

## **CLACS Conference Slides Draft.**

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### **1. Digitising the Sacred: Maya women's cosmovision online.**

I lived in Guatemala during the 1990's in a period referred to as 'the peace process'. I was fresh from film school and interested to document the indigenous communities of Latin America. Through my experience of working with film producers and directors of indigenous themes in Bolivia, I felt that I was ready to understand Maya culture from the inside. Little did I know that this process will continue until today.

Both countries, Guatemala and Bolivia, have the highest rate of indigenous population in Latin America, although they share social similarities, historical factors draw them apart, such as their 1953 Agrarian Reforms, the Bolivian was the most drastic in Latin America and generated highly contradictory processes. While the Guatemalan Agrarian Reform, successful at the beginning, became dramatic, unchaining the events that led to the overthrow of President Arbenz in 1954, the overturning of lands to private hands (Handy, 1988) and the subsequent Guatemalan Civil War which lasted from 1960 to 1996.

### **2. Terms**

In Latin America the term indigenous although widely accepted, because it's relation with the fight for indigenous rights, has not stopped from being contentious. A majority of the indigenous people in Guatemala prefer to be recognised under the term Maya, which include different ethnic groups which share the same cultural root.

In general we are used to the term digitisation in relation to archives and libraries, which are digitised to preserve and to make them available to the

public online. In this case I am applying this term to the digitisation of an oral transmitted knowledge, which until the end of the XX century was zealously kept by specialists.

The 260 days' Maya Calendar *Cholq'ij* is one of the two principal calendars still in use, along with the *Hab'*, by the Maya people. The Maya Spirituality is practiced through the Maya Ceremonies and the use of the *Cholq'ij*.

The A'jq'ijab' or bearer of time is a person who counts the days and knows their meaning, previously translated as Maya Priest or Priestess, today are known as Spiritual Guides.

### 3.

The Maya Spirituality is rooted in the oral tradition, practiced and maintained by specialists. During the armed conflict and because of the indigenous genocide, there was a fear between the *Aj'q'ijabs* for the continuity of the tradition.

The Maya Spirituality was officially recognised as a symbol of identity and political rights during the Peace Agreements (1997). Bastos and Cumes document that in the dynamic context of the 80s and 90s appeared a new religious proposal, which openly recognised itself as Maya and it is different from the others, because it does not present itself as a religion, but as a 'spirituality'. Furthermore it is based on the Mayan cosmovision and does not have a Christian foundation.

Nowadays there is a standard way to officiate a Maya ceremony, based in the k'iche tradition, although other traditional forms are practiced by the diverse ethnic groups.

### 4. Colonisation and post memory

Hirsch (1996) recognises the inherent character of postmemory as "the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their

birth... shaped by traumatic events that can be neither fully understood nor recreated.”

In the long thread of history the indigenous population of Latin America has resisted colonial imposition through the use of different strategies of adaptation. In the XVI century anonymous Maya K'iches wrote the Popol Vuh in their own language, using the Latin alphabet to transcribe the oral narrative that recounts the creation of the world and the origin of the human race.

However, as Rivera Cusicanqui points out ‘in colonialism there is a very particular function for words, they do not name, they mask.’ For this reason, decolonisation cannot solely be a thought or rhetoric, because words can distance themselves from the practice and the *Cholq'ij* calendar is primarily learned through experience.

## **5. Cultural resistance.**

Taking care of the traditions.

Indigenous cultural resistance and adaptation strategies since colonial times have been widely documented in Guatemala (See: Cumes, Chirix, Tzul Tzul, Warren, McClintock). The indigenous population of Latin America has been able to protect their culture, languages and knowledge by maintaining their beliefs applying diverse strategies.

In the case of the Maya the oral tradition, mnemonic systems and the continuous use of the *Cholq'ij* by specialists has been vital to maintain the Maya spirituality alive. They resorted to what they called ‘the invisible’, a system where traditional practices, oral history, and rituals exist as a form of cultural resistance.

## **6. Maintaining knowledge, cosmivision and identity.**

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'qijab'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 secrecy.

The map that we see was elaborated to protect these places from being vandalised by radical Christian groups, illegal developments or being destroyed for the exploitation of natural resources.

## **7. The Cholq'ij definition**

The uninterrupted use of the sacred Maya Calendar Cholq'ij by the Mayas is a continuous act of resistance. This lunar calendar marks the time for agricultural and ceremonial dates. Overall, it is an important working tool for the work of the Maya Midwives.

It has 260 days and as the *Aj'qijab'* say it is written in the human body, which has 13 joints, the numbers' energies and twenty fingers and toes as the number of the Nawals, who are the bearers which carry each day. The Nawals are B'aatz', the time; Ee, the path; Aj, the sacred vara; I'x the woman, and so on. Each Nawal has multiple meanings which change in accordance with the number that precedes them.

## **8. The Cholq'ij as a tool for specialists.**

Here we can see a Calendar posted on the Facebook page of the National Movement of Midwives *Nim Alaxic*, in which appears the *Cholq'ij* in relation to

the Gregorian Calendar. As I mentioned before the *Cholq'ij* is a lunar calendar and for the same reason of vital importance for the midwives' work, who are able to follow women cycles and determine birth dates through its use.

## **9. Mayanisation and the The Cholqu'ij**

from a specialist calendar to a symbol of identity.

The *Aj'quijab* are the guardians of the Maya tradition and the calendar's knowledge. By moving online, the *Cholq'ij* went from being a specialist calendar, interpreted by an *Aj'quijab*, inside a community in a defined time and context, to being standardised and available to everybody.

## **10.**

When I lived in Guatemala in the 1990s, the *Cholq'ij*'s knowledge was not widely available. It was necessary to become an apprentice in order to access it. In the picture we can see a mimeograph copy of the research made by the *Aj'quijab*' Gerardo Barrios, who made a compilation of the meaning of the 20 Nawals of the *Cholq'ij* after interviewing around 100 specialists. This research covered important aspects of the Maya philosophy, and beliefs system, and became the template for the *Cholq'ij*' digitised by the Ministry of Sports and Culture of Guatemala in 2013.

The three images, two of them digitised, correspond to the Nawal Noj, the Nawal of wisdom, which also appears in the logo of the Movement of Midwives *Nim Alaxik*. The third image is an interpretation of the day *Noj* in the midwives' Facebook page. It is possible to observe how the meaning of the day has been shortened for a major visual impact, with a picture of the animal which represents the day. This information has also been shared as a podcast. In an interview with the graphic designer, he mentioned that the meanings for the posts were provided by local specialists.

This information is posted by *Nim Alaxik* daily as an authentic source of knowledge and to show their Maya identity.

Today the Maya calendar is ubiquitous online in logos, names of institutions and social media pages, where it is possible to find an explanation of each days' meaning.

### **11. How is the *Cholq'ij*'s philosophy represented in Maya women's narratives in relation to their knowledge, world-views and philosophies online?**

'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.

**12.** In a Zoom meeting at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic a midwife commented that the terrible working conditions were only comparable with what she experienced during the armed conflict: midwives denounced that they walked for miles to attend their patients, sometimes to be stopped by patrols controlling the curfew. They still not count with proper PPE or sanitary facilities. Even with hospitals collapsed because the pandemic, the Maya midwives have continue working on first line, proving to be fundamental to attend the health needs of the population. On the 26th of January 2021 were, Julajuj Tijax, they successfully were recognised by the government with the implementation of a **‘Plan of Action for the National Policy for the Midwives of the 4 people of Guatemala’**, becoming part of the Guatemalan health system, but still without a salary

**13.** We can observe an Aj’quijab’ performing a blessing for the success of the ‘Encounter of Women and Power’ organised by the Association of Maya Lawyers Chomija. During this encounter, women who are traditional authorities in the system of municipalities recount how they have used ‘la vara’, as an element to assert their power, especially in situations where they were called to resolve problems of domestic violence.

#### **14. Conclusions**

The process of conveying the *Cholq’ij’s* abstract concepts in a contested media, such as an online/virtual place, certainly implies a process of cultural surrender, yet paradoxically vital and empowering to Maya culture.

The often-romanticised vision of Maya women, their culture, needs and way of life requires a paradigm change, for this it is necessary to look beyond economic

discrimination in relation to their knowledge, worldviews and philosophies. Currently, feminist Maya women such as Emma Chirix, Aura Cumes, Gladys Tzul Tzul and others are contesting the narrative imposed by the state, along with associations such as the *National Movement of Midwives Nim Alaxic*. To overcome social prejudices and media-imposed perceptions, reclaiming their place in society.