explain the unknown and misfortunes among the Azande in Sudan. Herewith he presented the new body of thought of magic being an important part of culture and a customary part of society which makes a logical system (Evans-Pritchard 1937). After this study on witchcraft, many more followed; however often criticized by other sciences. The abstractness of magic, which has to do with the existence or non-existence of the phenomenon within boundaries of specific social and cultural constructs witchcraft is seen by many scientists as unreason and irrational (Greenwood 2000).

Anthropology is committed to the understanding of concepts, activities and systems, including religious or belief systems<sup>8</sup>, which often contrast with secularism. Gellner (2001) claims that an anthropologist can be religious, but needs to analyse his or her data with a secular mind set.

“The project of sympathetically conveying and analysing other systems of thought, including religious systems, for outsiders’ consumption is one that could only have arisen in, and can only be perpetuated in, a moderately secular environment. The canons of anthropological assessment require some distance between indigenous religious commitments (whether shared by the anthropologist or not) and the terms into which indigenous representations are translated. Where such distancing from the object of study has not been achieved, anthropologists become apologists for specific traditions, making only highly selective and asymmetrical use of their interpretative skills, rather than being the bearers of a universal and humanist discipline” (Gellner 2001:340).

Until Evans-Pritchard published his findings about witchcraft in his book in 1937, science pursued the idea of modernist secularism. This secularist thesis was held in the 1950’s and included “the idea that there had been, and would continue to be, a unilinear, inevitable and irreversible evolution from religious belief to rationality and consumerism” (Gellner 2001:337). This idea has been falsified inter alia because of the rise of religious

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<sup>8</sup> Witchcraft is understood to be an everyday practice in a community and as a religion. This approach will be discussed further on in this thesis.

fundamentalisms, but the idea of the decline of power of religious institutions is a right one (Gellner 2001).

One of the basic assumptions of anthropological research is to see everything to be constructed in its changing context. “In other words, abstract reason is always directed and filled with cultural assumptions constructed in the dynamics of a contemporary history” (Kapferer 2002:341). Human practices adapt themselves to the context they take place in and thus need to be understood within this specific context (Kapferer 2002).

“He [the anthropologist] is not concerned, with the truth or falsity of religious thought. As I understand the matter, there is no possibility of his knowing whether the spiritual beings of primitive religions or of any others have any existence or not, and since that is the case he cannot take the question into consideration. The beliefs are for him sociological facts, not theological facts, and his sole concern is with their relation to each other and to other social facts. His problems are scientific, not metaphysical or theological. [...] The validity of the belief lies in the domain of what may be broadly designated the philosophy of religion “(Evans-Pritchard 1965:17).

Exactly this claim from Evans-Pritchard is the idea where this thesis is based on; the question is not whether or not witchcraft exists. Witchcraft is not definite and only obtains meaning in the eyes of the beholder. It is not something visible, tangible or audible; therefore it is not possible to research witchcraft itself. The approach I use in this thesis is to research witchcraft through its local manifestations and mostly through its social consequences. Steward and Strathern (2004) claim that rumours and gossips are the representation of people’s efforts to create and understand the truth about actions. Rumours provide a tool to make narratives about social values and judgments about the morals of others.

Witchcraft is understood as a mode of thought in the community, not just as a set of ideas of an individual. The impacts of witchcraft are maybe not very influential themselves, but the consequences for the community can be very radical. The focus in this model lies on community tensions and disputes which lead to accusations and attempts to resolve the ‘crises’<sup>9</sup>. Steward and Strathern (2004) claim that rumours are the representation of people’s efforts to create and understand the truth about actions that helps them to make narratives about social values and judgments about the morals of others (Steward & Strathern 2004:9).

## **1.2. Witchcraft Seen as a Part of Religion**

A debate about the relationship between religion and witchcraft is a traditional anthropological debate. One of the most used distinctions between witchcraft and religion

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<sup>9</sup> Steward & Strathern (2004:9) state that community tensions and disputes lead to a *crises* on community level. Such a crisis can revolve a sickness or death and may cause community fission.

comes from James Frazier and holds the idea that witchcraft “typically sought to coerce or command spiritual forces while religion aimed to supplicate their aid” (Frazier in: Bailey 2006:3). Frazier explained this distinction as the notion of the exerciser of witchcraft being accountable for the consequences. These consequences are always the same, when the action is well performed. Religion, on the contrary, is dependent on the goodness of the gods, prayers might not be answered, but when answered the responses can be different (Larner 1984:114-145).

In this thesis witchcraft will be understood as a religion, since there is an overlap between both concepts in many cultures and with many respects of both definitions (Bailey 2006:5). Witchcraft and Religion have similar ways of understanding the social world. Religion and thus witchcraft can give meaning to frailties, such as diseases, in a community, and therefore make them comprehensible for the religious believers. “Whether explanations for illness are “scientific” or “mystical”, all societies must have explanations for crises” (Lehmann & Myers 1985:148). Religion provides a supernatural authority or being, which offers a ‘mystical’ cultural prescribed explanation for frailties (Lehmann & Myers 1985:148). Christianity and Buddhism made a distinction between magic and miracle, which can be seen as a distinction between evil and good. Following this distinction; magic is evil, demonic and deceptive while miracles are good and divine. This difference can be seen as a distinction in legitimacy, not in effectiveness. Thus both are understood to have effects that make changes in the world or lives of people with the use of supernatural powers (Segal 2006:295-305).

Religion is a very ambiguous concept, with contradictory consequences which can complement each other. Religion is only to be researched in its local context, to understand the meaning and function within a community. “The contention that religion has both a psychological and a social aspect, that it can both unsettle and stabilize, can be both illogical and rational, can be both formalistic and spontaneous, and can be both devoid of personal significance and deeply meaningful, does not necessarily mean confusion or fundamental disagreement among scholars. Rather, it may reflect the complexity of the phenomenon ‘religion’” (Segal 2006:4). Malinowski adjusted a psychological approach to the study of religion, by claiming that religion gives people the possibility to cope with turmoil and perils in their lives. According to him, religion is a response to emotional stress. Radcliffe-Brown saw religion as a balancing part of the structure of society (Segal 2006:4-5).

The definition of religion that, in this study, is used to frame the concept comes from Geertz (1973). Geertz states religion to be “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating

conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Geertz 1973:4). This definition combines symbolic functionalism with the idea of religion being a system to give meaning and order the world.

The idea of a definition of religion has been extensively criticized by other anthropologists. Religion is created by the people who believe in and adhere this religion. It is shaped by political, historical, economic and more influencing factors and therefore unique in every social context. In every society, religion is a historical product of negotiation and therefore not one definition is universally applicable (Segal 2006:5-6). I do however not agree with this critique; in the sense that I do find the definition of Geertz applicable on different social contexts. Geertz (1973) does not generalize any content of religion, which does make his definition applicable on every local community and society. Therefore, Geertz his definition will be used to understand religion in this thesis.

An important part of many religions is the notion of good and bad, or as I prefer to name it religious dualism or religious morality. “Belief in good or evil is an almost universal concern of religions or world views” (Segal 2006: 271). The distinction between good and evil is made in several aspects of religion, for instance the other life which is divided in the mutually exclusive terms heaven and hell. But also God and Satan are an example of opposing elements of religion in the form of mutually exclusive deities. Even though good and evil are mutually exclusive and can never overlap, they do define and cannot exist without each other. “In creating or representing moral good, religious systems also inevitably create evil” (Clough & Mitchell: 2001:1). The notion of good and evil are highly ambiguous because of their connection.

In his work of the Azande, Evans-Pritchard (1937) refers to witchcraft as the prototype of all evil for the Azande. The Azande use the word evil to describe people who bring bad luck and are clumsy, but also for people, who in the shape of an animal, kill people. Evil therefore is, in anthropology, a word that can be used in a wide meaning of the word. “It can refer to extreme fear, death and destruction, but also to lesser misfortunes” (Parkin 1985:1). Anthropologists use the gradation for the word evil in the way their informants or research group does.

In anthropological studies it has become clear that the notion of witchcraft, and the associated notions of good and evil, are part of a “cross-cultural understanding of the manner in which persons are morally evaluated” (Crick 1976:115-200). Good and evil witches in societies mostly do have certain qualities expressions attributed to them. Good people or

good witches are mostly seen as a ‘perfect’ human being. Subsequently, evil people are seen as imperfect or as inhuman and monstrous. Believing in the existence of these monsters, makes the normal shortcomings of the people from a society tolerable (Parkin 1985:46).

Morally disapproved sentiments and activities are associated with immorality and evil doing. Evil forms of witchcraft are therefore thought of to be evoked by immoral sentiments, like envy, greed and sexual incentives. “The tendency is to equate witchcraft with the sentiments that provoke it, such as envy, greed, and hatred, in other words, the sentiments that are socially disapproved. Since a jealous person can be suspected of witchcraft, he is likely to minimize his jealousy. On the other hand, those he is jealous of may be witches themselves and may try to hurt him; thus, he is likely to control his jealousy” (Offiong in Lehmann & Myers 1985:165).

### **1.3. Religion and Witchcraft in Community life**

Witchcraft can be a highly disturbing fact in a community, but can, at the same time, be used constructively; this contrast makes witchcraft ambiguous. Witchcraft “is in principle an evil force, yet it must be canalized and used for constructive aims in order to make society work” (Geschiere 2000:219). Witchcraft, and its consequences for a community, is self-contradictory in several ways. There are both levelling and accumulating consequences, witchcraft can harm or cure someone and can give and take power to or from people. The role of witchcraft in a community, therefore fully depends on the local consequences, but even can differ for every individual inside the community. This ambiguity of witchcraft is also present in the study and description of witchcraft. Because of the ambiguity, there is not one definition of witchcraft nor is there a term that scholars agree upon using. (Geschiere 2000).

Resulting out of the discussed ambiguity; Geschiere (2000) claims that the view on witchcraft should not be solid and a traditional unchanging view, but rather as constantly changing and fluid, adapting to new consequences and influences. And that because of processes of modernity and globalization, witchcraft not only responds and adapts to local consequences, but that bigger and outside influences need to be taken into account in the study of witchcraft (Geschiere 2000:222).

Witchcraft becomes visible in a community through accusations, rumours and gossips which all thrive on uncertainty and speculation. Uncertainty and the associated rumours and gossip are very important in the processes toward witchcraft accusations. Steward and Strathern (2004) claim that rumours are the representation of people’s efforts to create and understand the truth about actions that help them to make narratives about ‘social values and

judgments about the morals of others'<sup>10</sup>. These rumours linger in a community, small seemingly innocent suspicions and suggestions may develop over time into morally justified actions. When this occurs, the accusations are seen as a struggle for social order inside the community, wherein the alleged witchcraft practitioner is accused of using evil forces as a conspiracy against the good (Steward & Strathern 2004). Demonization and dualism both define the image of the witchcraft practitioner and thus construct and maintain social order.

In the 1950s and 1960s most anthropologists followed a functionalistic tradition, which was also applied on the study of witchcraft. Evans-Pritchard laid the basis for the functionalist tradition in the study of witchcraft already with his research among the Azande. "Implicitly a modified functionalist argument appears in Evans-Pritchard's account: witchcraft accusations were a means of expressing and discharging tensions between people within a particular social structure" (Steward & Strathern 2004:3). The functionalist view focuses on the power of witchcraft within social order. Functionalistic research of witchcraft within anthropology focuses on the relation between witchcraft and power and the maintenance of social order. The functionalists believe that society is a reflection of a biological organism, wherein structures and functions are always in balance. When this equilibrium is disturbed, the society itself restores the balance (Barrett 2009:62). After the 1960s the functionalist tradition was followed by many other schools of thought. In the study of witchcraft, the functionalist school is still the most important, followed by a view provided by medical anthropology and an intellectualist tradition (Steward & Strathern 2004:3-5).

The witchcraft practitioner can be both an insider as an outsider of the community. Outsiders are distrusted because they are strangers in the community and therefore posit uncertainty. Rumours, according to Gluckman (1963), can be seen as picking on someone, to treat this person as an outsider. With gossiping, the boundaries of a community can be redrawn and confirmed. An alleged witch can live inside the community and still be an outsider. Lehmann and Myers (1985) state that the witch is the 'antithesis of proper behaviour'; a witch is an outsider of normal daily social life.

"Societies frequently associate particular types of personalities with individuals whom they feel have the highest probability of becoming witches. [...] many of the qualities associated with being a poor neighbour, such as unsociability, isolation, stinginess, unfriendliness, and moroseness, are the same qualities ascribed to the everyday witch" (Lehmann & Myers 1985:149).

Insiders, on the other hand, can also be seen as witches; neighbours, or relatives are often linked to the effect of witchcraft in suspicions. "In many respects, witchcraft is the dark

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<sup>10</sup> (Steward & Strathern 2004:194)

side of kinship: it is the frightening realization that there is jealousy and therefore aggression within the family, where there should be only trust and solidarity” (Geschiere 2000:11). He or she can betray his or her own people, and is therefore seen as something evil that needs to be punished or abandoned from the community. Violence, in the form of morally justified violent action, against the practitioner is in this case justified because it is in defence of the good (Steward & Strathern 2004:194-195).

“Claims and counterclaims about the activities of witches and sorcerers tend to exist in the background of community affairs in the societies where such ideas are held. They flourish in the shadows, fed by gossip and rumour, and emerge into public debate or accusations only in times of specific tension, most often following the actual sickness or death of someone in a prominent family. Notably, rumours follow the patterns of imputed jealousies, hostilities, and resentments that also keep mostly to the shadows or lurk in the background of social life, ready to reveal themselves in times of crises. Or they swing to play at times of unusual or epidemic deaths that themselves cause panic and fear” (Steward & Strathern 2004:7).

Niehaus (2001) claims the existence of connections between local changes in witchcraft beliefs and manifestations, and wider transformations. Niehaus (2001) and Geschiere (1997) both stress the importance of modernity and accompanying wide-scale changes on community life and tensions. In the study of the changing intensity of witchcraft, it is important to look at changes on macro-level. The changes of witchcraft beliefs can have influences on micro-level, for instance in the punishments and accusations of witches. Also the intensity and direction of gossips and accusations of alleged witchcraft manifestations can be connected on changes on a bigger scale.

“Witchcraft is a finely calibrated gauge of the impact of global cultural and economic forces on local relations, on perceptions of money and markets, on the abstraction and alienation of indigenous values and meanings. Witches are modernity’s prototypical malcontents” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1993:76).

Especially in the modern context of integration of communities in external and internal forces, witchcraft accusations and blames can be directed at the wrong source. The accusations in this way are motivated by grievances originated from outside the local community but directed at a local scapegoat. Witchcraft is used to give an answer to the irreconcilable forms of interpersonal conflict. Accusations would be useless when made toward outsiders, and the accuser takes the risk of being punished (Simmons 1980:463-464).

## **2. Religious Pluralism and Syncretism in Guatemala**

In this chapter, the religious landscape of Nebaj will be discussed. Historical religious development will be set out through a conceptual part using different theoretical sources. The current religious situation will be discussed on the basis of empirical data, gathered during the fieldwork period in Nebaj.

According to Colby (1976) the traditional religion in Nebaj and the rest of the Ixil region, was one of ancestor worshipping. “It is a tradition in which either or both elite and common members of a society are believed to acquire supernatural powers after death; and in which life and death, sickness, and other matters of human concern are partly controlled by departed ancestors known in life to individuals or to living relatives and friends of individuals” (Colby 1976:75). Over centuries, this religious belief became accompanied by a new religion based on the 260-day calendar, called the *Tzolkin* calendar. According to the calendar, every day has its accompanying animal spirit. This composite belief system, called Mayan cosmology, is embedded differently in every village and town. The differences do exist because of the little contact between towns and the long time that has passed. The most important cause for the differences is the oral transmission of Mayan cosmology practices and beliefs over the time (Fischer & Hendrickson 2003:85).

There is not one limited concept of Mayan cosmology, but there are a few things that are seen and understood the same by all Mayas in their system of beliefs. One common feature in Mayan Cosmology is the idea of god. “god is part of all living things, even apparently inanimate creatures like trees and stones; equally all living things are part of god” (Hart 2008:27). The principle of duality is another important part of Mayan Cosmology; nothing comes as one, but is always paired and complemented by something else. Earth cannot exist without Heaven, Male not without Female and Good not without Evil. “Within every human being there is a positive being and a negative being, [...] or the white force and the black force” (Hart 2008:36). A third main aspect of Mayan Cosmology is time and the calendars, the Mayas use several calendars to measure time and days are both named and numbered, and because of the notion of God and duality, are days seen as living creatures and have got positive and negative features (Molesky-Poz 2006).

Later, during the colonial era, in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Catholicism and Mayan Cosmology were exposed to each other. European ideas, customs and religions, and the Spanish language were imposed and influenced Guatemala by the Spanish colonizers.

The introduction of Catholicism was like in the rest of the country in the sixteenth century. However, the missionaries did not stay in Nebaj or the other Ixil towns permanently.

“Ladinos (Spanish-speaking Guatemalans) did not come to the Ixil area until 1890. Earlier in the nineteenth century, Ixil country was virtually autonomous. In the late sixteenth century, during the first period of missionary attempts, priests operated out of Sacapulas, visiting the Ixil towns but not maintaining a permanent residence (Colby and van den Berghe 1969). During the entire colonial and national periods, reports of visits to the Ixil area are marked by the mention of hardship, bad climate, or intractability of the natives. To this day the Ixil maintain more elements of the pre-Columbian calendar than any other group (Miles 1951).” (Colby 1976:78).

During the colonisation, European ways of thinking about witchcraft was introduced through colonization, accompanied by morally ambiguous ideas and demonization<sup>11</sup> practices, and the European terminology for witchcraft practices<sup>12</sup>. The catholic church and its Spanish leaders tried to ban other religious beliefs in Guatemala. Catholicism became the state religion, and there was no freedom of religion. This regulation did have consequences for the traditional Mayan beliefs in the country, but failed in the intentions of completely banning the systems of beliefs from the country. In 1873, more than three centuries after the Spanish conquest, Guatemala gained its independence from Spain. Catholicism was stripped from its status of state religion, and freedom of religion was allowed again (Fischer & Hendrickson 2003:94-97).

Protestantism was introduced ages later than Christianity arrived in Guatemala. When freedom of religion became the norm, every now and then protestant missionaries, mostly British, visited Guatemala. In most parts of Guatemala, protestant churches arose in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but from the 1960's Protestantism was actively spread in the by American missionaries (Fischer & Hendrickson 2003:94-97).

“Although the boundaries between Protestant, Catholic, and traditionalist Maya belief may seem absolute, in practice they are actually quite permeable” (Fischer & Hendrickson 2003: 96).

Currently a big part of the Maya population calls itself Catholic or Evangelical Protestant, but very often their religion is blended with the traditional Mayan cosmology and has a

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<sup>11</sup> Jurgensmeyer describes demonization as the process wherein “a negative reference to which one can position oneself and over which one can hope to triumph” or to put it in other words, it is the invention of an enemy, a symbol of evil or a scapegoat. (Jurgensmeyer 2003:174-175).

<sup>12</sup> In former-French colonies, the term *la sorcellerie* (French for sorcery and witchcraft) is commonly used for the unknown and unseen, and morally ambiguous practices and ideas (Bowen 2011[2005]:83).

different outcome in every village. The process<sup>13</sup> where different religions influence each other, take over and blend components is called *religious syncretism* (Stewart 1999).

Guatemalan Protestants define themselves by what they are not, they position themselves opposite Catholics and followers of the ways of traditional Maya customs and Mayan Cosmology adherents. Mayan Cosmology and Catholicism for instance both take a liberal view toward alcohol and tobacco, in fact they often play a big role in religious rituals. Protestantism however, strongly prescribes condemns and prohibits drinking and smoking (Fischer & Hendrickson 2003:96). Catholicism blends more with traditional Mayan Cosmology than Evangelical Protestantism, since Catholicism and Mayan cosmology do have a longer history together, share common features and have stronger overlap in several ways of thinking (Fischer & Hendrickson 2003). The Mayan population of Guatemala currently is religiously divided and varies from Catholicism, Protestantism, Mormons, Mennonites, traditional Mayan Cosmology and combinations of these religions (Fischer & Hendrickson 2003).

Syncretism is an important process interaction between religions. Religious practices are a very important aspect of everyday life in Nebaj. The religious practices have in common that they are a part of communal daily life but they vary greatly in their character and religious origin, some practices overlap or serve several functions. In the streets of the town, religious beliefs, practices and syncretism are visible every day:

*A woman is walking on the pavement of the main street of Nebaj. She is wearing flowers and candles in her hands and on her back a child in a brightly coloured cloth. The, small Mayan, woman, is dressed in the "traje tipico" of her village, a red "corte", or long skirt up to her ankles, with a few black stripes along the length. She is dressed in a most dominantly green "huipil" which is typical for Nebaj, a traditional blouse woven with different colours and motives of shapes and birds. In her hair she wears a long string of green fabric with pompoms at the ends, which are knotted at the upper front of her head. She greets another woman, who is wearing a dress that is comparable with hers, with a nod. Big black speakers are placed outside a store and occupy the full width of the pavement, which makes the women pass the store by walking on the street. Cars, trucks, busses but mostly bright orange tuctucs race narrowly aside the women, while one of the ladies is singing along with the loud music; "Hallelujah, hallelujah, we all pray to the one and only God, hallelujah, Jesus is our saviour, praise the lord, hallelujah". Abruptly she stops singing, a tuctuc, with the slogan "Guiame Dios" which means 'lead me God' or 'guide me God', makes a loud squeaking noise while breaking. The woman jumps aside and mutters a prayer. The tuctuc driver, a teenage Mayan boy with jeans and a black t-shirt on, kisses the*

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<sup>13</sup> Cultures are heterogeneous and hybrid, they cannot be stopped from changing, and thus there is no 'pure form' of culture. Syncretism therefore is not a stage, or end goal but a process, where change is a component of culture (Stewart 1999:41).

*small cross of the rosary necklace hanging on his rear-view mirror. A few horns of cars, trucks and other traffic sound in the busy street, and then everybody continues their path and occupations. The woman with the baby on her back enters the church at the main square, where the street ends at. She lights up her candles and offers her flowers at the altar of the church, where five other women are doing practically the same.*

The most adhered or practiced religions are, like in other towns in Guatemala, Catholicism, Protestantism and Mayan cosmology. Because in Nebaj, the majority, or even almost the entire population, identifies as indigenous or Maya, the Mayan cosmology has many adherents in town. Most inhabitants of Nebaj do however not see Mayan cosmology as a religion, but more as a part of their culture or as a way of life.

Strikingly not only did they see the Mayan cosmology as part of their cultures, they sometimes even told me that they are not religious and later on narrated their normal everyday habits by summing up that they go to church every Sunday and pray twice a day. Adriana, a local senior who sells clothes at her market stall every day, said for instance; “every week I buy flowers at the market and then at my altar I pray for the people who need it” after asking for an example, she answered; “I pray sometimes for friends who are sick, but it depends on the calendar, sometimes you can ask for one thing and tomorrow for something else. But if you live the way God tells us to, as it is written in the bible, you can pray for anything and anyone”. No matter how the people themselves interpret their religion, it is obvious that religion<sup>14</sup> is of huge importance on the daily lives of the people.

Just like other religions is witchcraft a big factor on the social system and rules of behaviour. However people disagree on the place of witchcraft within the community. Some claim that witchcraft is a separate religion, while others claim that witchcraft is a part of the Mayan cosmology. Antonia is a woman who is a part of the *alcaldía indígena*<sup>15</sup> and works at a women’s movement, she is very well-known in Nebaj and people come to her for advice on varying causes. Antonia thinks that witchcraft is a part of the Mayan cosmology. She told me that before the Spanish conquerors arrived; witchcraft was not denigrated to the work of the devil and not seen as something separate from the Mayan cosmology, which was at that time the only religion existing in Nebaj. Antonia sees witchcraft as being specific energies that exist in everything; “The energies are everywhere and in everything, humans, animals and

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<sup>14</sup> Religion is, in this thesis, considered as: “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Geertz 1973:4).

<sup>15</sup> *Alcaldia indigena* is the Indigenous mayoralty, which exists next to the regular mayoralty and is led by a few mayors who are indigenous and have a certain symbolic authority in town.

objects. The energies belong to the idea of everything being connected to each other, which is an important part of the Mayan cosmology. Mayan cosmology is no religion, it is much bigger, it is what we live and practice”.

Catholicism and Protestantism together cover almost the entire population of Nebaj and do have roughly the same amount of adherents<sup>16</sup>. Next to Protestantism and Catholicism are there a few people who are Jehovah’s witnesses, Jews or solely Mayan cosmology practitioners. A lot of Catholics do practice, next to Catholicism, Mayan cosmology and some Protestants do the same. The amount of Mayan cosmology practitioners is unknown, just like the numbers of other religious adherers. People who practice Mayan cosmology do this mostly alongside of another religion.

Padre de Leon is one of the two Catholic priests and church leaders of the biggest catholic church in Nebaj. Padre de Leon is convinced and therefore claims that Catholicism; “definitely is the biggest and most important religion in Nebaj, and the rest of the world”. But, the Evangelical church leaders and followers do claim the same. What is certain is that the biggest church in town is a catholic church at the main square in the central park, but that the evangelicals do have more, and smaller, churches spread over town.



**Photo 4**

Witchcraft ritual at the sacred site *El Calvario*; a church. This ritual site is the most important of the sites in Nebaj, and an example of syncretism between Christianity and witchcraft.

<sup>16</sup> The exact amount of adherents and practitioners per religion are unknown to me, since there are no records of these data in Nebaj.

Mayan cosmology practitioners do not have a building which is a sacred place for them to pray or go to; they do however use sacred places in town to perform rituals or to pray to the ancestors. On the cemetery there is also a sacred place; which is especially used to pray to the ancestors, which results from the ancient ancestor worship religion. “In the three Ixil towns today, cemeteries and cemetery temples are major loci of ritual. The displeasure of departed ancestral souls is a source of misfortune, and consequently their placation is a focus of curing and other rituals” (Colby 1976:75). Mayan cosmology adherents also have small altars inside their houses to perform rituals to honour their ancestors, ask something from or give thanks to a God. The altars in the houses are used for these same activities and mostly contain candles, flowers and pictures of living and deceased loved ones.

The catholic church, and its leaders, cooperated with Mayan spiritual guides in Nebaj for the first time during my fieldwork period. Together they organized a corn ceremony on seven *q’anil*. According to the Mayan *Tzolkin* calendar *q’anil* is a special day to plant corn and to thank the ancestors and Gods for the fertility of the earth. This idea very clearly stems from the Mayan cosmology and the importance of the calendars. The catholic pastor, who is an indigenous inhabitant, however announced the ceremony during the church service on Sunday and led the mass at the ceremony site. This corn ceremony celebration is a very clear example of syncretism.

*In a dark crowded cave there are a small fire, several candles, flowers and corn. Men and women from all ages, and all dressed in Mayan traditional clothing, are placing more candles, flowers and corn on a natural elevation on the back side of the cave. Because of the smoke and the only light being candle light, the cave seems a lot smaller than it actually is. Some twenty people are muttering prayers; some with their eyes closed, and are lighting candles. Outside of the cave, a lot more people have gathered and everybody finds a place to sit. There are also three musicians, two with keyboards and the third with a bass guitar, trying to find a place to install on the steep ground. The cave is a deep opening in the mountainside, surrounded by bushes, trees and rocks. After more people have arrived, musicians start playing and singing a religious, catholic song. Thank the lord, hallelujah, when you don't know, ask the Lord, hallelujah. The men and women, mostly dressed in traditional local clothing, sing along. By the time a few hundred visitors have arrived, and the musicians have played ten songs, a catholic priest starts talking through a microphone. The priest is wearing a white gown and a white hat which belongs to the traditional man clothing of the Ixil region. “Thank you all for coming. Today we celebrate the Mayan tradition of the special day of the four colours of corn. Thank God for this day of the regeneration of the land, the growth of the sacred corn.” (February 27, 2013)*

### **3. Forms of Witchcraft Manifestations in Nebaj**

During my fieldwork I have encountered three types of witchcraft in Nebaj; *hechicería*, *nagualism* and *entierros*. All three of these forms take an important place in the community of Nebaj, and appear to be interwoven in daily life, stories, rumours and items.

Witchcraft is strongly connected to the Mayan calendars. In the Mayan calendars, every day has got strong and weak points connected to powers and strengths. Rituals can only be performed on certain days and because every day is unique, at some days the ritual will be more effective, because that certain day contains stronger energies.

Within witchcraft rituals, a lot of items are used, that are connected to other religions as well. For instance candles, incense, fire, special water and Christian crosses are used. There is a strong process of syncretism happening between the several religions in Nebaj, and this is partially expressed in the items and places that are shared. In the type of witchcraft that is called *hechicería*, witchcraft-rituals are performed at four sacred sites in the town. The most important ritual site in town is *El Calvario* and is based in the centre of town in a former church. The other sacred sites are based on the cemetery, north and south of the city centre. Don José, *curandero*, explained that the sacred sites are connected with each other like a network of antennas and to the spirits of the ancestors.

Also animals are often present in witchcraft manifestations. Animals appear in dreams, which according to Eduardo, an English student and English teacher at several primary schools in and around Nebaj, are an omen to being bewitched. Animals are also claimed to live inside a person, cause an illness or handicap, when he or she is bewitched. For instance Eduardo was told by Don José, when he had a consult, that he is bewitched and therefore has a frog in his throat and that is the reason that he has a weird voice<sup>17</sup>. Miguel allegedly has a frog in his stomach, which causes his disease and of *brujos* it is said that they have a snake inside of them. This snake spreads poison in the body of the *brujo* and therefore he performs bad witchcraft instead of good. In *nagualism*, witches can turn themselves into animals during the night; they allegedly transform them in mostly, black, cats and sometimes kill poultry in their animal form.

From the three forms of witchcraft, *hechicería* is the most common, widespread and influential form in Nebaj. *Hechicería* is the form of witchcraft with the strongest moral opposition in good and evil, with good witches or *curanderos*, and evil witches or *brujos*. People can pay a *brujo* to harm someone, while they pay a *curandero* to undo the harm

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<sup>17</sup> Eduardo himself was shocked by this news, because he doesn't think his voice is strange.

caused by a *brujo*. Both *brujos* and *curanderos* use their powers to perform witchcraft with special rituals at the four sacred sites in town. *Brujos* and *curanderos* both use the same ritual sites, but are unlikely to meet at these places, since they use the strengths and energies of different days according to the Maya calendars.

Don José, a *curandero* in Nebaj, explained that being a witch is not a choice for him. He told me that his ‘powers’ came to him in a dream and that on the day he was born, it was already decided that he had to become either a *brujo* or a *curandero*. He himself could make the choice between using his powers in for evil or good goals. People visit the house of Don José daily; he has a room in the house where he does consults with his clients, people coming to him for solutions with their witchcraft problems. A lot of stories about witchcraft were told to me by the inhabitants of Nebaj, in the waiting area of the house of Don José, or when I was present during the consults or rituals he performed either in his office or in at the ritual sites.

The second form of witchcraft is *nagualism*, and is performed by a *nagual*. A *Nagual* is sometimes called a *vin*, *guin* or *win* and masters the ability of transforming him or herself from a normal human shaped person into an animal. These animals are mostly cats, but they can be any type of animal. Just like *hechicería*, does *nagualism* have a good and an evil side. Frederico teaches future teachers and gives classes on Ixil culture and language. Frederico calls himself *nagual* and ‘sacred places specialist’ in Nebaj and explained me the difference in good and evil *naguales*. A good *nagual* transforms himself at night and guards the entrances from the town and thus the community against people with bad intentions. A bad *nagual* does turn himself into an animal at night as well, but with the objective of doing bad. The bad *nagual* steals, damages houses and people’s belongings, rapes women, drinks blood from human victims and their livestock and sometimes kill its victims.

The third type of witchcraft is called *entierro de brujería*, or mostly referred to as *entierro* or *entierros* in Nebaj. This form is different because of the use of transitional objects in the performance of this type of witchcraft. An *entierro* is performed by burying objects with a resemblance. Francisca explained the manifestation of *entierros* to me with a story she experienced herself. “*The other day we went to the cemetery to leave flowers to my mom at 4 in the morning and we found a big hole and a closed box inside the hole. My aunt had a look and we the box contained chicken feathers, a bottle of liquor and a photo. The photo was upside down, I don’t know why. On the box there were the remains of a fire*”.

Don José explained the concept of *entierros* in Nebaj to me. He clarified the resemblance of the by Francisca encountered box; the feathers and liquor in the box bear the meaning of a drinking problem, which is aimed at the person on the picture. The picture in

the box resembles the person at who the witchcraft is aimed, and the position of the picture, being upside down, means the spell or curse is meant to result in a death. Other items that are often used in *entierros* are candles, hair, blood, fire and bones.

The demarcations between these forms of witchcraft are however not as clear as presented. A *curandero* can tell one of his clients to perform an *entierro* to neutralize or cancel the witchcraft problems. *Entierros* can be performed by people without mystical powers, but also by *brujos*, *curanderos* and *naguales*.



**Photo 5**

Consultation of Aracaly and her husband at the office of the curandero Don José, whilst I am observing.

### **3.1. Witchcraft Manifestations in Public and Private life**

It will be hard to find a person in Guatemala who does not have heard a witchcraft story in his life. There are some stories that are passed on from generation to generation and shared publicly. There are a few stories that are really popular and well known, which were broadcasted on the public national radio and later on printed in books. Probably the most famous of these radio shows and books is “*La Calle Donde tu Vives*” from Hector Gaitan. The famous stories in the books and radio programs of Hector Gaitan are not considered to be real, but as legends, fairy tales or fables. The stories do not contain people who have really existed.

The stories of Gaitan show that witchcraft is a part of public national knowledge. Alleged witchcraft manifestations, however, are both public and private. In the private spheres of Nebaj, only the alleged evil manifestations of witchcraft take place. The good witches, *curanderos*, and good *naguales* are publicly known, as so are there actions and witchcraft performances. The consultations at the office of the *curanderos* are public. Even though the ‘clients’ are inside the office the door and windows are open and when sitting outside, in the waiting area, the conversations inside are audible. Also the four sacred sites where *brujos* and *curanderos* perform their rituals are publicly known. *Entierros* which are performed often in the cemetery are, because of the public place, publicly visible as well.

Stories of *naguales* are also a part of public knowledge; however I have not encountered anyone who says to be or to know a person who is a *nagual*. The eleven years old daughter of one of my informants did tell me a story she heard from a boy in her school. “Carlos told me that a few years ago, I don’t know exactly, a woman turned herself into a wolf. She attacked someone in the central park and the people killed her. When she was dead, her body turned back and the people saw she was actually a woman”. The mother of this girl was really surprised by this story, since she did not know that the children in school share witchcraft stories among themselves.

The stories of *naguales* are not a new phenomenon; they are mentioned in several old documents including the *Popol Vuh*, which is the holy book of the Mayas. “*Beliefs concerning naguales have some antiquity in the Maya region. In the Popol Vuh of the Quiché Maya (Edmonson 1971:233), the cacique Q’uq’ Kumatz was a nawal ahaw (naval ahav, a "nagual lord"), who travelled between the sky and the underworld and transformed himself into a serpent, a jaguar, an eagle, and a pool of blood. He used his sorcery to fight his enemies*” (Colby 1976). Also in the ‘Título de Totonicapán’, another Quiche document from ca. 1554, are *naguales* and their magical powers mentioned in battles by the Quiché people (Colby 1976).

Evil manifestations of witchcraft are however more secretly shared and more private. *Brujos* and evil *naguales* are not publicly known, however *brujos* are findable when really necessary. They do not have an office or place to find them. *Entierros* can take place anywhere, so in someone’s own garden as well. *Entierros* are thus, depending on the place of performing them, both public and private manifestations. The evil types of witchcraft linger more in the rumours and gossips and are only shared with people who can be fully trusted.

Inside the community of Nebaj, witchcraft stories are shared quite easily. People gossip about suspected witches and visit *curanderos* without secrecy or shame. Very

remarkable is to the world and people outside of the community of Nebaj, witchcraft is denied and treated as something that does not exist or occur in their community. I visited the *Alcaldes Indigenas*<sup>18</sup> to ask them where and if I could talk to a Mayan spiritual guide<sup>19</sup>. The *Alcaldes Indigenas* did tell me that Mayan cosmology is not practiced and lived in Nebaj, and they told me the same about superstition and witchcraft. Later on, Leonel, one of the *Alcaldes Indigenas*, explained this way of acting. “*We deny witchcraft in Nebaj, to protect ourselves. The Ladinos will say we are backwards and stupid. We have to protect ourselves, against this etiquette, even though we do know it exists*”. This expression of Leonel about the Ladinos shows a clear example of the view of the inhabitants of Nebaj on outsiders. Since in Nebaj the majority of the population is indigenous and identifies as Maya.

There is ambiguous behaviour when it comes to sharing witchcraft stories in and outside of Nebaj. In Nebaj, people do live and share their experiences and stories of their encounters with the good types of witchcraft publicly. They do not shun sharing these stories with anyone. The bad witchcraft is however only shared below the surface and with people they fully trust, plus bad witchcraft is mostly expressed in gossips and rumours. To the world outside of their own community, both good and evil witchcraft is denied and dismissed as nonsense.

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<sup>18</sup> *Alcaldes Indigenas* are the indigenous mayors who have their own office in the municipality building, and co-rule the village with the regular mayor.

<sup>19</sup> A Mayan spiritual guide is a religious leader in the Mayan cosmology.

#### **4. Understandings of Good and Evil in Nebaj**

In many countries in the world witchcraft plays an important role, but manifestations and beliefs, and the role that witchcraft differ spatially because it is a dynamic aspect depending on local circumstances. The conceptions on witchcraft practices and manifestations differ on every scale. In Guatemala, religion and even more witchcraft is understood differently in every region and even in almost every village. In Santa Maria Nebaj, witchcraft plays a different role in society than for instance in the nearby village of San Gaspar Chajul<sup>20</sup>. “We, the people of Nebaj, have to cope with *hechicería* a lot more than the Chajul people. In Chajul there are a lot more *naguales* who cause problems” (Miguel, will be introduced in the next paragraph).

Within the *Nebajense* community, there is a clear division in what is seen and understood as good and bad. The inhabitants of Nebaj have sharp opinions on what is good or what is evil, and very often these divisions correspond to the opinions on good and evil of the religious leader of the several churches in Nebaj. Everyone who tried to explain his or her understanding of witchcraft to me, started by telling me that there is both good and bad witchcraft. The evil witchcraft in the community of Nebaj is used to harm a person, which is possible in the shape of a disease, death, or problems with for instance money and many more issues. The good witchcraft, on the other hand, is performed and used to solve these problems and to help and heal people.

Almost everybody knows a person who is, in a way, a victim of witchcraft attacks. The victims hurt by witchcraft, mostly get a disease. If a person is sick, it does not only affect him or her, but also the people living with the diseased. In an interview, Miguel<sup>21</sup>, an alleged victim of witchcraft, told me that he had to sell his house and his company because he became a victim of a witchcraft attack. He himself has been sick for 21 years and claims to have a frog in his stomach. Miguel now is 70 years old and used to own a business to build furniture.

“When I became sick, I went to a doctor, but nothing helped. Then I went to Quiché to visit a hospital and I had surgery, but it felt weird and when I came home I couldn’t do anything. Eventually I had to sell my business and I and my family had to move houses, because I did not have any money left. I went to *curanderos* in Nebaj and other villages to get better, they told me a man and woman were envy at me and attacked me with a spell. Now I am still sick”.

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<sup>20</sup> San Gaspar Chajul will, in this thesis, be referred to as ‘Chajul’.

<sup>21</sup> All names that will be mentioned in this thesis are pseudonyms to protect the informants.

As Miguel explained, he is bewitched because of envy. Envy is the incentive that is most mentioned by my informants to perform witchcraft or let witchcraft be performed by a *brujo*. Only once during my stay in Nebaj have I heard of a person being bewitched as a punishment, the person was a thief. Of course there are several reasons for people to be envious at another person. Greed and love problems are often mentioned motives to envy another person. Greed, or envy because of another person's wealth is what Miguel said to be the reason of his witchcraft problems. He used to own a big house, part of land and good running business. Because of the by witchcraft caused disease he lost all of this wealth.

The morality, or the notions on good and evil, is also applied on the incentives for witchcraft by the inhabitants of Nebaj. Not only the action of witchcraft itself is seen as evil, the motive that leads toward the action is considered to be equally evil, and since the motive is felt by the evildoer, the person itself is considered to be more evil than the actions he or she performs. Mair (1971) says the following about envy; "This kind of sentiment would be more aptly called envy and here we find ourselves right in the field of motives attributed to witch". Also Kapferer (2002:17) claims the importance of envy in witchcraft believes and alleged manifestations.

The notions of witchcraft are based on the evil expressions of it, and therefore can be applied in Nebaj on the evil part of *hechicería*, or the witchcraft performed by the *brujos*. The *brujos* in Nebaj are however not seen as the pure source of evil, like Offiong (In Lehmann and Myers 1985:165) claims, the people who pay the *brujos* to harm other people are thought to be bad. The envy, greed, hatred and other socially disapproved sentiments are ascribed to these 'enemies' and not to the *brujos*. However, of course *brujos* are seen as bad people too.

#### **4.1 Understanding of Witchcraft in the Religious Life of Nebaj**

The place that witchcraft takes within the community is understood differently by the inhabitants. Some people believe that witchcraft is part of the Mayan culture; others claim that witchcraft needs to be understood as a part of a specific religion. As I have mentioned before, is witchcraft seen as a part of the Mayan cosmology by Antonia, member of the *alcaldía indígena*. Others understand the Mayan cosmology not as a religion, but as the framework for the local culture.

Adriana, a local senior who owns a market stall in the daily local market, is convinced that witchcraft is part of the culture. She has heard of witchcraft practices not being universal and came to the solution that they must have been invented by the Mayas and therefore be a part of the culture and no separate religion or part of a religion. When she asked me why I

was interested in this topic, I told her that in the Netherlands I do not know a single person who is bewitched; with this answer she was even more convinced of witchcraft being a Maya-invention.

One of the catholic priests in Nebaj, Padre de León, told me that a lot of the Catholics in town see witchcraft as a part of Christianity or Catholicism. These inhabitants think that the only way to protect them from witchcraft is by praying to God and by living by the rules of the Ten Commandments. Witchcraft, by them is seen as a part of Christianity, wherein evil witchcraft is the work of the devil and that Christianity and good witchcraft, specifically healing, is the work of God<sup>22</sup>.

The three religions, Catholicism, Protestantism and Mayan Cosmology, all have a different view on witchcraft beliefs and practices "People suffer greatly from the consequences of it [witchcraft] until the moment they die. God, I believe, is the only solution and salvation, otherwise evil takes advantage. If my mom I had not touched a drop of alcohol I do not think she'd be dead. Now I believe in God, and I do pray, so the devil will not kill me". Francisca explains, by saying this, the meaning of the Christian God in witchcraft beliefs and of witchcraft believes in Catholicism. God and witchcraft both are said to be the things that can offer a solution for witchcraft problems. The Christian God thus takes a place in witchcraft in the form of pure good and solvation. Praying to God and visiting church every week are said to protect one from witchcraft attacks. "If you believe in God, you cannot get hurt by witchcraft. The witchcraft that is sent to you bends of and hurts an unreligious person in your family or your animals" (Eduardo<sup>23</sup>).

Catholics do seem to seek for solutions in witchcraft beliefs or the help of *curanderos* more than Evangelicals do. Don José says to have both Evangelical and Catholic clients, nevertheless the Catholics are the evident majority. The Mayan cosmology practitioners do have a very different view on witchcraft than the Christian religions do. They do not see witchcraft as something good or bad, but as something that exists in society and with good and bad parts. They believe that the only solution for witchcraft problems is good witchcraft in the form of rituals, the way that *curanderos* perform them.

Mayan cosmology adherents do sometimes see witchcraft as a part of Mayan cosmology, in the sense of good and bad energies. Antonia, who works at the *alcaldía indígena* and women organization, told me that there is no such thing as harming a person with witchcraft. In a case where people think they are hurt by witchcraft in reality the

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<sup>22</sup> A very clear example of syncretism between witchcraft and Christianity.

<sup>23</sup> Eduardo is a student of English language and teacher at several primary schools in and around Nebaj

energies of these people conflict with each other. This causes diseases which are incurable for doctors, because they, the doctors, do not know about these energies. *Curanderos*, with their rituals, can harmonize these energies and therefore cure the diseases.



**Photo 6**  
Sacred witchcraft site at the cemetery.

## 5. The Role of Witchcraft in Nebaj

As been discussed in the theoretical chapter, witchcraft serves a balancing function in the social system or order of a community. The inhabitants of Nebaj use witchcraft to solve problems, but they also claim that almost all of their problems are caused by witchcraft. The alleged victims of witchcraft always have an idea or suspicion on who caused the attack, and their way of dealing with these issues is visiting a *curandero*, who will perform a witchcraft ritual. The meaning of a visit to a *curandero* in Nebaj is thus not curing the disease, but changing the personal relationships. When I was talking with Valeria, an employee of a local restaurant, she shared the story of her sister in law being bewitched by her ex-husband's new wife. After her story she asked me if I have encountered these problems in the Netherlands as well. When I told her that I have never heard of any kind of witchcraft story in my home country she reacted surprised and asked me; "But then, what do you do when you have a dispute with your neighbours?". This question basically shows the functionality of witchcraft in Nebaj, people deal with disputes and social tensions by turning to witchcraft.

A lot of my informants told me that revenge on the evildoer is equal to lowering yourself to the person who caused the harm in the first place, but also the 'proof' against the suspected evildoer does not exist. Valeria told me: "When you know who the bad person is, who made you sick, you cannot take revenge. There is never proof that the person who harmed you is really that one person".

Striking is that during my stay in Nebaj, I have never spoken to a person who could introduce me to a *brujo* or person who practices the evil side of the several witchcraft types. But also nobody told or admitted to me that they have visited a *brujo* to harm another person. Besides that, people do not want to take revenge on evil witchcraft practitioners and do not accuse them either. It seems that the evil side of witchcraft is not only not publicly shared, but in its basic intangible. Victims and *curanderos* are publicly known, visited and acknowledged. The 'enemies' and *brujos* however only exist in suspicions, rumours and gossip.

Witchcraft serves as a means to canalize social relations and social conflicts in specific. By having the good forms of witchcraft and other forms of religion, there is a way to solve conflicts without having to confront a person in real life. The reason for these conflicts to exist is blamed on witchcraft and the practitioners of evil forms of witchcraft, however they are unknown. Problems, such as diseases, poverty, death et cetera are blamed on people who are unknown. Good forms of witchcraft serve as a means of expressing problems in

society, and changing the social relationships between people in the community of Nebaj. The evil forms of witchcraft, because the practitioners are unknown, serve as a way of mitigating the social conflicts that are at the basis of witchcraft suspicions.

### 5.1. The Use of Witchcraft in the Trial against Rios Montt

During my fieldwork in Nebaj, a trial started against Efraim Rios Montt. Rios Montt was a general in the army and took over the leadership of the country with a coup in 1982. Under the rule of Rios Montt, genocide happened in Guatemala in 1982 and 1983. This genocide raged heavily in the Ixil towns, and caused many victims. Up until today, mass graves are found by forensic anthropologists in the mountains in the Ixil area<sup>24</sup>. On March nineteen 2013, Rios Montt is brought to trial in Guatemala. Rios Montt is accused of genocide and crimes against humanity against the Ixil population<sup>25</sup>.

This trial was a much discussed topic among the inhabitants of Nebaj. Many people of the village are, in a way, victim of the genocide in the 1980s. They explained the trial to me, and shared their stories of what has happened to them and their families. The trial had a big impact on the lives of the people, even though it took place in the court in Guatemala City. When I was back in the Netherlands, writing this thesis, one of my informants shared his experience of a witchcraft ceremony with me through a video-conversation via Internet.



**Photo 7**

Witchcraft ceremony to influence the trial against Rios Montt. Taken in Nebaj

Photo from Leonel (prefers to be anonymous)

<sup>24</sup> This brief summary does not do justice to the full civil war that raged in Guatemala for 36 years. Consult other sources for more and extensive information on this topic.

<sup>25</sup> These charges allege that Rios Montt was the intellectual author of 1,771 deaths, the forced displacement of 29,000 people, sexual violence against at least 8 women, and torture of at least fourteen people. See [www.riosmontt-trial.org](http://www.riosmontt-trial.org)

“The day before his conviction a ceremony was held. Don José [curandero] led the ceremony. There were a lot of people, and together with our ancestors we made it happen”. With ‘it’, Eduardo meant the conviction of Rios Montt, that took place the day after the ritual<sup>26</sup>. The ceremony took place at the central park, in front of the catholic church in Nebaj. Eduardo did not know why it was not held at one of the sacred sites, but said that the ritual sites might not have enough space for the number of people who were present.

The trial against Rios Montt can be considered as an external influence on the social context within the community. Niehaus (2001) calls the outside influence; a wider transformation which influences local witchcraft manifestations. I consider not only the trial an external factor, but believe that the entire civil war has to be taken into consideration. During the civil war and especially during the genocide, the Ixil people were defenceless against the much stronger army. After the genocide in 1983 and the end of the civil war in 1996, nobody has been convicted for the crimes that were committed. With this trial, the people could actually do something. They have been testifying in court, protested in Nebaj and Guatemala City and eventually performed a witchcraft ritual. This ritual gave the people, victims of the genocide, a sense of control. Witchcraft is in this understanding a tool of power for the inhabitants of Nebaj.

To frame this event in the moral code, I asked Eduardo how they justified performing a ritual, asking the ancestors, to help sentencing Rios Montt. “Rios Montt is evil, nothing we do here is more evil than he has done to our people. So, we do not cause a disease or death, we want justice so our witchcraft is not evil, I believe it is good”. Striking is that the inhabitants claim to influence the conviction of Rios Montt, the judicial process, with the use of witchcraft, but that they think it is not wrong to do so<sup>27</sup>.

## **5.2. Social Effects of Witchcraft Beliefs in Nebaj**

Witchcraft is an important factor in the daily lives of the inhabitants of the village of Nebaj and is most present in stories, gossips and rumours. Since a lot of rumours and stories lead to suspicions it is logical that this comes with consequences on the people’s behaviour. Steward and Strathern (2004) make the claim that witchcraft gossips and rumours can be aimed at mobilization of the public opinion to demonize a certain person and therefore him or

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<sup>26</sup> The conviction of Rios Montt, has been annulled, and if Rios Montt does not receive amnesty, his trial will be redone in 2014.

<sup>27</sup> I do not know if the inhabitants of Nebaj believe that the court would have sentenced Rios Montt without them performing a witchcraft ritual, if they think the court is impartial or not and if they think their feeling of justification is more important than the rule of law.

her less powerful or wealthy and sometimes to eventually remove the person from the local community.

In the community of Nebaj I have never encountered such a form of demonization or a ‘witch-hunt’. People do gossip about suspected witches, but mostly about so called enemies<sup>28</sup>. These enemies are the people who pay a *brujo* to harm someone. This enemy is most often an insider from the community, since he or she is acquainted with the ‘victim’ at who the alleged *hechicería* is aimed. In the eyes of the inhabitants of Nebaj, the enemies are more evil than the *brujo* is. Since alleged incentives for the use of witchcraft are often said to be jealousy, envy and love problems, the enemies are thought of to feel one of these sentiments to their victim. These sentiments are ascribed to insiders, because only insiders know the alleged victims well enough, and have information on them to feel these sentiments.

The *brujos*, bad *naguales* and people who perform *entierros* with a bad motive are seen as evil by the inhabitants of Nebaj. There are gossips that linger in the community about suspicious people, events, and actions. These people can be both in- and outsiders of the community. Outsiders are suspicious because of being an outsider. Following the line of thought from Steward and Strathern (2004), an outsider can threaten the unity of a group because of multiple reasons. To protect group unity rumours and gossips are spread to make the person less powerful or influential and therefore less of a threat.

During my fieldwork I have never heard of or witnessed an expulsion or accusation of an ‘enemy’, *brujo*, *nagual*, or person who performed an *entierro*. The only story I have heard was a rumour, or folk tale which is shared and told in Nebaj often. Two local women, Adriana and her friend Maria, did share the story with me about three *brujos*. These *brujos*, two men and one woman allegedly did a lot of evil things in Nebaj, in the form of *hechicería* and *entierros*. They were not only paid to perform witchcraft rituals, but also performed these out of their own reasons and will. At one day, all three *brujos* were found dead. This story is a story everybody in Nebaj has heard according to the women, but nobody has seen or knew the dead *brujos*. The women said that they used to tell it to their children to keep them away from doing bad things.

Eduardo explained to me that the people do not accuse anyone they suspect from being an enemy or performing any type of evil witchcraft practices because they are either afraid of the evil-doer or God. The people who can and do perform witchcraft activities and rituals have strong powers, which other people do not understand or know how to use and

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<sup>28</sup> The inhabitants of Nebaj call these enemies ‘*enemigas*’.

more important, how to protect themselves and their loved ones from being harmed by a retaliation.

If witchcraft suspicions lead to actual accusations on the evil-doer and eventually results in his death, you are evil yourself as well. No matter who performs the evil action and what this action is; thus both paying an evildoer to take revenge, and hurting someone in person are evil actions in the eyes of God. Eduardo explained; “God and good are the unique way, if you kill someone, no matter who it is, you will have to defend your actions in purgatory”. He also expressed the idea that someone harms and especially kills another human being, in the eyes of God you are not better than the evil-doer or the ‘enemy’ yourself and thus will God punish you. Other informants expressed the same ideas as Eduardo, like Adriana; “God is the only thing that may judge, it is not up to us to judge what is good and bad”.

Colby (1976) explains another point of view for the locals not to kill suspected witches. He claims that because in the Ixil region, which Nebaj is a part of, ancestral spirits are considered to be able to intervene in daily life. They can be and do good, but can cause problems as well. The evil witches, during their lives in a human form being evil, will be evil as spirits as well. In this form they can continue causing problems and harm.

“I know of no such cases of witchcraft homicide among the Ixil. The Ixil believe that a man's "life-thread" is cut, his life shortened, if he engages in witchcraft. Hence old age is proof of good behaviour. It would be unsettling to have it otherwise in an ancestor-worshiping group, because ancestral ghosts actively intervene in human daily life and can cause sickness if displeased. If these individuals were thought to have been basically evil during their mortal life as witches they would be very feared as ghosts. Further, if one were to suspect another of witchcraft, killing him would be a sure way to bring his ghostly retribution in a society that believes in ancestral spirits” (Colby 1976).

The reasoning goes that if you hurt anyone who causes you harm, your problems will get worse. If you kill anyone, bad or good, you will have to defend your actions for God, who is seen as the ultimate power and pure form of good. Besides God, the evil-doer in the shape of any witch can hurt you, both being alive or dead. Furthermore, do the problems that were caused to the victim by witchcraft practices not go away by taking revenge. The victims focus on solving the problems rather than by taking vengeance.

Even though social consequences on witchcraft suspicions in the form of accusations and ‘witch-hunts’ are not usual in Nebaj, other reactions to suspicions are present. Valeria, the restaurant employee, gave an example of avoiding ones alleged enemy as protection from witchcraft; “My sister in law tries to avoid her ex-husband and his new wife, since they are not in contact. No new attacks have hit her and she can live tranquil now”. This avoidance of

the enemy by the victim will result in less contact or even in no contact at all. This will result in the ‘enemy’ being an outsider of the ‘victim’ his or her close group of social relations, and the threat of the enemy smaller or even not existing.

The inhabitants of the village try to protect themselves from becoming a witchcraft victim. They use several defence strategies against witchcraft attacks. Since one of the incentives of people to use witchcraft against someone else is jealousy, people try to avoid other people being jealous at them. Jealousy of possession can be avoided by not showing your possessions in public. “By not flaunting or admitting that you own or earn a lot of money or have many possessions, nobody will gossip about you”, is what Miguel told me. By not being gossiped about, people will not focus on your possessions and wealth and therefore not be jealous. Not provoking incentives by other people to use witchcraft against you will result in not being a victim.

Syncretism plays a role in a defence strategy against witchcraft as well; visiting a church and going to church services can protect someone from being accused of evil witchcraft practices. Padre de León explained the reasoning of these ideas in Nebaj. “Everybody who comes to my church is in its heart a good person. Of course we all make mistakes, but we do not do evil. God guides us and protects us in his ways from harming others. Witchcraft [doing evil] is not a practice of God and the church”.

Aracely and her husband live in Chajul, a nearby village, and come to Nebaj to visit Don José, a *curandero*, almost weekly. They visit him for a wide range of problems, not only their own, but also their children’s problems. Although in Chajul there are *curanderos* as well, they visit Don José to prevent people in Chajul from knowing that they seek help with a *curandero*. Since Aracely thinks she is, or the people she seeks help for are, bewitched, she does not want other people to know. Being associated with witchcraft in any way, can be bad for your status and relationships inside your community, she explained.

Antonia on the other hand told me that when people know that you visit a *curandero*, they will not envy you. When you visit a *curandero* you do have witchcraft problems, and therefore suffer in a way. However someone envies you for a reason, the already existing witchcraft problems make your wealth, health, love or other things that can be envied, undesirable. Therefore can both going to a *curandero* in public, or in secret by for instance going to another town, or in the mountains can have its advantages.

## Conclusion

With this thesis I have tried to gain more insight on the function and role of witchcraft beliefs, manifestations and the effects that witchcraft triggers or induces within the community of Santa Maria Nebaj in Guatemala. This study has been directed and shaped through the main question; “What is the impact of witchcraft on social relations in Santa Maria Nebaj in Guatemala, and how does witchcraft relate to other existing religious beliefs in the community?” I will provide an extensive answer in this conclusion.

In the first chapter I have claimed that it is not of interest to research if witchcraft has existence, rather, more intriguing are the consequences of witchcraft on social relations and behaviour within communities. In Nebaj, the impact of witchcraft is widely visible in daily practises and behaviour. The existence of witchcraft in this study is not questioned, nor do the inhabitants of Nebaj question this. For the believer, witchcraft is given shape and meaning in the eye of the beholder. According to Evans-Prichard (1937) witchcraft is used to explain misfortunes, I have found that in Nebaj, witchcraft does not only serve this function, but is used to explain any kind of problem that occurs. Especially the effects of witchcraft, or more specific the role of witchcraft, within this community is valuable for the maintenance of social order. This leads to the justification of researching a system of beliefs or a mode of thought, such as witchcraft.

One of the expressions of witchcraft beliefs obtains shape and meaning in its rumours and gossips. The *processual* approach that Steward and Strathern (2004) use, is proven to be applicable in this study as they claim that rumours are a tool to give moral judgements on peoples behaviours. Negative moral judgements can lead to suspicions or accusations of witchcraft. The rumours therefore do have consequences on social behaviour. To prevent being accused from witchcraft practices, the villagers from Nebaj adjust their behaviour to the morally set standards of behaviour. The generally accepted norms of behaviour or social manners are connected to religious participation, for instance church attendance. Participation in religious activities and non-deviation from social norms therefore are used as defence strategies against accusations from witchcraft. In Nebaj, many times have I been told that people who do not go to church, which church is not of importance, they are immoral and antisocial people. Practitioners and users of types of evil witchcraft never attend to church, according to Miguel, which corresponds with the claim of Lehmann and Myers (1985:149) that unsociability and other negatively ascribed personality characteristics are ascribed to evil witches.

Religious participation as a defence strategy against witchcraft accusation is not the only connection between religion and witchcraft. During the executing of my study in Nebaj I have encountered three concepts which are of importance in the understanding in both religious and witchcraft beliefs, participation and understanding. Syncretism, religious dualism and religious morality are all three important in both religious and witchcraft beliefs. Therefore I affirm the claim that witchcraft is a religion. Religion, and the thus underlying concept witchcraft, is a system or set of beliefs, which gives meaning to the inexplicable frailties and problems that occur in community life. Lehmann and Myers (1985:148) call these frailties a crises, which might be resolved by a supernatural force, like witchcraft. In Nebaj, this became clear in the consultations that were executed by the *curandero* Don José. People came to him with problems ranging from illnesses, to failed attempts of crossing the border between the United States and Mexico illegally. Within religious beliefs, a strong process of syncretism occurs in Nebaj; people pray, for instance, because this allegedly will prevent them from falling victim. The use of a church as a sacred place for Maya rituals and witchcraft ceremony is another example of religious syncretism in Nebaj.

Religious dualism, as I prefer calling the division and notion between good and evil in religious beliefs, also exists in religious beliefs and witchcraft. This connection confirms the claim to consider witchcraft as a religion as well. The dualistic worldview of good and evil in witchcraft practices and manifestations are very clearly defined. These notions in all three allegedly existing types of witchcraft in Nebaj, *hechicería*, *nagualism* and *entierros*, are remarkably sharp defined. This confirms the statement of Geschiere (2000:219) that witchcraft is highly ambiguous, and can both be constructive as disturbing and disrupting.

The notion that witchcraft should be considered in its local context specific situation claimed by Kapferer (2002:341) is shown to be applicable to the village of Nebaj too. This has been shown by the witchcraft ritual performed to secure the conviction of Rios Montt. Niehaus (2001) states that there is a connection between external influences on local witchcraft beliefs. The Rios Montt trial is a good example of how an external event has brought local frictions into the community of Nebaj; due to its sensitive and painful history for the inhabitants. The local talks, including gossips revolved around Rios Montt, the genocide and the trial. These local friction, and accompanying different local, political and social context eventually was transposed in the witchcraft ceremony in the central park of Nebaj. The witchcraft is in this case adapted to the new situation, and serves as a tool of, the feeling of, control.

This reasoning results in the affirmation of the functionalist tradition being applicable on the situation of witchcraft beliefs in Nebaj. Evans-Pritchard (1973) claimed the use of witchcraft being to discharge social tensions between people. This is already shown in the Rios Montt trial and locally organized witchcraft ceremony. On solely local level, this argumentation can be affirmed as well. Witchcraft serves the maintenance of social order. Social relations can be restored or fixed by the use of good types of witchcraft. A curandero can perform a ritual, to resolve the problem caused by a negative relationship and therefore remove the problem and restore the relationship. Blaming attacks of witchcraft, on the people who perform evil forms of witchcraft, results in blaming the intangible. The evildoers are unknown; therefore the blames and accompanying negative relations and conflicts are canalized out of the community. Both good and evil witchcraft thus discharges social tensions, which is in accordance with Evans-Pritchard (1973) his functionalistic tradition and claims.

## Discussion

During the entire process of preparing, conducting and reporting my research, and finally finishing this thesis, I have learnt many things. I believe this whole process has been a useful contribution to my studies and a valuable preparation for further studies. Not only have I learnt useful things scientifically, for myself as a person it was a unique experience to do anthropological fieldwork.

I am very pleased about the way I have gathered my data and eventually have turned it into this thesis. Even though DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) explain the necessity of conducting fieldwork for at least two years when the topic of witchcraft is leading in the research, I am pleased about the results and the willingness of people to share their stories, experiences and practices with me. Of course, this study could be many times more extensive and comprehend more elaborate and profound topics and information, I do keep in mind that this entire project is set up with the intention to be a learning project and therefore limited.

Before entering the field, whilst my research location was unknown and indicated as village X in my research proposal, I did not know about the Rios Montt trial. Moreover was I ignorant about the local social turmoil that the trial would trigger in Nebaj. Protests, manifestations and many conversations about this topic were everyday practices. This trial did however, confirm the claim about the external influences on witchcraft manifestations that I have made in the first chapter.

Resulting out of this thesis, more interesting follow-up studies can be executed on this topic. Especially the trial against former de facto president Rios Montt, and its consequences on local scale witchcraft manifestations might be very interesting. Note that the verdict on Rios Montt has been overthrown and, if he does not receive amnesty, the trial will be redone in 2014. Furthermore I have encountered information on Ixil laws<sup>29</sup>, which prohibit witchcraft, especially *nagualism*. Asking the ladino authorities, at the *ministerio public*, about this law resulted in denial of the existence of laws and rules against witchcraft practices. In a thesis from 2006, laws are not mentioned, but expulsion from the community is mentioned as a sanction<sup>30</sup>. Further research on this topic, does seem very interesting as well.

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<sup>29</sup> The document 'El sistema jurídico Ixil' states: "En asuntos sumamente graves para la percepción comunitaria, el causante es expulsado de la comunidad: "Robar y otros, o por practicar la maldad" (como la práctica del vin en Chajul), "10 expulsamos, que sea ejemplo para los demás."

<sup>30</sup> "La práctica de hechos dañinos que realiza el aj'itz (brujería) es sancionada en las comunidades mayas; pero el Sistema Jurídico Oficial no la reconoce como delito o falta. Es el caso de el "win o güín" que se practica en San Gaspar Chajul, de la Comunidad Ixil, que consiste en la creencia que el aj'itz (el brujo) convierte en animal a una persona con el propósito que ésta cause daño a otra, lo cual es temido y sancionado incluso con la expulsión del hechor, de la comunidad."

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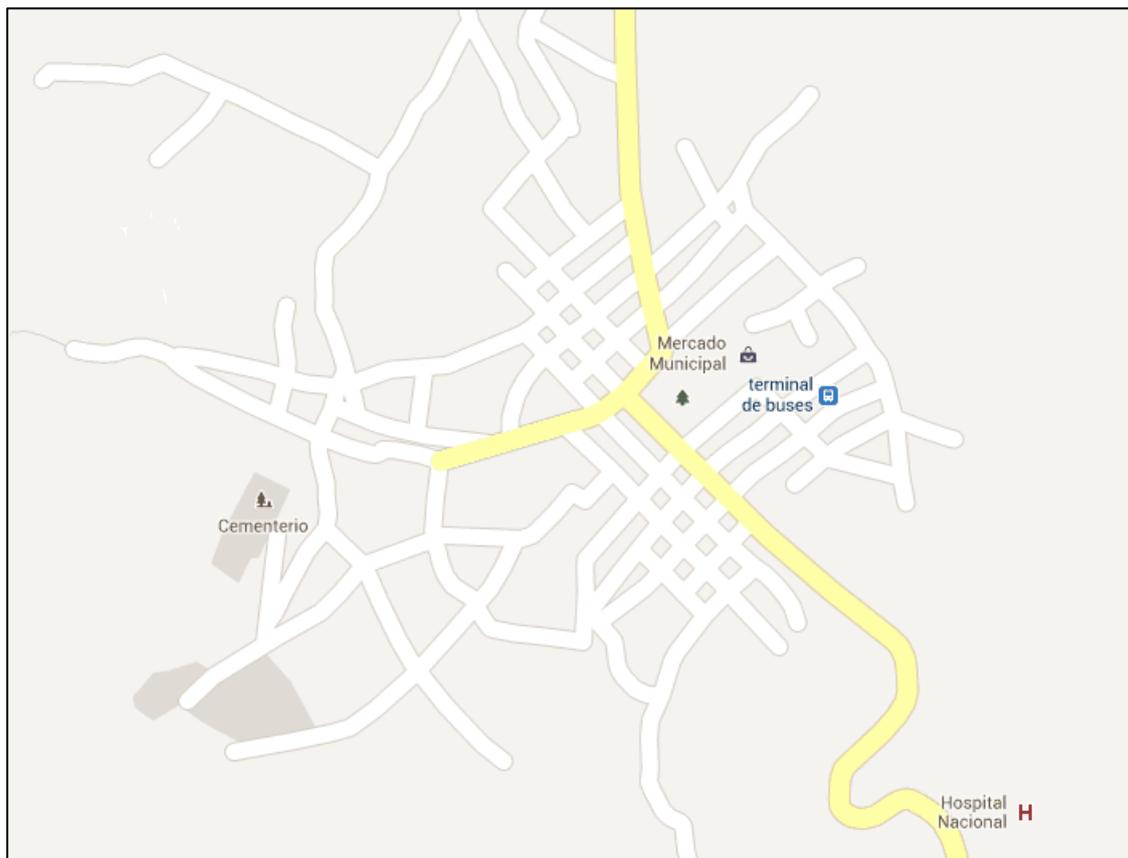
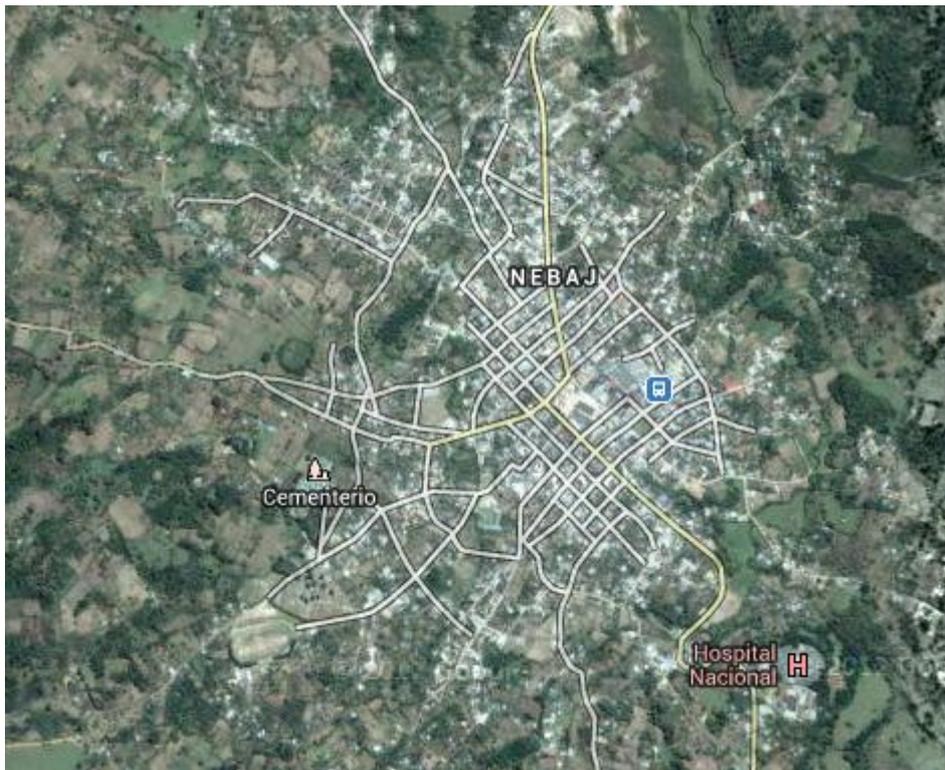
**Appendix 1** Map of the position of Santa Maria Nebaj in Guatemala

Guatemala is a country in Central America and borders with Mexico, Belize, Honduras and El Salvador. The capital of Guatemala is Guatemala City. Within Guatemala there are 22 regions. Nebaj (displayed with the letter A on the map) is located in the Quiche region.



Source: Google maps

## Appendix 2 Maps of Santa Maria Nebaj



Source: Google Maps

### **Appendix 3** Methodological Accountability

With my research design in my backpack, and an analytical plan of action in my mind I arrived in Nebaj. The following day, ‘the first day of my fieldwork’, I had to start. Eager and anxious I ‘entered the field’. But by walking around and finding my way in the village, I felt lost and all of the sudden, my research design and plan of action did seem useless. I started my fieldwork by ‘hanging around’, being there and mapping the city.

In the first few weeks in the field, I only came in contact with male inhabitants of Nebaj. The *curandero*, church leaders, mayors, doctors, and in general people who work outside the house are all men. The women generally work inside the house, do the household, take care of the children and prepare food. Eventually I also met women. A couple of my female informants have been very helpful by including me in their gossip circle at the market. These women do not have husbands, most of the women are widows since the genocide in the 1980s, and therefore have to work outside the house to earn money. Since these women are in a project of the local government by selling handicrafts, and there are not many tourists who visit Nebaj, they did not have many interested people in their stalls; and therefore a pretty amount of time to talk and share local gossips and rumours. One of my key informants, and friend, was a woman who included me in this gossip circle, or who told me all the gossips she heard personally.

The methodological approach of possible informants I had described, in my research design, as “To be able to discuss witchcraft with my informants and participants, I will establish rapport with the informants and participants through starting the fieldwork through religious beliefs, Christianity and Mayan Cosmology. These religious beliefs, other than witchcraft, do manifest themselves in public life and on the surface, because they are not associated with negative happenings and people”. Therefore, in the first week in the field, the conversations I had with possible informants were about religion. One of my informants told me that he prays often, because one of his family members is bewitched. Resulting out of this information; I asked a couple of questions about this disease and witchcraft, and this led me to meet a *curandero*. After a few more weeks of fieldwork, I realized that this *curandero*, Don José, was my entrance and handed me the possibility of researching witchcraft beliefs in the community.

Don José gave me permission to observe the consultations in his office and the rituals he performed at the sacred places in the village. He allowed me to perform participant-observation or ‘wait’ in the waiting-area in front of his office to talk to his clients and thus introduced me to the villagers and directly to people who were either direct or indirect

alleged victims of witchcraft. This benevolence of Don José, to help me with my research, and his wife, who always received with a hug and a cup of atole<sup>31</sup>, was very helpful in gaining trust from the villagers; which was an important factor in their willingness to talk with me and starting a relation of rapport.

The predefined research population covered the entire population of the village, since every person in the village could be in contact with witchcraft beliefs. I did not want to focus merely on men, women, young or old people or educated or unschooled people, et cetera. This both led to insecurity from my side, “how do I approach people?”, as to the possibility of meeting informants everywhere in the village. Eventually, my informants included teachers, market women, children, waiters, an indigenous mayor, adherents and leaders from the major religions in Nebaj and more diverse informants. With this research I have covered the stories, ideas and experiences of a very diverse research population.

Since witchcraft is a very sensitive topic, the interviews that I conducted were mostly informal and unstructured. In these types of interviewing, the questions are not decided upon before the interview starts. In this way it is possible to lead the interview, but in the direction that the informant is willing to talk about. I have also conducted other, and more structured, forms of interviews; but this was to gain more information on topics that were not as sensible as personal stories and experiences.

The sensitivity of the topic, demands a long-term research for a certain profound level of knowledge and analysis of witchcraft beliefs (DeWalt & DeWalt 2011). I, however, have conducted the fieldwork for this bachelor thesis in only eight weeks. In this short amount of time I have gathered more information than I imagined prior to the actual fieldwork.

An obstacle in my fieldwork was the language barrier, between me and the local population. I have followed a Spanish language course in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala prior to the fieldwork in Nebaj. However, with three weeks of extensive lessons, my Spanish language skills are far from perfect. The level of my Spanish was, however, not the problem. Many villagers in Nebaj do not speak Spanish, but the local language Ixil<sup>32</sup>. I attended a few classes on Ixil language, but I can only speak a few words. These words, greetings and courtesy expressions, were highly appreciated by the local population. I was not able in having conversations in Ixil language.

I have been looking for translators, or people who could help me translate during interviews et cetera, but could not find a suitable solution. Official translator asked a lot of

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<sup>31</sup> Traditional Central American drink made out of maize dough, water and optionally fruits.

<sup>32</sup> Both the region and the language are called Ixil. The inhabitants of the Ixil triangle, do speak Ixil.

money for their services. A local teacher has helped me out by translating during some interviews, but I have had not had the ability of interviewing or talking to a number of people because of the language barrier. Fortunately, a good number of the inhabitants of Nebaj master the Spanish language next to Ixil. Don José, the *curandero*, does not speak Spanish, nor does his wife. But in talking to each other, we used a lot of gestures. Don José his ten year old daughter, and his clients who were visiting for a consultation, translated our conversations at times.

## **Appendix 4** Resumen en Español / Spanish Summary

### **Hechicería, Nagualism y Entierros**

#### *Un Estudio de la Brujería en un Pueblo de Guatemala*

Esta tesis se basa tanto en una parte teórica como un estudio empírico. La información teórica es recabada durante ocho semanas de trabajo de campo en un pueblo guatemalteco, Santa María Nebaj. Esta tesis es el resultado final de mi título de antropología cultural en la Universidad de Utrecht. Con esta tesis he tratado de ganar más perspicacia en la función y papel de creencia de la brujería, manifestaciones y los efectos que la brujería provoca o induce dentro de la comunidad de Santa María Nebaj en Guatemala.

Este estudio se ha dirigido y se ha formado a través de la pregunta principal; “¿Cuál es el impacto de brujería en relaciones sociales en Santa María Nebaj en Guatemala, y cómo está relacionada la brujería con otras creencia religiosas existentes en la comunidad?” Para juntar la información para contestar a esta pregunta, una combinación se ha hecho de los resultados de un estudio teórico y el trabajo de campo conducido en Nebaj, Guatemala. Dividí la pregunta principal en cuatro aspectos; religión y sincretismo, formas de manifestaciones de la brujería, nociones de bueno, y malo en creencia de la brujería y el papel de brujería en la comunidad. Daré una conclusión corta de todos estos sujetos y a partir de entonces concluiré contestando a la pregunta principal.

En Nebaj, he encontrado tres tipos de la brujería. El primer tipo, hechicería es la forma más común e influyente. Hechicería contiene a brujos buenas, curanderos, quienes curan y ayudan a la gente y malas personas, brujos, quien pagan para dañar problemas de la causa y la gente. El segundo tipo es nagualism; las brujas que son naguales, se pueden transformar en animales durante la noche. En nagualism las brujas buenas protegen a los habitantes guardando (protegiendo) las entradas de la ciudad, las malas brujas dañan a los habitantes robando y violando en sus formas de animal. El tercer tipo de la brujería es una acción llamada un entierro de brujería o entierro; los objetos, que según se afirma se parecen a personas, objetos, animales y problemas o enfermedades, se sepultan juntos para dañar, enfermedad o ayuda, curar a una persona.

Notable es la oposición entre el bien y el mal en todos los tres de los tipos de brujería. Pero no sólo dentro de las formas de brujería esta oposición en la moralidad existe; los incentivos o los motivos para usar la brujería también moralmente se evalúan. El incentivo para el uso de la mala brujería a menudo es la envidia. Este motivo es fuertemente

desaprobado por los habitantes de Nebaj. La religión y el pluralismo religioso se han sujetado para cambiar del pueblo de Nebaj mucho tiempo. A través de la colonización de Guatemala por los españoles, el catolicismo se impuso a la población, años el protestantismo posterior se introdujo también. Actualmente, catolicismo, protestantismo y los sistemas tradicionales de creencia; la Cosmología maya y la brujería son las religiones existentes en Nebaj. La brujería se considera una religión porque la brujería y la religión tienen modos similares de entender el mundo social. La religión puede dar el sentido a debilidades en una comunidad, y por lo tanto hacerlos comprensibles para creyentes religiosos. Las religiones están en procesos del sincretismo el uno con el otro; que los hace difíciles de investigar por separado. Dentro de la brujería, Dios cristiano se ve como un protector o salvador de influencias de la brujería malas y Dios y la brujería se oponen a conceptos según la población local. El golpe consiste en que las nociones de bien y el mal sobre prácticas de la brujería coinciden con las nociones de los líderes de la iglesia en este tema. Debido al sincretismo entre brujería y otras religiones; la religión se usa como una estrategia de defensa contra ataques de la brujería. La gente que reza y visita la iglesia no se caerá la víctima con un ataque de la brujería; que causa a la gente que trata normas cristianas y valores.

El papel de la brujería tiene la importancia en la comunidad de Nebaj. La brujería sirve una función de equilibrio, debido a la relación entre brujería y moralidad. Desde la moralidad y la noción del bien y el mal es muy claramente definido por los habitantes de Nebaj; el comportamiento social y sus normas sociales y los valores se ajustan y formados por estas nociones. A menudo se considera que las personas que no se comporta según estas normas moralmente prescritas, son brujos. Las sospechas de la brujería y las creencias son acompañadas por rumores y chisme en la comunidad, que vienen juntos con la amenaza de acusar de la brujería. Para evitar acusarse, la gente se comporta según las normas sociales locales y por lo tanto no abiertamente muestran envidia, u otros sentimientos negativamente valuados y comportamiento. Las creencias de la brujería forman las relaciones sociales dentro de la comunidad de Nebaj.

Un comentario interesante es que nunca encontré a uno malo brujo, de ningún tipo de la brujería durante mi trabajo de campo en Nebaj. Realmente creo que la brujería sirve la función de un 'pararrayos'. El malo lado de la brujería es intangible, sólo obtiene el sentido en sospechas, rumores y chisme. La brujería sirve de un medio para canalizar relaciones sociales y conflictos. La gente no se opone el uno al otro con problemas, dejan a un curandero solucionarlos y culpar el problema de una mala bruja, que no conocen o pueden acusar en la vida real.

Siguiente de esta argumentación, la respuesta de la pregunta principal es que la brujería sirve de un mecanismo de control social; que dirige conflictos y sentimientos negativos de la vida social, a través de una mala bruja intangible. También controla el comportamiento social, formándolo en el comportamiento socialmente deseable y aceptado; evitar ser el objetivo de acusaciones de la brujería. La brujería sirve de un instrumento de control, en caso de transformaciones externas. La relación entre brujería y religión se complica, la brujería es una religión en Nebaj, porque sirve la misma función y comparten el mismo modo de pensamiento o cosmovisión. La brujería y el cristianismo están en una relación de sincretismos juntos. Dios y la brujería se oponen a dualidades según los habitantes de Nebaj. El cristianismo a menudo se considera como una estrategia de defensa de ataques de la brujería, sino también como una solución. El rezo y otras actividades relacionadas religiosas cristianas puede proteger a una persona de dañarse, sino también curar o ayudarles si lamentablemente se caen la víctima de un ataque de la brujería.