

Research Space

Conference keynote

Maya women contest online narratives in action: creating equality through horizontal communication

Miralles Terán De Wilkin, M.

All rights reserved.

Slide 1.

Hello! My name is Giovanna Miralles documentary maker and Phd Student at Canterbury Christ Church University.

I conduct my research online, moving from traditional ethnographic fieldwork to online ethnography because of Covid-19.

Slide 2.

This study is an online ethnographic exploration on the strategies of organisation and communication used by the National Movement of Midwives '*Nim Alaxik*' in Guatemala.

This will lead to a better understanding on how indigenous women sustain their communities, while adapting to the changing circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic, and if this creates a fairer society.

Analysing the online development of horizontal communication from a critical ethnographic, feminist and decolonial perspective.

Slide 3.

My research question is

How Maya Midwives represent their narratives of culture and identity in Facebook in relation to their knowledge, world-views and philosophies?

Slide 4.

I am using the key theories of Maya and Latin American scholars to have a perspective from the South.

In the area of Maya feminism I will refer to the work of Emma Chirix.

The Decolonial will be analysed through Cumes and Rivera Cusicanqui.

And Maya Social organisation with Gladys Tzul Tzul.

For Horizontal communication theory I will refer to Beltrán, Mattelart and Freire.

For the Methodology I am using: Narrative analysis, qualitative analysis of ideas, critical ethnography from feminist and decolonial (sociology of the image) perspectives.

Slide 5.

Historically, social injustice has been prevalent in Guatemala. A legacy of a divided social system traceable back to colonial times, land tenure patterns and labour market differences between the *ladinos*, mestizos of Spanish descent, and the indigenous, composed of a Maya majority. These have led to extreme inequalities preserved by state systems of governance (Gert, 2001).

Against this background, Maya women, who constitute a majority in the country, continue raising their voices and contributing with their work from a feminist perspective.

Slide 6.

Nowadays, feminist Maya women have been contesting the narrative imposed by the state, social prejudices and media-imposed perceptions. They are now reclaiming their place in society.

Emma Chirix (2014), in her book *Bodies power and policy: Maya Women in a Catholic Boarding School*, approaches important themes including discrimination, body and sexuality from her own educational experience in a religious oppressive environment.

It was at boarding school where she realised her indigenous identity, while understanding her body and the cultural differences between her home and the place where she was receiving an education: “In the boarding school there was a whitening policy towards indigenous bodies, the coloured body.”

The sociologist Gladys Tzul Tzul analyses the indigenous municipal authorities’ system, which maintains a balance between the state government and the indigenous population through different resistance and negotiation strategies.

For the Maya Kakchikel anthropologist Aura Cumes, the process of permanent colonisation has its epicentre in the dispossession of the indigenous people. Cumes reminds us that the Maya culture does not belong in the past, but it is alive and more relevant than ever, when she says: “*Seguimos vivos*”, we are still alive, Cumes is not referring only to the internal armed conflict, where the state committed genocide against the indigenous Maya of Guatemala; she is also referring to the colonial past, where the destiny of the indigenous population of the Americas was settled.

Slide 7.

The anthropologist Lina Barrios emphasises that, because of the discrimination against the indigenous population, many people, consciously or unconsciously, do not want to identify themselves as indigenous: *Mayas, Garifunas o Xincas*.

In the 2018 census, more women identified themselves as indigenous than men. Although the indigenous population represents a majority in the country, there are abysmal socio-economic differences for these communities.

Returning to Chirix's experience, it is in the body of the indigenous women where colonialism takes place, as if it were a territory to colonise and a civilising project.

Slide 8.

Online presence and Covid-19 pandemic

The Maya are not part of the past and their organisation and resistance take place in the virtual public sphere.

As Gladys Tzul Tzul noted, in an online meeting during the Covid-19 pandemic in May 2020, the indigenous population were able to organise themselves and support each other, not because of the state, but in spite of it. The subsistence strategies used during the internal armed conflict were applied. Horizontal communication took place through the communal radios, also cars with speakers, informed the population of the local indigenous authorities' decisions.

Slide 9

Currently, the majority of the Maya indigenous organisations maintain a constant virtual presence through social media. Facebook is widely used for this purpose, Twitter and other platforms to a lesser degree. Not all the indigenous organisations have websites, but they have Facebook pages. While following the Facebook group *Espiritualidad Maya* (Maya Spirituality), in April 2020 I found an invitation to a Zoom meeting of the *Movimiento Nacional de Abuelas Comadronas Nim Alaxic* (National Movement of Grandmothers Midwives *Nim Alaxic*), from that date I began to follow them in Facebook.

Slide 10.

Initially I did a non-participant online ethnography, to move to a participant observation of live conferences, for more than one year, from May 2020 until the present day.

I have:

- Documented their posts, videos and watched their live transmissions, observing and recording live comments.
- Attended *Nim Alaxic's* online press conferences. Transmitted live in Zoom and Facebook.
- Attended the international online 'Forum for the Acknowledgment and Defence of Traditional Midwifery', transmitted live in Facebook with participation of *Nim Alaxic*.

Slide 11.

The National Movement of Grandmothers Midwives *Nim Alaxic's* define themselves in Facebook as: 'A community of Grandmothers Midwives from diverse linguistic communities of Guatemala'. The term Grandmother is a sign of respect that does not relate to age or having grandchildren, but to knowledge.

Slide 12. Map with facts

Nim Alaxic were organising themselves in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic emergency. It was through this Facebook group that they coordinated the majority of their Zoom meetings. Some of them were transmitted live via Facebook. Their aim was to be considered part of the Guatemalan official health system, on the basis of the undeniable importance of the work that they were doing without remuneration. Through the following months, their work became to be supported by the public, and was praised in the local media.

Prensa Libre, a newspaper of national circulation, covered their story in a special feature.

Slide 13.

Findings: *Nim Alaxic* have communal organisational and communication strategies that differ from Western individualism.

Inclusive participatory system which overcomes access to the online information.

On their live transmissions they are not depending on established media, they control it.

They are proud of their cultural knowledge.

They led a successful campaign to gain recognition for their work.

They coordinate with the government sexual education campaigns.

And more midwives want to be part of the movement.

Slide 14.

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.

The guardians of the Maya tradition and the meaning of each day are the Aj'quijab', spiritual leaders, men or women who have acquired this knowledge through lineage, their destiny defined through dreams or oracular reading, or a role in the community.

When I lived in Guatemala in the 1990s, this knowledge was not freely available. It was necessary to become an apprentice in order to access it. Today the Maya calendar is ubiquitous online in logos, names of institutions and social media pages, it is possible to find an explanation of each days' meaning. 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 for everybody.

Nim Alaxic post this information everyday presenting themselves as authentic source of knowledge and to claim their identity.

Slide 15

Findings: Ethics, tradition and knowledge

Midwifery knowledge has been preserved and transmitted through generations. Many of these women come from a lineage of midwives. Others were born in a day propitious to practise midwifery in the Cholq'ij Calendar. Others say that their path was revealed to them in dreams. Their body of knowledge involves specialist techniques and therapies. Traditional midwives provide their service free of charge not only to rural areas, but also in the urban periphery.

In the rural areas, they attend 90 % of all births. Their ethos is reflected in their defiant motto: *'Una comadrona nace, no se hace'* (a midwife is born not made), which commits them to a life of service. A Maya midwife does not receive a salary. She receives a donation by the woman giving birth or her family.

Donations can range from a monetary contribution to animals or provisions. The adverse conditions of traditional midwives' work have not improved in all these years: they continue travelling by their own means to remote sites to attend their patients. They are discriminated against at hospitals; Western practitioners have appropriated their knowledge, and until recently they were not recognised by the Guatemalan healthcare system.

Slide 16

Social media presence

With hospitals full, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Maya midwives joined the front line to attend the needs of the population. In a Zoom meeting in June 2020, a midwife commented, that the terrible working conditions were comparable only to those of the internal armed conflict.

At the same meeting, midwives denounced the fact that they walked for miles to attend their patients, sometimes only to be stopped by patrols controlling the curfew and they did not have proper PPE or sanitary facilities.

Despite all these adversities, the Maya midwives have continued working on the front line, proving to be fundamental in attending the health needs of the population. On the 26th of January 2021, dated *Julajuj Tijax* in the Maya Calendar *Cholq'ij*, they were successfully recognised by the Guatemalan government with the implementation of a 'Plan of Action for the National Policy for the Midwives of the 4 peoples of Guatemala', becoming part of the Guatemalan health system. However, it is unclear how or when this will translate into actual policy and full remuneration.

After this accord, their online presence was focused on official commitments.

Slide 17

I found that the Facebook site of *Nim Alaxic* did not appear to be perfect example of online horizontal communication. Despite this, the members were able to participate in the meetings via Zoom, there were few ‘likes’ or comments following the presentations or the posts.

Although the majority of the midwives are experienced specialists and know how to use the Maya Calendar, many of them do not know how to read or write, or have a mobile, or access to internet.

With the aim that *Nim Alaxic*'s message is available to all their associates, literate or not, short videos are posted in their Facebook page. Opinions and ideas are privately exchanged in groups via WhatsApp.

Their system of horizontal communication is complex and the lack of access to technology does not make it less effective. This is incorporated into informal horizontal communication strategies. When one of the midwives who has access to the information travels, sometimes on foot, to inform the other associates so they can give their opinions and participate in the debates at distance.

On 5th of May 2021, the ‘Forum for the Acknowledgment and Defence of Traditional Midwifery’ was transmitted live from Mexico via Facebook, with the participation of midwives from Mexico, Perú and Guatemala, and an international panel of experts and specialists. *Nim Alaxic*, was the only organisation in Latin America, which has managed to gain official recognition from their local government.

Slide 18

Social media cannot be fully representative of the indigenous midwives' culture. The process of conveying meanings by words in a language that is not one's own and in contested media, such as an online/virtual place, certainly implies a process of surrendering. As Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2020) argues: 'In colonialism there is a very particular function for words; they do not name, they mask.' Nevertheless, it was possible to discern the dynamic of their horizontal communication and organisational system in their meetings and assisting to the 'Forum for the Acknowledgment and Defence of Traditional Midwifery'.

The social media platform Facebook allow them to rapid and daily communication during the pandemic, they keep their traditional knowledge and participate in new initiatives

Slide 19

The government of Guatemala has not fulfilled yet the promises made to the midwives. Currently, they continue with the sacred Mayan Calendar posts, and sadly there are some obituaries.

The Midwives made their political position clear when they asked on 19th of August for the resignation of President Alejandro Giammattei on corruption charges. It is not known whether the Midwives' work will be fully recognised by the state and remunerated.