

1. Maya Women in Power.

Hello, my name is Giovanna Miralles.

I lived in Guatemala during the 1990's in a period referred to as 'the Peace Process' that ended the 36 years of Civil war, also known as the armed conflict. I was fresh from film school and interested to document the indigenous communities of Latin America. The next three years were of intense study of the Maya culture from the inside.

Indigenous cultural resistance and adaptation strategies since colonial times have been widely documented in the country, which has the second highest rate of indigenous population in Latin America at 41%, first being Bolivia with 62.2% (CEPAL). Although they share social similarities, the historical outcomes of their Agrarian Reforms draw them apart. Whilst in Bolivia the 1953 Agrarian Reform triggered social inclusion and political representation, in Guatemala (1952) led to years of conflict that resulted in the armed conflict.

My aim is to delve into the narratives that have resisted colonialism, despite the differences of power between the indigenous population and the State inside a decolonial and feminist framework.

2. Guatemala is a Central American Country, which was colonised by Spain 1519. The indigenous population resisted the Spanish Invasion and colonial imposition. They maintained their social organisation, adapted to the colonial rule. While secretly maintaining a system of beliefs recognised today as Maya Spirituality.

To better understand the complexities of Guatemalan society stratification is necessary to search beyond socio-economic factors, but to analyse its social system, which dates from colonial times and has influence on every aspect of the population's life.

The asymmetrical dynamics of power created during the colonial period persist and mark a relation that is not always based in economic power, nor skin colour, but a descent

ideology traceable to a narrative of conquerors against conquered. This narrative provokes an *internal colonialism* crucial at the time to explain what Thompson recognises as ‘the society’s fundamental social contradictions and the specific mechanisms of exclusion-segregation; that are characteristic of the political and state structures and which are in the basis, deeper and more latent, of all forms of structural violence’

In the 1980s during the armed conflict indigenous women were often central to the narrative of many of the documentaries of denounce of the genocide that was taking place against the indigenous population, while ethnic reasons were cited, there were also interests to control land rich in natural resources.

The Peace Agreements of 1996 recognised the Indigenous Population Rights that have been partially or not implemented at all. Despite this, the Maya Kaqchikel anthropologist Aura Cumes, recognises that ‘there has been a sign of ethnic revindication for the indigenous Maya people of Guatemala that has taken place through a positive ethnic and politic reaffirmation, which tries to create different notions to the ones inherited from the colonial system.’

Almost half of the population identify themselves as indigenous, but they only have a 2.5% Parliamentary Representation. A total of 4 members of parliament, two men and two women from 160 representatives. The way in which Guatemalan indigenous men and women have been capable to organise themselves and improve their life conditions against a State that does not represent them has been through their communal organisation and an ethical system that is based on the Maya spirituality.

3. The presence of Maya women taking principal roles in social organisations during and after the civil war was not fortuitous or part of a feminist movement; many of them were the only survivors during the massacres, while others were looking for their disappeared husbands, brothers or fathers, some of them union members or leaders. The need to organise themselves and support each other in such circumstances was almost natural. The early documentary *Forging Peace in Guatemala* (1985) is a significant testimony about the formation of the political organization of mothers and widows of the disappeared, through the CONAVIGUA (National Coordinator of Widows of

Guatemala). Today the Maya women's, knowledge, experience and aspirations still need to be recognised.

4. The anthropologist Rita Segato in her analysis of power relations recognises that in every creation myth there is an event where a woman commits a delict and needs to be punished, by the male law.

5. These narratives have been used to back up reasons of domination and have also been used to justify colonial imposition, "the civilising process of the savage."

6. In the Maya narrative of creation in the *Popol Vuh*, men and women are created plural and equal.

The *Popol Vuh* recounts the creation of the world, the origin of the human race and the greater mythology of the Maya K'iche people. The narration begins in an empty sky and sea, 'where the idea [of the creation] of human beings is old as the earth itself... What they [the gods] want is beings who will walk, work and talk in an articulate and measured way, visiting shrines, giving offerings and calling upon their makers by name, all according to the rhythms of the calendar.' In the *Popol Vuh*, the gods of the creation, from the beginning of times, are looking to create beings able to fulfil the same work that today is upheld by the *Aj'quijab'*, the day-keepers, who despite centuries of cultural colonial imposition, have maintained their traditions.

But the gods are not infallible, like the one of the biblical narrative, for them to achieve their creation is not immediate or easy. After two failed attempts to create humanity, they ask for advice to the elderly husband and wife *Xpiyacoc* and *Xmucane*, who are daykeepers, *Aj'quijab'* like contemporary midwives and matchmakers. They consult the *tzite* seeds to interpret the auguries of the Maya calendar *Cholq'ij*, a divinatory method that is still in use among Maya *Aj'quijab'*. After consulting the seeds and one more failed attempt to create suitable human beings, before the sun rises, it is *Xmucane* who grinds and models corn to create humanity. The Maya in the present still consider themselves made of corn, one of the basic grains for their sustenance. It is notably that the grandmother *Xmucane*, as a midwife, makes the human beings by herself from ground

maize and water, without *Xpiyacoc*'s intervention. Today midwives are highly respected in the communities where they work and their opinion is highly valued as authorities in communal meetings.

7. It is noteworthy that Maya Spirituality does not reproduce a Western androcentrism, the concept of a complementary duality is always present in everyday life. The Maya Kakchiquel scholar Emma Chirix observes that the concept of complementary duality involves parity in a relationship between opposites (day and night, rain and draught, up and down, man and woman), but also it includes diversity – Aura Cumes finds this diversity represented in ‘the generation of life is always in pairs, and not always in the pair woman and man, there is the other close pair: lake and river for example.’ While Cumes finds cultural strength in this concept; Chirix reminds us that this dual representation, for those who misinterpret the Maya cosmivision, could become ‘a mechanism to reproduce generic disparity that generates a socio-cultural differentiation.’ A socially constructed binary vision of the world, in any society, impacts on what is expected from the conduct of the individuals according to their gender. Clifford notes that ‘all dichotomising concepts should probably be held in suspicion.’ For this reason the concept of complementary duality needs to be understood and interpreted in the context of the Maya culture and not according to Western absolute parameters.

8. The Maya K'iche scholar Irma Velásquez Nimatuj (2011) notes that Maya Spirituality has been maintained for centuries by the Maya population from different social classes, despite various forms of oppression. The persistence of the Maya cosmivision has been achieved through the narratives of resistance that give continuity to hidden ancestral practices, the use of its own ritual and civil calendars, and a diversity of cultural elements that are a part of quotidian life. These elements have been shared, without knowing, between the indigenous population regardless of their income or personal wealth. While participating in the celebrations of the Maya New Year, *Wajxquib' B'atz'*, during fieldwork (2022) in Momostenango, I could observe people from different social and economic backgrounds participating in the traditional pilgrimage of the town's altars; illustrating Velásquez Nimatuj's (2011) point that Maya spirituality and cosmivision are

the common element that unites the Maya from different social classes going above intersectionality.

9. But colonial and patriarchal narratives are present informing the Guatemalans everyday lives, that's why Amanda Pop, a feminist Maya woman calls not to ignore the unequal relations created by a patriarchal system, the state, capitalism, social prejudices and media-imposed perceptions in contemporary Guatemala.

10. If we look at this map, we can see that women's political representation in the parliament is very low. But is this the only place where women can exert power and have a political life? Indigenous people have been systematically excluded from power in larger institutions.

11. As Gladys Tzul Tzul remarks, women have always been present sustaining the communal organisations and the fights for communal lands. Women have had a place of power in the communities.

12. The *Aj'quijab'* day-keepers or spiritual have maintained Maya spirituality and cosmovision, defying all adversities, through decolonial and cultural resistance strategies. This has allowed Maya people to continue and maintain their religious tradition, communal identity, knowledge and health practices through complex systems of knowledge and cultural transmission, which reaffirm conceptions of the Maya identity by using oral history and specific traditional mnemonic systems.

In the pictures we can see the T'zite seeds which are used along the *Cholq'ij* as a piece of advice and an oracular method, they are used by the *Aj'quijab's* and authorities to define important dates and matters which concern the community or individuals.

We also can see a Maya ceremony being performed with participation of members of the National Movement of Midwives Nim Alaxik.

And a map with the State recognised Mayan Altars as sacred sites, previously many of these altars were kept secret, many of them are situated in remote and hidden places of

difficult access, as a way of protecting them from being vandalised by radical Christian groups, illegal developments or being destroyed for the exploitation of natural resources.

13. 'A midwife is born not made.'

A Maya midwife does not receive a salary, they receive a donation by the parturient or their family for their work.

This can range from a monetary contribution to animals or provisions.

Many of them come from a lineage of midwives, others have born in a day propitious in the *Cholq'ij* Calendar to take this path.

The Mayan midwives provide their service out of cost to not only to rural areas, but also the urban periphery. Their defiant motto: 'A Midwife is born not made',

'Una comadrona nace, no se hace', tell us about their commitment and their cosmovision, based in the use of the *Cholq'ij*, the lunar Maya Calendar.

Their body of knowledge involves specialist techniques and therapies.

The adverse conditions of their work have not improved in all this years, they continue travelling by their own means to remote sites to attend their patients. They are discriminated at hospitals, western practitioners have appropriated their knowledge, and until recently they were not recognised by the Guatemalan healthcare system.

14. During the online 'Encounter of Women and Power' organised by the Guatemalan *Chomija* Lawyers' Association (October 2021), non-mainstream voices could be heard in a dialogue about the participation of Maya Women in the system of ancestral authorities.

We can observe an *Aj'quij* performing a blessing for the success of the 'Encounter of Women and Power' organised by the Association of Maya Lawyers Chomija, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ancestral authorities were vital to organise their communities, despite the lack of the State support the index of contagion and mortality was the lowest

in Central America. In this encounter, women who are ancestral authorities in the system of municipalities recount how they have used *'la vara'*, their sacred bundle of authority, as an element to assert their power, especially in situations where they were called to resolve problems of domestic violence.

15. Maya Women are traditionally part of the ancestral authorities' system, this does not mean that their experiences and stances would be the same as the ones of men, and that women will live the same experiences as men in the same circumstances.

The women at the encounter discussed the difficulties that they face in their role, specifically when they need to confront situations of violence in the community, and how they negotiate for their authority to be respected, appealing to the Maya cosmovision and beliefs.

Often their authority is challenged by people who are outside the community and do not understand or respect their position as *Aj'quijab'* and authorities. This usually happens when they need to deal with the police, that does not allow them to act as mediators in cases of domestic conflict, preferring to exert force.

Midwives, are often not accepted in hospitals, when they are accompanying patients who have suffered complications. If they are not fluent in Spanish, they are discriminated. Graciela Velásquez, midwife and *Aj'quij* of the organisation *Hun Kawoq*, recommends that they need to assert their cultural and belonging rights, but not all indigenous women have the possibilities, impetus or character to do it.

In cases of violence in the community some women, who are ancestral authorities, needed to be accompanied by their husbands to be respected.

The language barrier needs to be overcome with interpreters in the hospitals and the police force.

16. The methodology of participant observation at online meetings, held in social media, which otherwise would have been very difficult to access, was invaluable for research and identify cases of horizontal communication. These were complemented with ethnography

in situ, which uncovered further problems of indigenous representation inside the institutions.