

The Rural Q'eqchi' Maya Consciousness and the Agricultural Rituals: A Case of San Agustin Lanquin, Guatemala

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Abstract—This paper investigates the agricultural rituals in relation to the historical continuity of cultural ideology concerning the praxis of cultural sustenance of the indigenous Mayas. The praxis is delineated in two dimensions: 1) The ceremonial and quotidian rituals of the rural Q'eqchi' Mayas in Lanquin, Guatemala; 2) The indigenous Maya resistance of 2014 against the legislation of the 'Law for the Protection of New Plant Varieties,' commonly known as 'the Monsanto Law' in Guatemala. Through the intersection of ideology in practice, the praxis of cultural sustenance is construed.

Keywords—Q'eqchi' Mayas, San Agustin Lanquin, Alta Verapaz, Guatemala, Maya animism, Q'eqchi' deities, Tzuultaq'as.

I. INTRODUCTION

THIS paper investigates the cultural continuity in the intersection of agricultural ritual practices and political resistance. This paper is based on fieldwork in Lanquin, Guatemala with the follow up analysis of the Maya resistance in 2014 against the Guatemala's legislation of the "Law for the Protection of New Plant Varieties", which is informally referred to as the "Monsanto Law." The economic and living patterns of the maize growers in Lanquin, Guatemala are described; the ceremonial and quotidian rituals are delineated to explicate the joint relationship of the cultural ideology and the moral economy in the contemporary rural Q'eqchi'. The embedded cultural symbols and the quincuncial ritual model of the Maya cosmology and cosmogony are also explained to explicate the historical continuity of ideology in which the Maya identity is shaped to account for the praxis of cultural sustenance. The author contends that the praxis of cultural sustenance is embedded in the quotidian and ceremonial rituals; in turn people's consciousness is socialized. In critical times, people's consciousness is mobilized to resist for self-defense. To accomplish this, the author will discuss the recent events of the Maya resistance in 2014 against the Guatemala's legislation of the "Law for the Protection of New Plant Varieties" which is informally referred to as the "Monsanto Law." The reportage of the events and the participant narratives are analyzed with references to the subsistence based economy of the milpa system in Lanquin and the adhered ritual model in the quincuncial framework. Thus the

praxis of cultural sustenance through the case of the rural Q'eqchi' Mayas in San Agustin Lanquin, Guatemala is construed.

The means of maize cultivation are in a binary relation with commemoration of the Maya gods to whom the creation of the Maya race and the humanity is indebted. Maize cultivation is as much a means for survival as a religious obligation. *Popol Vuh*, The Book of Council, esteemed as the Maya book of bible, is crucial to approach the understanding of the Mayan cultural heritage. The transformative theme on the struggles between the light and the dark forces, death and resurrection is inscribed in the Maya pyramids. A cultural narrative of transformation is recurrent in *Popol Vuh*. It tells how the protagonists, a pair of hero twins, named Hunahpú and Xbalanqué, defeat the lords of Xibalbas, the rulers of the underworld kingdom; hence the inevitable death is overcome. The twins resurrect their sacrificed father who later emerges to be the Maize god. The hero twins transform to be the sun and the moon in the end, whose appearances alternate in two different worlds of the living and the dead.

Popol Vuh as a mythology tells the dawn of the Maya humanity. At the dawning places the Maya ancestors had "their sowing and also there was the showing of the sun, moon and stars" [1]. The dawning of the Maya consciousness is intertwined with the major staple food of maize as the means of subsistence for the perpetuation of the Maya race; in turn for the religious end, the Maya gods' existence is commemorated through rituals.

The fields of archaeology and anthropology observe cultural continuity [2]-[5]. The ideological infusion in the subsistence economy is evidenced in tropical forestry [6]. Sapper [7] observed that "up to very recent times the [Q'eqchi's] were very concerned, at least in the countryside, in maintaining their purity, and they, therefore, kept their race uncontaminated... [T]he strict customs of yesteryear have had considerable influence on the capacity of the [Q'eqchi'] tribe."

Several theories are found to explain the dynamics of indigenous cultural sustenance. Wolf postulates a model of closed corporate community common in traditional Latin American societies [8]. An intimate link is observed between the means and ends of production in relation to the social organizing structure. In this model of society, efforts are orchestrated inter-community to coordinate labor on agricultural production and ritual patterns for regulated consumption. Expanding on the "cultural survival model" [9], Wilk suggests a strategic model of settlement explain the

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dynamics between the “external pressures” and “internal responses to them” in regards to the changes and continuity of settlements through the case of Q’eqchi Mayas in Toledo, Belize. The Q’eqchi’ opted for strategies between “dependence or flight,” “subsistence or trade,” and “nucleation or dispersion” [10].

The study contends the Maya ontology is articulated through the joint relationship of the Maya animism and materialism as it is performed in the religious rituals as an obligation for ideological sustenance and subsistence through the cultivation of maize.

II. METHODOLOGY

This research is based on a fieldwork for eight months in San Agustín Lanquín, Guatemala. Through the method of “words of mouth,” interviews of the informants and the villagers were obtained. A mix method approach was implemented for data collection – examination of historical documents from the available institutional archives on educational planning, economic development and statistics, etc.; maintain participant observations through daily interaction with the villagers, conduct household visits through invitations in different villages, and shadow planting and sowing activities. Video recording and photographs were taken with permissions; field notes were entered on daily life routine of the communities, and on recurring or significant events; community participants were interviewed with audio/video recordings and field notes.

The data collection on the particular events of resistance against Monsanto Law is a result of following and searching reportages from the publications of advocacy groups and from multiple news outlets of Guatemala and international independent news/media agencies.

III. SUBSISTENCE BASED ECONOMY IN LANQUÍN

A subsistence based economy through the milpa system is maintained in the rural Lanquín. Maize is the main staple food through milpa cultivation in addition to chili peppers, beans, squash, and herbs of intercropping for supplies of other major dietary nutrition needs. The Q’eqchi’ grows fruit trees, herbs and raise wild turkeys, pigs and chicken in the family orchard. The subsistence staple of the Q’eqchi’ Mayas continues to consist of what is commonly called “the trinity of the American Indians” [11]. A typical breakfast consists of tortillas, chili and salt in Lanquín. Besides the maintenance of subsistence sufficiency by milpa, the rural Q’eqchi’ participate in the global cash crop market. They acquire supplemental incomes from cultivating commercial crops, such as annatto, cardamom, cacao, and coffee, from a small portion of the milpa. Or they offer extra hands on large estates picking coffee, cacao beans or labor on production of African palm oil in the department of Peten north to Alta Verapaz.

The intersection of milpa, the Q’eqchi’ peasants, and the local landscape forms an un-alienated human-world relationship; and an intimacy of social relations is a formulated constituent in the matrix of interdependency

among the subsistence based economy, human, and land. The rural Q’eqchi’ as subsistence farmers differ from the commercial farmers; land and labor are regarded as common wealth if the collective survival is to guarantee. Family lands are passed down evenly among sibling, regardless of gender, household heads pass down land cultivating rights to those who are able to care for the land and those who are in need. Each family cluster from 10 to 15 or more members on a common compound shares cultivating land and the harvest; relatives and community members reciprocate labor during planting seasons. The harvests of maize hence according to my informants do not go to the market or to the hands of middle men as commodities to trade for cash, instead, should feed the families first. My informants advise, “None of the people sell their small maize harvest here because if they do, they will have to pay a higher market price when the reserve of *mazorcas* (corn harvest) runs out.” Land is esteemed as ancestral properties, is “to be looked after,” even if not utilized.

IV. THE RITUAL MODEL OF MAYA COSMOGONY AND RITUALS FOR SOWING

A. The Sowing Ritual

The means and end of the creation of humanity is encapsulated in the ideology of self-perpetuation of the humanity for the sustenance of the creation myth. As decreed in the Maya bible, *Popol Vuh*, the Maya gods designed the human to be a “provider, nurturer, whose creation is ‘the dawning of [gods’] invocation, [their] sustenance, [and their] recognition” [1]. According to Permanto’s fieldwork on Q’eqchi’ Maya animism in Chisec, Alta Verapaz, in spite of cultural assimilation by Catholic and Evangelical missionary, “the beliefs and ritual practices concerning the Tzuultaq’a were never completely eradicated” [2]. “[Q’eqchi’] spirituality has conserved important principles belong to the old [Maya]” [12]. This ideological and material binary of motivations for creation and subsistence production is observed in the rituals and worships to the agricultural deities, *Tzuultaq’as*, of the Q’eqchi’ Mayas in Lanquín. Kahn [13] states that “Q’eqchi’ since Pre-Columbian times have been stuck in a cycle of debt towards tzuultaq’as, who are “the legitimate owner and keepers of the Earth”.

The name of the Q’eqchi’ agricultural gods, *Tzuul-taq’as*, encodes a semantic union of the heaven and earth, is both mother and father. The deity is iconized as an embodiment of the universe or consciousness of multiplicity and totality as interpreted by Caballero Mariscal [12]. As a compound word, *tzuul - ta’qa*, stands for mountain and valley, respectively. The belief of *tzuultaq’a* is central in defining the Q’eqchi’ cultural identity. Wilson points out “*tzuultaq’as* are local mountain spirit[s]; they represent the ongoing portrait of the [Q’eqchi’] community” [14]. “Each pueblo or hamlet corresponds to and is watched over by a *Tzuultaq’a*” [15]. In Durkheim’s words, *tzuultaq’a* embodies “a collective representation, a social fact of the cognitive life of the village” [16]. The Q’eqchi’ Maya spirituality per the belief in the agricultural deity, *Tzuultaq’a*,

in the case of Lanquin weaves a contractual relationship into the matrix of interdependency among the organizing social relationship in the subsistence model of economy of the rural communities to which the religious ideological continuity of the Maya cosmology is adhered.

In Lanquin, the annual planting cycle starts in the end of May and lasts until the first week of June, when the dry season comes to end as precipitation increases. The villagers engage in a series of rituals and observance of taboos over a period of seven - eight days. Family members are vigilant about taboos. Husbands (the heads of the household) and wives sleep separately. Family members avoid mushy foods such as bread, opened tortillas are never left unfinished, and corn cobs are stored under the altar table. Maize grains are meticulously selected from the reserve of the previous harvest. Seed selectors wear loosened sashes, symbolizing the maize's robust growth. The head of the household makes pilgrimages to churches to pray for blessings for the upcoming sowing season. On the night before sowing, the head of the household performs rituals to ask for permission from the land's supernatural owners – tzuultaq'a, the local deities – to use it. Common ritual objects such as copal incense, tortillas, and candles are offered to “pay” the deities for favorable reciprocation. The prayers should invoke each name of the local tzuultaq'a, asking them to watch over the maize, protect it from animals, insects, or plagues and nourish it with rain.

In Lanquin, the villagers raise necessary funds to prepare for the ritual. As an essential part of the ritual for production, families recruit and reciprocate labor. Only male and young adults carry out the sowing task. Each household of three generations comprises approximately 15 members (adults and a number of children). To complete the sowing in a half day, a crew of 12-15 male members, usually kin or neighbors are recruited.

At dawn on the day of sowing, the head of the household starts his journey to his milpa. He should arrive alone at his plot. The farmer, who represents masculinity in contrast to the feminine earth, then performs the ritual to initiate the sowing. The man burns the copal incense in the field (and buries a chick as done in other villages) as an offering to the tzuultaq'a. He prays for the deity's blessings and protection for his crop. Afterwards, four times, he plunges his planting stick into the soil and reaches for maize seeds from the bag, then lets them slide from his palm into each shaft. For the last act, he plunges the planting stick into the center of the field, where it remains. The man waits for his crew to arrive to join him to finish the task before noon.

B. Analysis of the Sowing Ritual

The framework of a quincunx as observed above in the sowing ritual is also performed in the cave ritual, the healing ritual and other occasions in Lanquin. Vogt views the ritual framework as a model after and of “a quincunx cosmogony” [17], according to Cabarrus a symbolic “replica of world creation” [16]. The quincunx ritual framework has another variant - a pecked cross – which was uncovered on the floor of the Candelaria Cave system in Alta Verapaz. It is speculated

an Early Classic feature [18]. Woodfill (2014) suggests that the pecked cross as an astronomic device codifies the celestial observations of “emergence and submergence of the sun” [18]. According to Akkerren, the twin brothers in Popol Vuh, who transformed to be the sun and the moon, appear in substitution crossing the heaven and the underworld [19]. The ritual model embodies the essentialism of the Q'eqchi' ideation of metaphysics and materialism.

Community vitality and consolidation of social relation culminate during the annual sowing season through the ritual procession to initiate the planting cycle. The rituals draw upon a reservoir of social, natural, and supernatural symbolism of the Maya cosmogony. As a vehicle of the Q'eqchi's ideological and material sustenance, the ritual procession manifests a “character of conservatism” [16]. The labor and social relationships for maize cultivation and the related rituals/worships to tzuultaq'a are orchestrated efforts toward maintaining subsistence as the community's way of living, in addition to preserving the continuum of peasant consciousness. The ritual procession forms bonds between each household and community members who are generative agents of labor to produce common wealth. Hence, the author contends the result of cultural sustenance of the rural Q'eqchi' in Lanquin premises on the common abundance of which the social and the material multiply; the sum of labor, reciprocation, land, and harvest cycles is the total of the historical endowments of the Maya consciousness. Arden King on the Q'eqchi' history in Alta Verapaz, concludes “the supernatural world becomes part of the natural world wherein [one] finds [his/her] proper place through cultivating the milpa through the metaphorical union” of the matrix” [20].

V. RESISTING AGAINST THE MONSANTO LAW

The mobilization to resist the Monsanto Law – more than for the protection of the small farmers' economic interests – is driven by the Maya's particular cultural ethics. The event of the defeat of Monsanto underscores the indigenous praxis of cultural sustenance in interlocking relations with the efforts in preservation and conservation of the ancestral heritage as the common wealth. The legislation of the Monsanto Law is to guarantee intellectual and patent rights of the genetically modified seeds of maize as the new plant varieties to the company Monsanto. In consequence, farmers and subsistence peasants are required to invest annually to purchase the seeds. However, their income is not guaranteed.

The Monsanto Law implicates a further marginalization of impoverished indigenous peasants since the colonial time; it deprives the subsistence farmers of productive autonomy embedded in the traditions of subsistence production and conservation. The indigenous sovereignty over the local natural reservoir are supplanted under the Monsanto Law; and the common wealth is handed to a handful of industries and business who own concentrated capital in the international market. According to Mario Itzep, coordinator of the Observatory of Indigenous Nations [21], the law is indifferent to the lower income Guatemalan majority and “promotes ‘development poverty’ which is an act of [colonial] pillage of

Guatemalan [citizens] who depend on agricultural production” for a living. It threatens to destroy small and mid-sized farmers and is predicted a crisis of destabilized subsistence production that will undermine global food security [22]. It poses threat for all Guatemalans, elite or not, who share the common staple crop of maize for tortillas [23].

The responses to the call for unification to resist were reported an instigated popular resonance. The common ancestral origin of the race in the symbolism of maize was evoked to sketch a time evolved portraiture of the Mayan cultural identity and the existential purpose. The nation of Q’anjob’al de Llom Konob’ called upon local municipal and community assemblies for a collective resistance.

[T]he [Monsanto] law... contradicts subsistence sovereignty; it denies the free determination of the pueblos; it [threatens the lives], health, and food security of all Guatemalans; it contradicts the plant biodiversity and native grown seeds; it goes against the nation’s bio-cultural patrimony, particularly maize, which is the sacred nourishment of the Mayas by which our cosmogony is guided, and [which determines] our calendar of rites [24].

The political persuasion mobilizes a cultural discourse from which inclusive and generative interpretation are generated to account for the material-natural-animistic experiences of the indigenous Mayas. From the fusion of the Maya ideology and the moral economy of the milpa system, the social fabric has evolved to maintain abundance through ritual practices of conservationism, diversification, production, and reciprocity. A grower from Tacaná in the department of San Marcos pointed out “[t]he native and hybrid seeds are important links to the heritage from our grandparents; they passed down the seeds [to us], which we conserve and produce in our plots” [25]. Furthermore, “Maya women [harvest] and conserve the seeds but with the [Monsanto] law, their efforts will [be interrupted and] disappear, including the ancestral [sources] of knowledge” [25]. Antonio Gonzalez, from the National Network for the Defense of Food Sovereignty, articulated the Maya’s historicity and the cultural agency by which the moral economy of *milpa* and the accompanying rituals and the organizing social relations are mobilized. He said, “[*milpa* as] the basis of the food sovereignty, [is] associated with intercropping maize, *frijoles*, *ayote*, and other herbs. [For] more than a thousand years, the *milpa* system [has allowed us] to bring diversity to the [dinner] table for daily consumption...” [25].

The ideological tenet as professed in the religious rituals and as maintained in the mundane cycle of production undergirds the political motivation in the pursuit of the economic and political autonomies in the event of resistance against the Monsanto Law. In the ideological juxtaposition of the Monsanto Law and the Maya cosmic vision, the Maya cultural identity emerges distinct to the foreground of globalization in which the ideologies of indigenous peoples and neoliberalism are fought.

VI. CONCLUSION

The above analysis underscores the essence of cultural

sustainability which is in the constant reflexive cycle of theoretical reflection and practice through action. The historicity is shown to locate in multiple dimensions of a cultural community in the mundane, the ceremonial, in the rural geography, and in the political activism on the global stage, etc. Its capacity of cultural sustenance draws from the reservoir of the ritual practices and customs in which the social and productive relations are organized as seen in the case of the Q’eqchi’ Mayas in Lanquin and the collective resistance of the Mayans against the Monsanto Law. The Mayan resistance against cultural obliteration, assimilation, and political economic oppressions is ever perpetual across multiple times against cultural hegemony since the early conquest times, through the eras of colonial, post colonial and postmodern to the neoliberal of the present. In the final analysis, the agricultural rituals are historical obligations as they are the cultural reservoir and the vehicle of the political motivation to organize and to struggle for cultural sustenance of the Maya humanity.

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