

BARBORA
PŮTOVÁ (ED.)

**IDENTITY, TRADITION,
AND REVITALIZATION
OF AMERICAN INDIAN
CULTURES**

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Identity, Tradition, and Revitalization of American Indian Cultures

Barbora Půtová (ed.)

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INTRODUCTION

BARBORA PŮTOVÁ

The collective monograph *Identity, Tradition and Revitalization of American Indian Cultures* focuses on revitalization of traditional culture and contemporary approach to native identity, culture and art of American Indians. It strives to describe various aspects of native identity from the anthropologic perspective and answer the question how the indigenous inhabitants of America can freely develop their traditional culture within the modern society that is becoming increasingly more globalized. The studies in the book, characterized by a variety of topics and plurality of research approaches, contribute to a wider discussion on topical issues such as cultural tradition, modernity and ethnic identity. The book consists of four relatively independent parts – *Revitalization and Identity*, *History and Its Legacy*, *Art and Identity* and *Mythology and History*.

The first part of the book *Revitalization and Identity* is introduced by a study by Olga Vilímková *The Mayas in Guatemala: The Identity Revitalization* in which the author investigates ethnic and cultural identity of the Mayas, the current situation of the Mayan languages as well as work and free-time activities of the Mayas or Mayan spiritual traditions and calendars. The issue of native Indian identity is further elaborated by Radoslav Hlúšek in his study *Being Indian in Mexico: Problems of Identity in Nahua Villages of Hueyapan and Santa Clara Huitziltepec* in which the author describes and interprets two different villages inhabited by Nahua people in Central Mexico – Santa Clara Huitziltepec in Puebla and Hueyapan in Morelos that serve for demonstrating and discussing the problems of identity and self-identification of Mexican Indians. This part of the book is concluded by Michelle Leisky who analyses the Aztec Dance in her study *Seeking Identity Through Original Traditions: The Aztec Dance*. Special attention is dedicated to a role in the formation of personal as well as collective identity and the movement valorising the native origins and culture.

The second part of the book, *History and Its Legacy*, is opened by a study by Yvonna Fričová *Paraguayan Indians Chamacoco* which presents Paraguayan Indians Chamacoco, their history, way of life, habits and also the cultural change they are going through. The topic of Indian traditions is further elaborated by Livia Šavelková in her study *When the Creator's "Game" Spreads to the World* in which she describes the meanings and origins of lacrosse for

different groups of contemporary players and also its role in the so-called revitalization of Native cultures. In the following study *Sunrise Ceremony: Revising Addiction and Discussing Culturally Relevant Sources of Healing* Daniela Pěničková focuses on the only Western Apache communal ritual. The second part of the book is capped by Roman Tadič and his study *Corn, Gourd, Indian Breadroot, and Chokecherry in the Hunting Culture of the Cheyenne* where the author describes plants in the Cheyenne culture that were not only used as food sources, but they also became articles of intertribal trade, materials used for manufacturing and decorating objects, even religious symbols.

The exposition of the third part of the book dedicated to *Art and Identity* consists of a study by Marek Halbich *Tourism, Marginalization and Commercialization of Art in a Small Indigenous Village in the Peruvian Andes* which deals with the implications of the commodification (commercialization) of certain manifestations of Native American art. Cultural heritage of Indian art is also discussed by Barbora Půtová in her study *The Salish Peoples: Cultural Codes in Pacific Northwest Coast Native Art* in which she presents basic characteristics and attributes of artworks by Northwest Coast peoples including revitalization of Salish art. This topic is further elaborated by Kristýna Řeháčková who lays more emphasis on decontextualisation of artifacts, revitalization and current development of Coast Salish culture art which they represent. This part of the book is concluded by Shaun Peterson and his study *View from a Real Indian* where this contemporary Salish artist describes the method of creating his artworks, experience and key events that shaped the way people perceive the art of the Native and non-Native.

The final part of the book, *Mythology and History*, is dedicated to symbolic aspects of traditional Indian culture. This topic is introduced by Václav Soukup and his study *Historical Changes of the Raven: An Anthropological Reflection on the Trickster* in which he presents the raven as a cultural hero of Indian myths and puts it in the context of native cultures of the Northwest Coast. Heroes from American Indians' myths are also discussed in a study by Barbora Půtová called *Historical Changes of the Coyote: An Anthropological Reflection on the Trickster*. The author presents the phenomenon of the coyote as a mythological, art and literary motif from the North American Indians' culture. It presents the coyote as a cultural hero of Indian myths as well as a symbol and a specific socio-cultural construct. Mythological aspects of Indian culture are also discussed by Zuzana Kostičová in her study *Quetzalcoatl and Human Sacrifice* where she describes one of the Aztec gods, mostly too dark and cruel for the contemporary mind, but also for all the inner paradoxes that fill the mythic narratives connected with Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, demiurge and god-king of paradisiacal Tollan.

The origins of this collective monograph are linked to several events. The first of them was the scientific conference *Revitalization, Preservation and*

Formation of Cultural Identity of Native Americans held in 2013 by the Institute of Ethnology of the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, with the support of the U.S. Embassy in Prague (Public Affairs small-grants program). The conference was very authentic thanks to the presence of the Salish artist Shaun Peterson who continues the tradition of wood carving of Indians of the American Northwest. Another significant event that led to the creation of this book was the exhibition of Peterson's works and photographs of his works in the University's Galerie pod schody (Gallery Under the Stairs) and a reunion in the Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures in Prague where this Indian artist presented traditional Salish wood carving techniques and his artwork. The third important event that inspired the editor to compile this book was lectures given by Matika Wilbur, a photographer of the American Northwest from Swinomish and Tulalip tribes. Her lectures were held with the support of the U.S. Embassy in Prague in 2016 at the Institute of Ethnology of the Faculty of Arts, Charles University. Wilbur also presented in Prague her own works at the exhibition called *Project 562* in the "Nativ Gallery." While Peterson is at the beginning, Wilbur is at the end of one continuum that opened and concluded this book dedicated to various forms of revitalization of American Indian cultures.

REVITALIZATION AND IDENTITY

THE MAYAS IN GUATEMALA: THE IDENTITY REVITALIZATION

OLGA VILÍMKOVÁ

The beginning of the 21st century in Latin America is characterized by the multiethnic and pluricultural countries' existence acknowledgement, and the Indian nations' identity empowering. Guatemala, no doubt, is a multicultural country. The 2012 census showed the country population was 14,713,763¹; the ethnical structure, though, was not included. In the democratic, multi-ethnic country, within the politics of assimilation, the homogenous Guatemalan citizen is being preferred, i.e. from the official perspective, the ethnical differentiation is not being taken into account.

At the 2002 census, when the ethnic denomination was being determined, the population in Guatemala was 11,237,196, out of which 4,428,178 were Indians, which makes about 40% of the population. The Indian population in Guatemala is divided into two principal groups: the Maya and Xinka². 14,794 citizens claimed themselves Xinkas in 2002.

Major part of the Indian population consists of Mayas of various language groups. According to the Mayan organizations' resources, the Mayan population rate is currently being assessed as 60%, most of which belongs to the ethnic groups Quiché, Mam, Kaqchikel and Kekchi and it is significant that the Mayan ethnic groups (*pueblos* or nations according to the Mayas) have, in spite of various peripeteias, preserved their collective identity up to the present.

THE ETHNIC AND CULTURE IDENTITY OF THE MAYAS

To the external identity traits belong the name and last name, language, clothing style, typical architectural style, dances and celebrations, human behavioral patterns, e.g. when having a conversation, etc. For the Mayas themselves, the important features also include their permanent residence

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- 1 The statistical data we are referring to regarding the population and language occurrence numbers are quoted in accordance with the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística de Guatemala* (www.ine.gob.gt).
 - 2 According to *COPARE* (*Comisión Paritaria de Reforma Educativa*), the Indian ethnic group Xinka originates in the nation Nahuatl, who speaks the language Nahuatl. The data from the document of a national institution is quoted by Paz 2007: 74.

in the Mayan territory. To the Mayan identity internal traits belong: their sense of belonging to the Mayan nation, common shared history, living myths, faith, and rituals, religion that is, in case of traditional Guatemalan Mayas, represented, in the first place, by the relationship to the Ritual Calendar and respect to sacred beings, known e.g. from the book *Popol Vuh*. The external and internal factors coalesce – embroidered patterns on the dresses do not bear, for the Mayas, only a decorative significance, but they also contain spiritual, social and political overlap, folk dance can be a reflection of the relationship to the ritual, a deep expression of the ethnic identity, and a relationship to ancestors (e.g. a drum dance in the play *Rabinal Achí*).

Currently the identity does not need to be concealed as in the times of the military conflict in Guatemala in the years 1960 to 1996 when, under the reign of military dictatorships and in the context of the cold war, a genocide of the Mayas took place. The OSN committee report states 200,000 victims of the conflicts, most of them of the Mayan origin (CEH 1999). In the context of the systematic killing off the Mayan population, which the country government felt as a collective enemy, many Mayas left their homes (more than a million refugees) and spent ten to sixteen years in exile (in Mexico, in the Guatemalan forests or cities, etc.). During the lengthy period of their removal from the natural conditions of life, the “traditional” Mayan life was disturbed and there was no generation to generation experience transmission. Therefore, due to this matter, the Mayan identity empowerment has recently been the priority of the Mayan organizations.

THE CURRENT SITUATION OF THE MAYAN LANGUAGES

One of the most significant identity expressions is the language. In Guatemala, the national communication language is Spanish, which is spoken by 68.9% of the population.³ Major part of the population uses also or solely Mayan languages. The number of the languages is not determined exactly, it fluctuates within the range of nineteen to twenty-three. Among linguists, in some cases, there is no agreement on whether it to be an individual language, or a dialect. The National Statistical Institute of Guatemala files twenty-one Mayan languages; The Academy of the Mayan Languages of Guatemala states twenty-two Mayan languages (their names are written in capital letters): *P'opoqomchi*, *A'chi*, *Q'eqchi*, *Ch'orti*, *Kaq'chikel*, *Poqomam*, *Sipacapense*, *Tz'utujil*, *Mam*, *Ixil*, *Sacapulteca*, *Itzá*, *Uspanteca*, *Awacateca*, *Chalchiteca*, *Akateka*, *Chuj*, *Jakalteka*, *K'anjobal*, *Tektiteka*, *K'iché*, *Mopan*.⁴ The orthography is not uni-

3 According to the results of the census in 2002 (www.inec.gob.gt).

4 Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala (<http://www.almg.org.gt/>).

fied, even the names of the individual languages differ: *quiché*, *K'iche'*, *kiché*, *kiche'*. In 1987, a unified Mayan alphabet was instituted that includes sounds and signs common to all Mayan languages. The guarantee of the Mayan languages' orthography is the Academy of the Mayan Languages of Guatemala, established on the basis of the governmental decree in November 1987. The institution organizes, among other things, courses in Mayan languages, issues the supplementum *Mayatzil* in nine Mayan languages, and magazines, e.g. a popular *Kukuy* for children, or the weekly periodical *El Regional* in four languages – *mam*, *popti*, *quiché* and Spanish.⁵ However, in practice, the rules prescribed by the Academy and other institutions are not followed, thus, with the orthography still being disunited.

In the second half of the 20th century, due to the armed conflict, the number of the Mayan languages significantly decreased. Currently, we are observing an increase in the interest in Mayan languages (primarily in the countryside), which is given, among others, by the possibility to pass the elementary school in bilingual schools with the classwork conducted by university-educated bilingual teachers, teaching materials, children's magazines, and books in Mayan languages, (limited) offer of educational and cultural activities for both children and adults in Mayan languages, etc. For the communication at bilingual schools in the countryside, children use Spanish to speak among them and with their teachers, or a particular Mayan language; in families, young generations communicate in Spanish, and in Mayan languages with grand-parents. In some areas, the Mayan language of the local ethnic group is the only means of communication and some women would not even speak in a different language nor understand it.⁶ At present, Guatemala is – regarding to the linguistic policy of the government (or the language rights of the minority population groups) – ranked among the, so called, special law status policy countries. It originates in the principle that the majority population (the dominant group) owns all the (language) rights, whereas the minority rights (of the minorities) are limited, even though they are legally or officially approved. These rights are set in the constitution or in the legislative amendments. The existing political approach conveys the effort to harmonize the language co-habitation of heterogeneous population groups without having declared the lawful equality of all national languages. Thus, there are certain rights in certain state sectors secured for the minority groups, e.g. in the area of justice, education, or media.⁷

In Guatemala, there are several institutions that spread the Mayan languages and establish their position. Among the most significant workplaces,

5 Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala (www.almg.org.gt).

6 The author's personal experience made during her ten visits in Guatemala from 2004 till 2013.

7 The same language politics is also exercised in Québec, Sweden, Slovakia, etc. (Leclerc 2012).

there are, besides the aforementioned, the Rafael Landívar University (established in 1975), the linguistic project of Francisco Marroquín's (since 1975), or the Marian Galvez University, which bring up linguists and publish books and grammar books of the Mayan languages. Among these linguists, there are many native Mayas. The language *quiché* is scientifically treated, in the western part of the country, by *Academia de la Lengua Maya Kí-chè de Quetzaltenango* and *Comunidad Lingüística K'iche'*. The Kaqchikel language community publishes the magazine *Kaqchi Wuj*. The Mayan association *Uk'u'xBe'* with its center in Chimaltenango (the Kaqchikels) publishes children's magazines and book publications treating Mayan languages and traditions, the current situation of the Mayas in the multiethnic state, the analysis of the problem of racism and discrimination in the country, the publications introducing the law system in Guatemala and the traditional administrative and "legal" system of the Mayan communities. The Center organizes courses of Mayan philosophy, natural medicine, and ensures the running of the cultural center for children and youth. Another important Mayan center is *Oxlajuuj Keej Maya Ajtz'ib (OKMA)*, which, since 1990, has devoted its activities to the study of languages: *quiché*, *kaqchikel*, *poqomam*, *mam*, *qanjobal* and *tzutujil*. OKMA publishes grammars, textbooks, and work books. It spreads its materials also via the radio station OKMA and the internet.⁸ There are other radio stations that broadcast in Mayan languages: *Radio Swam Titamit* Chichicastenango, *Radio Quiché*, *Radio Nawal*, *Radio Chortí*, *Radio de Nahuá* or *Radio The Voice of Atitlán (Voz de Atitlán)*, broadcasting from Santiago de Atitlán.

Both school teachers and students, whom we have talked to within the last years about the problem of education materials in Mayan languages and written by Mayan authors, assess positively the growing number of given publications and claim that there is also an increased interest in the textbooks and specialist and literary works in Mayan languages. The Mayan writers' association has been established called *Asociación de Escritores Mayances de Guatemala*. Regarding expert publications and treatises by Mayan authors (including university professors), recently they have focused on, besides the language problems and the subjects to empower the ethnic identity, on socio-political, economical, and ecological themes, such as multiethnic state, democracy, autonomy, right to vote, international treatises concerning human rights, free market contracts, globalization, etc. Such issues are involved in many discussions not only in the academic field, but also in the meetings of Mayan organizations and in the adults' education courses.

Presently, there is the effort for the renaissance of the Mayan culture including the everyday-life experience and relationships according to the

8 OKMA, *Oxlajuuj Keej Maya Ajtz'ib* (www.okma.org).

Mayan traditions, with regard to the conditions of modern times. The Mayan organizations keep to spiritual masters' teachings, the nation's memory keepers (*ajq'ij*), the older generations' memories that experienced the traditional community life in the countryside in the natural conditions before the armed conflict started. For the Mayas, the conflict marked a period of massive slaughter, all-permeating fear, and, for a majority of the society, it meant a forced escape to exile. Another source of the revival of the traditional life and family and community relationships are old Mayan texts.

The Mayan community was, until the recent past, relatively uncommunicative and reclusive. Among the cultural identity features belonged co-living within an ethnic group, e.g. it was not possible to get married to a partner from a different ethnic group, not even establish a family with a half-breed or a white-man. The expats we talked to feel as positive experiences those that the everyday life had brought, e.g. in the exile communities in woods or refugee camps in Mexico where Mayas of different ethnic groups met and lived together. Under those circumstances, events and occurrences, inconceivable or very unusual before that, were happening, e.g. there were mixed marriages between half-breeds and Indians, or even between the whites and Indians.⁹ These days, cross-ethnic and cross-racial relationships are a commonplace.

TRADITIONAL CLOTHES AND LIVING

A significant indicator of a man's identity is, in general, his dress. In the Mayan environment, the traditional dress conveys, besides belonging to a particular Mayan ethnic group, also a show of the handwork mastership. The wearers and carriers of the traditions in clothing are women. Mayan women like lively colors that sometimes bear a symbolic meaning for their wearer. The colors represent e.g. life and power (the red), sky and lake (the blue), light and purity (the white), the Sun/sun and corn (the yellow), the end and death (the black).¹⁰ Some women use colors for certain reasons (colors heal and provide power), but, mostly, they combine colors according to how they like them – according to their taste. Regarding the style of clothing, however, it is required to follow the style of the ethnic group or municipality. Previously, natural pigments were used to dye, presently, artificial colorants are used. As to material, mostly cotton and wool are used these days, even though also the

9 Based on the oral communication that took place in 2007 and 2009 – conversations with the exiles in the woods of Petén, Mexico, currently living in the villages along Usumacinta, and with the inhabitants of the Santa Rita CPR municipality.

10 The information provided by the bilingual elementary school in Patzún, January 2009.

artificial fiber has shown up. The traditional clothes are richly embroidered. Formerly, the clothes were decorated even with bird feather or little shells, today, embroidery is frequently used. Among the patterns are flowers and birds, the figures are often stylized into geometrical shapes; the Ritual Calendar motives are very popular, in which case the dress, especially women's blouse, *huipily*, has a spiritual dimension to it, which most of the wearers are aware of. Bird feather, these days, is used rarely, e.g. on the occasion of folklore celebrations. The women's dress composes of the traditional wide blouse (*huipil*), longer or long, straight, wrap-up skirt and the traditional head cover, *tzute*. The blouses are a real work of art. Traditionally, they are made on weaver's loom and their production lasts for three to four months. Some of the blouses are sewn from purchased cotton fabric and are richly embroidered around the neck. The real jewels among these types are the *huipilas* from the area of Cobán, Alta Verapaz. Skirts are simpler, but correspond to the area style/code as well. The fabric they are made of is bought by women. Skirts are not made-to-measure, lack zipping/buttoning, and wrap up and fix with a clasp-free belt. The belt is weaved (or loomed) and, all by itself, a noble handiwork. Women often use head covers, *tzute*, which is a kind of scarf or table cloth folded on top of the head. The scarf can also be used to carry a load. Closefitting T-shirts and mini-skirts are considered inappropriate, and pants, worn by some "modern" Mayan girls and women, are considered as clothes of "no fantasy." Girls and women often decorate their hair. At times they use a long colored ribbon of blittering threads which they interlock into their long hair; or they use a craftily folded belt, which, folded on the head, builds into a shape similar to hat.

Men have left the traditional way of dressing in the recent history for political-social reasons. The traditional dress meant, in the times of the armed conflict, the adherence to expressing belonging to the Indian ethnic group and as such, it was unfavorable and threatening his carrier's life.¹¹ The tradition of using the typical male dress has almost disappeared, only in scarce localities, we can rarely see the traditional male dress consisting of a shirt, vest, pants and a hat. A "clearly Mayan" part of the dress are mainly pants, with white at the background (red in less cases) and geometrical patterns that can indicate signs with a spiritual overlap. In some cases, pants have embroidery with decorations depicting little birds or other animals, or flowers.

Mixing of traditions is noticeable on the typical male dresses: e.g. Mayan head covers, *tzute*, were replaced by commonly used "Spanish" hats. Most of men, however, are hatless. Mayan men, the spiritual guides in Chichicastenangu, use, to cover their heads, red *tzute* (in different areas ceremonial head

11 The author's research, oral communication of men from different areas in Guatemala, 2009–2012.

covers differ and they also have different names). Most of men both in towns and countryside wear the clothes of the “European style” that are, according to their own words, more practical and cheaper. Most of the time, the dress consists of a white shirt and black, dark-blue or white pants.

Before, another feature of the Mayan identity was a construction, architectonic style. In many areas, the contemporary constructions resemble the houses from the past. In general, one can say that there is no apparent difference between the cottages/houses in the Mayan and “white” villages or between the houses of members of various races in a mixed municipality. The construction materials are natural and locally available (wood, bamboo, reed), or bricks and the roof is made of satchels or metal. In the census in 2012, it was shown that, on average, there live five persons per house.¹² In the countryside, a dwelling usually consists of a closed room and some parts of the household that occur in the open air, e.g. the kitchen, dining room or living room. Cooking is often done on fire and wood. The houses of the better economically situated families usually possess more rooms, are furnished and equipped with modern devices, such as TV, stove, blenders, etc. The Mayas in the countryside live in the houses with yards and gardens. A part of the outdoor space serves for inhabitation. Most families have, in the open air, a traditional stove with an open fireplace for the preparation of corn pancakes, a dining table is usually found here, and, most importantly, hammocks for the moments of rest. For the family and friends’ gatherings, outdoor space is used that is pleasant to be in for all year long in the lower mountain altitudes and lowlands (Guatemala is situated in the tropics).

Before, Mayas performed ceremonies during a house construction and on its completion; these days they are performed only in some areas (Rupflin Alvarado 1997: 202). However, in the case of a family discord, even today, ceremonies are organized, with a spiritual guide’s assistance, to purify the house. In this case, family members together carry out a ceremony to honor the nature’s spirits (that being creators and the energies of the day due to the Ritual Calendar). Then, the house is smoked with corn. Candles are burnt, too.

WORK AND FREE-TIME ACTIVITIES OF THE MAYAS

The Mayas in the countryside are mainly employed in agriculture. In the garden or on the field near their house, they grow crops for their own use, some also sell a part of their produce. To make the processing and sale of the crops (e.g. coffee, cocoa, cardamom) easier, cooperatives are often formed.

12 Instituto Nacional de Estadística de Guatemala (www.ine.gob.gt).

During the harvest times of coffee, sugar cane, cotton, and bananas, many men go for season work onto the plantations of the southern coast. Many Indian women attend to handicrafts and commerce. The Mayas living in the cities often work in commerce (the women on the markets sell agricultural foods and handicraft products), some of them are employed in offices and in the nonprofit sector.

In their free time, Mayas are happy to meet up with their family. Nevertheless, the members of the elder generations criticize the youth for their poor interest in visiting grandparents. During family get-togethers and Sunday sittings with friends, they cook and debate, eat well and dance. Mayas enjoy village celebrations, e.g. to celebrate the patron. During the celebrations, they meet up with their friends, feast and dance.

The traditional Mayans consider as the most significant cultural event of their region festive ceremonies when they collectively communicate with the Mother Earth, thank to the Earth for life, they ask her for strength, etc. This, among other things, expresses their very close relationship to their own territory and reinforces their ethnic identity. The nature of such events brings closer individuals and groups even before they actually happen as it is important to plan and organize everything well in advance. Also the local artists, especially music groups (marimba players), take part in the ceremonies. It is through these activities – ceremonies, musical and dance programs, theatrical performances, etc. – that the contemporary Mayans convey their adherence to their ancestors' traditions. By expressing a cordial relationship to the Earth is also strengthen the solidarity in the fight of the Indian communities when defending their territory, or, better said, the territory of the Mother Earth (Vilímková 2014). The young also spend their leisure time exercising and practicing sports, especially football and baseball are popular. Reading is not included in frequent leisure activities, even though what has started spreading is getting to know famous places holding relation to the Mayan history.

To the expressions of identity that are currently being accentuated belongs also people's behavior. The expression of the ideal is embodied e.g. in the concept of the Mayan Miss Beauty vote (the princesses *Rabín Ajaw*) during the festival in Rabinal. The criteria are not the girls' measures (the candidates never show up in swimming suits, which would be considered quite undignified, but they are dressed in the traditional dresses). The evaluated criteria are their demeanor, attitude to the fellow competitors and personnel (modesty, diligence, sympathy), the propriety of their language, and their identification with the Mayan traditions. The winner, bound with her role-duty of the princess *Rabín Ajaw*, commits herself to actively participate in the social, cultural and political events and activities in the country. Each girl awarded the title of the Mayan princess *Rabín Ajaw* becomes a model for the

young and it is her duty to actively support the transmission of the traditional wisdom and the Mayan nation's ancestors' experience in the contemporary society.¹³

MAYAN SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS, MAYAN CALENDARS

One of the primary subjects (besides the human rights and ecology problems) in the contemporary Mayan society are spiritual traditions and looking at the worldly matters in a spirit of "cosmovision". They are tackled on each social occasion, they make the referential frameworks to political, expert, and cultural debates, they are a part of the school curricula and the education in the schools managed by Mayans, as well as the adults' education programs. The spiritual theme appears also during the conversations related to the common operational matters of everyday life. One of the keystones of the traditional Mayan religion, these days, is the worship of the sacred Calendar (*tzolkin, cholgii*). The days of the Ritual Calendar are obeyed by the human life in the traditional Mayan society, ceremonies get organized due to the Ritual Calendar as well as the significant events of individuals and communities.

In the contemporary Guatemala, traditional Mayan rituals are held – both the everyday ones (based on the Ritual Calendar) and the anniversary ones. Among those are also regular pilgrimages to sacred places. The sacred places are located near ancient Mayan cities (a significant sanctuary is to be found near Iximché, the former city of the Kaqchigels) or inside the historical Mayan cities (in the sacred region of Uaxactún, in Yaxhá, in Quiriguá, etc.). There are localities where the ceremonial places are commonly inaccessible as they are situated within someone's, private property. Here, only a Mayan priest can enter together with his assistant and the participants of the ritual. Ceremonies are also held in some mountains, at springs, rocks and boulders or at ancient trees. A ceremonial place can be found in inconspicuous little sanctuaries in villages in or near the village squares or even in front of a church. A well-known ceremonial place is e.g. a small hill Pascual Abaj, near Chichicastenanga, where a natural altar is situated and where frequent ceremonies take place in the spirit of Christian-Mayan syncretism. Among sacred places can be found also Catholic churches and chapels that were built in the colonial times, often in the areas of Indian sanctuaries or at so called power places, e.g. the Chichicastenang church. On the staircase in front of the church, there is a big boulder serving as an altar where oblations are

13 During the festival *Rabín Ajaw*, the winning girl dances the ritual dance with an older woman, the hostess, which is the expression of the Mayan traditions transmission and the continuation of the Mayan culture (Rabín Ajaw, Asociación Maya Uk'u'xB' 2011: 19).

burnt, e.g. candles but also freshly killed cocks' blood. Prior to entering the church, people sacrifice also resin, copal.

Mayas preserve their traditional philosophy that is transmitted from generation to generation. Among the fundamental axioms of the philosophy are: "All¹⁴ has a father and mother; all is alive; a spirit is included in each and every being; all has a heart, all feels, cries, sings, speaks, can get angry. The whole is a part of each existing being, all are, among them, in cousinly relationships. Some places are sacred either because it used to be inhabited by ancestors or it provides something that helps, feeds, or simply because it was created to exist." (Uk'u'x Be' 2008: 38) According to the Mayan philosophy, sacred places are closely related to the energies of the Ritual Calendar or, in other words, certain days (their energies) are, due to the Ritual Calendar, suitable for performing ceremonies at certain localities, e.g. the *Ajqij* day is suitable for carrying out a ceremony on the beach or in the forest, preferably at dawn or dusk; on the *Ajmaq* day, ceremonies in caves are performed or caves are worshipped as the Earth's wombs, etc. (Barritos 2004: 116–254).

In the Mayan world are present supernatural beings, not only in myths but also in the everyday life which they can interfere with. Among such supernatural beings can be found ghosts of the ancestors both the family ones and national ones, e.g. Tecún Umán. People meet their ancestors in their dreams and in reality and believe some of the ghosts protect them. There is an oral tradition that before (even fifty years ago) people met *Characoteles*, *Q'isoma'*, which were persons turned into animals. These days, people keep believing they still exist but don't let others see them.¹⁵ Some are, until today, afraid of Wild Girls, Forest and Water Maidens who can harm to families. In the awareness of people also exists *Talán* who can incarnate into a chosen person or animal and causes harm to people as well. They believe a human can turn into an animal and the other way round (as described in myths). In the Mayan world, it is not possible to separate the material world from the spiritual. Nonetheless, not everyone is able to communicate in person with the supernatural world. To communicate with spiritual powers, people sometimes use the abilities of intermediaries who speak to gods (e.g. in the form of statues), with nature spirits or, less often, with ancestors' ghosts. For the communication with the invisible powers, established rules are used, e.g. in rituals. Oblations are offered to the supernatural powers, they are honored by the expressions of respect, the participants thank for a favorable situation and good deeds (e.g. recovery from sickness, good harvest, obtaining a partner, impregnation, etc.), and ask for help in stressful situations.

14 All meaning people, animals, plants, rocks, etc.

15 Written oral communication with Marcela Ajuchan, 69 years, of the Mayan ethnic group Tzutujil (Uk'u'x Be' 2010: 53).

An interesting figure among the supernatural beings in the highlands of Guatemala is the local distinctive saint, Maximón. He puts on different appearances: one of his main representatives from Santiago de Atitlán has a face carved in wood, wears a hat and his dress is richly decorated with ties and scarves. He is a pagan saint who likes to smoke and drink, and the very alcohol and cigarettes are offered to him by priests for an oblation. Furthermore, Maximón is fond of women. In Santiago de Atitlán, due to the tradition, each year Maximón is taken care of by a family. His statues occur in various places around the Guatemalan highlands as well as on home altars where even several Maximóns can be found together. A girl asking Maximón for a specific man's love sits naked into the statue's lap, strokes and caresses it, and brings it alcohol and cigarettes for oblations. Also Christian saints in the form of statues are worshipped as supernatural beings. The statues of the saints are dressed up into becoming clothes and, during the festival of the saint patron of the village, they are carried in processions.¹⁶

Mayas carry out numbers of rituals, above all the everyday ones related to honoring the energies of the days due to the sacred calendar. Ceremonies are performed that are related to the agriculture year. E.g. in the times of sewing, the Mother Earth is asked for a blessing and harvest; in the times of harvesting, ceremonies are held to thank for the crops. The ceremonies are performed when building a house, starting a new job or studies, people ask for help when healing a sickness, resolving family problems, etc. Earlier, ceremonies took place also prior to hunting (the chased animal was contacted and asked to give away its stamina, life power, to the people), cutting down a tree, and wood stumping for setting a field, etc. These days, such ceremonies are held rather rarely.

During Mayan rituals, there are candles of four colors used as oblation: red, white, yellow, and black. The colors are related to the kinds of corn, four cardinal directions, or compass points, and hold other symbolical meanings.¹⁷ In the ceremony, the candles are placed in four cardinal directions, often only candles of yellow and white are used or, the other way round, of many dif-

16 According to Rojas Lima, the saints' cult introduced in colonies by the Spanish and adapted by the Indians was, later on, brought to absurd dimensions: in some villages, especially the saint patrons (the church is consecrated to them) of particular villages turn into mighty beings who request a special ostentatious cult, whereas Jesus Christ is degraded into the second place (Rojas Lima 1992: 265–266).

17 The red signifies life, blood and strength, and it is related to the east (where, at dawn, red sky shows); the white signifies light, purity, and innocence, and is bound to the north (from where winds blow, and clouds and mists come); the yellow is the color of food, the elementary color of corn, and is related to the south (where, according to Mayas, corn was cultivated); the black embodies the Earth but also ruin and death, and is related to the west (after the sun sets, the night sets in). To choose among the four paths of the aforementioned colors was a task for the heroes on their way to the underworld in the book *Popol Vuh* (1976, 2005).

ferent colors. Other oblations used during ceremonies are the earth's gifts: crops, mainly corn, cocoa, petals, herbs and plants, animals or their blood, e.g. a hen or a cock (the animal is killed shortly before the ceremony starts). Frankincense is also used, often copal, resin are burnt. Among the objects used for the ceremony, the images of Holy Mary and Jesus Christ and other saints can be found, in which case it is a syncretic ceremony (e.g. often in the area of Chichicastenanga). During the ceremony, supernatural beings are invoked: always the spirits-energies of the days due to the Ritual Calendar, and Mayan ancestors, especially mythical heroes of the sacred book *Popol Vuh*, the Mayan hero Tecún Umán, etc. These beings can be invoked through words, singing, playing a musical instrument (e.g. small drums, shells, and, on the important occasions, marimba).

During some ceremonies, e.g. in the Chichicastenanga region or elsewhere within the syncretic environment, prayers to honor the Virgin Mary are sung (in Latin America, she is commonly related to the Mother Earth). After some of the important ceremonies, a festival follows where they feast themselves, drink and dance accompanied by a marimba.

For some Mayan ceremonies, the day when they take place is of great importance. The day is determined by a Mayan priest in line with the days of the Mayan Ritual Calendar. The importance is held not just by the day's energy (*nawal*), but also its numerical coefficient. The date of an important ritual – including the whole village or ethnic group – is set well in advance.

The ritual is usually performed by a Mayan priest and his assistant. The spiritual representative is named in Spanish: *sacerdote maya* – Mayan priest, *guía espiritual* – a spiritual guide, spiritual teacher, or it is identified in a Mayan language of the area, e.g. *Ajq'ijab'*, *Chi-mam*, in some cases *H-men* – a sacred calendar's traditions keeper. The Mayan priests are not only the spiritual leaders of the society, but, also, often act as healers and, surely, are Ritual Calendar and the interpretation of the days' energy experts. Their role is very important in ceremonies related to sowing and harvest, events such as a wedding, delivering baby, or leaving life (here, the case would be to reconcile the dying one and his family with the existing situation; the concept is to perceive the end of life as a transition from the material dimension to the spiritual one). Mayan priests are the middlemen between the human world and supernatural powers which people look for, often in the stressful times, i.e. when there are problems with supernatural beings and carnal neighbors, or in the times of social insecurity. Rojas Lima sees the traditional priests as "the pillars of the society who carry the collective mind of the nations" (Rojas Lima 1992: 266).

On the occasion of the ritual, Mayan priests sometimes put on traditional clothes or, at least, the traditional head cover; however, usually, they perform the ceremony in their common, "civil" dress. The dress is critical neither for

the “power” of the ritual nor for the believers who have the faith in the Mayan priest’s abilities and his connection to the spiritual world even without ceremonial attributes.

In some ceremonies, blood is shed, e.g. in the region Chichicastenango, hen or cock blood is sacrificed and cast in the four cardinal directions. During the wedding ceremony in certain regions (Izabal), human blood is offered to supernatural beings. Eye witnesses of the Mayan procession claimed that, sometimes, the engaged couple thorned in each other’s finger with a needle or thorn and let a few drops drip on the ground or cotton which then got burnt as oblation. The wedding ritual, even in the traditional families, is often carried out in the Christian manner.

Ceremonies take place in the Mayan languages of the particular region. On the occasions of significant spiritual leaders’ gatherings of various ethnic groups, the languages of particular priests are used which are then translated into Spanish. During the international gatherings, e.g. on the occasion of the Columbus’s discovery of America anniversary, or the meeting of the former American nations’ representatives, *Abya Yala*, the ceremonies are carried out in the languages of the present priests’ and are then translated into Spanish (for the U.S. guests of the Indian ethnic groups, there is also an English translation).

In Mayas’ everyday life, symbolical objects have a great significance: amulets, objects in the form of seals, pebbles, seeds, the symbols of days of the sacred calendar of the *nawals*, etc. Spiritual leaders, too, have their sacred objects. Among them belong e.g. 260 (due to 260 days of the Ritual Calendar year) red seeds of the plant *Erythrina corallodendron*, called, in the local name, *tzité* or *palo de pito*. These seeds, similar to beans, are used for foreseeing.¹⁸ Among sacred objects belong corn seeds, “special” pebbles, obsidian fractions, old coins, etc. The Mayan priesthood keeps the sacred objects in a small pouch or a vessel and uses them for foreseeing, too, in combination with the Ritual Calendar and other techniques.

An important aspect of Mayan traditions is their relationship to their ancestors. For Mayas, it is of utmost importance to keep a close relationship to their ancestors, alive or dead, and to ancestors in general. Before, ancestors used to be buried in the vicinity of villages. Thus, they were all the time present near the family’s house and the people were in a permanent contact with them. People send messages to their ancestors on paper “kites” which they let to the wind. On the All saints day and death day (November 1st and 2nd), almost everybody goes to cemeteries in order to spend time with their ancestors and honor them. During our research, we did not encounter

18 The Mayan priesthood’s oral message, also in *Popol Vuh* (1976, 2005).

trials to communicate with ancestors e.g. during séances to “invoke ghosts.” Mayas themselves claim that, in certain situations, they are aware of their dear departed’s presence, e.g. they perceive their protection when their life is in danger. They also mention that, at times, some of their ancestors appear during a ritual. The traditional theater (ceremony) *Rabinal Achí*, taking place in Rabinal until these days, reckons with ancestors’ presence during the so called drum dance and Mayas even invite them for a performance – for such a purpose, they visit the cemeteries and sacred places in the town’s vicinity.

The close relationship of the Mayas to their ancestors is also expressed in the way they pass on their names: children often get their grand-parents’ or relatives’ names. It is a common trait that, within just one municipality, several persons have the same names, both the first and last names. Besides their respect to the persons, Mayas respect also the objects their ancestors used to use in the past. In the oral folk tradition, e.g. in the myths and legends, people are punished for their disrespect with which they treat old decorated ceramic vessels and other objects found in fields, etc. (Uk’u’x Be’ 2012: 214). Children in both families and Mayan schools are led to paying respect to the ancestors and sacred objects.

Among the significant material-spiritual aspects of the Mayan life also belongs the traditional medicine. Presently, it has been going through the process of renaissance, even though especially young people prefer the “modern” medicinal ways. The traditional way of healing consists in a different concept and perceiving of the problem: the illness is an expression of a balance disturbance within the sick person’s body (the nature of the imbalance can be physical or psycho-physical) or a balance disturbance between the human and his/her environment (regarding other people or supernatural beings). The sickness can be also caused by the act of black magic. When healing in the traditional way these days, a “triangular” communication (spiritual connection) scheme is used: the healer – the patient – the day’s energy due to the Ritual Calendar. Regarding the day’s energy, there is an influence on healing the sickness held by the patient’s ally (*nawal*) ascribed to him/her according to his/her birthday and the healing day’s energy. Based on the interpretation of the Ritual Calendar’s aspects, the *Batz* day (the energy is *nawal*) is suitable for the healing of circulatory disorders; *Aj* directly influences the spine; *Tzikin* is related to the eyes; *Noj* is related to the brain (on this day, it is convenient to work on improving the memory functioning); on the *Tijax* day, it pays off to fix teeth and take care of finger nails; *Ajpu* helps heal lung diseases, etc. (Barrios 2004: 116–254). The healing is implemented through a spiritual connection, or even alliance, with the days’ powers (therefore, it is necessary for the doctor-healer to know the Ritual Calendar), herbs and plants and herb-based healing preparatives. In almost all cases, part of the

healing are alterations in eating habits. The healing is enhanced by a ritual held in a suitable place on a suitable day. The patients with complicated health problems are sent to medical facilities and recommended a treatment using the contemporary medicine resources. During consultations, the healer is helped also by, besides the Ritual Calendar day, other indicators: first of all, they are dreams or, at the moments of pondering, a certain animal would make a sound (the symbol of the day and the powers related to the day), wind would blow, when pondering the solution for a problem, the healer would notice a physical response, etc. People's problems could be also caused by inappropriate behavior to ancestors, in which case, in dreams or in reality, a coyote would show up, the symbol of the ancestors (Rupflin Alvarado 1997: 79). Currently, as a part of healing and the ground for spiritual meetings, a type of sweat lodge (*temascal*) has come into use in the traditional manner, especially in the highlands of colder climate (the area of Chimaltenanga and Huehuetenanga). The traditional medicine, besides its purpose to treat sickness, constitutes a part of the Indian spiritual life as well as the traditional diet consisting of the original foods: *ramón*, *zapote*, *jocote*, etc.

Within the traditional medicine field, a special space should be devoted to obstetrics. The themes of a new life being born, the role of the woman-mother and the standing of the midwife (*comadrona*) within the society bear a great importance, even among the members of the current "modern" Mayan social stratum. The midwife (in the areas distant from medicinal facilities and a maternal hospital) enjoys the social authority to the similar extent the spiritual teacher does. She is an ancestors' wisdom keeper and is related to the most sacred moment of the family's and society's life – the new being's nascency.¹⁹ The beginning of a new life is covered with the aureole of sanctity and a mystery of its own, as even in the current Mayan society children are not explained that or how their sibling is going to be born (Uk'u'x Be' 2012: 43–47). The midwives pass on their experience from generation to generation enriched by their own childbirth experiences, which helps them in their midwifery practice. Previously, some twenty-five to thirty years ago, women gave birth in the knee-bend position on a mat (*pop*, *petate*); these days, they give birth while lying in bed. After the baby has been born, the midwife introduces it to the family and creators. In the traditional Mayan society, besides her medicinal contribution, the midwife's significant role is perceived also from the spiritual viewpoint: the transmission of wisdom and the ancestors' traditions onto new generations. Regarding the baby's sex,

19 The baby birth is considered a significant moment for the whole society. It is important to realize that, before, the significant events were perceived by Mayas from the perspective of the whole collective, and, these days, there is an effort to return major parts of the Mayan society to the traditions, including reinforcing collective apprehension.