



AJQ' IJAB

- A research about the role of spiritual guides in Maya ethnic identity construction in Quetzaltenango and Totonicapán, Guatemala -

By Maartje Verhaagen

Picture front-page: Maya ceremony with *El Tiempo y El Espacio*, Totonicapán 22-03-2011

Note: All pictures in this thesis belongs to the author

AJQ'IJAB

-A research about the role of spiritual guides in
Maya ethnic identity construction in Quetzaltenango
and Totonicapán, Guatemala-

By Maartje Verhaagen

June, 2011

Name: Maartje Verhaagen

Student Number: 3340783

Supervisor: Marike van Gijssel

University of Utrecht, The Netherlands

Bachelor Cultural Anthropology

Contact details: M.H.Verhaagen@students.uu.nl

"Some things have to be believed to be seen"

(a quote by Ralph Hodgson)

Contents

Acknowledgements	9
Maps 1. Geographic map of Guatemala.....	10
2. Linguistic communities in Guatemala.....	11
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	12
Chapter 2: Theoretical framework and context.....	18
2.1 Current anthropological views on ethnicity and ethnic identity construction.....	19
2.2 Identity politics.....	22
Religion.....	25
2.3 The Maya movement.....	26
2.4 The Maya movement in Guatemala.....	27
2.5 Maya Spirituality.....	29
Chapter 3: Ajq’ijab in Quetzaltenango and Totonicapán.....	31
3.1 Ajq’ijab, Maya spirituality and worldview: an explanation.....	33
3.2 Transmission of Maya knowledge and rite d’ passage.....	36
3.3 The popularity of Maya spirituality.....	39
Chapter 4: The re-examination of Maya spirituality in groups of Ajq’ijab.....	42
4.1 Maya identity.....	43
4.2 Diversity and unification.....	45
4.3 Purification.....	48
4.4 The intellectual Maya aqj’ijab.....	50

Chapter 5:	The presentation of Maya spirituality to the world.....	53
5.1	Ajq'ijab and politics.....	55
5.2	Ajq'ijab and local programs.....	58
Chapter 6:	Conclusions.....	61
Bibliography		66
Appendix		70
Appendix 1.	Reflection as a researcher.....	71
Appendix 2.	Summary in Spanish.....	74

Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the help of many people. I want to thank them for their time and interest in my project and their emotional, practical and analytical support. First of all I want to thank all off my respondents in Guatemala, who let me be part of their culture and who shared their stories and lives with me. Then, I would like to thank my supervisors, Marike van Gijssel and Elisabet Rasch, for their patience and support before, during and after the fieldwork period. I want to give special thanks to Ariel Jose James who invited me to Guatemala and who helped and supported me, from the first moment, in many ways. I also want to thank all teachers at the University Utrecht from the department of Cultural Anthropology for their enthusiasm and analytical support. I want to give special thanks to Ajq'ij Don Carlos Escalante for all his support and his friendship with me. He opened many doors and contributed much in this research project. I am very pleased that I could join the group of ajq'ijab *El Tiempo y el Espacio* during many events and that they have let me be part of them. Thank you. I also want to thank *Instituto Chi Pixab* and *Rex We* for lending me documents and contact information. Last but not least I want to thank my family and friends for their emotional support and enthusiasm during and after fieldwork. Thanks to all of you.

Maps

1. Geographic Map of Guatemala



http://www.tripfff.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/map_of_guatemala_.jpg

2. Linguistic Map of Guatemala

LINGUISTIC COMMUNITIES OF GUATEMALA



SOURCE: BEST Project 520-0374, USAID – Guatemala

<http://www.worldpolicy.newschool.edu/globalrights/guatemala/guat-map3.gif>



Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 1: Introduction

1

“Bèèè, bèè”, a colorful bus, full of people and a lot of stuff packed on the roof, passes by with high speed. Dust comes through the open window. The bus is filled with women in the most colorful ‘traje’². One woman holds a basket on her head and a small baby in her arms. Two young girls, wearing Western clothes and make-up, play with their mobile phones. An old man with a sombrero is sleeping with his head against the window while his wife peels of the leaves of a tamal³ before she breaks of pieces and puts it in her mouth. Loud music is coming from the speaker; ‘ooo padre santo, nos ayudaaahaa’ while the young bus driver steps on the gas. Uncomfortably, packed between people, I look down the open window and take a first glance at the city. There are hundreds of people at the local market; women with baskets full of vegetables and fruits, two men discussing about the price of a second hand pair of pants and children playing underneath the tables where goods are laid out. Next to the local market appears a giant modern building. ‘El Hiperpais’ a modern shopping mall with a cinema and junk food restaurants. From another giant building with a cross on it, comes evangelical music. I look at it puzzling. Where will I be able to find Maya guides, ceremonies and traditional Maya culture that I have been reading about? Is this really the beating hearth of Maya culture and spirituality? ‘Here I am’, I whisper softly. In the hearth of the ‘Maya world’ making my way though the city that had to become my home for the next months.”⁴

Quetzaltenango, also called Xela, is the second largest city in Guatemala and the unofficial beating hearth of Maya culture. Many of the 130 000 inhabitants are converted to Catholicism or the Evangelical Church⁵, although Maya spirituality has become popular since the signing of the peace accords. Half of the population is indigenous although the boundaries

¹ Picture Frontpage Chapter: Maya ceremony in Tikal, 17-03-2011

² Traje means the traditional Maya dress

³ *Tamal* is a boll made out of maize, wrapped in a special leave

⁴ A part of my diary, 27-01-2011

⁵ CIA Factbook

between ladino and Maya identity are not very clear. When I arrived in Quetzaltenango I was dazzled by the city's contradictions and the diversity of people. I found a city in struggle between the idea of Western modernization and the maintenance of Maya cultural life. New shopping malls were built next to the local market and youth used *facebook* and *twitter* while wearing traditional Maya dress.

A one-hour drive from Quetzaltenango, 2500 meter above sea level, lays Totonicapán. The small city has been an important place for Maya Quiché⁶ as it has served as headquarters for their leader Tecúm Umán. In 1830 an important uprising against Spanish colonialism took place here. Even nowadays Totonicapán is considered 'indigenous' and with her 44,762 inhabitants (in 2002), it is an important commercial center for agriculture, cottage and pottery⁷. Maya cultural aspects like *traje* and the consumption of maize, which is considered holy food according to Maya worldview, is a common sight although Maya culture has been mixed and hybridized. The beating hearth of Maya culture wasn't what I expected to be and I realized that being Maya had to be understood in the contemporary world.

Since the mid-1990s, Maya culture and spirituality appears in public media more frequently. Not only was Maya culture and practice legalized after signing the peace accords of 1996, but the popularity can also be linked with the international trends towards the popularity of indigenous cultures. Since the 1980s there has been an explosion of NGO's and funded programs promoting Maya culture in order to help indigenous communities⁸. Ethnic groups and cultures had to be re-defined in order to claim an ethnic identity. Ethnic identity became important in the claim for rights and participation within the discourse towards multiculturalism. Spirituality and worldview, which is considered the base of Maya culture, had to be redefined in the search for Maya ethnic identity.

The role of Maya spiritual leaders, *ajq'ijab*, in this process is the topic of this bachelor research project. While reading interesting articles about the Pan-Maya movement and Maya tradition I wondered how *ajq'ijab* themselves defined spirituality and how they were related to the Pan-Maya movement and the political processes in Guatemala. While activists and intellectuals were writing about the rich Maya culture I missed the opinion of the keepers of spiritual knowledge. What I initially thought to find was a group of spiritual leaders emerged in local politics with a clear idea about Maya culture. During three months of fieldwork I

⁶ For Linguistic Maya communities see Map 2, pag 8

⁷ See CIA world factbook

⁸ Many people live under the poverty line.

found out that the role of ajq'ijab was actually more complicated, hybridized and more interesting. There were many forces that influenced ethnic identity construction and I found a broad diversity of people who were considered ajq'ijab. Maya spirituality and the role of ajq'ijab could not be considered outside the context of political, social and global processes. The question guiding this thesis is the following:

∞ How do ajq'ijab relate to the construction of Maya ethnic identity by practicing Maya spirituality?

In order to investigate this subject I chose three topics. First I concentrated on who ajq'ijab are, how they become ajq'ij and how they put spirituality in practice. In this topic the transfer of knowledge is important to understand recent processes in Maya religion. I asked myself the question if ajq'ij followed a continuing tradition or that their tradition was based on recent processes. Then I focused on the interpretations of Maya ethnic identity and the motivations of ajq'ijab to become ajq'ij. I found out that diversity demonstrates intended and unintended strategies in the construction of Maya ethnic identity. Thirdly, I focused on the presentation of Maya culture by ajq'ijab in local, national and international organizations. The relationship between ajq'ijab and the people is important in order to understand the role of ajq'ijab in Maya ethnic identity construction. Here I focused on identity politics as an intended strategy of ethnic identity construction.

Theories following the research topic are discussions on ethnic identity construction and identity politics. Essentialist's aspects of culture are often used to present a homogeneous ethnic group as such, which can be a powerful tool in politics. Religion serves as a symbol and tool in ethnic identity construction and is a focus in this project. Spirituality is analyzed as an essentialist aspect of culture used by spiritual leaders in claiming an ethnic identity. Besides intended strategies of ethnic identity construction, unintended strategies and emotional underpinnings play a role in identity construction. In this research I follow Baumann's theory of 'dual discursive competence' where he places objective and subjective approaches towards identity construction next to each other. I will set out this theory in the study of the role of Maya spiritual leaders, the keepers of knowledge of ancient traditions, in ethnic identity construction. In the theoretical framework discussions on how ethnic identity is constructed and how essences are used in political processes will be examined, including debates about essential strategies and emotional underpinnings. Globalization, tourism and technological development will only be discussed briefly although they play a role in identity

construction. The aim of this project is to investigate the role of spiritual leaders in ethnic identity construction from both a subjective and an objective perspective.

The research project was carried out in a fieldwork study between the 25th of January and the 28th of April 2011. Initially the research was carried out in Quetzaltenango, but after some weeks I became involved in a group of Ajq'ijab of which most people came from Totonicapán, which made me decide to broaden the research area. There is a difference between the countryside and the city which has to be discussed briefly in order to understand the differences between the two areas of research. Quetzaltenango can be seen as the metropolis of Maya Highland where many things are happening on political, social, cultural and economic level. Many people come to the city to find work or education and it is a famous destination for young tourists to study Spanish. Totonicapán is an indigenous village where Maya Quiché is spoken by almost everyone. It is true that Maya culture is more related to countryside life. Maya spirituality is often mixed with Christian practices although people become more and more conscious about practicing a 'pure' religion. In Totonicapán Maya spirituality was more integrated in all cultural aspects, than in Quetzaltenango. Most of my data I obtained within groups of ajq'ijab with people from the countryside and from the city. In the social groups I did not find much difference between people from Quetzaltenango or Totonicapán in ethnic identity construction and that is why I do not compare the research areas within this thesis. It is not in the aim of this research to compare Quetzaltenango and Totonicapán but to study ethnic identity construction.

I made use of unstructured and semi-structured interviews to carry out qualitative research with a diverse group of people from both cities. I talked with many ajq'ijab and practitioners of Maya spirituality. I also interviewed people from organizations promoting Maya culture and local intellectuals and inhabitants of both cities. I attended ceremonies, conferences and other events that were taking place in Quetzaltenango. The group of ajq'ijab *El Tiempo y El Espacio* became the focus group of this research as they let me be part of their group. Being an insider gave me the opportunity to observe while participating and to obtain valuable information for this anthropological research project. Some of the names of the informants in *El Tiempo y El Espacio* have been altered in this thesis for privacy reasons.

In this thesis I will start in Chapter 2 with theoretical discussions and a sketch of the research area; the Highlands in Guatemala. In this theoretical framework, theories on ethnicity and identity, including identity politics will be examined from perspectives in the past, and recent debates about the subject. The theoretical framework also includes theories about cultural essences, authenticity and the influences of political processes and

technological developments. I examine how these concepts influence strategies of creating a homogeneous image of a people and how religion can be part of this process. Here Baumann's theory of 'dual discursive competence' will be explained as an inclusive theory on ethnic identity construction. Then, of course it is necessary to link these theories with the context of the research area. First there is a close look at political processes in Latin America which explain the rise of the popularity of indigenous identity. The Pan-Maya movement is one of the most important movements which will be given much attention. I will look briefly at Maya spirituality and link all concepts to Quetzaltenango and Totonicapán.

In Chapter 3, I introduce empirical data of the research project in the Maya Highlands. Here I present who *ajq'ijab* are and how Maya spirituality and knowledge is transmitted. The aim of this chapter is to discuss contemporary practice of Maya spirituality and *ajq'ijab*-ship in relation to the construction of a traditional culture. The stories and motivations of *ajq'ijab* question the traditional continuous character of Maya culture and explain intended and unintended strategies of identity construction.

Chapter 4 is the second empirical chapter that examines how Maya spirituality is defined in groups of *ajq'ijab*. The chapter examines the role of *ajq'ij* in the creation of a homogenous image of Maya people. The aim of this chapter is to explain the controversy between diversity in local practice among *ajq'ijab* and the presentation of a Maya people as a unified being.

In Chapter 5 an analysis of the relation between *ajq'ijab* and the society is presented. It examines how the presentation by *ajq'ijab*, as the keepers of Maya knowledge, influence Maya identity construction by working with local, national and international organizations.

In chapter 6, I present my conclusions by summarizing the different arguments presented in the empirical chapters. I present that Maya spirituality and worldview is not a continuing transmission from generation to generation and that Being Maya has to be placed within contemporary processes in Guatemala. Formation of groups and the work of *ajq'ijab* in local and international programs influence the image of Maya identity. The data follows theories of identity politics and ethnic identity construction. Diversity among *ajq'ijab* and diversity in the motivations show a duality of unintended and intended strategies towards Maya identity construction. Maya spirituality cannot be seen as a construction only. For some people it is also a form of religious worldview and giving meaning to the world. Finally I conclude that an inclusive theory of ethnic identity construction is necessary to understand ethnic identity construction in the contemporary world.

Chapter 2:

Theoretical Framework and Context



Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Context

⁹The theoretical frame of this thesis serves to relate theories about ethnic identity construction and identity politics with the topic of research: the construction of Maya ethnic identity by Maya spiritual leaders, *ajq'ijab*. The theories follow discussions of past and recent anthropological discourses, especially of the duality of subjective (symbolism, meaning) and objective (functional, constructive) ethnic identity construction. In this chapter I discuss how these dualities can be exceeded in an inclusive theory about ethnic identity construction. Political and historical processes in Latin America, like the renewal of indigenous identities and the rise of indigenous movements, will be presented here as well. It is necessary to make explicit these theoretical assumptions underlying the research as they affect the collection and interpretation of research data and to understand the debate about Maya ethnic identity construction by Maya spiritual guides. The data about Maya spiritual guides presented later on, will demonstrate that the inclusive theory about ethnic identity construction works.

2.1 Current views on ethnicity and ethnic identity construction

There are different approaches in the anthropological literature on identity and ethnicity. Until recently there were two great paradigms. On the one hand scholars with an essentialist approach who focussed on the continuity and the content of cultures, on the other hand were scholars who stated that cultures were a product of colonialism and marginalization because of power-structures (Wilson 1995). The first approach draws upon the idea that Indian cultures are survivals of colonialism or any other kind of interference. Within this approach the cultures of indigenous ethnic groups are described as a continuity of ancient times. These cultures appear to be static, untouched and they look like cultural 'artefacts' or 'relics' from the past (Wilson and Watanabe in Wilson 1995). Many scholars questioned the fact that ethnic groups and their cultures are static and exclusive. Some scholars (John Hawkins, Friedlander 1984) argued that indigenous ethnicity should be seen as a product of colonialism and marginalization; an approach that became known as 'Historical Contextualism'. Barth (1969) was one of the most influential scholars within this approach. He came up with a vision on identity and ethnicity with a focus on boundaries (Barth 1969:15). He criticized the

⁹ Picture Frontpage Chapter: View on Totonicapán 24-03-2011

idea of ethnicity as an isolated whole and explained that ethnicity does not exist without the existence of other ethnicities and should be understood in relation to others. Barth drew upon the idea of his teacher Leach who described culture as a form of social situation and history (Leach 1954:16 in Wilson 1995). Moreover, he stated that ethnicity has to have a kind of benefit in order to be viable (Ibid). Here he drew upon an instrumentalist or functionalist approach that was to develop later on by Abner Cohen¹⁰ and Gellner (in Eriksen 2002: 56). Wilson explains that by focusing on boundaries, ethnic identity defines membership and exclusion (1995). With the focus on boundary-making instead of content, scholars, like Barth, categorized ethnic groups and presented them as social and historical constructions. Smith (1990) demonstrated that these categories reflect cultural opposition. Here, the adherents of this theory postulate that Mayas and Ladinos are opposite groups (C. Smith 1990: 220 in Wilson 1995: 8). Fischer and Brown (1998) added that the theory assumes that Indians wear traditional dresses and speak Mayan languages. If you are born as an Indian it is hard to become a Ladino even if you change status (Fischer and Brown 1998: 11). The data, presented later on in this thesis, will show that the boundaries between Ladino and Maya identity are not as clear as Barth suggests.

Recently, scholars try to find a more dynamic way to look at cultural content and form with a constructionalist approach. One of the most influential scholars within this approach is Benedict Anderson. Anderson (2006) explains how people are bound within a nation and how people imagine themselves as a member of a community. Anderson states that nations (or ethnicities) are imagined because the members will never know or meet all members of the social group, but in the minds of these members there is this idea of a communion (Anderson 2006: 6). This imagined community is a product of institutionalizations, standardizations and notions of a shared history, descent, moral and other aspect of culture (Ibid). In his book 'Imagined Communities', Anderson explains that the rise of nationalistic feelings are the result of the institutionalization of language, media, tax and bureaucratic systems and the introduction of specific symbols like flags and songs. These aspects make people conscious about the nation as the social group where he or she belongs to (Ibid). The constructional character of identity emphasizes the fluidity of boundaries. Although his book is about nations and nation-ness, the process of the construction of a nation and nationalist

¹⁰ Abner Cohen was an important anthropologist with an instrumentalist and functionalist approach. He emphasized that ethnicity should be studied as an important aspect of political organization. Ethnicity was created in order to participate in the fight for resources (in Eriksen 2002: 56). See also Gellner 1983.

feelings can be explained as well for ethnic identity construction. Anderson not only focuses on the form or the construct of a social group; he argues that being a member of a group is not only something ascribed from outside or created from the inside, but that culture means a lot to people because people would not sacrifice themselves for their social group if it did not mean anything to them (Anderson 2006: 8). He therefore also focuses on symbols and personal and cultural feelings. Anderson explains that history and cultural essential aspects are often used and developed in the construction of an identity group but these aspects should not be seen as untrue or invented (Anderson 2006). Cultural practices and symbols have historical roots and are often linked to a people and her territory (Ibid). There are more critics (Baumann 1999: Kinvall 2004) who emphasize the importance of symbols and emotional and psychological aspects within the construction of ethnic identity construction

From a psychological perspective Kinvall (2004) explains that there are emotional underpinnings in the construction of ethnic identity, as there exist a personal, emotional need to construct a comforting story about the self (2004: 748). 'Belonging' to a social group by sharing the same cultural aspects give meaning to oneself and one's identity. Especially in times of uncertainty there is a trend towards the formation in identity groups (Kinvall 2004: 750). Eriksen (2002) argues that symbols give meaning to society and symbols and rituals give content to culture (139). Cultural practices and symbols should not be seen as a static continuity from the past, he explains, or as a tool to differentiate from others, but these practices and rituals are used to create meaning about oneself (Ibid).

The constructionalist approach and the symbolic approach have often been studied separately. Gerd Baumann (1999) talks in this book 'The Multicultural Riddle' about a dualism within the field of ethnicity which is based upon these approaches; namely an objective approach versus an subjective approach towards ethnic identity (Baumann 1999). The first one includes a Durkheimian way with an emphasis on external and institutional factors, historical processes and power-structures. Scholars with an objective approach (like Barth) state that ethnicity is constructed because of external factors and that it is something that goes beyond individuals (in Bauman 1999). The subjective approach emphasizes voluntarism, symbols meaning and agency. Scholars with this approach (Weber 1993: Kinvall 2004) explain that ethnicity is constructed and ascribed by people themselves and that people are in search for a social group that they can belong to, because it will give meaning about themselves (Bauman 1999). Baumann warns that essentialist, instrumentalist and constructionalist approaches often miss assumptions of symbols and personal and

cultural feelings (Baumann 1999: 92-93). He suggests that it would be best to study these theories next to each other. His 'dual discursive competence' includes external factors and historical processes but also personal meaning and agency (Ibid)

Warren concludes that recent scholars move away from cultures as bounded entities toward a focus on culture markers (Warren 1998: 27). She explains that the recent work on indigenous ethnic identity construction (Warren 1978, 1992, 1993, Anderson 2006, Watanabe 1992, 1995 Wilson 1995 in Brown and Fischer 1998: 11) focuses on the fluidity of boundaries and the changing system of meanings assigned to cultural symbols (in Ibid). Scholars within this new paradigm recognize the continuity of cultural tradition although they do not forget that cultural signs have changed and have received new meaning (Wilson 1995: 11).

In the data presented later on, I will discuss the construction of ethnic identity construction from a symbolic and constructionalist perspective. I will show that ethnic identity construction includes external factors of identity making and emotional underpinnings. First I will discuss the intentional strategies of ethnic identity construction in more depth as they play an important role in Maya identity construction by spiritual leaders.

2.2 Identity politics

Nash (2001) emphasizes that changes in ethnic identity and cultural content relate to economic, political and social changes. Ethnic identities can be renewed, sometimes in an essentialist way, to claim cultural group rights, she explains (Nash 2001). Identity construction is therefore a powerful tool in politics, which in theoretical terms is called 'identity politics'. Anderson (2006) demonstrates that the presentation of a common history and the institutionalization of language, education, practices, tradition and other aspects of culture are important in propaganda strategies, in the creation of stereotypes and in the standardization within a social community (Anderson 2006). Firth (1981) adds that the state's role in identity construction is one of a number of possibilities. Ethnic groups, churches or civil organizations can influence the image of one's identity; they obtain power by doing this (Firth 1981: 583-586). According to Eriksen (2002) cultural aspects are even 'manipulated' to create a homogenous image of the social group. Identity politics is a reclaim to understand one's distinctiveness with the goal of a greater self-determination (Heyes 2007: 1). In the

construction of ethnic identity, common cultural symbols, practices, language, worldview, descent and history must be defined. Bolaños (2010) states that groups often tend towards an authentic character in self-determination to imply links with the past. Authenticity, the claim of an undisputed origin, is established through a sense of rootedness and historical memory, Bolaños explains. Rootedness is linked with notions of a place of origin, attachment to the land and territory; a shared history is often based on shared memories, local histories and a shared notion of oppression (Bolaños 2010: 73). These strategies play an important role in the construction of an ethnic identity and the representation of an ethnic group.

Eriksen talks about the rise of identity politics, which is related to the aspects of the wider social system (Eriksen 2002: 73). A specific ethnic group, oppressed politically, socially or economically, is likely to use identity markers as tools in the fight against oppression and they often use the homogenous group as a platform in the search for recognition (Ibid). When a whole group is affected by outsiders, it is likely to have tight social identity structures and it is important then to maintain boundaries (Kinvall 2004). It is crucial that an ethnic group is recognized as such by other social groups in order to claim rights. When an ethnic group has strong notions of shared origin and strong identity markers it is likely that they will be recognized as an ethnic group by others (Eriksen 2002: 80).

Critics of identity politics fear that identity politics tends towards an essentialist approach of culture. Identity politics, they say, put pressure on participants to fit within the defined feature (Appiah in Gutmann ed 1994: 163 in Heyes 2007:5). On the other hand there are scholars (Kinvall 2002) who argue that from the inside people can have essentialist feelings about oneself without intentional purposes to construct an identity. Kinvall explains that people naturally search for safety in their social group in times of uncertainty (Kinvall: 2004). Eriksen explains that a strong ethnic identity is an unchanging, stable core of ethnic belonging. It assures a person of a form of security and the feeling not left behind (Eriksen 2002: 82). Critics of identity politics warn that notions of sameness justify political mobilizations and that the approach on intentional strategies can miss complex social situations. The lack of intern pluralism can push away individual rights (Heyes 2007). Spivak suggest a 'strategic essentialism' where definitions of a culture only should be used for political goals without implying a deeper authenticity (Spivak 1990: 1-16 in Ibid). Others (Young 2002; Nelson 2001 in Ibid: 5) emphasize the fluidity and independency of social groups instead of fixed identity politics. Here a similar discussion is visible as earlier mentioned in theories on ethnic identity construction. In the research I aim

to include both perspectives on identity politics; the intentional strategies and the social situation.

Important aspects, which I did not mention before, in the rise of identity politics are the social and political context and technological developments. These aspects influence opportunities for leaders of a marginalized group to speak for themselves. Democracies and multicultural regimes aim to preserve various cultural identities to their residents and to give space for political parties to let their voice be heard (Heyes 2007: 13). Andolina et al. explain that when there is a lack of opportunity to participate or to give voice to a particular group, links with national or international organizations become very important (Andolina, Radcliff, Laurie 2005). These organizations (like NGO's) can help to make claims for cultural rights and help to define group-identities (Andolina, Radcliff, Laurie 2005, Hale 2002, Rosenblum 2003).

Scholars (Annis 1992; Halleck 1994) explain that technological developments also influence identity politics as it gives wider access to global communication systems (in Conklin 2002: 1051). With the use of new media, isolated communities are given the opportunity to make their voices be heard and connect with nonlocal groups (Ibid). New modes of communication create new images and perspectives about the 'Other' and make people conscious about the content and borders of a social group (Ibid). Andolina et al. explain that spatial representation in an international network is important to validate identities. Transnational representation is important by informing definitions of regions and group identities and by defining identity markers as social institutions of a particular group (Andolina et al. 2005: 681; Eriksen 2002).

I already mentioned some identity markers, like history, shared memory and notions of origin. Eriksen (2002) adds other cultural markers to the list, like the standardization of language. Stereotyping of social practices, gastronomy and dress are also powerful tools (Eriksen 2002: 83-85) and it asserts that all people within a social group reflect the typical image, like all Dutch people wearing clogs and eating cheese. Another powerful tool is religion which will be explained in more depth now, because it is the main focus of this thesis.

Religion

Religion is not only studied as part of identity construction but it is also an important field in the anthropological and social science. Kottak describes religion as ‘a cultural universe that influences belief and behaviours of peoples’ (Kottak 2008: 503). He argues that the study of religion includes subjects like worldview, function, meaning, inner faith, ideology and rituals (Ibid). The founder of the anthropology of religion was Sir Edward Tylor who described religion as a search for explanation. He believed that religion would fade away when people were capable of explaining the world by science (in McGee and Warms 2000: 377-392). Malinowski did not agree with this evolutionary character of religion and drew upon the functional aspect of religion, as the base of social organization (Ibid: 158-159). Clifford Geertz focusses on symbols and rituals as metaphors of social life (Ibid: 469-516). Rappaport follows a Durkheimian way of thinking by stating that religious rituals are formal, styled and repeated and therefore rituals are stereotyped and standardized (Winzeler 2008). Sociologist Max Weber argues that religion can produce a stereotyping effect on institutions and social organizations in society as it forms a base for other ideological aspects (Weber 1993: 207-209). Religious ideology is rather an ideological worldview, than a shared spiritual experience and it is therefore impossible that members of a religious or ethnic group share the same spiritual values or experiences (Ibid). In this research I follow Kottak’s view on religion as an ideology, worldview and tradition and I will also include inner faith and meaning. This approach seems the most appropriate vision when examining religion as a base of a particular culture in identity politics. The data presented later on demonstrates that religion gives meaning to Maya ethnic identity and is a symbol and tool in Maya ethnic identity construction.

In the previous paragraphs the theoretical discussions of ethnic identity construction and identity politics were presented. The focus of this research is the role of spiritual leaders and Maya religion in Maya ethnic identity construction. Identity construction and religion can only be understood when viewed in the particular socio-historical context. To understand the rise of Maya ethnic identity politics it is important to look first at social and political processes in Latin America and at the processes had led to the rise of the Pan-Maya movement.

2.3 The Maya movement

In Latin America the rise of indigenous identity politics and indigenous movements are related to changes to multicultural societies, transnational capitalism and neoliberalism. Yashar (1999) explains the rise of indigenous politics as an unintended consequence of two broader developments; the wave of democratization, which produced new spaces of participation, and neoliberal reform, which eliminated corporatists constraints on indigenous autonomy (Yashar 1999 in Hale 2004: 17). In most countries in the late 1970s and the early 1980s there was a transition to authoritarian rule which re-established democratic institutions (Yashar 1999). Governments promoted the private market, transnational capitalism and eliminated agricultural subsidies and credit programs (Yashar 1999: 85-87). With this approach many Indians lost rights and became even more marginalized (Ibid). Yashar explains that indigenous movements now pose a so-called post-liberal challenge. This contains an approach to a multi-ethnic and multicultural state where individual rights must be secured and where more diverse identities must be accommodated (Yashar 1999: 87-90 and Hale 2002). Hale (2002) states that this approach is the first step towards the claim that Indian cultures cannot be reduced to individual identities and rights. With this change, citizenship transformed to what Kymlicka calls a 'multicultural citizenship' where group rights within political liberalism could be compatible with one another (Hale 2002: 492).

Hale (2002) explains that since the 1960's and especially during the 1980's and 1990's many indigenous peoples in Latin Americas mobilized. It was a process of re-Indianization and the re-creation of patterns of indigenous militancy (Hale 2002: 574). Indigenous peoples increasingly advanced their struggles through a discourse that linked Indian identity with rights to territory, autonomy and people hood (Albó 1991, Bonfil Batalla 1981, Conklin and Graham 1995, Jackson 1995, Sherzer and Urban 1991, Stavenhagen 1992 in Hale 2002: 574). Andolina et al. (2005) state that there was an explosion of grass root organization, NGO's and international funded programs that promoted Indian culture (Andolina, Radcliff and Laurie 2005: 680). Indigenous rights became a common subject on national and international agendas and with great successes. In 1994 ten Latin American states signed the International Labour Organization (ILO) convention 169 to claim indigenous rights (Hale: 2002 486).

One of the most influential movements is the Pan-Maya movement. As Fischer (1999) and Warren (1998) note, leaders of Maya movements in Mexico, Belize and Guatemala,

reoriented Maya identities away from the local community towards a more universal conceptualization, uniting Mayas throughout Latin America. Yashar argues that with the establishment of a historical and cultural basis for their political agenda, Maya activists have tended towards an essentialist analysis (Yashar 2002). According to Fischer and Brown (1998) they used analysis from American and European academics to assess new meaning to traditional symbols in an attempt to construct a unified pan-Maya identity (3-11). Warren argues that the movement seeks to break the association of Maya identity with oppression by Ladinos, and that they wanted to create new combinations of ethnicity, work, religion, public culture, higher standards of living and democratic political participation (Warren 1998: 20). As the movement institutionalizes, it unites Mayan cultural and symbolic elements related to language, cosmology, religious ceremonies, the sacred calendar, traditional dress and spirituality, explains Little (2004).

Some scholars (Warren 1998, Rasch 2008) warn that identification takes place on many levels and that not all indigenous people identify themselves with the Pan-Maya movement. Rasch (2008) explains in her work that “articulations of ‘indigeneity’ are often so fragmented and multifaceted” and “that it is nearly impossible to adequately represent Indians and Mayas as such (a homogenous Maya people)” (Rasch 2008: 328). Warren argues that it is better to speak of micro-ethnicities and community identifications (Warren 1998: 10). To understand the particular case of Maya identity politics and the recent popularity of Maya culture in Guatemala it is necessary to understand the history of social and political processes by indigenous people in Guatemala. In next paragraph I will discuss Maya identity construction in relation to the country and her history.

2.4 The Maya Movement in Guatemala

Like in many Latin America countries the rise of indigenous movements started in the 1960s after years of oppression and marginalization (Fischer and Brown 1998). According to Fischer and Hendrickson (2003), the critics from indigenous people rose after the coup of 1954 where the CIA had overthrown Jorge Ubico, the president who favored indigenous people and peasants. Favoring indigenous people was a threat to internationally orientated companies¹¹ and the powerful position of the United States (Ibid). After the coup, right-wing

¹¹ like the United Fruit Company

leaders came to power and as a result indigenous peoples became even more marginalized. The criticism grew but did not turn into violence like some Mexican guerrilla groups (Fischer and Brown 1998). In fear of the violent revolution in neighboring countries, the army overreacted disproportionately and chased the indigenous movements of favoring communism (Ibid). The military kidnapped, murdered and tortured thousands of indigenous people and destroyed many indigenous villages. Under rule of Efraín Ríos Montt the violence reached its height between 1981 and 1983 (Ibid). The United Nations has judged the massacre as genocide (Fischer and Brown 1998). After a decade of changing power, final peace accords under pressure of the international community, were signed in 1996 (Fischer and Hendrickson 2003). This turned Guatemala into an official multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-cultural country. Documents that were signed included the right to develop cultural identities, the right to promote schooling in minority languages and to participate in politics (Warren 1998: 9).¹².

Since the signing of the ILO Convention 169 and the UN draft, many things have changed for indigenous people. Maya identity had to be redefined in the multicultural discourse and being Maya became something to be proud of (Rasch 2008). Many programs were established to promote Maya culture and to unify Maya people, although many indigenous people still identify themselves to local groups or villages rather than a transnational Pan-Maya identity (Warren 1998; Rasch 2008). Yashar explains that a key element in the process to unify Mayas is the organizational capacity and networks. At local level these networks consists of political, civil organizations, churches and NGO'S, Yashar explains. These institutions provide space for leaders to meet, to develop strategies, identify problems and construct a unified indigenous identity (Yashar 2005: 71 in Rasch 2008: 23). In the empirical part of this thesis the role of spiritual leaders in defining Maya culture in these projects will be examined.

The reexamination of Maya culture became important to claim an existing culture within the multicultural state of Guatemala and to participate in a society based on Ladino culture (Fischer and Brown 1998). Fischer and Brown (1998) state that organizations in the Maya highlands as elsewhere in Guatemala, are based on ideologies of capitalism, the free market and Western oriented science. There seems no perfect fit between Maya ideology and

¹² The ILO Convention 169 and the UN Declaration are the most important documents which state that the government must ensure that indigenous people and authorities have full membership in the country (Warren 1998: 9)

contemporary institutionalized life in Guatemala (Ibid) and therefore, the trend towards multiculturalism, is fragmented. There have been many discourses on how Maya culture and Ladino culture would fit within the country. Rigoberta Manchu, the first Maya woman who won a Nobel Prize for peace, proposed in 1992 a division of the country into two different states (Centro de Estudios Mayas 1999). Rigoberta argued that Maya and Ladino culture were too different (Ibid). Left-wing intellectuals proposed a unified Guatemala without Ladinos or Mayas where an independent government would rule the country (Fischer and Brown 1998). Others (like Falla) have put emphasis on the fact that ten Ladino-families have been in power for many years and till now are ruling the country. They argue that it would be almost impossible to change a system in such a way that both groups would have equal power and rights¹³ (Ibid). The multicultural discourse is very complex, especially in a country where cultures are presented as opposite to each other. In this research I do not aim to search for a solution in the multicultural debate. What I do want to investigate is the role of spiritual leaders in Maya ethnic identity construction as it becomes more important in the context of the multicultural discourse. Maya spirituality plays an important role in the construction of ethnic identity because it is considered the base of Maya culture. In the last paragraph I now will discuss spirituality as part of Maya identity.

2.5 Maya Spirituality

Molesky-Poz explains that Maya spirituality and worldview receive much attention and ceremonies are held more publicly since 1996 (Molesky-Poz 2006: 19). The peace accords have recognized the importance and uniqueness of Maya spirituality as an essential component of their cosmovision and the transmission of their values. It also established the right to transmit identity and spirituality to descendants (Ibid). According to Molesky-Poz¹⁴, Maya people started to reexamine their ancestral ways and spirituality in order to clarify their distinct cosmovision (16). Chiappari (2002) argues that the formalization of Maya religious rituals and practices is the product of the changes in the status of Maya religion as a tradition.

¹³ For more information about families in power read '*Guatemala: Linaje y Racismo*', by Casaús Arzú and Marta Elena (2010), F & G-Editores

¹⁴ Molesky-Poz is an American anthropologist who also did research about Maya spirituality in the Maya Highlands. I actually spoke with some informants who she mentioned in her book.

When studying Maya spirituality or religion many problems arise. First of all Maya spirituality is an unwritten tradition passed from generation to generation (Fischer and Brown 1998). It has been hybridized with other religious and spiritual traditions and has strong relations with regional myths and regional language (Ibid). There are many Maya linguistic communities in Guatemala¹⁵ who all have their own way of practicing Maya spirituality. Chiappari argues that there is no Maya church with a set doctrine and ritual with many participants during ceremonies (Chiappari 2002). Fischer and Brown (1998) add that there is a loss of knowledge which is partly caused by the fact that Maya spirituality is an oral tradition, and partly because of the systematic oppression of Maya spirituality by the state (Fischer and Brown 1998). During the 36- years of violent conflict Maya spiritual practice was forbidden and many *ajq'ijab* and practitioners were persecuted (Molesky-Poz 2006: 18-20). Moreover the popularity and the explosion of Evangelical churches, sponsored by the USA, have made many indigenous people converted to the Evangelical church. All these influences make it difficult to speak of a unified Maya church. This research explores the role of spiritual leaders, *Ajq'ijab*, in the reexamination of Maya spirituality and ethnic identity construction. Spiritual leaders are considered the keepers of the Maya calendar, Maya worldview and Maya spirituality and therefore they play an important role in defining Maya culture as part of Maya identity. The next chapters will approach the empirical data-analyze of my fieldwork period in Quetzaltenango and Totonicapán with the underlying theories which has been presented in this theoretical framework. I will look at the constructionalist aspects of identity construction but also include notions of symbolism, essentialist strategies, personal meaning and agency. Next chapter will start with an introduction about who Maya *ajq'ijab* are and how *ajq'ijab* transmit Maya knowledge.



Chapter 3:

Ajq'ijab in Quetzaltenango and Tonicapan

Chapter 3: Ajq'ijab in Quetzaltenango and Totonicapán

*“Like our modern cell phones vibrate, we also vibrate”*¹⁶

¹⁷ The area around Quetzaltenango and Totonicapán has various volcanoes and little villages where you find people harvesting their fields and doing their daily shopping's on the local market. Between ten mountaintops is the city of Quetzaltenango¹⁸ located. The city is considered the metropolis in the Guatemalan Highland where people find work and education. It is also the hearth of Maya culture, as briefly explained in the introduction. Being Maya in the 21st century has to be understood within the context of cultural, political and global changes. In my first days of my stay in the city I met a young Maya student, Gener, who had moved to Quetzaltenango in order to study. He explained to me that speaking a Maya language or wearing Maya dress is not considered 'cool'. In order to survive in the city he had to speak Spanish and live a 'modern' life, which made him balancing between two different worlds, as he explained. Gener is not a particular example, for many people the boundaries between being Maya and Ladino is complex and fluid. Western modes of living are popular among most people, especially youngsters. The difference between the two ethnic groups becomes less and less visible. Inter marriages, migration and assumptions of modernity caused this complex mixture of two cultures. In Totonicapán Maya culture is more visible than in the city, but also in this village Maya culture has been hybridized and mixed with various religious and cultural elements.

In Quetzaltenango and in the one-hour-drive-away city of Totonicapán, a process of reification of Maya culture is visible. I found a broad diversity of people who were practicing Maya spirituality; men and women, young and old, rich and poor, educated and non-educated. Many of them were considered spiritual guides, or *ajq'ijab* in Maya Quiché¹⁹. They

¹⁶ A twenty-one years old ajq'ij from Totonican (17-04-2011)
NB All quote's in these thesis are translated by the author.

¹⁷ Picture Frontpage Chapter: A women offering materials to the fire. Ceremony 22-03-2011

¹⁸ Xelajuj, the Maya name of Quetzaltenango, means 'between ten mountains'

¹⁸ In Quiché, '*Aj*' means 'work' or 'service' and '*q'ij*' means 'sun' or 'day'. Ajq'ijab is the plural form.

are considered the keepers of Maya culture and spirituality. Ajq'ij Audelino explained to me that ajq'ijab serve others by his or her knowledge about the calendar-system and Maya worldview.²⁰ Ajq'ijab are sometimes called 'Maya priests', 'day keepers' or 'shamans' as well.

The first ajq'ij I met was Don Carlos, a man in his sixties, wearing fancy glasses and with his hair always in a perfect fit. I was very nervous and could hardly speak during our first meeting in a restaurant close to the central park in Quetzaltenango. The tensions did not last very long and during my stay in the city we even became friends and Don Carlos one of the most important informants in this research project. Don Carlos is a respected ajq'ij in the area and has worked in many organizations. He introduced me to many projects in the city and to a group of ajq'ijab with people from Quetzaltenango and Totonicapán. It was in this group where I learned who Maya ajq'ijab are, what Maya spirituality is and how Maya knowledge is transmitted. This chapter explores who ajq'ijab are, what Maya spirituality is how knowledge is passed and why people become ajq'ij.

3.1 Ajq'ijab and Maya spirituality and worldview: an explanation.

With baskets full of candles, fruits, beans, blankets and jugs filled with atoll²¹ we struggle the way up to the mountaintop. It is dark and chilly and a soft rain falls down between the leaves. Two girls and a boy of seven years old, run up and down the line of people. Miriam walks in front of me. She is wearing her sandals with heels and she is holding a heavy jug on her head. Just before the sun rises we reach the top. The petals on the ground show that there have been people recently. An old man with a stick is the first who kneels to greet the altar which exists of a pair of rocks, lying in a half moon. There is garbage in the bushes next to the open spot where the altar is. People begin to clean the spot while the old man starts playing flute. Don Juan makes a small fire were the children can warm themselves because it is very cold. When the sun rises people pull out their bags of colored cloths and start to prepare the altar. Don Carlos makes a circle on the ground with sugar and draws a cross, from north to south, and from east to west, in the middle of it. At the point where the cross

²⁰ interview Audelino 04-04-2011

²¹ Atoll is a drink made out of maize, often used in ceremonies

coincidence the circle he makes little circles and puts cobal²² on it. Then people join him by putting candles, wooden sticks, flowers, seeds, caramels, sweets, incenses, cigars, rosemary, cinnamon and cacao beans in the circle. Then it is time to start the invocation. Don Carlos starts to speak with a soft voice. He greets the altar and welcomes us. Miriam's grand-daughter, a girl of six years old, ignites the fire with a cigarette lighter. There is a crackling sound of materials which are burning now. One by one people start to speak with muted voices in Quiché. They speak about the twenty nawales²³ on the Maya calendar. After each nawal, candles and beans are thrown into the fire. "It to pay back the days and thank the Ajaw²⁴, Mother Earth", Don Carlos whispers in my ear. An amazing feeling of energy surrounds us and the awareness of time of space fades away. Then, when all materials are burned, we share the fruits we have been carrying with us. It is a pleasant breakfast which we share in silence, within the first light of the sun that is rising above the mountains now.²⁵

'Maya spirituality is very much alive', a sentence often used in books and articles about Maya spirituality. And indeed, when I was introduced in the group *El Tiempo y El Espacio*, they showed me a world embraced with Maya spirituality. The ceremony described in the vignette above is a ceremony to celebrate the Maya New Year and was held on the 22th of February 2011. The perception of time and the calendar system is a basic aspect of Maya spirituality. Don Carlos explained that a certain day on the Maya calendar explains and predicts the characteristic of events. He explained that the Maya calendar, which consists of several cycles, is more precise than the Gregorian calendar. The third cycle for example consists of twenty days which are linked to a personal spirit. The fourth circle is the sacred cycle of 260's days based on the lunar system. The third, based on the solar system, consists of 360 days plus five extra days which are called the *Wayeb*. In the *Wayeb* ajq'ijab gather together to reflect and meditate²⁶. Kawoq, Baldomero Cuma Chávez²⁷, an ajq'ij and writer,

²² Cobal is a kind of wood which is used in ceremonies

²³ A Nawal is a spirit of people and objects which is linked with the day of birth

²⁴ A synonyme for Ajaw is God, Mother Earth or Creator.

²⁵ Vignette about the ceremony to celebrate the spring 22-03-2011

²⁶ Interview Don Carlos 25-03-2011

states in his book that ajq'ijab are the persons who interpret the calendar and connect their knowledge with everyday practices. They know when farmers should harvest their land and when ceremonies should be held (Kawoq 2005).

The ceremonies serve to dedicate and celebrate important dates. Don Carlos explained that the ceremony is the place where human people search for contact with the *Ajaw*. With offers, people 'pay' Mother Earth as a gesture of gratitude. They can also ask for well-being, health, or knowledge in difficult moments of life. At all ceremonies I joined, the center of the ceremony was fire, which is inflamed from incenses, copal, sugar, candles and many other materials. The ajq'ijab of *El Tiempo y El Espacio* told me that the spiritual guide communicates with and interprets her volume, length and sparks. That is how the *Ajaw* and grandparents communicate with Maya people. Ajq'ijab convert and transmit these interpretations and use their knowledge to resolve problems and coordinate ideas and thoughts. Don Carlos explained:

"It is the teacher, who directst, guides and coordinates spirituality, and it is the teacher who interprets the calendars, fire, signals, nature, dreams and the Nawales."

Daniel Matul, a Maya intellectual and activist, gives also an explanation of Maya spirituality. He argues that the Maya cosmovision is based on the sciences of earth, like nature, astronomy and maths. This knowledge permits to situate and relates the human condition and the cosmos, and the earth and the life (Matul 2008: 4).²⁸

As mentioned before in the theoretical framework, when studying Maya spirituality or religion as a form of a continuous tradition based on a certain fixed ideology problems arise. First of all Maya spirituality is an oral tradition with only few written testaments. Historical accounts from Pedro Mártir de Naglería and Bartolomé de las Casas presented in four different Codexes²⁹ are written stories of the sixteenth centuries (Centro de Estudios Mayas: 1999). The Popol Vuh, a book about the life of Maya Quiché is also written during Spanish colonization. When I talked with ajq'ijab about what Maya spirituality was they based their idea on these historical accounts and archaeological findings but also stories told by Maya people. Scholars like Fischer and Brown and Molesky-Poz mention that cultural traditions

²⁷ Kawoq, Baldomero Cuma Chávez is an ajq'ij from Ixchime and works for the organization Oxjalul'Aj

²⁸ Daniel Matul has sent me various unpublished documents. One of them, which I refer to here is 'El Poema Galático'

²⁹ Codex of Dresden, Codex of Madrid, Codex of Paris and the Grolier Codex

have been passed from generation to generation and therefore Maya spirituality has been hybridized with other religious and spiritual traditions. According to them, the loss of knowledge can also be explained by the systematic oppression of Maya spirituality and culture by the state. Most indigenous people in Quetzaltenango and Totonicapán are converted to evangelical churches and their practices are sometimes mixed with Maya traditions (Fischer and Brown 1998). Chiappari confirms that Maya spirituality is not an ordinary religion where the community comes together and where a leader leads the ceremony. According to him, this has also to do with the shamanic character of it (Chiappari 2002). The idea, often mentioned by scholars (Centro de Estudios Mayas 1999: Molesky-Poz 2006: Hale 2002) and in programs of indigenous peoples, is that *ajq'ijab* are the transmitters of knowledge of the *ancient* Maya traditions. The existence of *ajq'ijab*, the 'ajq'ij-ship' as you can call it, is also described as a continuing tradition. As Molesky-Poz states: 'Ajq' ijab are the center of transmission of Maya knowledge because spirituality and worldview are the core of Maya culture' (Molesky-Poz 2006). However, stories obtained by the *ajq'ijab* in Quetzaltenango and Totonicapán demonstrate that in most cases there is no family-tradition of a pure practice of Maya spirituality and that most *ajq'ijab* only involved recently. The stories show that Maya culture cannot be seen as only a transmitted tradition of ancient knowledge.

3.2 The transmission of Maya knowledge and rite d' passage

People often explain that Maya culture is an oral tradition, passed within the family. When I spoke with *ajq'ijab* they often told me that their parents were converted to a Christian church. Not in all cases, but most *ajq'ijab* came from a Christian family. There were stories about *ajq'ijab* with great-grandparents who were *ajq'ij* and *ajq'ijab* with parents who mixed Maya rituals with Christian faith. However, in most cases I did not find a long family tradition of practicing Maya spirituality and most *ajq'ijab* only were involved recently. Knowledge about Maya spirituality and worldview was in most cases transmitted by a friend or relative in groups of *ajq'ijab*.

When I asked for the reasons to become *ajq'ij*, people had different motivations. Some of them explained that they wanted to restore the country's history and the loss of their Maya roots. Don Juan is an *ajq'ij* and teacher on a private University in Quetzaltenango, and said "Maya people are confused. They are befouled by colonialists, the church and Western ways

of thinking”³⁰. Ajq’ij Rosa explained to me that she thought that bad things were happening because of the fact that Maya people didn't know anymore how to live a Maya way of life and how to threat Mother Nature. Some ajq’ijab explained that they were searching an alternative way of understanding and living the world. Don Juan explained:

*“It is the situation who drives you to it. A disease or problems on you work; something that you cannot overcome. These are the circumstances who drives people to search for something more: to Maya spirituality. Because by practicing it, you are going to understand yourself and to live like it to overcome your problems. I had the feeling I missed something crucial. That is why I started to look for my history and my culture. Maya spirituality was a part of me, but I had lost it, and now I have it back.”*³¹

For some people like Don Juan it was a combination of alternative ways of living and a search for his roots. Ruth, a female ajq'ij from Totonicapán, told me that Maya spirituality was her last hope. She had lost her house and family and she could not make a living any more by weaving. She had first turned towards the Christian God, but lost her faith when her situation did not change. She explained that she had hope now, because “the Mayan way was closer to her roots”³². Thus, she turned towards Maya spirituality because she was in search for a different belief-system. Don Carlos told me a very different story. He was grown up in a little town where people suffered a lot during the violent conflict. He was not very open about what had happened but I understood that he had witnessed a lot and that he had fled to the city. All his life is about promoting Maya spirituality and culture because he felt that his people and his culture was and is threatened. He was very conscious about the importance of maintaining Maya spirituality in the political and social situation in Guatemala. Ruth on the other hand involved into Maya spirituality because of personal interests. Don Juan was conscious of the maintenance of a Maya identity but also put forward personal interest. By repairing Maya spirituality the meaning of his personal identity would be re-established. These different stories reflect the social reality in Quetzaltenango and Totonicapán. There are a great number of ajq’ijab who become involved because they thought that it was important

³⁰ Interview Don Juan 17-02-2011

³¹ Interview Baudelio Sis Sis 16-02-2011

³² Conversation Ruth 21-03-2011

to maintain Maya identity and culture. This would give new meaning to their personal identity but also to Maya identity as a social ethnic group. There were also a number of people who involved because of personal interests in Maya spirituality as a belief system. Some ajq'ijab even involved into Maya spirituality by coincidence when their friends or family attracted them to join in.

Knowledge about Maya worldview and spiritual practices are often transmitted by relatives, friends or in a groups of ajq'ijab. Maybe it is better to speak of a gathering of people as these groups are often informal without official leaders and organization. There exist many different groups who practice Maya spirituality and they all practice it in a different way. Not only between different language groups there was a lot of difference but also between groups within the same area. Also the way people could become ajq'ij varied but there was always a form of rite d' passage. I got the idea that the general notion was that young people (mostly men) would go through a kind of rite d' passage and then become ajq'ij. But there were also elderly people and women who became ajq'ij. Carlos Moran, ajq'ij and investigator, explained that these elderly were recuperating what they had missed. "During the last years", he said, "there is more attention to Maya spirituality and that is why many people want to become ajq'ij now". "What is the difference between being a practitioner and being ajq'ij?" I asked him. "Ajq'ijab put all their live into Maya spirituality and worldview", he explained, "they know everything. Practitioners go to ajq'ijab to ask for advice because they often mix with Christian traditions". Ajq'ijab can be seen as the teachers of the Maya people who offer their services to people. The frequencies of these services vary between the ajq'ijab. Some ajq'ijab dedicated their whole life to it³³ and some ajq'ij seldom offer his or her service.

There are many different ways to become ajq'ij but they all seemed to involve a period of learning which was followed by a special ceremony. After completing the rite d' passage a person achieved the status of ajq'ij and is considered ready to help other people. Ajq'ijab received their status by their social group and also in the society (local, national, international). Alejandro a 21 year's old ajq'ij from Totonicapán felt that he was ready to become ajq'ij when was sixteen. Don Carlos and his father (who is also ajq' ij) helped him with the preparation by studying the Popol Vuh and by sharing their experiences. At one night he had to go to four different altars alone where he held four ceremonies. After that night he was considered ajq'ij and equal to Don Carlos and his father although they had more

³³ Only few ajq'ijab can make their living out of these services. Don Mario explained that the people should take care of the ajq'ijab, so they didn't have to ask for donations for the services. "Nowadays", he explained, "ajq'ijab have to have a job next to it in order to survive"

experience than him. Every group of ajq'ijab has a different way of rite d'passage but there were also similarities, like a ceremony and a period of studying. Despite the different ways they all received the status of ajq'ij. When I asked Alejandro about the differences he said;

“You have to understand Maya spirituality by practicing it. Our teachers (the elderly) know, but they don't tell you. They want us to find out for ourselves. That is why there is so much difference. We are not the same but we are all Maya and we are all ajq'ij.”³⁴

The stories explain that there is a much difference in the practice of Maya spirituality and that it is open for interpretations. In most cases there was not necessarily a family tradition which highlights the temporary character of the popularity of ajq'ijab. There motivations are a melting pot of people who are interested in Maya spirituality and worldview. They involved because they wanted to recuperate personal or cultural meaning or because they had intentional political strategies or personal interest in the religious ideology. Therefore Maya spirituality cannot be studied as a continuing tradition. It has to be studied in the context of the rise of popularity of Maya culture and identity.

3.3 The popularity of Maya spirituality

Molesky-Poz and many other scholars state that there is a rise in the numbers of practitioners of Maya spirituality and ajq'ijab in the Maya Highlands as well as in other parts of Guatemala, since 1996. During the 36- years of violent conflict Maya spiritual practice was forbidden and many ajq'ijab and practitioners were persecuted (Molesky-Poz 2006: 18-20). A man from Totonicapán, Don Santos, explained that altars were destroyed and any association with Maya culture was band from newspapers and television. Maya spirituality and practice was described as *'brujeria'* (witchcraft). Even nowadays, fifteen years later, in Quetzaltenango and Totonicapán, there is discrimination and fear among Maya ajq'ijab. As one man from Totonicapán explained:

³⁴ Interview Alejandro 21-03-2011

“Some ajq’ij are ashamed to tell that they are ajq’ij. When you ask them in public for a treatment they say: ‘No, I am not an ajq’ij’, but you know that they are. You know that they go up the mountain in the night to pray secretly. They just fear of what people say about them”³⁵.

Despite of these continuing discriminations and fear, there is a new popularity of Maya spirituality and being ajq’ij. Many scholars (Fischer and Brown: 1998; Hale 2002) explain the rise of the number of ajq’ijab with the fact that people can openly express that they are ajq’ij now. The peace accords asserted the right to be an ajq’ij and to transmit Maya knowledge. Scholars, like Hale (2002) or Fischer and Brown (1998), argue that ajq’ijab don’t fear anymore because of the decline of public discrimination. It asserts that Maya ajq’ijab have always been there and just have been hidden. It asserts that being ajq’ij is a traditional, continuous aspect of indigenous Maya culture. As mentioned above, in most cases there is no long family tradition of the practice of Maya spirituality or being ajq’ij. The rise of the number of ajq’ijab since 1996 cannot be explained by the fact that ajq’ijab have been hidden. There are more and more people who become ajq’ijab. As briefly touched in the theoretical framework, since the existence of the Pan-Maya movement, there has been much attention paid to Maya culture. Especially ajq’ijab have been given many attention as they are considered the keepers of Maya knowledge and tradition. Many NGO's and funded programs were established in Quetzaltenango and Totonicapán to help Maya people. It became important to people to express that they were Maya in order to obtain aid from these programs. I do not want to insert that people only turned towards Maya spirituality because it became profitable. This would be a single explanation. What I want to show is that Maya spirituality has been promoted and therefore the indigenous population became more in contact with Maya spirituality. Some ajq’ijab involved because of personal reasons, some in search for their roots and some were conscious about the political benefits of the construction a Maya identity. Rasch (2008) explains that being Maya became something to be proud of. With all the interest from the international Diaspora Maya spirituality became an interesting ‘thing’. People became in touch with Maya spirituality through their networks in their group of friends or relatives. The popularity of being ajq’ijab and the vibration of Maya spirituality is part of the approach towards the construction of Maya ethnic identity. The practice in social groups of ajq’ijab created space to define contemporary Maya spirituality as part of

³⁵ Conversation Norato Santos, Totonicapán 24-03-2001

being Maya. The definitions of Maya spirituality include aspects of written documents and local experiences of practicing. How the re-examination of Maya spirituality works by *ajq'ijab* in social groups will be explained in the following chapter.



Chapter 4:
The reexamination of Maya
spirituality in groups of Ajq'ij

Chapter 4:

The re-examination of Maya spirituality in groups of Ajq'ijab

"You have to feel it, that you are Maya. It is inside you. The way you are thinking, understanding and believing. Maya spirituality is not a religion. It is the way you are."³⁶

³⁷ Chiappari (2002) states that Maya spirituality, because of the lack of institutionalization and the fact that it is an oral tradition, is open for interpretations. In order for a tradition to be maintained or to be seen as such, there must be some kind of continuity, by institutionalizing it (Chiappari 2002). Many authors (Wilson 1995, Warren 1998) talk about the process in which spiritual leaders become more purists when they become more conscious about the boundaries of Maya identity. The homogenizing character of contemporary Maya spirituality is often explained from a higher national or international level and not from a local level. How this process of reexamination of Maya spirituality works in groups of ajq'ijab, and how they define Maya spirituality, will be examined in this chapter.

4.1 Maya identity

As mentioned briefly in former chapter, ajq'ijab are often part of small unofficial social groups consisting of relatives. It may be better to speak about a gathering of ajq'ijab and participants where people are related through relationships of friendship, neighbors or relatives. What the ajq'ijab within the group share is a notion of being indigenous or Maya. I asked Don Juan if being Maya was something 'in his blood'. He doubted a little before answering me. He believed that Maya culture was transmitted for one part by 'the' Maya people but on the other hand he considered Maya culture as a way of living and understanding the world. He gave me an example of an ajq'ij from Ireland who had moved to

³⁶ Interview Ajq'ij Don Carlos, 29-01-2011

³⁷ Picture Frontpage Chapter: Meeting El Tiempo y El Espacio in the Wayeb, 18-02-2011

Quetzaltenango and who had learned to speak Maya Quiché. According to Don Juan this Irishman had learned how to live and think according to Maya ideology. The people in the city considered him a Maya ajq'ij, although it was not like being 'real Maya'.³⁸ Don Juan's answer was typical in the way Maya ajq'ijab talked about Maya identity. On one hand they were very careful when talking about race or a bloodline. They linked race with racism and oppression. Especially intellectual ajq'ijab were conscious about the fact that 'race' was not a subject studied in the modern social sciences. Ajq'ij Audelino for example explained that notions of race had caused civil war and violence in Guatemala. According to him, it was better to speak of 'Maya society' than 'Maya people'³⁹. When I asked Don Carlos if I could become Maya, he told me that I could learn and act like Maya people, but because I was raced in the Western world, I could never eliminate my occidental way of thinking. On the other hand ajq'ijab often spoke about a Maya ethnic group of people as descendants of the Ancient Maya people. Most ajq'ijab I spoke with, made a distinction between the practice of Maya spirituality and being Maya. They explained that the practice of Maya spirituality is an essential part of Maya identity that people were able to learn. Indigenous people converted to Christianity were often described as Maya people who have been confused. Audelino argued that during 500 years of colonization people had been seduced to other ways of living. According to him it would take 500 years more to recuperate Maya spirituality and culture.

During one of my first weeks during research I joined a conference in the cultural center of Quetzaltenango. It was about a painting from the Ancient Mayas reinterpreted by a Dutch anthropologist⁴⁰. At the end of the presentation there was a discussion (interestingly, most of them were ajq'ij). Audelino, who was also presented, stated that anthropologist and other scholars were trying to create a history about Maya people, but that these histories were all interpretations. This gave me the opportunity to ask him and the others how linguistic Maya communities form an overall Maya identity. Audelino compared Maya society with the Roman Empire, where people lived in different communities but shared fundamental things; like politics, worldview and spirituality. According to him, the different languages did not influence Maya identity. Don Carlos intervened and explained to me that he tried to connect some ajq'ijab from the Mam-community (another linguistic community) with ajq'ijab from *El*

³⁸ Interview Don Juan 16-02-2011

³⁹ Interview Audelino 12-04-2011

⁴⁰ The 'Lienzo de Quauhquechollan' is a map painted in the 16th Century painted by indigenous Quauhquechollan. Florine Asselberg, from the University of Leiden has done research about the content of it.

Tiempo y El Espacio, so they could share and learn from each other. According to him, all people in the linguistic communities were Maya people. They only practiced Maya culture differently and within another language. Don Carlos and also others identified themselves with the Pan-Maya movement while they did not deny local differences. Discussions like these in the cultural center of Quetzaltenango are one of the many ways ajq'ijab redefine Maya spirituality and culture. Don Carlos explained to me that he wanted to strengthen Maya identity by eliminating Christian influences in order to practice a pure form of Maya culture. In order to explain this process I first tell something more about the group where he is part of.

4.2 Diversity and Unifying

The group of ajq'ijab *El Tiempo y el Espacio* had been formed five years ago by people from Totonicapán. Don Mario, his son Alejandro and friend Don David were the initiators who organized communal ceremonies. Some people from different suburbs joined in, like Miriam and her husband, Santos, and their daughter Rosa with her two daughters. Also Francisco and Ana, a just married couple and the single woman Ruth joined the group, together with some uncles and aunts. They all seemed to have known each other as friends, family or neighbors. Don Carlos joined the group not very much later and although there was no official leader, he received much status and often led the ceremony. Don Juan and his family sometimes joined the group but were seen as outsiders⁴¹. The members of the group came together on special days and gathered almost every Sunday at somebody's house. On these meetings they talked about the content of Maya spirituality, problems in the community or upcoming events. Although they assured me that men and women have same status within the Maya thought, the women never led the ceremony or meetings. Not only between men and women but also between men there was a lot difference and even rivalry. This rivalry was about their qualifications and their ways of practicing Maya spirituality. Don Carlos whispered me during one ceremony:

“That man with the long hair, David, you know, he doesn't do it right. He speaks to loud and he wants a lot of attention. That is not good, that is not the way we should do it. We have to be reserved. He wants to lead the ceremonies, but it would be better if

⁴¹ Don Juan and his family moved from the Alta Verapaz to a small village close to Quetzaltenango ten years ago. The family is still seen as new people, and not Maya Quiché

*Alejandro learns to lead the ceremonies and meetings. Although he is much younger, he knows and wants to learn.”*⁴²

This example shows that there is a kind of underlying conflict between ajq'ijab. Don Carlos didn't want Don David to do the ceremony because he considered his way too predominant. Status within a group was mostly related to knowledge and one's attitude. In *El Tiempo y El Espacio* Don Carlos received a high status and even a kind of unofficial leadership status. He achieved this status by doing many projects and promoting Maya culture actively. He is an ajq'ij well known in the area and even in the international Diaspora⁴³. Don Carlos and Don Mario explained to me that that by practicing within the group they could create a proper form of Maya religion and teach young people in a proper way. Many ajq'ijab listened to Don Carlos and joined his reexamination-process of Maya spirituality.

In order to explain the different forms in which ceremonies can be hold I will give an example about a ceremony to celebrate the beginning of the spring. There were a lot of people invited to join *El Tiempo y El Espacio* during that night and early morning. There were even journalists, photographers, young people working for NGO's and ajq'ijab from Tonicapán and the surrounding villages. Then an interesting thing happened. A short story from my diary:

'An old man collapses. He sits with his bag against a rock which is part of the altar. His hands are trembling and he is making high sounds. Three or four people gather around him and start asking questions while the others continue and don't give any attention to what is happening. The man is answering the people around him in a high voice. When I ask Don Carlos about it after the ceremony, he tells me that the Nawal of the mountain had entered the man. "Do you believe it?" He asks me. "He has been taught by a different teacher. That's why 'El Tiempo y El Espacio' doesn't want him

⁴² Don Carlos during a ceremony 22-02-2011

⁴² Don Carlos had a principal role in the Documentary '*La Distancia*'. A movie about the effect of the violent conflict in Guatemala to Maya people. The movie was shown on the Latin American Film Festival in Utrecht in May 2011 for instance.

⁴³ Part of my diary. Ceremony to celebrate the beginning of the spring 20-03-2011

⁴³ Interview Don Carlos 21-03-2011

to be part of the group. But he is Maya and ajq'ij, so on these special days we invite them (people like him), but it is not the good way to do it. ”⁴⁴

Some ajq'ijab didn't believe that a *nawal* could enter a human being and communicate with people. Like Don Carlos, they explained that the man was taught by a teacher who didn't know how to practice Maya spirituality. This story is great example about the complex contradictions within the practice of Maya spirituality and the way ajq'ijab are included or excluded from social groups. Rivalry and the mechanism of inclusion and exclusion do not represent the idea of a homogenizing process or an institutionalization of Maya spirituality and do not follow theories about Maya identity politics. But when taking a closer look at what happened during that day there are some interesting aspects of identity construction visible. First of all, journalists and young people from NGO's (some of them foreigners) where invited. The ajq'ijab of *El Tiempo y El Espacio* had invited all these people because they wanted the ceremony to be *seen* by the *public*. Don Carlos explained that it was important to show that Maya spirituality existed to decrease prejudices⁴⁵. And secondly, before the ceremony started, there was a small conference in the valley where people spoke about the importance of the practice of Maya spirituality. We were all standing in a circle around a fire in the middle of the night. Don Carlos started the meeting with a speech about Maya culture and the importance of maintaining it. He said that we were all standing on the land of Maya people, where hundreds of years ago 'our' ancestors also practiced Maya spirituality and shared the same view. With words like 'shared territory', 'shared history' and 'shared ancestors' Don Carlos created a sense of rootedness, by connecting the people to the Ancient Maya people. He connected the people also to the territory where we were all standing on, in the perception that it was the land of their ancestors. In the presence of journalists, photographers and people from NGO's he talked about Maya spirituality as part of Being Maya and claimed a form of authenticity. Then others joined the conversation by adding stories about projects promoting Maya culture and stories about oppression and marginalization. These stories contributed to a notion of a shared memory.

I could feel an energy of people, young and old, enthusiast of being part of that great Maya 'thing'. Especially the young people from the NGO's were curious about their roots when Don Carlos talked about their shared identity. The young people asked many questions,

and thanked Don Carlos for the wonderful, 'exotic' experience by making them part of the celebration of the spring with 'real Maya ajq'ijab'.⁴⁶

I do not want to assert here that ajq'ijab are not descendants of the Ancient Maya people. I also do not want to give the image that Maya spirituality is something invented and doesn't have historical roots. What I want to explain is, how ajq'ijab by the practice of Maya spirituality and their presentation as practitioners of Maya culture in meetings like these, have effect on the image of Maya identity and how this image is used in Maya ethnic identity construction.

4.3 Purification

During many ceremonies and meetings where I joined *El Tiempo y El Espacio*, the ajq'ijab discussed about the contents of Maya spirituality. They used the Popul Vuh, other historical testaments and personal experiences as the base in defining Maya religion. Don Carlos used to call it a 'purification process', where influences from Christianity are eliminated in order to go back to the purity of their religion. Although he never explained to me with so many words, he was aware of the presentation of the Maya people as a strategy in politics. He considered himself and his people as representatives of the Maya people and Maya cultural practitioners. He emphasized the importance of presenting themselves as such. Don Carlos said for example:

*“We (ajq'ijab) are the ones who have to know (what Maya spirituality is). The government doesn't know, tourists don't know, even the Maya people here don't know. We don't know things. We don't know exactly how the lunar systems work, what the animals of the days mean or how to present a child to the mountains when it is born. We have to study more and practice together. We should know about astronomy and maths. If they don't know, we have to know who we are and what we know. We are the Maya people”*⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Words used by the people present at the meeting 20-03-2011

⁴⁷ Don Carlos, meeting 'El Tiempo y El Espacio' in El Wayeb 18-02-2011

What Don Carlos means is that the indigenous people should know what Maya spirituality is in order to represent themselves as such. By studying historical documents they should be able to present a stronger image of Maya culture. Not only the ajq'ijab from *El Tiempo y El Espacio* but other ajq'ijab from Quetzaltenango I spoke with, confirmed the idea of a purifying process. Audelino for example spoke about 'going back to the roots' in order to revalue Maya spirituality⁴⁸.

One of the moments when the ajq'ijab talked about the content of Maya spirituality was during the Wayeb, the five days before the Maya New Year started. They talked about how they, as ajq'ijab, could do their work better and eliminate other influences. One purpose came from Miriam, a very sympathetic elderly woman. She wanted to make the materials for ceremonies herself. She explained that many materials could also be used in Church. By making materials herself she could claim materials as an authentic part of Maya religion. She told the others in the group that she had a problem because she did not know how to make these materials in a way like their ancestors would do. Miriam said:

*"I tried to make copal by myself. No one ever told me how to do it (because) a lot of knowledge is lost. But I experimented and my daughter (Rosa) watched, so she can give her knowledge to her children. Materials always have changed and some materials don't exist anymore. But we can experiment and make our own new materials in order to revalue Maya spirituality."*⁴⁹

What Miriam means here is that they could try to find new ways within the contemporary world to practice Maya spirituality. By showing her daughter how to make the materials she wanted to create a new continuing tradition as part of Maya culture.

Another aspect they talked about during this meeting was the way the dead should be buried according to Maya worldview. Don Mario started this topic by saying that there were no facilities for Maya people to bury their dead on a Maya way. People always went to church because they offered ceremonies and a place on the graveyard. He proposed that ajq'ijab could hold ceremonies as well, but that they had to study the Popol Vuh better in order to understand how this should be done because most ajq'ijab didn't know well⁵⁰. The proposals

⁴⁸ Interview Audelino 12-04-2011

⁴⁹ Miriam during the meeting of the Wayeb 18-02-2011

⁵⁰ Don David during the meeting of the Wayeb 18-02-2011

by Miriam and Don Mario show that there is an attempt to create new forms of Maya spiritual practice. Miriam and Don Mario tried to find new ways by offering services to people and to reinstall Maya spirituality as a tradition.

Another problem they faced was the institutionalization of language. Don Juan explained that he felt 'more' Maya' when he spoke Quiché. According to him, language is not only a form of speech but a connection with worldview and one's feeling about themselves. According to him, the institutionalization of Spanish on schools takes away the right of Maya people to be themselves. He hoped that one day Maya Quiché would be institutionalized into the Guatemalan system.⁵¹ The *ajq'ijab* in the group *El Tiempo y El Espacio* all agreed that there was a long way to go, to transfer Maya spirituality and cultural practices into a pure form and to institutionalize it in the society.

These meetings were very important in the redefinition of Maya spirituality. They often based on written documents like the Popol Vuh but also on experiences of the people with the most experience. In the group of *El Tiempo y El Espacio*, Don Carlos was this person. During the meetings Don Carlos sometimes turned into a teacher and taught about many aspects of Maya spirituality. He is an intellectual and had written many articles about Maya spirituality. I discovered that intellectuals had a lot of influence in defining what Maya spirituality is.

4.4 The intellectual Maya *ajq'ijab*

Recently there have been a number of intellectuals who become *ajq'ij*. It is likely that the rise of Maya intellectuals coincidence with social and political circumstances. According to sociologist Carlos Guzman Böckler it may be true that intellectuals changed their political strategies as left-wing intellectuals fighting individual rights, towards strategies focusing on Maya ethnic identity and claiming rights from a shared platform. Böckler explained that with the recognition as indigenous Maya people and the rise of NGO's and organizations promoting Maya culture in the area, a focus on Maya people as a specific group of civilians was a more powerful tool than a focus on participation of indigenous people as civilians in the existing fragmented, political and social system. Maya intellectuals, like Falla (2005),

⁵¹ Don Juan during the Wayeb 18-02-2011

now promote Maya culture as opposite to Ladino-culture⁵². These intellectuals play an important role in defining what Maya culture is, by studying it (see also Rasch 2008). Some of them claim to be ajq'ij as well. I assume that many intellectuals started to study Maya culture and Maya spirituality since 1996 and that they play a major role in Maya identity politics and also in the popularity of Maya spirituality. It is hard to obtain reliable data about the theory that some intellectuals changed from left-wing political strategies towards a Maya cultural focused program. Most of the intellectuals didn't agree with changes in political strategies. Audelino, ajq'ij and teacher on the public university, explained that strategies of Maya activists never have changed and that Maya culture has been promoted because there is more consciousness about the loss of Maya culture but not because of political strategies.⁵³ Intentional or not, the fact is that there is a rise of intellectual ajq'ijab who started to study Maya spirituality.

In Quetzaltenango I found a number of ajq'ijab with a university degree who studied and taught about Maya spirituality. Audelino, explained that he began to study Maya culture in order to rescue elements that were lost. By studying Maya culture he wanted to develop the indigenous society. According to him, the work of intellectuals and activists has led to a decline in discrimination and to a rise of knowledge about Maya culture.⁵⁴ Don Juan, ajq'ij and teacher within the social and political sciences on a private University, explained:

*“Most of the students believe in a Christian God and the students who do practice Maya spirituality are too shy to tell so. I sometimes teach them about Maya spirituality and tell them about the ceremonies. It is very important; it's part of the country, our history. Someone has to tell them about their own culture, if nobody does, the schools don't teach these things”.*⁵⁵

Intellectual ajq'ijab were recognized by other ajq'ijab and often they received much status. As mentioned before, Don Carlos received this status within the group *El Tiempo y El Espacio*. Most of the articles written by ajq'ijab were based on texts, like the Popol Vuh. Daniel

⁵² Interview Carlos Guzman Bockler 25-02-2011

⁵³ Interview Audelino 12-04-2011

⁵⁴ Interview Audelino 12-04-2011

⁵⁵ Interview Don Juan 16-02-2011

Matul's article about Maya cosmovision and predictions in 2012 writes for example in his introduction:

With the testament from those books from the past, also including, Maya philosophers and scientists: we can find astronomy, astrology, agriculture, maths, philosophy, mystics, architecture, calendar, history, genealogy and everything that distinguish Maya culture and Maya civilization (Matul 2008: 6).

In his article he based Maya spirituality at written historical testaments. Daniel Matul also held ceremonies in the Maya Highlands and taught in the Diaspora about Maya culture. In the example of Daniel Matul it is visible that his knowledge and vision about Maya spirituality, based on written documents, play a significant role in defining what Maya spirituality is. Intellectual Ajq'ijab do not write about local practices and diversity but present Maya spirituality as a continuing tradition. Therefore they play an important role in the construction of Maya ethnic identity. How this image is presented to the world is examined in next chapter. In this chapter the relationship between ajq'ijab and local, national and international organizations is presented with the aim to understand how ajq'ij contribute to image-making and ethnic identity construction.



Chapter 5:
Presenting Maya spirituality to
the world

Chapter 5: Presenting Maya spirituality to the world

“Maya spirituality exists and they have to know it!”⁵⁶

⁵⁷ Of course it is also necessary to look at the role of *ajq'ijab* in the society because they cannot be seen as an independent group of people who act for themselves. *Ajq'ijab* live and work within a social context where boundaries between Maya identity and *ladino*-identity are vague and complex. The popularity of American culture drives young people further away from Maya culture. In Totoncapán the influence of Western culture is less visible although the popularity of American culture is growing as more young people leave to the United States in search for jobs. Most of the indigenous population does not follow a Maya way of living as it is written in the *Popol Vuh* although they sometimes mix their practices with Maya traditions. During my stay in the city, I talked with various people about the role of Maya spirituality in their everyday lives. Most inhabitants I spoke with, did not see the loss of Maya ideology as a problem. Gener (introduced in chapter 3), explained that for him Maya ideology is an interesting and alternative way of thinking which represents his original roots, but that it didn't fit in the modern society any more.⁵⁸ He means that Maya spirituality is more a symbol or image of his identity than that Maya spirituality actually plays a role in his life. Gener is one of the many indigenous people who do not practice Maya traditions but relate to these traditions when Maya identity becomes important. The relationship between the Maya population and Maya spirituality is therefore fragmented. As mentioned in former chapters, Maya spirituality and worldview is promoted by non- government organizations (NGO's) and in the tourist industry, especially after 1996. These programs often presented Maya spirituality as a continuing traditions and part of Being Maya. The role of *ajq'ijab* within these programs is analyzed in this chapter to understand how *ajq'ijab* represent Maya spirituality in the local, national and international Diaspora and to understand their role in the construction of Maya identity.

⁵⁶ Interview Federico Velasquez, director of the Spanish language school Celas Mayas, 14-02-2011

⁵⁷ Picture Frontpage Chapter: Annual Conference of CODECOT 09-02-2011. Note the poster on the background with the symbol of the day and an explanation, according to Maya ideology.

⁵⁸ Interview Gener 31-01-2011

5.1 Ajq'ijab and politics

As the keepers of Maya knowledge, ajq'ijab have been invited by various Maya communities in Diaspora, universities or religious groups in the Americas or in Western Europe. They crossed geographical boundaries to support, pray with, advice Maya people in exile, or to lecture (Chiappari 2002). The interest was not only about human-rights, but also the Maya predictions about the start of a new period on earth in 2012 and ecological changes. Most of the ajq'ijab who were invited, were intellectuals and were seen as representatives of Maya people. Ajq'ijab Audelino and Don Carlos, for example, traveled a lot and worked with many international organizations in order to promote Maya culture. As explained in the theoretical framework, and stated by Eriksen (2002), it is crucial that an ethnic group is recognized as such by others to claim rights. By lecturing in the Diaspora Don Carlos and Audelino represented Maya as part of a distinguished Maya culture. Don Carlos showed me one of his PowerPoint presentations which he had shown on a congress in the United States. In the presentation Maya spirituality and worldview was explained with many referents to the Popul Vuh. The presentation also included pictures of the group *El Tiempo y El Espacio* during ceremonies. On the last page of the show he had written that 'although there is much local difference, the Maya communities are based on a fundamental cultural system with authentic elements'.⁵⁹ By claiming a Maya culture, showing pictures and representing himself as spiritual guide of Maya people he transmitted an image of Maya people as an ethnic group. This example shows that ajq'ijab, by presenting Maya culture and themselves as part of Maya identity they do play a role in the creation of an image of Maya ethnic identity.

Maya spirituality was not only presented outside the national boundaries but ajq'ijab were also presented in national politics. The president, Álvaro Colom Caballero, claims to be an ajq'ijab as well. When I asked Alejandro about the role of Álvaro Colom as ajq'ij in his presidency, he laughed and said that the president was only showing that he was favoring indigenous people. "But", he explained, "he never involved Maya spirituality in politics and did not do a lot for the Maya society".⁶⁰ According to Alejandro and other people I spoke with, Maya spirituality was more a strategy or symbol rather than an ideology in politics.

⁵⁹ Powerpoint document by Don Carlos

⁶⁰ Conversation with Alejandro 21-03-2011

In the first weeks during my stay in the city I tried to find *ajq'ijab* directly involved in politics to ask them about the representation of Maya spirituality and ideology. I found out that there were actually few *ajq'ijab* involved in politics and I did not manage to talk with the few who were. However, I noticed that *ajq'ijab* could be seen as representatives of indigenous people more than people who involved Maya ideology directly into politics. When I asked Don Carlos about it, he argued that *ajq'ijab* shouldn't be politicians. According to him the job of *ajq'ijab* is helping people and they "should not mix up their work with politics"⁶¹. Although Don Carlos did not support direct political involvement of *ajq'ijab* he promoted the idea of young Maya people as politicians. During one of the meetings with *El Tiempo y El Espacio* he suggested Alejandro to involve in politics as he was a student in political science and because he would be a great representative of the Maya population. He explained that Alejandro would be a politician then and that he would not serve others as an *ajq'ij* because mixing two jobs would influence both work. Don Carlos ideas about political involvement of Maya *ajq'ijab* reflect the general situation in Quetzaltenango and Totonicapán. Maya spirituality in politics was more about the existence of Maya culture than that *ajq'ijab* wanted Maya culture to be part of a political ideology. Maya spirituality was part of the representation of Maya identity as a symbol, rather than that Maya spirituality was actually practiced as an ideology in politics.

Some *ajq'ij* were conscious about Maya spirituality as a symbol in political strategies although I did not find a organized national platform of *ajq'ijab* promoting Maya spirituality. There were many local organizations who worked in their own region (often the linguistic community) and sometimes with governmental institutions to promote Maya culture. When traveling through Petén, the Northern region of Guatemala, I found an organized group of *ajq'ijab*⁶² in a small city, called Poptún. I was invited to a meeting in their office where we talked about their initiatives and their views on Maya spirituality in relation to Maya ethnic identity. One of the prominent *ajq'ij* in the group, Domingo Ché, explained that each linguistic Maya community in Guatemala has the goal to promote Maya culture. He believed that there were more than 900 *ajq'ijab* only in Petén, but that most of them were not conscious of the political aims of constructing a unified platform. He told me a platform would be needful because they are no opportunities for Maya people to practice their culture

⁶¹ Conversation with Don Carlos, 24-03-2011

⁶² Asociación De GuíasEspirituales de Poptún

because the government does not promote Maya spirituality. The goal of his organization is to promote Maya spirituality in Poptún and in international programs. The funds of these international programs would be necessary in order to be recognized and to receive support in the practice of their culture. When I asked him why there were no national initiatives, he argued that the communication between the communities was very difficult. The group did not use social media and for them it was too expensive to travel to other communities to talk with other organizations. Another men from the group argued that they didn't know how to use internet or to set up a national network through social media. The men explained that with obtaining funds from international organizations they hoped to create a strong organization with national ties. Now they focused on the people in Poptún by teaching young people and promoting Maya spirituality in the community by writing about it and by holding ceremonies in public.⁶³

Although there is no national platform there are initiatives on national level to promote Maya spirituality. An example is the conference about the Popol Vuh which was held in Quetzaltenango on the 30th of May until the fourth of June in 1999. The goal of this conference was to 'analyze the philosophical, mystical, social, cultural, magic and spiritual contents of the Popol Vuh', which had the aim to 'strengthen the identity and the strategies in the development of the Maya people' (Centro Estudios Mayas, 1999). Ajq'ijab and Maya activists from all over the country were invited to talk about the content of Maya spirituality and worldview. In a book about the congress it is explained that

'this congress represented one of the socio-political events of the most important cultural claim within the dark reality of negotiation, devaluation, exclusion and marginalization about the principles, values and everyday's practices in the Maya communities and registered in the Popol Vuh, and other documents.' (Centro Estudios Mayas, 1999).

Here it is visible that the conference had the aim to reevaluate Maya culture as an important strategy in the socio-political context, and in order to claim rights to develop Maya communities. They based their knowledge on written documents and documented the conference in a book, titled *'Memorias del Congreso'*. The congress is a very clear example of re-examination of Maya spirituality in the national context. The ajq'ijab played a significant role in this congress as they tried to agree on the content of Maya spirituality.

⁶³ Meeting with the group of ajq'ijab in Poptún

There are not many conferences like these on national level. Most initiatives to promote Maya culture takes place on local level which I will discuss now.

5.2 Ajq'ijab and local programs

One of the initiatives to promote Maya culture in Quetzaltenango is in the tourist industry. On every tourist spot in Guatemala 'Maya handicrafts' are sold to tourists and have become a cultural marker (Warren 1998). Also spirituality is promoted in the tourist industry. Quetzaltenango is recently becoming a tourist place where young foreigners travel to, in order to study Spanish. In the city there has been a rise of language schools where they offer courses about Maya spirituality. The director of a Spanish language school explained:

“We teach people about the calendars, the ceremonies and the nawales. We often invite ajq'ijab to lecture and to hold ceremonies. We want to revalue Maya culture and show them that it exists.”⁶⁴

The director thought that teaching about Maya spirituality was important to present Maya people as an existing ethnic cultural group. He did not mention that many tourists wanted to learn about Maya culture and that it is actually a booming business. I did not speak with ajq'ijab who worked for language schools and do not know how they represented Maya spirituality to tourists. However, with presenting Maya spirituality to tourists they attributed to the representation of a Maya culture.

Besides language schools, there were a lot of organizations who promoted Maya spirituality into their programs. One of them is the organizations of ajq'ijab in Quetzaltenango called 'Rex We', sponsored by an organization in Cataluña (Spain). The goal of their program was to integrate Maya knowledge in the life of indigenous people and to promote Maya culture in order to develop the society. The organization can be compared with the group of ajq'ijab in Poptún although Rex We seemed more official and carried out more projects. One of the ajq'ij from Rex We, Carlos Moran, explained that they were a group of intellectual ajq'ijab who investigate the social, political and economic situation of Maya people in Guatemala. They wrote for example about indigenous medical systems and about the economic situation of the indigenous communities. As ajq'ijab they also taught

⁶⁴ Interview Federico Velasquez, director of the Spanish language school Celas Mayas, 14-02-2011

young people to become *ajq'ijab*. Carlos Moran explained that they were part of a network of NGO's and local organizations in order to be able to help the Maya population⁶⁵. By connecting the situation of indigenous people and Maya culture there were able to work with local organizations that could help them with development-programs. The *ajq'ijab* in Rex We use Maya spirituality and worldview as a tool in the construction of Maya identity.

Another important organization in Quetzaltenango is CODECOT (*Coordinación Departamental de Comadronas Tradicionales de Quetzaltenango*). This organization also promotes Maya culture although the people who work there are not *ajq'ijab*. It is a group of indigenous gynecologists (called *camadronas* in Spanish) who involve Maya traditions in their work. The organization is sponsored by 'Global Fund for Women'. Don Carlos has been working with the organization since the last twenty years. On the annual meeting on the ninth of February 2011, Don Carlos opened the conference with a small ceremony. He spoke a long time about the value of maintaining Maya culture and about his admiration for the women. He told them that he was pleased to see that they involved Maya ideology in their work. He also explained the people in the audience about the significance of that day and how that would influence their work.⁶⁶ When I visited the organization in their office in one of the suburbs of Quetzaltenango, I asked about the role of Maya spirituality within their daily work as traditional gynecologists. Gilberto, the only man in the organization, highlighted that Maya spirituality was a central point in the Maya tradition of genealogy and that Don Carlos was often invited to explain about the Maya calendar and the significance of the days. However I noticed that Don Carlos did not involve in the daily work of the gynecologists because the Maya calendar was not considered in their daily practices. Don Carlos was often invited on congresses like these, when the journalists were also invited, and was more like a symbol for the organization. After Don Carlos finished his speech on the annual congress, some elderly women also started to speak through the microphone. They talked about their daily work but they did not involve *nawales* or Maya spiritual thought. What I want to demonstrate here is that Don Carlos did not directly put spirituality in practice in the organization. He is the symbol of Maya identity and their being as Maya people. His presence created the image of genealogy as a tradition based on Maya spirituality and worldview.

⁶⁵ Interview Carlos Moran of Rex We 14-04-2011

I have used the examples of Rex We and CODECOT to demonstrate the relationship between ajq'ijab and the society. In Rex We, ajq'ijab actively redefine Maya spirituality by studying and practicing it and to present Maya spirituality to the world as part of the Maya communities. CODECOT used ajq'ij Don Carlos and Maya spirituality to demonstrate that they were practicing a Maya way of genealogy, although Maya spirituality did not involve directly in their daily practices. Ajq'ijab are therefore representatives of Maya culture and use spirituality and their knowledge to present Maya culture but they do not directly involve Maya ideology into social practices.

There are many examples of organizations promoting Maya culture where ajq'ijab work; actively or as a symbol. Rex We and CODECOT are significant examples of how ajq'ij present Maya spirituality to the world and how they are part of Maya ethnic identity construction. The role of ajq'ijab is therefore multiple: active and as a symbol. In next chapter I will present my findings comprehensively.



Chapter 6: Conclusions

Chapter 6: Conclusions

⁶⁷ I started this research project because of the lack of information about the role of *ajq'ijab* in Maya identity construction. Maya *ajq'ijab* are considered the keepers of Maya culture and Maya knowledge and therefore, I presumed, they would play a significant role in Maya ethnic identity construction. In Quetzaltenango and Totonicapán a revitalization of Maya culture was visible as Maya identity becomes more and more important in the multicultural discourse in Guatemala. In the social reality of everyday life the boundaries between Maya culture and Ladino culture becomes less visible as Western culture becomes popular. Most indigenous people do not include Maya traditions in their daily lives and therefore the relationship with the indigenous population is fragmented. In Totonicapán Maya traditions were more visible than in Quetzaltenango, although people often mixed with other religious or cultural lifestyles. Besides of this social reality, the revitalization of Maya culture is visible in the media and in programs favoring indigenous communities. It was therefore that Maya spirituality had to be redefined.

In chapter 3 I have shown that when studying Maya spirituality as a tradition many problems arise. In most stories of *ajq'ijab* I found out that most *ajq'ijab* were raised in a Christian family without a continuing tradition of Maya spirituality. Therefore Maya spirituality can not be seen as a continuing tradition passed from generations to generations. *Ajq'ijab* often learned about Maya spirituality recently through networks of friends and relatives and they practiced Maya spirituality in a social group of *ajq'ijab*. Their reasons to become *ajq'ijab* were multiple. Some of them wanted to give new meaning to their personal or cultural identity. These *ajq'ijab* were not pressed by external factors but ascribed their Maya identity by themselves and to themselves in order to re-establish their personal identity. This shows agency and voluntary in their motivations to become *ajq'ijab* and to involve in the practice of Maya spirituality. Other *ajq'ijab* had intentional political reasons and were conscious about political benefits by establishing a strong Maya ethnic identity. There were also *ajq'ijab* who were seeking a different form of religious belief and unconsciously were part of Maya ethnic identity construction.

⁶⁷ Picture Frontpage Chapter: Prepared altar at ceremony during the Wayeb 17-02-2011

The knowledge about Maya spirituality and worldview was transmitted in groups of *ajq'ijab* related through networks of relatives and friends. There is much difference in the practice of spirituality within these groups because of the fact that Maya spirituality is not a fixed religious doctrine but it is open for interpretations. In these groups a rite d' passage existed in order to become *ajq'ij*. The way of rite d' passage differed from one group to another. In most cases there was a period of studying followed by a special ceremony where they received the status as *ajq'ij*, within the group and in the society. Within these groups of *ajq'ijab* the content of Maya spirituality was redefined and spread to the world.

In Chapter 4, I have shown that there is a lot of rivalry between and also within groups of *ajq'ijab* which show that Maya spirituality is open for interpretations. On the other hand I emphasized that within these social groups Maya spirituality is redefined and that *ajq'ijab* seek new ways in practicing Maya spirituality in a more pure form. They often based their re-examinations on written documents and essentialist elements of Maya spirituality in order to create an image of a Maya tradition. Don Carlos, who has been the main figure in this thesis, emphasized in his speeches senses of rootedness, attachment to land, shared memories and descendants. He actively constructed the image of a homogenous traditional ethnicity that he proudly presented to journalists photographers and researchers. Intended essentialist strategies were used in Maya identity politics in order to establish an image of a strong Maya culture. Intellectual *ajq'ijab* played an important role in the re-examination of Maya spirituality. As Rasch (2008) also explained, intellectuals study written testaments about the Ancient Maya culture and write new documents based on this knowledge. They also lecture in the Diaspora and often work with organizations promoting Maya culture. In this way they actively contributed to Maya ethnic identity construction with essentialist strategies.

In chapter five I explained that the relationship between Maya spirituality and the Maya community is complex, because most indigenous people do not include Maya spirituality or worldview in their daily practices. *Ajq'ijab* actively work in local and international organizations where they have a significant role in presenting Maya spirituality. This work is often attempt to present a Maya identity rather than involving Maya spirituality as an ideology in daily social practices. Therefore Maya spirituality can be considered as symbol or tool in the construction of Maya ethnic identity.

Given this information, Baumann's 'dual discursive competence' can be understood as an inclusive theory about ethnic identity construction. Where scholars often followed an objective, constructionalist approach or a subjective approach with a focus on symbols, agency and voluntarism, I conclude, and agree with Baumann, that both approaches should be included in studies on ethnic identity construction. People not only go back to cultural traditions because of their intentional motivations driven by external factors. People also go back to spiritual traditions because of personal interest and to re-establish a personal identity, which tends towards voluntary and agency. People become part of ethnic identity construction without being conscious and become symbolic strategies in ethnic identity construction. On the other hand it is clear that in the social-political context, identity and culture becomes more important in the discourse towards multiculturalism and the interest from international organizations. People are conscious about this and use identity politics in order to construct ethnic identity. In identity politics notions of shared memory, history, descendents and culture are common strategies. The representations towards the outside world are important to claim the existence of the ethnic identity group. Ajq'ijab play an especial role in the creation of ethnic identity because they are considered the keepers of the essentialist aspects. They themselves are symbolic representations of Maya identity and they also actively construct ethnic identity by going back to pure forms of spiritual practices.

This brings me to the question that started this research project. How do Maya ajq'ijab relate to Maya ethnic identity construction? The answer is multiple. First Maya ajq'ijab themselves are the symbol of the persistence of Maya spirituality, Maya culture and Maya identity. In the context where boundaries between Maya culture and Ladino culture becomes less visible ajq'ijab are the symbol in the differentiation between Maya and Ladino Culture. With the practice of Maya spirituality they keep Maya traditional practice alive and Maya spirituality is therefore symbol of Maya identity. Some ajq'ijab are conscious about the benefits of practicing Maya traditions in the construction of Maya ethnic identity in the multicultural discourse and act intentional. External factors, like the interest in Maya culture from international organization and the Pan-Maya movement, drive them towards a unified Maya identity. There are also emotions and the need to construct a Maya identity because some ajq'ij feel that they are losing their roots and knowledge. Intended or unintended, their symbolism is part of Maya ethnic identity construction. Secondly, Maya ajq'ijab re-examine Maya spirituality often in an essentialist way to eliminate Christian aspects in order to establish a more pure form of Maya spirituality. Intellectuals have an important role in the re-

examination of Maya spirituality through the spreading of written documents, by lecturing and by their presence at programs promoting Maya culture. With essentialist strategies they develop an image of a united Maya culture and identity, and cultural pride. Thirdly, Maya ajq'ijab present Maya spirituality to the world by making it more public and by working within or with organizations promoting Maya people. Making Maya spirituality more public and institutionalizing it, is part of identity politics. The role of ajq'ijab is therefore symbolic, essentially constructing and carrying out Maya spirituality for political purposes. Symbolism, active constructing and identity politics have to be studied next to each other in order to understand ethnic identity construction in the contemporary world. Here I come to a similar conclusion as Gerd Baumann and Anderson who suggest that identity construction must include meaning and symbols. Personal and cultural feelings should be studied next to external interests, identity politics and historical processes. Anderson explained that culture cannot exist if the content didn't mean anything to ajq'ijab. Maya identity is constructed but Maya spirituality and worldview have to be believed in order to be seen.

Bibliography

Anderson, Benedict

2006 *'Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism'*, Verso
London

Andelino, Robert; Laurie, Nina and Radcliffe, Sarah

2005 'Development and Culture: Transnational Identity Making in Bolivia', *Political
Geography* 24: 678-702

Barth, Fredrik

1969 *'Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: the Social Organization of Culture Difference'*,
Bergen, Universitetsforlaget

Baumann, Gerd

1999 *'The Multicultural Riddle: Rethinking National, Ethnic and Religious Identities'*,
Routledge New York

Bolaños, Omaira

2010 'Reconstructing Indigenous Ethnicities: The Arampium and Jaraqui Peoples of the
Lower Amazon', *Latin American Research Review* 45 (3): 63-68

Brown, R. McKenna and Fischer, Edward

1998 *'Maya Cultural activism in Guatemala'*, University of Texas Press

Centro de Estudios Mayas 'Timach': Adrian Inés Chávez

1999 *'Memorias del Congreso'*, Centro Estudios Mayas 'Timach' Xelapublicidad,
Guatemala

Centro de Estudios Mayas 'Timach': Adrián Inés Chávez

2001 *'Pop Wuj: edición Bilingüe K'iche' - Español'*, Centro de Estudios Mayas 'Timach',
Xelapublicidad Guatemala

Chiappari, C.L.

2002 'Toward a Maya Theology of Liberation: Reform of a "Traditional" Religion in the
Global Context', *Journal for the Science Study of Religion* 41 (1): 47-68

Conklin, Beth A.

2002 'Shamans versus pirates in the Amazonian Treasure Chest', *American Anthropologist* 104 (4): 1050-1061

Eriksen, Thomas Hylland

2002 *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*, Pluto Press

Firth, Raymond

1981 'Spiritual Aroma: Religion and Politics', *American Anthropologist* 83 (3): 582-601

Fischer, Edward F.

1999 'Cultural Logic and Maya Identity', *Current Anthropology* 40 (4): 473-500

Fischer, Edward F. and Hendrickson, Carol

2003 *Tecpán Guatemala: A Modern Maya Town in Global and Local Context*, Westview Press

Hale, Charles R.

2002 'Does Multiculturalism Menace? Governance, Cultural Rights and the Politics of Identity in Guatemala', *Journal of Latin American Studies* 34 (3): 485-524

Hale, Charles R.

2004 'Rethink Indigenous Politics in the Era of the Indio Permitido', *NACLO report on the Americas* 28 (2): 16-21

Heyes, Cressida

2007 'Identity Politics', in: Edward N. Zalta Editor, *The Standard Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Electronic Document available at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-politics/>

Little, Walter

2004 'Outside of Social Movements: Dilemmas of Indigenous Handicraft Vendors in Guatemala', *American Ethnologist* 31 (1): 43-60

Kawoq, Baldomero Cuma Chávez

2005 *'Pensamiento Filósofo y Espiritualidad Maya'*, Editorial Junajpu Guatemala

Kinvall,

2004 'Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security', *Political Psychology* 25 (5): 741-768

Kottak, Conrad Phillip

2008 '*Anthropology: the Exploration of Human Diversity*', McGraw-Hill New York

Matul, Daniel

2008 'El Poema Galático: El Solsiticio de Invierno del Año 2012 en la Cuenta de la Cultura Maya', *unpublished*

McGee, R. Jon and Warms, Richard L.

2000 '*Anthropological Theory: an Introduction History*', Mayfield Publishing Company Southwest Texas State University

Molesky-Poz, Jean

2006 '*Contemporary Maya Spirituality: The Ancient Ways are not Lost*', University of Texas Press

Nash, June C.

2001 '*Mayan Visions: The Quest for Autonomy in an Age of Globalization*', New York Routledge

Rasch, E.D

2008 '*Representing Mayas: Indigenous Authorities and Local Politics of Identity in Guatemala*', Sociale Wetenschappen Universiteit Utrecht

Rosenblum, Nancy L.

2003 'Religious Parties, Religious Political Identity and the Cold Shoulder of Liberal Democratic Thought', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 6 (1): 23-53

Warren, Kay B.

1998 '*Indigenous Movements and Their Critics: Pan-Maya Activism in Guatemala*', Princeton University Press

Weber, Max

1993 '*The Sociology of Religion*', Bacon Press Boston

Wilson, Richard

1995 *'Maya Resurgence in Guatemala: Q'eqchi' experiences'*, Norman University of Oklahoma Press

Winzeler, Robert L.

2008 *'Anthropology and Religion: What We Know, Think and Question'*, AltaMira Press

Yashar, D.

1999 'Democracy, Indigenous Movements, and the Postliberal Challenge in Latin America', *World Politics* 52 (1): 76-104

Websites:

CIA Factbook

2011 'Guatemala', at Cia Factbook website. Available at:

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/gt.html> (07-06-2011)

Appendix

My fieldwork experience was a very intensive period and a whole new experience. In the weeks before I left The Netherlands preparation was offered through courses at the University of Utrecht where tips and ethics were deeply discussed. When I arrived in Guatemala, the things I learned in the courses faded away. I was finally there!

Ariel James gave me the opportunity to come to Quetzaltenango by helping me with a place to stay, traveling to the city and meeting people. Ariel was living in the same house as I did for three weeks which gave me the opportunity to learn a lot from him and to ask many questions. However, I was also relieved when he left because it gave me more freedom in doing research. Through his network of *ajq'ijab* and other people I was introduced in Quetzaltenango. Don Carlos was the first *ajq'ij* I met and he also played a major role in the research project. He not only gave me lot of information and insides, he introduced me to *El Tiempo y el Espacio*. Being his friend opened many doors. I used the snowball-technique, where you meet people by others. I also searched for informant myself. This was more difficult because there was no telephone book or other organized data-base. I have to admit that the people I spoke with were mostly randomly picked and met by coincidence.

My research proposal was about ethnicity and identity and the use of essentialist aspects of culture in Maya identity construction. The goal of the project was not really clear, neither were my strategies to answer my research-questions. I didn't know what to expect and when I arrived in Quetzaltenango I found many interesting aspects which all seem to relate to my research proposal. It was like I was absorbing everything in my enthusiasm of starting the project. However, the project lasted only three months and I did not have so much time to collect reliable data. It was only after five or six weeks that I started to organize and analyze my research data better and tried to make a structure out of the chaos of data. It was only in the last weeks and in the weeks writing this thesis that my goal and questions were finally clear. I restructured my theoretical framework and focused more on ethnic identity politics, authenticity and the purification process of Maya spirituality within groups of *ajq'ijab*. What I learned about this process is that the discussion from the theoretical framework must be really clear before going into the field; not only on paper, in a research proposal, but also in your mind; so you can make strategies about how to succeed finding answers. I did not do this well. I really liked to write the stories of the people but I forgot sometimes the analytical

aspect of it. There were lot of stuff is going on: different culture, language, food and climate, and therefore I found it difficult to stick with the line in my research purpose.

The research methods I used differed. Before I went to Guatemala, I never had done any official interview but I had experience with involving in groups and observing. Maybe it is important to note here that I have a problem with speaking fluently. I stutter since I was a child and in some periods I do it more than in others. Stuttering might be a handicap in doing anthropological research but in some cases it was a benefit as well. It is true that I sometimes didn't speak so much or that I was afraid to ask questions because I feared I would stutter. On the other hand I always have been a good observer a listener and I am very aware of *how* people speak. Sometimes it is inappropriate to enter a group of people with a dominant position. I introduced myself in the group of *El Tiempo y El Espacio* as a woman who listened a lot and only sometimes asked question. I received a lot of trust, as I was always there and helpful without talking a lot. After some weeks I was able to ask more depth-questions because of the relationship I had created with the people. So, the fact that I stutter wasn't really a handicap for me during the fieldwork period. Moreover, some ajq'ijab asked if they could threat me. It was interesting to see that there were so many ways of treatment.⁶⁸

I didn't use recording material because I was afraid that it would influence data. During interviews and other meetings I wrote down keywords in a small notebook which I carried every day. The problem was that sometimes I didn't have time to elaborate my notes after a meeting, and thus, after some days I wasn't shore any more about what the keywords meant. In next anthropological research project I may consider using recording equipment at official interviews to be more sure about statements people have made. Also I need to spend more spend on writing and analyzing next time. Despite of these problems I collected much material and enjoyed my role as a researcher.

What I really liked about the way of doing anthropological research is becoming part of a special group; to see the faces behind the pictures and to listen to the voices behind a written text. I am satisfied with my role as a researcher although I should have focused more

⁶⁸The most interesting treatment, which I will always remember was the following: find four starfishes, put them in a glass of water on the day of Tijax (my personal nawal) en drink it that day like wine. Then wish with all your hearth and strength that you will speak fluently when you return to The Netherland. When the energies and the Ajaw will allow it, they will release the knot out of your tongue.

on the analytical aspect. I have learned a lot from the research period, not only during my fieldwork period but also in writing a proposal and writing this thesis.



This picture was taken during a ceremony near Totoncapán, with the group *El Tiempo y El Espacio* on the 17th of February 2011, during the Wayeb. It reflects me (in the middle) as an anthropological researcher: participating with Maya *ajq'ijab*.

Ajq'ijab

Una investigación sobre los Ajq'ijab en la construcción de la identidad étnica Maya.

En este trabajo se analizará el papel de guías espirituales mayas, ajq'ijab, en la construcción de la identidad de los Mayas. Se trata de teorías sobre la construcción de la identidad étnica y política de la identidad. Me acerco a las diferentes escuelas del construccionismo y el simbolismo, (enfoques subjetivos frente al objetivo). La identidad se construye no sólo por factores externos sino también por los símbolos, los significados, los sentimientos personales y culturales y la agencia. Se tienen que incluir todos los aspectos cuando se mira a la construcción de identidad. La construcción de un grupo étnico es, a menudo, reforzada de manera esencialista. Indicadores culturales son el idioma, la historia, las tradiciones, la vestimenta y la religión. Este último es el enfoque principal en este estudio. La religión en la antropología está interpretada de múltiples maneras. En este trabajo se explica no solo como una forma de entender el mundo sino también como una forma de organizar la realidad social. En este trabajo se considera la religión como ideología, organización, significado, símbolo y tradición.

El aumento de las etnias indígenas y el movimiento organizado en América Latina ha creado un gran interés de los programas internacionales. Los derechos de los indígenas son una fuente importante de discusión. Los pueblos indígenas buscaron nuevas formas de expresar su identidad étnica, a menudo, en una forma esencialista. Uno de los mayores movimientos fue el movimiento Pan-Maya, que se extendió por México, Guatemala y Belice. En Guatemala, los movimientos indígenas surgieron en los años sesenta, cuando el capitalismo y el liberalismo debilitaron su posición. En respuesta a esta rebelión, el ejército mató a muchos pueblos indígenas y algunos de estos pueblos desaparecieron del mapa. En 1996 se firmaron los acuerdos de paz y desde aquello siguió un discurso de democracia y multiculturalismo. Hubo una explosión de diversas ONG's y proyectos patrocinados que ayudó a la población Maya. Frente a este contexto, redefinir la cultura maya como la identificación con la identidad Maya, era importante. Un aspecto importante es la

espiritualidad Maya y los ajq'ijab que se consideran los guardianes de la cultura Maya y el conocimiento Maya. Poco se ha escrito sobre el papel de estos líderes espirituales.

El estudio fue realizado en Totonicapán y Quetzaltenango, una aldea indígena y un pueblo en las tierras altas de Guatemala, entre el 25 de enero y 27 de abril de 2011. Aquí he hablado con varias ajq'ijab a través de entrevistas no estructuradas y estructuradas y he participado en un grupo de ajq'ijab, *El Tiempo y El Espacio*.

En el capítulo 3, demuestro que hay muchas diferencias locales en la práctica de la espiritualidad Maya. Sin embargo, en la literatura se habla de una tradición que se transmite de generación en generación. En los cuentos de las ajq'ijab encuentro que la mayoría de ajq'ijab provenía de una familia cristiana sin una tradición de la espiritualidad Maya. Fue por razones personales o motivaciones intencional es para revivir la espiritualidad maya que se convirtieron a la espiritualidad maya. Se pusieron en contacto a través de las relaciones de amistad en grupos de a'q'ijab. En estos grupos se practica y se define la espiritualidad maya.

En el capítulo 4 muestro la redefinición de la espiritualidad Maya. A través de la práctica en grupos y la analización en estos grupos, EL contenido de la cultura maya fue definido. A menudo se hacía referencia a los textos antiguos de los Mayas clásicos. Además, se habló de la historia compartida, los recuerdos compartidos, los antepasados, y un territorio compartido. De esta manera, utilizando formas esencialistas, se definió una espiritualidad Maya contemporánea y mostró una imagen al mundo exterior. Los ajq'ijab intelectuales juegan un papel importante, porque estudian los textos escritos y escriben textos nuevos. Estos intelectuales tienen, a menudo, conexiones con el mundo exterior.

El capítulo 5 muestra como los ajq'ijab transmiten esta imagen de espiritualidad al mundo. A menudo los ajq'ijab trabajan en las ONG donde los ajq'ijab son el símbolo de la identidad y cultura Maya. En la sociedad actual, es difícil incluir la ideología Maya en la vida cotidiana. Así se convierte la espiritualidad Maya en un símbolo. El papel de los ajq'ijab en la construcción de la identidad ajq'ijab es múltiple. En primer lugar, ellos mismos y la práctica de la espiritualidad maya son el símbolo de la identidad Maya. Esta función puede ser consciente o inconsciente. En segundo lugar, los ajq'ijab tienen un papel activo en definir la espiritualidad Maya. Y, en tercer lugar, llevan esto, a través de la labor en las ONG, al mundo exterior. La construcción de la identidad étnica Maya no solo tiene carácter construccionista sino que también da sentido a la propia gente. Las personas son agentes de acción, pero también inconscientemente un símbolo de la identidad Maya.