Discovering Aj Pop B’atz’: Collaborative Ethnography and the Exploration of Q’eqchi’ Personhood

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Resumen
Este informe explora la relación entre el conocimiento histórico y el poder en San Juan Chamelco, Guatemala. En Chamelco, los q’eqchi’ producen la historia regional por medio de cuentos de Aj Pop B’atz’, quien protegió la comunidad q’eqchi’ contra la invasión española en el siglo XVI. En 2006, fundé un grupo étnografico colaborativo para analizar los cuentos orales y un documento colonial. Nuestro análisis revela Aj Pop B’atz’ como una parte vital de la vida contemporánea q’eqchi’. Este artículo propone que mis colegas utilicen Aj Pop B’atz’ para construir la identidad q’eqchi’ y fortalecer su papel en la historia guatemalteca. El descubrimiento de un texto colonial que documenta Aj Pop B’atz’ da a mis colegas el poder para cambiar la historia oficial de Guatemala que ignora las contribuciones del pueblo q’eqchi’. De hecho, este informe examina las investigaciones colaborativas como un medio de la historicidad latino-americana.

This article explores historical knowledge and power in San Juan Chamelco, Guatemala. In Chamelco, the Q’eqchi’ re-write history through stories of town founder Aj Pop B’atz’, who protected the community from a 16th-century Spanish invasion. In 2006, I established a collaborative research group to analyze stories of Aj Pop B’atz’. Our analysis revealed that for the Q’eqchi’, Aj Pop B’atz’ transcends time as part of Chamelco’s historical consciousness. This article argues that my collaborators use stories of Aj Pop B’atz’ to construct Q’eqchi’ identity and strengthen the Q’eqchi’ role in Guatemala’s historical landscape. I argue that our discovery of a colonial text documenting Aj Pop B’atz’ gave my collaborators the power to challenge official Gu-
temalan histories that ignore Q’eqchi’ contributions. This paper examines collaborative research as a medium of historicity in Latin America.

PALABRAS CLAVES: etnografía colaborativa, historicidad, q’eqchi’, resurgimiento cultural

KEYWORDS: collaborative ethnography, historicity, Q’eqchi’, revitalization

IN SAN JUAN CHAMELCO, GUATEMALA, the Q’eqchi’ perform history through narratives about the town founder, Aj Pop B’atz’. Residents depict Aj Pop B’atz’, a sixteenth-century Q’eqchi’ leader, as a wise man who befriended the Spaniards upon their arrival in the region. During a year of fieldwork, I worked with a group of Q’eqchi’ on an analysis of oral narratives and of a colonial text documenting Aj Pop B’atz’. Our analysis revealed that Aj Pop B’atz’ personifies Q’eqchi’ identity for most Chamelquenos. Chamelqueños transform Aj Pop B’atz’ from a historical figure into a mythological one, who represents an “authentic” Q’eqchi’ identity.1 This article examines on-going collaborative research on Aj Pop B’atz’ as a symbol of Q’eqchi’ value, which Chamelquenos invoke to legitimize their place in Guatemalan history. It argues that researching Aj Pop B’atz’ allows my collaborators to produce a sense of Q’eqchi’ identity that reminds all Chamelquenos of what it means to be Q’eqchi’. Our discovery of a colonial text documenting Aj Pop B’atz’ gives my colleagues the power to challenge official Guatemalan histories that overlook the role of the Q’eqchi’ community. Oral histories and colonial documentation assist them in constructing a historical Q’eqchi’ identity that transcends time and space. In the following work, I discuss my collaborative research in light of literature on power, identity, and historicity. Secondly, the story of Aj Pop B’atz’ is presented, and finally, an analysis is given of Aj Pop B’atz’ as a symbol of Q’eqchi’ identity. This research reveals that collaborative ethnographic research can act as a medium of resistance throughout Latin America.

Grupo Aj Pop B’atz’

Arriving in the municipio (township) of San Juan Chamelco, Guatemala, visitors take in a powerful image. In front of the town’s Catholic church stands a statue of a Maya warrior, identified in a mural below as Don Juan Matalbatz, cacique de caciques (Aj Pop B’atz’, king of kings) (see Fig. 1). Aj Pop B’atz’, a 16th-century Q’eqchi’ leader, remains at the forefront of Chamelqueno society through his physical presence in the town centre and in the stories that the Q’eqchi’ tell. He remains today a subject of much historic and artistic curiosity. Chamelquenos attribute the relative peace they experienced during Guatemala’s 36-year civil war, and the ab-
sence of natural disasters, to his ongoing protection. Since Aj Pop B’atz’ emerged as a key theme of my research in Chamelco, I investigated his story. However, as I collected these stories, I became overwhelmed by their complexity, and sought ways to contextualize the information collected through looking at contemporary Chamelqueño life.

Conversations with elders and activists revealed their interest in learning more about Aj Pop B’atz’, though community members commented that they lacked both a forum for such investigation and a person to coordinate their research endeavors. They needed someone with time to spearhead their efforts and coordinate their pursuits. Before my arrival in Chamelco, I had developed an interest in collaborative ethnography after reading the growing body of literature about its significance in Mesoamerican anthropology and the revitalization of Maya identity (Schele and Grube 1996, Strum 1996, Warren 1996). Thus, I welcomed this

Figure 1 Statue of Aj Pop B’atz’ located in the centre of Chamelco.
opportunity to combine my research efforts with the depth of the community’s expertise, knowledge, and resources, which would give our work ethnographic depth. The chance for collaborative work not only supported my interest in Aj Pop B’atz’, but also assisted the community in an investigation of cultural and political importance. One evening, I discussed the challenge of such investigations with a local *folklorista*, the late Oscar Fernandez. Oscar suggested that we hold a forum for elders to tell their stories and explore the Q’eqchi’ past. On August 31 2006, the Grupo Aj Pop B’atz’ met. Members included the president of Guatemala’s national folkloric committee (a Ladino), a retired schoolteacher, Don Oscar, and me. We ranged between three and five members, and each participant lived in Chamelco and spoke Q’eqchi’ fluently. Most were community elders, though the group later expanded to include a younger Q’eqchi’ artist and the former president of the Q’eqchi’ branch of Guatemala’s Academy of Mayan Languages. During the following months, our project gained momentum. We visited historical sites, viewed artifacts, and met bi-weekly. We discovered a colonial text about Aj Pop B’atz’ that changed my colleagues’ understanding of Q’eqchi’ history and, ultimately, of themselves. My colleagues stated that my participation motivated them to put aside other tasks and dedicate time to our pursuits during my (relatively) short stay in Chamelco. They also relied on me to relate our findings to documents stored in the National Archives and to other academic works. They encouraged me to disseminate our findings to both a national and international audience, which they, because of lack of formal education or time constraints, might not reach alone. Together, we embarked on a journey to discover how the Q’eqchi’ use Aj Pop B’atz’ to reconstruct Q’eqchi’ identity.

*Historicity and revitalization in Latin America*

Aj Pop B’atz’ is largely absent from official accounts of Guatemalan history; his story does not appear in history texts and is not taught in schools, and although the Spanish chroniclers record their difficulties in entering the Tezululúlan (now Verapaz) region, they do not mention him (Las Casas 1927, Remesal 1932). Ximenez records that a “Don Juan” cacique of Zacapulas worked to assist the Spaniards’ entrance into that region (Ximenez 1930:108), and mentions “Señor de Cobán,” who rejected Spanish attempts at Christian conversion. A few other histories mention that “Cacique Juan Aj Pop’o B’atz’” was named “Lifelong Governor” of the Verapaz province in 1555 (Saint-Lu 1968:48, 52; Estrada 1979; Guerrero 2007:194), though they do not detail the life of Aj Pop B’atz’. Regional histories instead focus on Manuel Tot, a nineteenth-century Q’eqchi’ leader, who fought against Spain for Guatemalan independence (Martinez Pelaez 1969; Wasem 2006). Manuel Tot is commemorated by a statue in Cobán’s central park and in school curricula. Thus,
our research on Aj Pop B’atz’ allowed my Q’eqchi’ colleagues to fill a void by highlighting an ancestor who otherwise remains absent from the region’s historical discourse.

Recent anthropological inquiry examines how indigenous groups challenge official histories created by hegemonic forces. Foucault (1984) examines the way in which history and knowledge are created, stating that those who produce knowledge create “regimes of truth,” control access to knowledge, and thus dominate the oppressed. Scott (1990), however, argues that although subaltern communities appear to believe dominant truths, they unify against elite power through the use of hidden transcripts. Hidden transcripts take the form of folklore, gossip, and songs that hold meaning for indigenous groups as hegemonic resistance. Like Scott, Connerton (1989) and Benjamin (2003) explore how societies create collective memory through historical reconstruction, bodily practice, and commemorative ceremonies. As a result, multiple historical accounts may emerge from the same past events. Sahlins (1981, 1985) and Whitehead (2002), among other scholars, term this process of creating history, “historicity.” Similarly, Whitehead (2002:xi) suggests that such histories are not “factual” accounts of reality, but rather reflect the “experiences of a given group and the cultural significance of recalling the past.” Trouillot (1995) states that the information left out of official histories, or “silences,” holds greater meaning for the dominated than historical “facts.” Thus, the dominated produce alternative historical narratives.

In Latin America, historical narratives often assist in resistance and rebellion (Farage 2003, Pérez 2003, Uzendoski 2005, 2006). The co-investigation of such histories, or of other related ethnographic projects, gains significance throughout Latin America as indigenous groups use this as the basis for cultural revitalization, identity formation, or political movements. Collaborative research endeavours between anthropologists and indigenous communities are vehicles for exploring history, politics, and identity. Lassiter states that recent anthropologists have sought to “develop ethnography along dialogic lines and have in their individual accounts shifted the dominant style of writing from authoritative monologue to involved dialogue between ethnographer and interlocutor” (2005:3). In response to critiques of conventional anthropological practice, the emerging discipline of collaborative ethnography seeks to represent more justly the indigenous cultural perspective by engaging collaborators in the process of conceptualizing, executing, and reporting on research (Lassiter 2005). By doing so, anthropologists produce rich and ethical ethnographies that support the political interests of their indigenous collaborators.

The Bolivian Taller de Historia Oral Andina presents a clear example of the political value of collaborative ethnography. In this workshop, members of the Aymara, Kichwa, and Uru communities investigate Andean culture, history, and
identity (Rivera Cusicanqui 1998). While the group initially formed to commemorate Santos Marko T’ula, a 1920s Aymara leader, today it helps to reinforce local identity by disseminating historical, political, and cultural knowledge. Their investigations revitalize indigenous identity in a political forum.

Similarly, Vasco (2002) explores the impact of an oral history project centred on land-claims in Guambía, Colombia. This project, led by local researchers and national anthropologists, helped community members to legitimize their territorial claims. Rappaport (2008) reflects on the internal dynamics of a similar project undertaken in Cauca, Colombia. Though this project’s original goals were to engage in “scholarly publishing,” the project quickly assumed greater political significance for participants who explored collaborative methodologies. Participants discovered that ethnic identity influenced their research participation. The group strove to understand how member’s identities had an impact on their role in, and the potential benefits of, this research. Rappaport concludes that this multicultural research helped its members to develop strategies benefiting their organization’s specific goals.

Although fewer collaborative projects have been conducted in the Maya area, many studies reveal that Maya communities use historical knowledge in a similar way. Clendinnen (1987) states that in the colonial period the Maya used historical discourse to resist Spanish domination by linking the past to the present. Today, contemporary Maya groups do the same. Maya communities use stories of indigenous heroes like Tecún Umán, Xhuwan Q’anil (Montejo 2001, 2005), and Kaji Imox (Warren 1996:97) to promote Maya identity, by highlighting the core values of local life, Adams (2001) argues that in response to such oppression the Q’eqchi’ transform historical leaders into mythological figures in order to redefine Q’eqchi’ history. Specifically, she states that in Chamelco, Q’eqchi’ elders situate Guatemalan dictator Jorge Ubico in the mythology of the tzuultaq’a, or ‘mountain spirits.’ Today, they regard Ubico and Aj Pop B’atz’ as manifestations of the tzuultaq’a. While Aj Pop B’atz’ embodies the positive nature of these spirits, Ubico represents their fickle nature. Like the tzuultaq’a, Ubico brought both positive and negative change to Chamelco (Adams 2001:217). While he constructed roads, his regime wrought hunger and poverty. Like the tzuultaq’a, he betrayed his people when faced with opportunity and advancement. By transforming Ubico and Aj Pop B’atz’ into Q’eqchi’ spirits, Chamelqueños situate historical events within local ideology, thus strengthening Q’eqchi’ identity.

Warren (1996, 1998) explores the process of re-discovery that a group of “Maya intellectuals” experienced while translating segments of the Annals of the Kaqchikel. The analysis allowed Maya scholars to re-construct their personal and group identities through the legacy of the Maya past: “Culturalists are reviving the heroic imagery of Maya warriors in an attempt to deal with the passivity they see as one of
the scars of Ladino racism and its language of inferiority for indigenous populations” (Warren 1996:100). Warren shows that the historical contextualization of Maya identity is the cornerstone of the Maya resurgence movement.

In Guatemala, the Maya resurgence movement began in the mid 1980s to unify Maya communities against military regimes’ oppression. Led by Maya intellectuals, Maya communities have fought for equality and cultural preservation (Fischer and Brown 1996:13, Asociación Maya Uk’u’x B’e 2005a, b), and Maya spiritual leaders recover elements of Maya identity lost through centuries of oppression (Cojti’ Cuxil 1994, 1997, 2006). In doing so, they use historical narratives to generate a Maya identity that legitimizes their role in Guatemala’s political hierarchy. Smith (1990:17) argues that this affirmation of Maya identity is a “visible repudiation of state attempts to create a national hegemonic culture.” Wilson (1991, 1995) suggests that Q’eqchi’-Maya identity does not derive from ancient times, but rather has been re-created by the contemporary Q’eqchi’ population. In this respect, being Maya is not exclusively an ethnic designation, but is also a form of resistance.

McCallister (1996) explores similar issues in her analysis of Guatemala’s national \textit{Rabin Ajaw} pageant system, arguing that for the national community the pageants serve as “authentic” representations of indigenous realities. In these pageants, judges identify the woman they deem the most authentic representative of Maya communities, based on her profundity of knowledge and physical “purity.” Nevertheless, McCallister argues that this authentic representation of Maya life comes from how the country’s dominant sector has perceived Maya women instead of from the Maya community itself. In the pageant, contestants perform this constructed image of Maya life in order to be considered authentic. She states, “Authenticity … is always emergent and never more so than when the authentic representation is not an artifact, but a person, a producer of representation” (McCallister 1996:107). By conforming to national standards of indigenous life, candidates reproduce a national image of Mayanness, rather than the values of their communities, thus continuing the cycle of oppression.

Nevertheless, many within the indigenous communities believe that pageants elevate Maya identity to the national stage. Event speeches allow candidates to voice opinions about Maya equality and to showcase indigenous practice. The images of Maya identity performed in these pageants remind people about core Maya beliefs. Thus, these pageants, and the authenticity they generate, simultaneously empower and oppress Maya communities.

Authenticity in Maya practice, then, is a complex concept. For the Q’eqchi’, \textit{Aj Pop B’atz’} is an authentic representation of Maya past, present, and future. Through the narratives they tell, the Q’eqchi’ convert \textit{Aj Pop B’atz’}, a historical figure, into a mythological one, who becomes an authentic symbol of Q’eqchi’
identity. Aj Pop B’atz’ is an authentic Q’eqchi’ ancestor because he helped Chamelco to remain free for decades of the colonial forces that challenge Maya authenticity. The absence of Aj Pop B’atz’ from official discourse further legitimizes his authenticity as a symbol of Maya value, since his story is known and told only by members of the Q’eqchi’ community. While I initially thought that Chamelco’s interest in Aj Pop B’atz’ stemmed from the oppression and violence suffered during the civil war, community elders related that his story has been a crucial part of town life, and of indigenous resistance, for decades (Goubaud 1949:14). Thus, the significance of Aj Pop B’atz’ as a Q’eqchi’ symbol does not stem from the desire to rebuild Maya identity in the post-civil war era, but rather has perpetuated an authentic sense of Q’eqchi’ life through centuries of oppression (from colonialism through the civil war). To examine how my collaborators use this knowledge to construct Q’eqchi’ identity, Aj Pop B’atz’ is contextualized here in the ethnography of San Juan Chamelco.

Aj Pop B’atz’ in Chamelco’s history

The municipio of San Juan Chamelco is located in Alta Verapaz, Guatemala. With more than 45,000 residents, Chamelco lies within the Q’eqchi’-Maya homeland (INE 2002:1). Ninety-eight percent of municipal residents identify themselves as Q’eqchi’. Most Chamelqueños earn their living as farmers, although increasingly some seek jobs in Cobán. Although Chamelco was officially founded by the Spaniards on June 24, 1543 (Gomez 1984:19), it was home to a large Maya population throughout the pre-Columbian era (Granados 2004:9). During the colonial period, the Spaniards dubbed Chamelco a pueblo de indios (Indian town), an autonomous political entity. Today, Chamelco is governed by elected officials.

Having survived the persecution of Guatemala’s 36-year civil war (Perera 1995, Carmack 1998, Schirmer 1998), Chamelqueños honor the practices of their “ancestors.” Although Chamelco escaped much of the violence experienced by other Guatemalan Maya groups, today the Q’eqchi’ use the changing circumstances under which they live to “reinvent” (Hobsbawm 1983) ancestral traditions. Wilson (1991, 1995) states that throughout Alta Verapaz, the Q’eqchi’ re-enact ancient traditions to reconstruct a sense of Maya identity.

In Chamelco, residents argue that Q’eqchi’ culture remains representative of their indigenous past due to their colonial autonomy. One man explained that:

Chamelco is a special, tranquil town. The culture of the people is original. Our values, morals, are deeply rooted … Chamelco has a lot of originality, because it hasn’t been invaded by people from other places … if we want to take a real example, a pure representation of Alta Verapaz, it is here.
Chamelco is a town in which indigenous culture is authentic. Chamelqueños often tell narratives of their ancestors, identifying them as tough, hard-working, and wise individuals who endured difficult circumstances. For this reason, Chamelqueños honor the ancestors by emulating them.

As a symbol of Q’eqchi’ ancestors, Aj Pop B’atz’ is the model of value upon which the Q’eqchi’ base their identity. While the Spaniards documented their interactions with Aj Pop B’atz’, they provided little information. The great curiosity surrounding this figure led to many publications examining Aj Pop B’atz’ (Revista de la feria de Alta Verapaz 1936:30; Quirim 1971; Portocarrero 1978; Estrada 1979; Terga 1982:19–21; Yaxcal 2003). As a result, a complex narrative of Chamelco’s past emerges.

All the adult Q’eqchi’ interviewed related this tale with ease, despite initial hesitation. Elders remember that decades ago this story was told during community celebrations. The pageants India Bonita, “Pretty Indian” (McCallister 1997: 112) and, later, Rabin Aj Pop B’atz’, “Daughter of Aj Pop B’atz”, provided a public forum for the story of Aj Pop B’atz’ and educated youngsters about his accomplishments. Also, Q’eqchi’ elders told me that cofradía leaders read the story aloud during saint’s day celebrations as recently as 40 years ago. Since primarily Q’eqchi’, rather than Ladinos, participate in these events, they provided ideal settings for the performance of the narratives that ground Q’eqchi’ identity. Other Chamelqueños recall that their elders told them the story of Aj Pop B’atz’ during family celebrations or in the home. Nevertheless, I rarely heard his story told publicly and children do not learn them in schools. Young women sometimes learn his tale when they train for participation in pageants, while other Q’eqchi’ learn it in the home.

That the story of Aj Pop B’atz’ is today only told in controlled contexts reinforces its role as a hidden transcript of Q’eqchi’ resistance. To the local Ladino community, Aj Pop B’atz’ appears as a mythological character. In Q’eqchi’ narratives, he is something much more: the embodiment of Q’eqchi’ value. The Q’eqchi’ use his story to remind each other about core Q’eqchi’ values: intelligence, strength, compassion, and endurance. These qualities are the basis of Q’eqchi’ resistance in a national forum. To examine how these narratives are used to reinforce a clear sense of Q’eqchi’ identity, I will now outline the story of Aj Pop B’atz’.

Aj Pop B’atz’ in Chamelco’s history

Although the exact information surrounding his birth remains unknown, Chamelqueños state that Aj Pop B’atz’ was born in the municipio of Chamelco. He became Aj Pop (leader) of the Q’eqchi’ after the Spaniards abducted and killed the cacique...
of Tezulutilán, now Alta and Baja Verapaz, in 1529. Elders elected him king because, as one man explained, they

arrived at a consensus, they came up with criteria to elect a new cacique. One of these criteria was that he had to be a cautious man who was … careful and faithful … One of the criterions was also age; another criterion was to have participated in war … He had to know war and had to be a strategic man, to be able to direct the army that they had then. Above all else, he had to … be able to manage destiny. So, with these characteristics … the election took place.

The council elected Aj Pop B’atz’ since he embodied core Q’eqchi’ values. Aj Pop B’atz’ immediately prepared to resist the Spaniards, who struggled to enter the region. While numerous Maya groups fell under Spanish rule, Aj Pop B’atz’ kept his people free of Spanish domination by using magical powers, praying to tzuuultaq’ a, and blocking them strategically. He strengthened his army, preparing for conflict.

The Spaniards soon forged alliances and expanded their presence throughout the region. To protect his people from conquest, Aj Pop B’atz’ received the Spaniards. He accepted Catholicism, enabling the region’s peaceful settlement, and protecting Chamelco from forced conversion and death. Q’eqchi’ life remained unchanged, as he oversaw the region’s re-settlement.

In 1544, the Spanish friars took Aj Pop B’atz’ to Spain as a representative of Mesoamerica’s indigenous population to meet Spanish King Carlos V (Estrada 1979:172). Two colonial Q’eqchi’ documents state that he travelled with seven Q’eqchi’ men, seven Spanish priests, and nine Spanish men. Elders suggest that the men travelled through caves under the earth, flew through the air, or travelled by sea via the Polochic River to Spain. With them, they took gifts—quetzal feathers, birds, and textiles. The journey took from a few months to a few years. It was night when Aj Pop B’atz’ arrived at the palace, and the Spanish king was asleep. He lined the throne room with gifts. In the morning, the King awoke to the birds’ songs and asked to meet Aj Pop B’atz’ immediately. As Aj Pop B’atz’ was led into the throne room, he was ordered to bow for the King. He refused, replying that, “One king does not bow for another king.” Stunned, Carlos V admired Aj Pop B’atz’ and gave him silver crosses, cloth, incense burners, and most famously, silver bells for Chamelco’s church. As the men set off on their return journey, Carlos V cautioned them not to look behind them during their travels. Chamelqueños tell distinct versions of the men’s return trip, though they all state that the journey to Chamelco was arduous. Chamelqueño workers arrived at the coast to meet the men to carry the bells. When they stopped to rest in a village just north of Chamelco, now known as Sa’ Campana (The Place of Bell), the bell sank because its sound was so powerful.
that it would have deafened Chamelco’s residents (see Fig. 2). Other stories suggest
that the bell did not sink in Sa’ Campana, but was lost when a canoe overturned in
the Polochic River.

Returning to Chamelco, Aj Pop B’atz’ erected a cathedral to house the Spanish
bells and to be the municipio’s central place of worship. Many Chamelqueños state
that he did so in one night, whistling the spirits of the wood into place. An old man
from an aldea told me that Aj Pop B’atz’ called out to the forest animals for as-
sistance; he worked only at night because he was old and could not show his face
during daylight hours. He later inaugurated the church in a wa’tesink (inaugura-
tion) ceremony, using human sacrifices. In recognition of his power, the provi-
sional Spanish government named Aj Pop B’atz’ governor of the newly established
Vera Paz region (Real Cédula de Chamelco) on August 3 of 1555.

At the end of his life, Aj Pop B’atz’ entered a cave in the side of a sinkhole in
the village of Chamil. While some elders state that he entered the cave to hide, out of
shame for the devastation the Spaniards wrought, others state that he sought refuge
in the cave because the sun was rising. While most Chamelqueños believe that he
died in this cave, others state that he resides in it and returns to help Chamelqueños
in crisis. Chamelqueños visit this site today to perform ceremonies for his blessing
during planting and harvest seasons. In 2006, candles, flowers, and incense marked
it as an active pilgrimage site.

Chamelqueños thus construct Aj Pop B’atz’ as a man who embodied Q’eqchi’
values. For the Q’eqchi’, value centres on the idea of being “taken into consider-
ation” for participation in public events and rituals and being “remembered” by
future generations of Chamelqueños (Kistler 2007). The Q’eqchi’ demonstrate wisdom, morality, a hard-working nature, and compassion for others so that community members will emulate them. Doing so gives them a legacy that will endure in local history long after they are gone.

Doña Rogelia, a Q’eqchi’ woman with whom I lived for several months, discussed Q’eqchi’ values while washing dishes in her kitchen one morning. “For Q’eqchi, working hard is prestigious, and brings you recognition,”10 she said. Other Q’eqchi’ related that they strive to “leave a good image and good memories” of themselves behind by demonstrating wisdom in daily tasks.

More importantly, perhaps, the Q’eqchi’ stress that these qualities were possessed by their ancestors, whose wisdom and strength far surpassed that of contemporary Chamelqueños. The ancestors left the practices that define Q’eqchi’ life as their *patz b’alaq*, loosely translated as ‘inherence,’ and contemporary Q’eqchi’ communities respect them. A short anecdote from my 2005 fieldwork exemplifies this phenomenon. One evening, I talked with Don Andrés, my host, after we had finished a wa’tesink petition ceremony for his new kitchen’s construction. We sat, admiring the half-finished structure, and he told me that he had planted all of the wood used to build it when his eldest son was a baby. His labour gave him great pleasure, he said, because it represented how his ancestors had lived. Relaxing in the new construction helped him to connect to his ancestors. As a university-educated Q’eqchi’, he dedicated himself to pursuits other than farming, and enjoyed this opportunity to live like his ancestors. This experience exemplifies that the desire to embody their ancestors is at the core of Q’eqchi’ values.11

Returning to the story of Aj Pop B’atz’ then, one notes that he attains great prominence in the narrative of Q’eqchi’ life by embodying the characteristics that define Q’eqchi’ values. Aj Pop B’atz’ confronted the “conflicts of value” (Gregory 1997) faced by Q’eqchi’ communities today: the confrontation between Spanish, or today’s Ladino, values and established Q’eqchi’ values. Although the Q’eqchi recognize Aj Pop B’atz’ as a real person, the Q’eqchi’, and especially my collaborators, use him as more than a historical figure; narratives of his life transform him from the purely historical into a mythological character to whom they attribute the authenticity of Q’eqchi’ life. His authenticity is further confirmed by the fact that his story circulates among members of the Q’eqchi’, and not Ladino, community.

My collaborators and I thus examined the ways in which the story of Aj Pop B’atz’ helps Chamelqueños construct an authentic sense of Q’eqchi’ identity. First, Chamelco honors Aj Pop B’atz’ through folkloric events held during the town *feria* (fair) each June. In particular, the pageant *Rabin Aj Pop B’atz’* (Daughter of Aj Pop B’atz’) selects a Q’eqchi’ teenager as the town’s representative in national folkloric events, including *Rabin Ajaw*. In this way, judges elect the embodiment of Aj Pop B’atz’ to represent Chamelco in a national forum.
Through discussions and analyses, we identified other ways that Aj Pop B’atz’ embodies Q’eqchi’ values: his wisdom, success, and his protection of Q’eqchi’ practices. One Q’eqchi’ elder explained that before Aj Pop B’atz’, the Q’eqchi’ lived in the pim (wild), scattered throughout the countryside. Aj Pop B’atz’, he said, was the first man who “knew how to think.” He used his wisdom to organize towns, he founded the church, and constructed the town centre, which many Chamelqueños identify as a prominent pre-Columbian trading post.

Chamelqueños also honor Aj Pop B’atz’ for his wisdom during colonial encounters. One woman expressed that “he was like the town’s original mayor, but more powerful than a mayor, because he knew everything. He was the only man that had xwan xwankil, ‘wisdom, power,’ here.” He also demonstrated strength and power by resisting Spanish forces through supernatural means. Today, people that mediate the spiritual and living worlds, such as healers, shaman, sacerdotes mayas (Maya ritual leaders), are among the most respected community members. Aj Pop B’atz’s manipulation of the spirit world garners him respect.

Chamelco’s vice-mayor further explained that the significance of Aj Pop B’atz’ stems from his vision of peace. He explained, “He was successful, never defeated, and the world honored his attitude.” He sacrificed, accepted baptism, and worked for the Spaniards to prevent the destruction of his community. Thus, he proved himself to be hard working and self-sacrificing. His strength is also seen as protecting Chamelco from natural disaster and conflict. The civil war, earthquakes, and mudslides, which devastated other regions of the country, have had less impact on Alta Verapaz because Aj Pop B’atz’ keeps the region safe from harm. His sacrifices for the Q’eqchi’ community further cement him as symbolic of Q’eqchi’ values.

More importantly, however, Aj Pop B’atz’ is a producer of authentic representations of Q’eqchi’ life. Chamelco is a centre of Q’eqchi’ culture because his peaceful reception of the Spaniards prevented the ethnocide that decimated eastern Guatemala. One Q’eqchi’ man explained that Aj Pop B’atz’ “was one of the greatest men as governor of Alta Verapaz. He knew how to defend the town, because if not for him, we would have different [Spanish] last names. We would be ‘López,’ we would be ‘García.’” The Q’eqchi’ state that they live free of many of the hegemonic forces that have shaped nationalist interpretations of Maya identity because Aj Pop B’atz’ granted them their autonomy. In other words, his actions allowed for a Q’eqchi’ identity grounded in indigenous knowledge and practice.

A former mayor concurred, stating, “He left us everything that he did as a Maya inheritance. Everything our people do, our activities, are a way to remember his life.” In other words, Aj Pop B’atz’ fought so that Q’eqchi’ practices would persist and not be replaced by Christian or Spanish ones. Thus, he achieves immortality as remembered through such practices. As a result, by embracing the practices that he
left behind, Chamelqueños, like Aj Pop B’atz, become authentic producers of Q’eqchi’ culture.

Most importantly, Aj Pop B’atz’ serves as a mediator of two distinct realities: that of local Q’eqchi’ and that of Spanish, now Ladino, culture. In his negotiations with the friars and the king, Aj Pop B’atz’ embraced Spanish values to protect Q’eqchi’ life. Today, the contemporary Q’eqchi’ straddle two worlds, fighting to preserve Q’eqchi’ identity. Struggling against Ladino culture, centuries of oppression, and the genocide of the civil war, the Q’eqchi’ mediate Ladino values to preserve their own. Aj Pop B’atz’ is the hidden transcript through which they do so. Though he was a historical figure, and appears only as a mythological character to members of the Ladino community, the Q’eqchi’ transform the reality of his life into a mythological metaphor for how they live today. In telling his stories, they are not concerned with remembering him with historical accuracy, but rather in a way that reminds them about the core values of Q’eqchi’ life. As a form of resistance, Aj Pop B’atz’ represents an authenticity free from centuries of oppression and domination. The hidden transcript of his narrative allows Chamelqueños to connect to his model of value and, as he did, to mediate conflicting realities.

Documenting Aj Pop B’atz’

Since Chamelqueños share narratives of Aj Pop B’atz’ only in private settings, people were less willing to share their oral narratives with the group than they were with me alone. As a result, other group members dedicated themselves to finding written accounts of Aj Pop B’atz’ to legitimize his story for a national audience. Q’eqchi’ interest in documenting Aj Pop B’atz’ proves significant for understanding his contemporary significance in Chamelco. Medina (2003) documents a similar phenomenon in his analysis of Ye’kuana territoriality. In fighting for land rights, the Ye’kuana moved from an oral tradition to a written one to preserve their territorial identity (Medina 2003:17–18). While their history had been preserved orally for generations, the Ye’kuana wrote their history to conform to national standards that deem written, rather oral, histories as legitimate.

In contrast to the Ye’kuana, though, Maya communities have long emphasized written tradition as essential to historical knowledge. During the pre-Columbian era, Maya elite recorded historical information on stele, lintels, and ceramics, among other media. During the colonial era, they recorded their cosmologies (albeit under Spanish supervision) to suit their own purposes in the Annals of the Cakchiquels, the Books of Chilam Balam, and the Popol Vuh. While storytelling continues to be the primary form of Maya cultural education today (Montejo 2005), the Maya view written documentation as key to legitimizing their historical identity, especially as a larger sector of the population becomes literate. Literacy
replaces orality as the primary form of education in Maya communities where the national ideology stresses written documentation as necessary to legitimize power. Although Maya communities regard oral narratives as legitimate histories, they recognize that national standards require written documentation to authenticate history. Thus, my collaborators sought to reinforce the community’s oral history with written documentation to prove the authenticity of Aj Pop B’atz beyond Chamelco, and to further legitimize Q’eqchi’ historical legacy.

In the search for historical records, one group member recalled that a friend boasted having a colonial document about Chamelco’s history. Though his friend was murdered 25 years ago, we approached his son, who was initially reluctant to share the document. Nevertheless, he finally did, and despite a few water stains and fading ink, it was beautifully preserved (see Fig. 3). The fact that it was written in

Figure 3  The colonial document about Aj Pop B’atz’.
colonial Q’eqchi’ further legitimized its significance for my collaborators, as it was written in their language and not in Spanish.

The process of translating the document was arduous and time consuming. Understanding the colonial Q’eqchi’ in which it was written did not prove to be as big a barrier as deciphering the script, which varied significantly from contemporary writing. Over five, eight-hour sessions, two group members and I struggled to understand the text, disputing the words and their meaning. While we shared common goals, the desire to complete and publically share our transcription and assist in community revitalization efforts, we differed in our approach to analyzing the document. I felt frustrated when my colleagues were content with translations that did not fit contextually, while they disliked my need for everything to “make sense” instantly. Tensions mounted, since my colleagues argued that their native understanding of the Q’eqchi’ language trumped my anthropological interpretations of the material in situations where the two conflicted. We, debated, disputed, and discovered together.

The conflicts we experienced raise interesting questions about the nature of collaborative ethnography. What happens when the “expert” voices of Western academics contradict those of the cultural “experts,” the indigenous intellectuals with whom we work? How can we mediate these conflicts and our distinct forms of “expertise” to reach our common goals of investigation and dissemination? Should my status as a gringa anthropologist challenge their native expertise of Q’eqchi’ language and culture? We struggled to reconcile these issues as we forged ahead.

While the dynamics of conventional ethnography often create a power imbalance that subjugates the communities’ interests to those of the anthropologist, collaborative ethnography has as its goal the dialogue between ethnographer and native colleagues. Considering these issues, I realized that my fluid status as a gringa anthropologist gave me only a partial perspective on Q’eqchi’ culture (Nelson 1999), and that my collaborators’ “expert voices” as fluent speakers of Q’eqchi’ filled a crucial void in my knowledge as an academic. Though our knowledge and approaches to research seemed to vary—I wanted to translate each line in order and understand every word before moving on, while my colleagues wanted to wait and contextualize each sentence within the “bigger” picture—they were in fact complementary. Our differing perspectives allowed us to situate the rich ethnolinguistic information we deciphered into a larger context of meaning, giving us a complete picture of the document and its significance. The lenses of our distinct cultural traditions helped us to view and interpret the document through a holistic perspective unique to the process of collaborative research. As a result, we successfully completed the translation of 95 percent of the document into contemporary Q’eqchi’ and Spanish.

All tensions dissolved when we moved onto the document’s analysis, where we shared the common vision of understanding Chamelco’s history more fully. My
colleagues marvelled at how the documents detailed account of the journey of Aj Pop B’atz’ resembled contemporary oral history, and I noted their sense of accomplishment and pride.\textsuperscript{12} With renewed vigor, they commented that the document authenticated Aj Pop B’atz’ for a wider audience.

Before the translation of this document, my collaborators believed that Chamelco’s interest in Aj Pop B’atz’ stemmed from contemporary Maya politics. One group member admitted that he believed Aj Pop B’atz’ to be “just” a mythological figure whose story empowered the Q’eqchi’ community. Our work, however, changed my collaborators’ historical views. Though they had not doubted the existence of Aj Pop B’atz’, they saw him more as a myth used to reinforce Q’eqchi’ values. The discovery of the written document validated him as a symbol of Q’eqchi’ identity not just for the Q’eqchi’ community, but also for the national audience whose notions of authenticity require written authority. What made this written authority acceptable for my collaborators was that it used Q’eqchi’, a subaltern language, rather than Spanish, the nation’s dominant language, to document this facet of national history. Thus, the written document highlighted not only the political existence of Aj Pop B’atz’, but also the significance of the Q’eqchi’ language, for my collaborators and for the town as a whole.

*Grupo Aj Pop B’atz’ in Guatemala’s political landscape*

The Grupo Aj Pop B’atz’ then sought ways to share our work and, like Aj Pop B’atz’, to become producers of authenticity. During a brief visit to Chamelco in 2007, and longer fieldwork in 2009, a colleague and I met with Chamelco’s administration. As we waited for our first audience with the mayor, the political weight of our work became evident. My colleague explained that our research gave something valuable to all Chamelqueños and beyond: it proved that Aj Pop B’atz’ was real and that Chamelco was built on his legacy. Though Chamelqueños used him as a mythological figure, our documents meant that his story, and the power of the Q’eqchi’ community as tied to him, could not be negated by national authorities. For this reason, our work should be recorded as an official part of Chamelco’s history.

By 2009, Chamelco’s municipal officials had changed, and my colleague and I met with the new mayor. In our meeting, we proposed August 3 (the date that the Spanish government named Aj Pop B’atz’ as the first governor of Verapaces) as a holiday in recognition of his achievements. Later, we presented our proposal to the city council, who agreed to support a conference in honour of Aj Pop B’atz’. Elated, my colleague felt that this experience validated our work, since it meant sharing the story of Aj Pop B’atz’ with a wider audience.

These meetings revealed that my collaborators used our research to empower themselves. Here, my colleague confronted the institutions representative of the...
Spanish colonial legacy. By presenting our work to the mayors, my colleague reinforced Q’eqchi’ power in Guatemalan history. He used the written authority of the documents, a nationally accepted medium, and the strength of oral tradition, the Q’eqchi’ medium, to prove Q’eqchi’ perseverance. By grounding Q’eqchi’ life in the past, he demonstrated the enduring legacy of an “authentic” Q’eqchi’ identity. In doing so, he used Aj Pop B’atz’ to show that history, and the production of history, are sources of indigenous power in Chamelco.

Thus, my Q’eqchi’ collaborators use our research to re-write Q’eqchi’ history. The strength of Maya oral tradition and the written authority of the colonial documents allows my collaborators to use the hidden transcript of Q’eqchi’ life to produce a regional history that legitimizes Aj Pop B’atz’ as an authentic representation of Q’eqchi’ life in all national forums. Educating municipal officials and the Q’eqchi’ community about his wisdom and sacrifice, they generate a Q’eqchi’ history centred on indigenous knowledge and practice. By bringing this hidden transcript to the forefront of local consciousness, my collaborators became authentic producers of Q’eqchi’ identity, despite continuing oppression and global integration.

Conclusion

In Chamelco, then, Aj Pop B’atz’ is a symbol of the Q’eqchi’ past, present, and future. Chamelqueños invoke his model of value through his presence in the town centre, through the stories they tell, and the colonial documents they preserve. Chamelqueños identify Aj Pop B’atz’ as an authentic representation of Q’eqchi’ life because he mediated conflicting worlds to define Q’eqchi’ identity and practice. Because he represents the authenticity of Q’eqchi’ life, Chamelqueños strive to embody him. By commemorating Aj Pop B’atz’, the Q’eqchi’ construct him not simply as historical antecedent, but also as a force defining Chamelqueno life.

Our collaborative research on Aj Pop B’atz’ helps my Q’eqchi’ colleagues to contextualize their identity in the legacy of their Maya past. While oral narratives educate community members about the strength of Aj Pop B’atz’, the discovery of the colonial record gives them the power of written authority to challenge nationalist histories. They confront the absence of Q’eqchi’ history in national histories by re-writing history to include their community as one whose identity transcends time and space. In doing so, and by publically presenting our work and creating a space in which to celebrate Aj Pop B’atz’, they challenge authorities to define the Q’eqchi’ role in Guatemala’s historical narrative. Thus, this article demonstrates that collaborative ethnographic research contributes to historicity and revitalization throughout Latin America.
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Notes

1. By “authentic,” I do not mean something that is a literal representation of the past. Instead, I refer to the belief of indigenous communities that certain practices and beliefs represent a direct connection to their past and identity.

2. The composition of our group changed, as members gained or lost interest, or when they died.

3. I use the term historicity throughout this paper to refer to the making of history or the process of re-writing history based on alternative interpretations of historical events.

4. Saint’s day brotherhoods are dedicated to celebrating the town’s primary Catholic saints on their designated days.

5. On one occasion, I observed an elder telling the story to gathered community members on the street of one of Chamelco’s largest aldeas, Chamil. This was the only time, however, that I heard this story told in a public forum.

6. For this reason, my collaborators and I plan to write a children’s book about Aj Pop B’atz’ for use in local schools.

7. While the bells hang in the church tower today, the smallest bell cracked in the mid-1900s. Some state that Aj Pop B’atz caused the bell to crack when a woman touched it, violating a custom that forbade women from touching sacred objects (Adams and Brady 2005).

8. The Q’eqchi’ perform the wa’tesink petition ceremony to inaugurate new constructions and objects. They “feed” their spirits so they will not be restless or harm their owners.

9. The term “value” refers to the complex social phenomena that underlie Q’eqchi’ action. Recent research reveals that value is a social construct, and does not necessarily correlate to the accumulation of capital resources (Graeber 2001; Gregory 1997).

10. This quotation is a reconstruction based on my fieldnotes.

11. This phenomenon is not true for those Q’eqchi’ who practice Evangelical religion and thus reject Maya ritual.

12. I revised our transcription with the former president of the Q’eqchi’ branch of the Academy of Mayan Languages.

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