

de excavación. Informe de la unidad de arqueología local o de sitios mayores del Proyecto Triangulo (Unpublished report submitted to the Institute of Anthropology and History of Guatemala).

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Sacred Landscape and Oral Traditions in the Ixil region, Guatemala

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Within an Ixil Maya worldview, natural and transformed elements of the landscape play a vital role in the perception of the environment as part of sacred geography. In many aspects, ritual life concentrated around those spaces provides evidence for the continuity of ancestral traditions. At the same time, these sacred geographies are subject to ongoing dynamic processes and transformations. Not only are natural and transformed landscapes in the Ixil region considered places of prayer and sacrifice, but they are also many times considered as living beings. The *K'uykumam*, or the ancestors' live inside the caves, pre-Columbian building remains are explicitly manifested in the mountains. These elements of sacred geography are organized in spiritual spaces through the Ixil Maya calendar and many times associated to the particular days of the ritual cycle. All kinds of ritual specialists, such as Daykeepers (*Aj'qij*, *B'aal*, *Vatz*, *Tiixh* in Nebaj, or *Mama'* in Chajul), as well as midwives (*K'uyintxa'*), ancestral authorities, and *cofradía* members (religious brotherhoods within the Catholic Church), look after these places and are the important keepers and transmitters of local oral histories and traditions. These stories are also consid-

ered very important in the ongoing attempts to reaffirm local autonomy, revitalize local culture, and promote social justice for community members based on human, indigenous, and territorial rights.

This report presents part of the data that has been collected within my doctoral research project, that aims to document the dynamics in the relationships between people and sacred places and the perception of sacred landscape among the indigenous people of the Ixil region in Guatemala. Moreover, it explores the different ongoing changes and challenges that I will mention further on. Initially the research included collecting and recovering information about the natural and transformed elements of sacred landscape in the region, that are considered as sacred places, based primarily on local oral traditions and histories, as well as participant observation of rituals and religious celebrations. In addition, GIS technology was used to document some of the locations of specific sacred places where people continue to pray and practice ritual, as well as spaces that now only exist in the community's memory. I have also considered some of the archival resources and existing archaeological data, as contemporary sacred places are often located in the former settlements. As the research progressed, I included another analytical focus that examines women's roles and approaches to religiosity both within *costumbre* and Maya spirituality. The research findings have been immensely informative in terms of the contemporary perspectives, not only on the sacred landscapes, but also environment and its conceptualizations within Ixil Maya communities. Of course, it would be difficult to expand on all of these points of interest in this report, so I will concentrate only on selected aspects of my research materials.¹ Partial results of the project had been already submitted to local Ixil Maya authorities and community leaders in order to help strengthen their efforts in promoting environmental social justice in the Ixil Region and the recovery of information about cultural patrimonial heritage. Sharing the research results, including community members in the ethnographic fieldwork, as well as in the production, presentation, and dissemination of the results is part of the method that I put effort in implementing and developing throughout my academic work.

The Ixil Region is located in the El Quiché department in the western highlands of Guatemala where almost 90% of the population are Indigenous Peoples (INE 2018). It consists of three municipalities: Santa María Nebaj, San Gaspar Chajul, and San Juan Cotzal, where the majority of inhabitants are Maya Ixil. There

¹ This report has been initially submitted in 2017. Some necessary amendments have been added to its final version. There have been also other publications where I have broadened different topics that had been mentioned here and that I add in the bibliography.



Figure 01. View from Xe'Mam Tze' archaeological site on the mountain Vi' Kooma, one of the four cardinal points of Ilom (Chajul) (Photography by Monika Banach).

are also three variants of the Ixil language, which is one of the 30 Mayan languages spoken in Guatemala, Mexico, Belize, and Honduras (England 1992, 20). Part of the research results, that this report focuses on, concerns the community of Ilom (4,182 inhabitants), located in the municipality of Chajul. Ilom is a unique place for plenty of reasons. According to local oral tradition, it is the first settlement from which the Ixil people emerged and then founded the three towns of Tx'aul (Chajul), Naab A' (Nebaj), and K'usal (Cotzal). Numerous archaeological sites exist in the valley where Ilom is located, one of them called in the Ixil language B'ayal I' or Xe' Kuxhab' (also known as La Panchita), which is considered by *ilomeros* the first settlement where the Ixil ancestors dwelled. The remains of pre-Columbian buildings can be found there, and religious specialists hold *costumbres* (ceremonies) among them. Archeologists have conducted research there since 2009, after the hydroelectric project HidroXacbal affected part of the site. Excavations had shown that this site denominated by the archae-

ologists as 'Xacbal' was inhabited uninterruptedly between 500 BC (Preclassic period) and 1530 AD (Late Postclassic period) (Hermes and Velásquez 2014; Velásquez 2012; PRAX 2010). There are many more archaeological sites located around Ilom, covered by contemporary houses or *milpas*. Some of them, like Bayal I', are also considered sacred places.

During the fieldwork conducted in collaboration with the ancestral authorities and elders, 38 sacred places were re-identified around Ilom and measured 25 exact and three approximate locations of *altares* (altars, places of prayer) using a GPS device.² Because of the diversity of the elements of sacred landscape and many possible ways of understanding them, in this work, I consider any categorization or typology only as a guide. Most of the sacred places around Ilom are mountaintops, hills, water springs, rocks, pre-Columbian buildings remnants, cemeteries, or caves. There are four mountains surrounding Ilom where altars are located, defining the community's four cardinal points. They correspond to

² Vi' On (South), Vi' Kanoja (North), Vi' Kooma (East), Vi' Sajsivan (West), Xe'Naloj, Tzi Jul A', Jul A', Txinaki, Vi' Paalma, Xe' Paalma, Kutchmaltostiux, Sajmb'al Tza'jatoja, Xixil I', Xe' Kaq Tze', Nikapamaki, Vi' Chib', Xatch Kooma, Nikapamaki, Vi' Vitz, Xe' Poj, Txixhil A', Pombal Tze', Vi'k Vialtz'ukuna', Xe' Mam Tze', Xe' Kuxhab', Jasali', Vi' Musan, Baxamuunte, Timuunte, Q'aqleb'altixh, Tzi Tze A', Vi' Jobj'al, Aj Tzib' Tib'altenam, Aj Tzib' Nikatenam, Katchb'al Sivan, Cha'b'ala', Nimla Kuruz, Vi' Muxsivan, Vi' Sivan Tzi Xakb'al.



Figure 02. Ancestral authorities carrying their *varas*, consulting community matters over ceremonial fire in Nebaj (Photography by Monika Banach).

the particular days of the Ixil calendar known as the Four Yearbearers: on the East Vi' Kooma (day No'j); on the West Vi' Sajsivan (day Chee); on the North Vi' Kanoja (day Iq'); and on the South Vi' On (day Ee). Some of these places are shared or considered as boundaries between nearby communities, such as respectively Sotzil, Sajsivan, and Santa Eulalia "La Pimienta". In the center of this system, there is a particularly important cave called Xe' Naloj³, where maize is thought to have originated. In today's town center, there is another group of sacred places (mostly rocks, from one to ten meters high), which seem to constitute a separate system due to their special role in local celebrations. In the past, those places were organized in groups, and there were ritual specialists assigned to each of them. Many of the sacred places in Ilom are strongly linked to local oral traditions and bound to the ritual and agricultural cycle of the pre-Columbian calendar. The ritual language associated to these and other locations (also outside Ilom) shows the local cosmivision in the context of

local and regional notions of the sacred landscape and its roles in community life.

There are various factors that affected local Ixil religious life in the past and others currently shaping the relationships with the environment and its sacred characteristics. First, imposed Spanish Christianization, forced resettlement of the population, and expropriation of indigenous lands displaced whole communities from the sacred context of the surrounding environment. This process continued through the following centuries with the capitalist politics of the Liberal dictatorships in the 1870s (Lovell 2015, 573). Relationships with the sacred landscape had been further damaged during the Guatemalan Civil War (1960-1996). According to residents, some of the sacred places in Ilom stopped being visited on a regular basis in the 1980s due to the violence, massacres, and persecution of many ritual specialists, who were accused of participating in the guerilla. Evangelical churches significantly grew after the war, and have discouraged publicly practicing

³ As I have described elsewhere, the term *naloj* refers to a number of caves in the Ixil region, especially those where speleothems can be observed and those associated to the oral tradition concerning the origins of maize (i.e. Xe' Naloj in Ilom, Xe' Naloj in Oncab' and Xe' Naloj or Paxil in Xolcuay, Chajul). Traditionally, the word *naloj* means two tied maize cobs of good quality separated from the crop for the next sowing season and normally hung on the beam (see Banach 2016, 2017).



Figure 03. Spiritual guides and *Cofradía* members during ceremony carried out at the cemetery altar in Chajul (Photography by Monika Banach).

Ixil rituals in sacred places, which they have demonized.⁴ Recently, the current political and economic context has changed due to the decline of coffee production that has led the plantations such as La Perla (established on Ixil's ancestral lands in the early 20th century) to sell some of its properties to companies building megaprojects.⁵ The arrival of international investments, such as HidroXacbal hydroelectric project has led to an escalation in land conflicts at all levels, but has also impacted the relationship between the Ixil and sacred places. The case of the aforementioned Bayal I' is a good example of a sacred place that has been directly affected by such changes. It has been considered 'abandoned' by different sides of recent conflict, but it has also always been deeply rooted in the oral tradition of the entire Ixil region and never forgotten by the people of Ixil, including the original toponymy.

Responses to these changes in power dynamics has proven that sacred places continue to play an important role in the Ixil worldview, in Ixil and in the Ixil region

in general. Implementation of the development projects based on Western ideas, in addition to existing historical complexity, has impacted the landscape. Not only has this occurred in a physical way, but also in a political and a religious sense, changing local discourses and approaches regarding the environment, its significance, and preservation for the communities and their resistance. These changes are visible also in gender dynamics, as more Ixil women reclaim leadership positions, including religious functions, as well as engaging in activism. Many times, these decisions are grounded within ancestral indigenous knowledge regarding the environment, and thus, the significance and present situation of the Ixil sacred places, an interest and preoccupation that many times crosses the boundaries of present religious affiliations. These ideas are intrinsically connected with the perspectives on community and collective wellbeing, including gender equality and equity informed by ancestral principles and values.

4 Presently there are 17 Evangelical churches in Ixil. For more on the protestantism in Guatemala see for example the works of Virginia Garrard-Burnett (1998).

5 For more on the megaproject activity in the Ixil region see Giovanni Batz's work on the "Four Invasions" (Batz 2020).

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Implicaciones de la recalibración cronológica en las Tierras Altas del Área Maya: un ejemplo en el área del Montículo C-IV-4 de Kaminaljuyu, Guatemala y su importancia arqueológica y cultural

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Resumen

Ante las nuevas propuestas e investigaciones arqueológicas, no solo en Kaminaljuyu, sino también en toda el Área Maya, es necesario replantear el rumbo de las interpretaciones y estudios en los diferentes sectores investigados en los sitios arqueológicos durante la última década. Con el fin de aportar nuevos datos a la cronología y desarrollo de los antiguos habitantes de Kaminaljuyu, se contrasta la información obtenida por el Proyecto de Investigación Arqueológica Montículo C-IV-4 de Kaminaljuyu y se presenta una nueva secuencia de ocupación del mismo.

Palabras clave: cronología, cerámica, Preclásico, canales hidráulicos, depósitos, áreas de actividad

Introducción

La ciudad de Kaminaljuyu es el sitio prehispánico más importante del Valle de Guatemala para el período Preclásico (Popenoe de Hatch 1997; Barrientos 1997; Ponciano 2000; Corado 2008). Durante las fases del Preclásico Providencia, Verbena y Arenal, se caracterizó por su amplio desarrollo, aumento poblacional y relaciones con otras áreas culturales, reflejado en la abundancia de hallazgos y materiales arqueológicos que son testigos de la fuerte actividad económica y cultural que tuvo lugar en el sitio.