

We Are Alive: Recovering the History of Rabinal (1944-1996)

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Translated into English by Eric Banner

This research to recover the history and memories of Rabinal is the result of the collaboration of a number of groups.

The “Reconciliation Project,” the result of an alliance between the Popular Justice Law Office and the Association for the Comprehensive Development of the Victims in the Verapaces, Maya-Achi (ADIVIMA for its acronym in Spanish), supported the work. This project has been financed by the Norwegian government through the United Nations Development Program. With this collaboration between institutions, we have been able to offer a complete product (book, video, and abridged version) to the people of Rabinal.

Kaqaya kan ri' wajun wuj che ri
achijaab', ixoqiib' jay ak'alaab'
xkik'amisaaj chupa ri k'axkoliil.
¡Xoqo kaqak'uxtaj alaq!

We dedicate this book to the victims
created by the violence in Rabinal.
We will always remember them!

Map #1 – The province of Baja Verapaz

Map # 2 – Rabinal County

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I – Introduction

We Are Alive

“K’o kuriqa’
Kintz’olq ‘omij ri nub’e:
Xa jewa ‘kinna ‘tisaj jun jasach.

Weta xata nutukel kin b’in chonuwech
Kin kwinq’uri kinb’ij chäwe
Jas ri’, ri ucholaj ri sachib’al.”
Tz’olq’omin b’e,
H. Ak’abal

“Once in a while
I walk backwards:
It’s how I remember.

If I only walked forward
I would be able to tell you
How it is to forget.”
Walking Backwards,
H. Ak’abal

We often tell ourselves that history is written by the victors, with all the consequences that brings with it. History, then, becomes the subjective version offered by the dominant group, and, as a result, telling that version never quite reflects the actual events. It doesn’t include the viewpoints of all the people who were part of what happened. An example at hand is the Dance of the Rabinal Achi, or “Xajooj Tun,” a world literary heritage and the pride of Rabinal. There is told the story of how the people of Rabinal split from the K’iche with the capture and sacrifice of K’iche’ Achi. Nevertheless, the text, and the oral history that it is drawn from, only reflects the version told by the Achi people. It might have been different if time had conserved the version told by the K’iche about their version of what happened. Alain Breton contextualizes our analysis with the following example:

“As a comparison to our time, it would be as if, after centuries, someone found the peace accords and thought that those documents reflected a complete telling of the story that was shared by all the people of Guatemala at the end of the 20th century. It’s not like that at all! This is how one must look at the Rabinal Achi.”¹

Keeping that in mind, in this book (Oj k’aslik) we try to recover the history of the recent decades in the region of Rabinal with a wide view, that doesn’t reflect the perspective of the victors, but rather instead centers the experiences of those who suffered, in flesh and blood, the events and the results of the internal armed conflict. The focus is on Rabinal, specifically during the period known in Guatemala as the “Years of Violence.” This era lasted between 1978, the year of the first massacre in Panzos, Alta Verapaz, and 1985, when the civilian government began a transition to democracy in Guatemala.

Nonetheless, in this book we consider the violent events in their historic context. We will look at the 80s in their wider context, a context which goes back to the decade of the revolution of 1944, but that goes back even further, all the way to the arrival of the

¹ Alain Breton during a museography conference in Rabinal, July, 2000.

Spanish invaders 500 years ago, as one of the victims said it “It was 500 years ago that they started to violate our rights.”² Besides, for the Maya people in general, and for the Maya Achi people in particular, the invasion doesn’t represent some experience in the remote past, far away, but “a circumstance visible in the current conditions of their lives.”³ The ongoing colonization has happened in different eras of the last 500 years, and over time has changed its face, but the decade of the 80s, the violence of the 80s, was just the most recent version of what has been ongoing all these years. We are arguing that the invasion never ended, but instead has continued to be present in the daily lives of the indigenous Maya Achi people. Factors, like the racist exclusion and marginalization from the social, cultural, political, and economic life of the country have brought us to the conditions of the present day, discrimination and extreme poverty.

Cultural Identity

In the historical overview that we share in the coming pages, we have opted to focus in ways that try not to further victimize the Maya Achi people. The perspective of victimization can be found, for example, in the following excerpt from the Guatemalan historian Severo Martinez Pelaez:

“Historically the Indians are a product of the colonial powers, a result of the oppression and the exploitation of the natives; the persistence of the indigenous population after the colonization is just the same as the persistence of the colonial servant class, and in the end, the persistence of the indigenous majority in this day and age is, in the first place, a response to the inertia of four centuries of servitude.”⁴

² EC-01

³ La Farge, O. cited in Lovel, G., 1989, pg. 5.

⁴ Martinez Pelaez, S., 1970, pg. 472.

Thinking like that shown in this passage result in the conclusion of the same author that “the Indian was the historical result of the colonial oppression,”⁵ and that, therefore, their culture is also colonial or represents “a complex culture that is essentially new.”⁶ In practically the same way of thinking we find ourselves having to interpret the constant efforts to folklorize the cultural expressions of the indigenous Maya Achi. At the end of the day, Rabinal is promoted as “The cradle of our national folklore” inside and outside of the region, when people refer to the traditional dances, the handcrafts, and the festivals of the fraternal organizations, among others. Nevertheless, treating a culture, or its expressions, as folklore means killing that culture, and denying the fundamental ties connecting the tradition to the cultural identity of the people, which is to say, the heart of what it means to be Maya Achi. Folklore, then, is the equivalent of superficiality, interpreted as a dead culture, allowing anyone who wants to present the folklore at any time. The traditional dances have a very different meaning, and in Rabinal are tied to the deepest parts of the indigenous identity. We can look, for example, at the presentation of the Dance of the Stag, that usually happens on May 3rd, the festival day of Santa Cruz. This is one of the days with the largest number of traditional dances and that isn’t a surprise because this is a day that western religion took and substituted for the pre-Columbian custom of given requests for rain. The dances also are about giving homage to the ancestors and the “rajawales” (the owners of the hills and valleys), because not only do the dancers do their dances, but also

⁵ Martinez Pelaez, S., 1970, pg. 489.

⁶ Martinez Pelaez, S., 1970, pg 492.

“The rajawales, those are the spirits that are invited through prayers and the candles, they arrive there, the rajawales also dance in between the dancers. They also call upon the ancestors because those that danced before, they still exist. They didn’t take away the story that is the dance because that has stayed for forever. When, for example, Don Pascual died, there were still calls for him to participate, even though he is deceased. We call upon the souls that have danced in the past and they dance there in spirit, too. They are living there and because that they are called and invited to the place and because of that nothing happens to us. The dance is the same as the qajawxeles (the administrators of the fraternal organizations) because they bring joy to the festival. If there isn’t a lot of dancing, the whole festival passes in silence, without the desire to fulfill its function, without anything.” E-00

The dances are intimately related with the cult of living with the ancestors and the “rajawales.” Because of that they form an intrinsic part of the identity of the Maya Achi. Consequently, the dance customs have nothing to do with folklore (interpreted as something that is culturally dead), but instead is the living culture of the Maya Achi people.

In this book we share about the cultural expression and cultural identity that have supported an active resistance and cultural perseverance that the indigenous people have adopted over the centuries. Finally, we must conclude that the Maya Achi people have responded in creative ways to the new systems of domination. In this way, through the adoption of some changes in their customs and traditions, the Maya Achi people

have been able to “conserve the essential parts”⁷ of their cultural identity. To clarify this point, we share the following example. El Popol Vuh tells us that the god of the Rabinal people was Jun Toj:

“And also (having to do with the god of the K’iche’s, Tohil) is the name of the god of the Rabinal people, which only has a small change in his name, JUN TOJ, as they call the god of the Rabinal people in their language.”⁸

One of the main characters in the “Xajooj Tun” (or Rabinal Achi), Job Toj, the sovereign of the Kajyub’, could then be the fifth decendent in the Toj lineage, which started with Jun (the first). TOJ (translated as payment or offering) represents one of the 20 days in the Maya calendar and its counterpart in the Nahuatl language is ATL which means “water.” In the present day, the shawl of St. Peter, which coincidentally is blue, is covered in the mark of the day ATL. Even though the comparison between Saint Peter and Toj (or Tohil) is much more complicated⁹, we can conclude that St. Peter represents

⁷ Farris, N. cited in Lovell, G., 1989, pg. 6.

⁸ Tedlock, D., 1996, pg. 162, our translation.

⁹ See, for example, Van Akkeren, R., 2000, pgs. 176-183: Van Akkeren ties the reverence of Tojil with the sacrifice (understanding that the interpretation of ATL “water” is coming from the blood coming from the sacrifice). He also argues that the Toj of Rabinal substituted for their god Tojil with St. Peter because he carried a sword in his hand and was martyred by decapitation. In addition, in the text of the Rabinal Achi, this figure of Toj is always mentioned with the following pair of word: “Ajaw Teken Toj, Ajaw Teken Tijax” (Breton, A., 1999, 1057-1058). Father Ximenez says that in his time St. Peter was known as Jun Tijax (a flint knife, used during the sacrifices). In this preceding passage, Van Akkeren summarized the sacrifice of K’iche’ Achi at the end of the Xajooj Tun, which is the subject of the dances during St. Peter’s festival (from January 17-25 every year)

Tohil and that the people with the last name Toj descend from an ancient lineage with the same name that was giving their reverence to Tohil. In other words, the figure of St. Peter, along with the other saints, constitutes a continuation of the prehispanic religious practices, which is the same conclusion that Florescano reaches:

“In the core of the Indian people they were able to realize a radical movement to indigenize the Christian saints, cults and rites that had been imposed upon them.”¹⁰

(Images- The sign of ATL on the shawl of St. Peter, based on the work of Van Akkeren, 2000)

Which is to say, we have here a clear example of the creativity of the Maya Achi people to be able to continue with the same essence (indigeneity) under another banner (Catholicism). And even though it could be that the majority of the indigenous people have lost that meaning for St. Peter, the cult of the saints continues forming an essential part of the Achi worldview, just the same as living with the ancestors. In future pages we will clear up with detail with even more examples.

¹⁰ Florescano, E., 1999, pg. 265.

The previous information serves us as an example of the persistence, survival, and cultural resistance that the Maya Achi people have adopted during the centuries of colonization right up until this very moment. From this perspective they become creative actors and resisters of the imposition of a foreign culture and religion during those years. Basically, these facts lead us to conclude that the cultural identity of the Maya Achi people contains autochthonous and prehispanic elements that look different on the surface, but not within their actual meaning. Under the conversion to Catholicism, then, they have been able to conserve a limitless quantity of cultural expressions present since before the invasion.

That kind of victimization that proposes the native people are passive in the face of the invasion is something we don't want to apply to any of the different phases of the invasion, and neither do we want to apply it to the more recent period of government led violence. Instead, we propose an active role in which, after years of silence and fear, the people have begun to break these frameworks that had sowed terror in their lives. Because of that, we prefer to use the term "survivors" instead of "victims." Even though it is true, that the Maya Achi people, all of them, were victims of a brutal repression, as a people they survived the effort to eliminate them. Survivor, in this context, has a connotation that is both active and purposeful, as one of the interviewees said –

“Our beloved dead are no longer speaking, but we are (here)!” EC-01

The title of this book carries in itself the same sentiment. In spite of all the harms that have been done, “Oj k'aslik! We are alive!”

“It's very hard. It raises a lot of feelings, pain, the victims who were killed, our own suffering, a lot of discrimination, so many awful things that have happened to us. We are alive, but we have a new life.” E-19

In spite of the brutalities that have stretched from the centuries of violence right up to the internal armed conflict, in spite of the fact that they wanted us gone,

all of us, We are alive! In spite of all the suffering and the harms, they have not been able to annihilate us as the Maya Achi people, and we continue to live with our own cultural identity.

Recovering the historical memory of Rabinal

One might ask, Why is it important, necessary, to look into the violence? Why do we need to open all of these wounds again? Wouldn't it be better to just forget it all? The answer is complicated. We think that it is only through a deep understanding of the past that it is possible to understand the present, and to lay down the foundation needed for the future. Remembering the past is painful, and remembering or listening to such stories of human brutality that happened, that can make us feel horrified, or deeply disgusted. Or, maybe, it hurts us to remember, one another, our own participation, or that of family members in the brutal acts of the internal armed conflict. At the end of the day, one must remember that such a record clearly flies in the face of the interests of the people who enriched themselves during the civil war, as it was put so well by the Alliance Against Impunity –

“Those implicated in multiple crimes insist on burying the past, and on pardons and forgetting, so that peace and reconciliation can be reached. Any effort to search for justice is framed as hateful, as vengeance, and a form of reprisal.”¹¹

Far from being the case that we are thinking about ways to enact vengeance and reprisals, of striking an eye for an eye, what is being proposed is an understanding of the past and, just as important, access to the truth, and to justice. To know what happened and the reasons for the events that occurred is an essential part of the process so that we might create the conditions that prevent things like this from ever happening again. In any case,

¹¹ Alliance Against Impunity, 1996, pg. 14.

we can listen to the warning of Primo Levi, a survivor of the Holocaust in Europe against the Jews during the Second World War –

“It happened, and for that reason it can happen again. That is the most important thing that we have to say. It can happen again, in any place.”¹²

In fact, this message holds the fundamental core of our present work, just as it lies at the heart of all the parts of excavating the past: exhumations, reburials, eyewitness testimonies, investigations, etc., which is to say, it forms the basis by which we will assure that it doesn't happen again.

This work, as we understand it, is not a set of steps towards a campaign of vengeance, but is better understood as the beginning of a long process that is directed at local reconciliation and the construction of a multicultural Rabinal, multiethnic and multilingual. We hope that in the near future, our children and our grandchildren will know a society in peace and be able to live in harmony. The concept of “peace,” nevertheless, is not something we understand as only a ceasefire or the end of the internal armed conflict, but something we interpret to mean something about the totality of the human condition, cultural, political, economic and social so that the people of Rabinal can think freely in the future. “How can we speak of peace, if my children have nothing to eat?”¹³ asks one of the men interviewed.

This peace, then, is still waiting to be built! This present study brings with it the dream of putting in a seed so that this process and tries

¹² Levi, P., 2000, pg. 612.

¹³ EC-03.

to be, along with other efforts of equal importance, a start to the process of reconciliation and construction. We have to plant today so that we can harvest tomorrow. And we feel the urgent importance of that sowing and, even more so, the harvest to come.

As a framework, the present investigation took on the following recommendation from the Commission for Historical Clarity –

“That the Guatemalan people continue in their efforts to investigate and analyze the past, so that, with the knowledge of what happened, the basis for avoiding the errors that provoked the conflict might be strengthened.”¹⁴

From this starting point, we began to gather all the available materials about the recent history of Rabinal. In this context we might mention the following books, which are themselves the result of important and difficult work: Guatemala, Memory of the Silence; Guatemala, Never Again; The Massacres of Rabinal; Fish Out of Water, among others, and a long list of articles and other works published inside and outside of Guatemala. Seventy interviews conducted with individuals (marked with the format E-#) and informal and unstructured group interviews (marked with the format EC-#), along with other documents (marked B-# and D-#), which gave us the information needed for our work.

Lastly, it is important to point out that, because of the limits of time, the present study, in no way, pretends to be complete, such that our point of stepping off also forms part of our conclusions. Or, saying it slightly differently, the people of Rabinal should continue investigating their own past, they should continue to offer alternatives to forgetting, and above all, they should keep recovering the memories of the past so that they might create a vision of a new future. During the investigation, very soon after we started, we realized that in Rabinal there could be a list of books of equal quantity to the number of people there, which is to say, each and every one of them could write their own book. In this context, it's worth mentioning the excellent work done by Jesus Tecu Osorio in his eyewitness book, Memory of the Massacres of Rio Negro. In the meantime, as we

¹⁴ CEH, 1999, TOMO V. pg. 81, recommendation 79.

await the publication of such a grand quantity of testimonies from the people of Rabinal, we present the present work.

The first chapter introduces Rabinal in the historical-cultural context of Guatemala. Who were the first inhabitants? When was it founded? How did the “peaceful” invasion begin? What were the consequences of the colonial period? In the second chapter we focus on the historical context from the perspective of the Guatemalan revolution, switching back and forth from the micro perspective of Rabinal and the macro perspective of Guatemala. In that same chapter we try to structure an understanding of the causes and origins of the internal armed conflict from a local level, given that Rabinal was never a war zone, or the location of firefights between the army and the guerrilla forces. From the events of the era of the violence, we start off the third chapter, where, in addition to describing the strategy and methods of the combatant parties, we also present some illustrative cases. Later we analyze the consequences of the violence, focused especially on the Maya Achi people: What did the consequences of the internal armed conflict mean for them, and what does it mean for them today in relation to their ancestors? Finally, in the last chapter, we offer some reflections as a way of concluding. We conclude, then, with the deep hope that the result of this work is to push for the construction of a multicultural, multilingual, multiethnic society where the word “peace” finally receives its due.