The Original Ancestor: Aj Pop B’atz’ as a Model of Q’eqchi’ Kinship

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Abstract
In San Juan Chamelco, Guatemala, the Q’eqchi’ redefine history through narratives of Aj Pop B’atz’, the sixteenth-century Q’eqchi’ leader. Chamelqueños trace their strength of character and the perseverance of indigenous practice to his legacy. This article examines Aj Pop B’atz’ as a model of Q’eqchi’ kinship. In Chamelco, Q’eqchi’ junkab’als, “families,” consist of individuals connected through biological or social ties. Stories of Aj Pop B’atz’ are part of the shared substance that binds them as kin. By grounding the contemporary family in Q’eqchi’ history, Chamelqueños define their indigenous identity in a time of global challenges and political unrest (Maya, kinship, ethnohistory, shared substance).

Keywords
Maya, kinship, ethnohistory, shared substance, oral history

August 3, 2010, was not a typical day in the town of San Juan Chamelco, Guatemala. In many respects, it seemed like a typical day: the rain started before sunrise, the mountain air was cold, and the town center was bustling with women selling goods in the marketplace. Something was different though, as one could observe through the faint sounds of the harp, wooden flute, and drum coming from the municipal hall, the brightly patterned banner hung in the town square, and the small arrangements of flowers and pine needles that adorned the statue standing proudly in Chamelco’s plaza. Excitement filled the air as bystanders piled curiously into town hall to observe the festivities marking the day’s special nature. Inside the municipal hall, town officials, scholars, and village elders gathered to celebrate the town’s founder, Aj Pop B’atz’, publicly for the first time in more than thirty years. Following years of ethnohistoric and ethnographic research in Chamelco, my Q’eqchi’-Maya collaborators and I worked with Chamelco’s municipal administration to establish an annual holiday honoring Aj Pop B’atz’. The first annual celebration took place on this special day, which featured ethnohistoric presentations by local experts and a marimba concert and was attended by the leaders of cofradias, “saints” day brotherhoods, school teachers, children, and government workers who gathered to

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celebrate the life of the man whom community members identify as the “grandfather” or “original ancestor” of all Chamelquenós.1

Today, although more than 450 years have passed since Aj Pop B’atz’s death in the mid-sixteenth century, Aj Pop B’atz’ continues to be a model of identity and personhood not just for Chamelquenós, but for all Q’eqchi’ throughout the Verapaz region.2 Here, I argue that he also plays a significant role in defining Q’eqchi’ kinship, as the town’s earliest ancestor and the figure to whom people attribute the perpetuation of authentic Q’eqchi’ social organization. As Maya communities face increasing threats to their indigenous identities—the introduction of Evangelical Christianity, their incorporation into global capitalism, and the growing violence of the drug trade—they use Aj Pop B’atz’ as a strategic essentialism of the Maya past3 to legitimize the authenticity of Q’eqchi’ cultural institutions, like the junkab’al, “family.” As the person whom nearly all Chamelquenós identify as the town’s original ancestor, Aj Pop B’atz’ connects all Chamelquenós who trace descent from him as kin. Likewise, Aj Pop B’atz’ unites Q’eqchi’ junkab’als through the traditions that many Chamelquenós state that he “left behind” and that define Q’eqchi’ family life. These practices, and the celebration of Aj Pop B’atz’ as the town’s ancestor, become a part of the shared substance of Q’eqchi’ kinship that connects Q’eqchi’ families. Defining contemporary Q’eqchi’ families through their historical legacy and the politics of Maya cultural resurgence, Chamelquenós legitimize the junkab’al as an institution that perpetuates twenty-first-century Q’eqchi’ identity. This article contributes to the growing body of literature on kinship as a culturally constructed institution by exploring the role of historical memory in creating the shared substance of kinship. It also explores the internal hierarchies of Q’eqchi’ houses and reveals that the politics of Maya cultural resurgence unite Q’eqchi’ families across time and space.

Aj Pop B’atz’ and Historical Memory in San Juan Chamelco: Guatemala

Set in the highlands of Alta Verapaz, Guatemala, San Juan Chamelco is home to approximately 40,000 Q’eqchi’-Maya,4 most of whom speak Q’eqchi’ as their first language. Inhabited since the Early Classic Maya period (300–600 AD), Chamelco had a large pre-Columbian population that served an important pre-Hispanic trade route from Central America to Central Mexico. Left independent as a pueblo de indios, “Indian town” by the Spanish colonial government, Chamelco has a strong sense of its historical identity today. Chamelco is unique among other Maya towns in that community members are largely united in efforts to use their history to define their present and future.

Today, many Chamelquenós living in the town center are fluent in Spanish, and some have studied at the high school or university level and work in office jobs rather than in agricultural production. While Chamelco is off the tourist route in Guatemala, it faces growing challenges as a result of its incorporation into the global economy, increased gang violence, narcotrafficking, and more recently, greater access to global media, including cell phones, cable television, and the Internet.

Most contemporary Chamelquenós belong to one of many local Christian churches, either as members of the Catholic church or any number of newly introduced Protestant groups. Parishioners of Chamelco’s Catholic church practice a flexible version of Catholicism that allows them incorporate Maya rituals into the framework of their Catholic beliefs.5 In contrast, members of the more recently founded Charismatic Catholic church practice a more conservative version of Catholicism, which discourages attendees from engaging in many elements of Maya practice. A growing number of local residents state that they do not belong to any Christian church, but rather practice a mayanista religion based on the Maya ritual calendar round,6 dedicated to the tzuultaq’ a mountain spirits, and representative of ancestral tradition.

The recent introduction of Evangelical Christian faiths, including the Nazarean Church, Assembly of God, and other Pentecostal churches, have brought significant changes to the way that some Chamelquenós perceive and define Q’eqchi’ identity.7 In 2012, there are more than a dozen Evangelical denominations present in the Verapaz region, and their teachings and practices are diverse. Many of
Chamelco’s Evangelical Christians distance themselves from their indigenous legacies when church teachings suggest such practices are diabolical. Members of the region’s most conservative Evangelical Groups, like the Assembly of God: New Life Church or the Calvario Church in Cobán, for example, abandon many aspects of traditional Q’eqchi’ practice, including participation in planting and harvest petition rituals (mayerjak), in townwide cofradía, “saint’s day brotherhood” events, the use of household religious altars, and among younger congregation members, Q’eqchi’ dress and language. This phenomenon is not unique to Chamelco, but is widespread throughout Guatemala, where historically Evangelical converts abandoned subsistence agriculture in favor of more lucrative, capitalist business endeavors.8

Other Chamelqueños continue to embrace Q’eqchi’ practice and belief even after converting to Evangelical Christianity. Adams suggests that many of Chamelco’s Evangelical Q’eqchi’ follow long-standing indigenous practices, though sometimes in altered form.9 She argues that practices and prayers performed Chamelco’s Nazarean church provide a new means of feeding the spirits central to Q’eqchi’ cosmology. Maya activist and a former president of the Academy of Mayan Languages, Rodrigo ‘Tz’ib’, concurred:

It [our identity] remains in our subconsciousness. People, because of external pressure or internal pressure, have not been able to forget the identity, their identity. They have not been able to . . . even if they are part of the Nazarean church, the Assembly [of God], Pentecostal, or from another domination . . . I feel that for these people, in their subconsciousness, their identity persists. Of course because of their religion, they cannot express [this] openly.

Despite an apparent break from tradition, some Evangelical Q’eqchi’ practice indigenous ritual activities, sell traditional garments, dedicate themselves to agricultural pursuits, celebrate their ancestors and bless their homes with prayer ceremonies, wear indigenous dress, and serve as godparents to others, among other Q’eqchi’ practices. The extent to which Evangelical converts engage with Maya practice differs with each individual, each family, and in each church. As a result, while integration into Evangelical Christianity can create a new Q’eqchi’ identity for some devout congregation members, one that favors Christian beliefs over Q’eqchi’ values, it does not necessarily do so.

While some Evangelical Christians oppose efforts to connect with Chamelco’s Maya past, most local Catholics and mayanistas unite in their efforts to legitimize their role in Guatemala’s political hierarchy today through their historical legacy. Fischer10 and Warren11 explore how Maya communities generate an essentialized sense of their indigenous identity to establish the authenticity of Maya cultural practice. The Maya use the essences of their historical culture to fight for equality and establish the Maya community’s rightful place in Guatemalan politics.12 Learning about Maya history from ancient and colonial Maya texts and by studying the works of foreign anthropologists, members of Maya resurgence movements authenticate cultural practices based on their ancestors’ historical accomplishments.13 While such practices are often reintegrated into Maya communities through the use of foreign materials and as the result of cultural change, they become authentic representations of the Maya past for many.

The authenticity of such cultural practices has been contested both within Maya communities and in the anthropological study of Maya cultural resurgence. Some Western scholars studying Maya cultural resurgence critique the use of essentialized cultural representations as authentic continuities with the past, stating that centuries of culture contact, colonial oppression, and civil violence have irrevocably changed Maya belief and practice. While such practices are reintegrated into Maya communities through the use of foreign materials, through the work of foreign researchers, and as the result of cultural change, many Maya deem these practices to be authentic representations of their past. Others do not, rejecting the notion that contemporary Maya culture is grounded in ancestral tradition.
McCallister’s analysis of Guatemala’s national folkloric pageants further explores the contested notion of authenticity and the role of reinvented cultural practice in contemporary Maya society. Regional and national pageants elect as winners women whom judges deem the most authentic representative of her indigenous community. Women are identified as such based on their knowledge of indigenous language and culture, use of indigenous dress, and their physical attributes. Many Guatemalans believe that these essentialized performances of Maya culture help preserve indigenous practice and highlight Maya heritage in a national forum. Others view them as forms of oppression that exploit Maya practice and Maya history in the national spotlight. Critics of these pageants suggest that by confusing “culture” with “folklore,” folkloric festivals devalue indigenous practice. In Chamelco, several community members, especially those active in Maya resurgence movements, expressed their discontent with the local folkloric pageants, stating that some candidates mocked Q’eqchi’ practice as they did not speak the language fluently or did not use indigenous dress on a regular basis. Likewise, McCallister argues that these essentialized representations of Maya culture at the core of these pageants are a form of state domination that impose national perceptions of Maya women rather than reflect authentic cultural realities. As a result, folkloric pageants and the authenticity they generate, both empower and marginalize Guatemala’s indigenous communities. While pageants help some to connect with the practices of past and define their indigenousness in the twenty-first century, for others, they provide a contested image of Maya identity grounded in national values rather than Maya ones.

For many Chamelqueños, mayanista rituals help generate an authentic sense of Q’eqchi’ identity lost during centuries of colonial oppression and the violence of the Guatemala’s thirty-six-year civil War. Amid the widespread terror of Guatemala’s military regimes in the 1980s, Maya activists from across the country together founded the Maya resurgence movement, which unifies Maya communities in the fight for equal rights and cultural preservation. These activists fought to preserve Mayan languages as a vehicle of Maya cultural identity, institutionalizing bilingual education throughout the country, establishing Guatemala’s national Academia de Lenguas Mayas, “Academy of Mayan Languages,” and achieving political equality for the Maya communities marginalized by decades of state sponsored terror. Participants in the Maya resurgence movement also turn to historical knowledge to empower themselves, grounding their present and future in the legacy of the past.

For Chamelqueños active in Maya resurgence and beyond, the story of Aj Pop B’atz’ generates one model of Maya identity grounded in Chamelqueño history. Despite the contested nature of Maya identity in Guatemala, Aj Pop B’atz’ story is told by all in Chamelco as a valued and defining part of their history. Many of the community members with whom I spoke, regardless of age, gender, or religion, identified him as Chamelco’s original ancestor and a model of Q’eqchi’ personhood who embodies the personal characteristics that ground their twenty-first-century Q’eqchi’ identities—wisdom, bravery, and compassion. Many Chamelqueños attribute the authenticity of their cultural practice to Aj Pop B’atz and his role at the forefront of Chamelco’s historical memory.

**Aj Pop B’atz’, the Original Ancestor**

The life of Aj Pop B’atz’, has been of great interest to scholars studying in the region. While the story of Aj Pop B’atz’ has been part of Chamelco’s oral tradition for centuries, its significance has decreased as younger generations fail to learn it as their ancestors did. As recently as forty years ago, Aj Pop B’atz’s story was read aloud during cofradía and other community celebrations. Nevertheless, during the terror of the Guatemalan civil war, public gatherings like these were sometimes viewed as subversive acts throughout the country and subject to military attacks. Although many Chamelqueños related that their community was spared much of the violence that impacted other regions during the civil war, as Adams suggests, town and village elders identified the intensified
violence of the early 1980s as the historical moment that ended the public telling of Aj Pop B’atz’s story.\textsuperscript{21} One elder recalled, for example, that when he was a child, narratives of Aj Pop B’atz’s were read aloud or performed during cofradía celebrations. This tradition ended, he said, during the civil war era when people were afraid to share their history publicly. Romeo Lucas García, President of the Republic from 1978 to 1982 and Chamelquén native, developed the town’s infrastructure during his presidency, celebrated his community’s heritage, and protected Chamelco from attacks and persecution rampant elsewhere in the country during the civil war era. Some community members even recalled that Guatemalan anthropologist Agustin Estrada Monroy and national officials sponsored a public celebration of Aj Pop B’atz’ in the village of Chamil in the late 1970s. Nevertheless, the violent and oppressive regimes that succeeded Lucas García’s, my collaborators told me, forced many Chamelqueños to stop sharing their cultural history or performing indigenous practice in a public forum. Community events, like saint’s day celebrations, were celebrated privately or stopped entirely. While no one I spoke with could say with certainty why the story of Aj Pop B’atz’ is no longer performed during cofradía events as it once was, many attributed its absence to the fear of this era.

The absence of formal presentations of Aj Pop B’atz’s story in public settings has led to significant changes in his story and the role it plays in the lives of younger Chamelqueños. Many Chamelqueños state that while they learned the story of Aj Pop B’atz’ as children, they know little about him today. While his story is performed in skits during the town’s folkloric activities, the complexity of his story, the lack of formal opportunities to learn it, and the absence of detailed public performance of his narratives make it difficult for children to learn about Aj Pop B’atz. As a result, while younger generations of Chamelqueños identify him as Chamelco’s founder and culture hero or the man who built the community’s Catholic church, they cannot recall the further details of his story or relate his significance to the town of Chamelco as a whole.

In my interview with them, many community elders expressed their interest in revitalizing the story of Aj Pop B’atz’. Most of these individuals ethnically identified as Q’eqchi’ and participants in the Maya resurgence movement. Several were involved in the directive committee of Chamelco’s Catholic church and others were interested Ladinos, like municipal officials and the late folklorista Don Oscar Fernandez, who had dedicated his life to investigating and writing about Chamelco’s history. Local school teachers, both Ladino and Q’eqchi’, stated their desire to document the town’s history to share with their students. Based on the interest that many distinct sectors of the community shared in revitalizing the story and my interest in collecting these tales, four Chamelqueños, both Ladinos and Q’eqchi’, and I established the “Grupo Aj Pop B’atz’,” a collaborative research group dedicated to the investigation of Aj Pop B’atz’s story, in 2005.\textsuperscript{2} For years, my Q’eqchi’ collaborators and I worked to revitalize the story of Aj Pop B’atz’ in conjunction with growing Q’eqchi’ involvement in the Maya resurgence movements. In 2009, we worked with Chamelco’s city council to establish an annual holiday honoring Aj Pop B’atz’, celebrated each year on August 3, the date on which the Spaniards named him governor of the Verapaz region.

August 3, 2010, marked the first celebration of the new holiday, in which local scholars and community members came together to celebrate the life and achievements of Aj Pop B’atz’. With more than 200 people in attendance, our symposium and the ensuing public marimba concert were met with great enthusiasm from the community at large, who united across religious divides to celebrate this important man. The public revitalization of Aj Pop B’atz’ affirmed his importance not only as a model of Q’eqchi’ identity in the twenty-first century but also as a part of the shared substance that unites junkab’als over time.

I collected narratives of Aj Pop B’atz’ from more than twenty Chamelqueños of different ages, religions, and educational backgrounds. According to the stories I collected, the exact birthplace of Aj Pop B’atz’ remains unknown. Following the Spanish abduction of the region’s former leader, a council of elders elected Aj Pop B’atz’ king of Tezulutlán, now Alta and Baja Verapaz, based on his
wisdom, bravery, faithfulness, skill, and prudence. As king, he prepared his forces to resist the inevitable Spanish invasion and invoked his supernatural powers to ask the tzuultaq’á to keep the Spaniards away.

Nevertheless, as time went on, Aj Pop B’atz’ found the Spanish invasion inevitable and, rather than risking the slaughter of his people, he welcomed the Spanish peacefully to his home. Following a meeting with Dominican priests, Aj Pop B’atz’ became the region’s first Catholic, accepting baptism in a nearby river. His cooperation with the Spaniards’ colonization efforts led them to take him to Spain to meet King Carlos V in 1544.²²

Aj Pop B’atz’ took with him on his journey gifts native to the region with him, including quetzal feathers, birds, and textiles. Aj Pop B’atz’ arrived at the palace during the night to find the King asleep. He lined the throne room with his gifts and awaited the King. The next morning, the Spanish king woke to the songs of the birds and asked to meet the man who had delivered them. When Aj Pop B’atz’ was presented to the King, he refused to bow to him despite court tradition. Former president of the Q’eqchi’ branch of Guatemala’s Academy of Maya Languages Rodrigo Tz’ib’ recalled that “They say that when he arrived in front of Carlos V, they told Juan [Aj Pop B’atz’] to kneel, because he had to kneel and he said no. One king never ever bows in front of another king. And so then, I think he had really clear his ideas and position.”

Aj Pop B’atz’s refusal to follow court traditions led King Carlos V to admire his strength. Respecting his position as an indigenous king, he gave Aj Pop B’atz’ silver crosses, incense burners, and three silver bells for Chamelco’s church. King Carlos V designated Chamelco a pueblo de indios “independent Indian town,” giving it autonomy in governance throughout the colonial period. In 1555, he named Chamelco a royal city of the Spanish crown and designated Aj Pop B’atz’ “Lifelong Governor” of Guatemala’s Verapaz region.²³

Perhaps the most famous part of Aj Pop B’atz’s story, and the one told by most Chamelquenos, addresses the fate of the bells given by Carlos V. Landing in Guatemala, Aj Pop B’atz’ and his men struggled to carry the bells to Chamelco. When they stopped one evening in the village of Sa’ Campana (The Place of Bell), the largest bell sank into the ground. Today, residents of this village state that the bell rings from within ground to celebrate planting and harvest seasons.

Arriving once again in Chamelco, Aj Pop B’atz’ assisted the Spaniards’ efforts to spread Catholicism and settle the town center. He organized the town’s central neighborhoods, still recognized today, and constructed a large cathedral in the newly founded town square in honor of the town’s designated patron saint, Saint John the Baptist. The story of the church’s construction also holds a legendary place in Chamelco’s historical memory. Elders often recall that he built the church in one night, working with his supernatural powers or with the spirits of the forest animals to complete its construction before the sun rose.

One day, as I sat with a friend in her clothing stall in Chamelco’s municipal market, an old man walked by us selling wicker baskets. He had come to town to sell from Poopob’aj, a remote village that many identify as Aj Pop B’atz’s birthplace. I asked him about Aj Pop B’atz’s birthplace, and he stopped his sales to share with us the following version of Aj Pop B’atz’ work in building Chamelco’s church, which I have transcribed from my September 6, 2006, field notes:

Everything Aj Pop B’atz’ did was a miracle, he said. First, all he had to do was call to things, and they came to him . . . When he built the church and his other house, all he did was call, and the materials flew into place. Some people say that he built the church in one day, others say two, but what is certain is that he did it all at night. He did not show his face or the church construction in the day. He said that the people went to bed and it wasn’t there, and then the next day, they woke up and it was. It was a miracle. Another miracle occurred when he brought water to the town. Originally, there was no water in Chamelco or in Carcha. He held a meeting in neighborhood of Chitubtu, where he called all of the forest animals to him. Among these animals were the coatimundi, the song birds, and the jaguar. He called
them, and they all came to the center of town. With them they brought water, which now fills these regions and formed rivers. The animals and the spirits of the water arrived and these animals worked with him to build the church.

The story of the church’s miraculous construction reinforces Aj Pop B’atz’s special status. Endowed with special powers, Aj Pop B’atz’ achieved the impossible. His command of nature allowed him to construct the building at the heart of Chamelco’s center for centuries overnight. This collaboration secured Aj Pop B’atz’s legendary place in Chamelco’s historical memory.

Aj Pop B’atz’s eventual fate remains unclear for most Chamelqueños. Many state that he spent his final days overcome with shame, seeing the changes that Spanish had brought to his town. Others state that the Spaniards, envious of his power, turned against Aj Pop B’atz’. In either case, he retreated to a cave in Chamil, where he died. His spirit, Chamelqueños say, protects the town from natural disasters and from the violence of the civil war.

While the story of Aj Pop B’atz’ is not taught in Chamelco’s schools or recorded in national histories, his image is invoked in various ways in Chamelco today. Throughout Guatemala, San Juan Chamelco is recognized as the “land of Aj Pop B’atz’.” During public speeches, municipal government officials invoke the name and power of Aj Pop B’atz’. For example, when Guatemalan First Lady Wendy de Berger’s visited Chamelco in 2005 to award stoves to local women, the mayor invoked the name of Aj Pop B’atz’ in his welcome speech.

Chamelqueños also dedicate the town fair, held each year during the third week of June, to Aj Pop B’atz’. In preparation for the town fair, the pageant Rabin Aj Pop B’atz’ “Daughter of Aj Pop B’atz’,” held in late May, selects a Q’eqchi’ teenage girl to preside over the fair’s activities, and to serve as the town’s representative in national folkloric events, including the national Rabin Ajau pageant. By bearing his name, the indigenous queen embodies Chamelco’s history and symbolizes the town’s indigenous identity for all those she represents. Nevertheless, while these events commemorate his name, few share detailed accounts of his story.

Instead, the story of Aj Pop B’atz’ is shared today in private settings, from family celebrations to gatherings of community elders and small, ritual ceremonies held in Chamelco’s rural villages. During visits to the rural village of Chamil, I occasionally observed elder men sitting together in the street, discussing Aj Pop B’atz’ and disputing the details of his life. The following excerpt from my July 24, 2006, field notes documents one such occasion during a Catholic celebration in the village of Chamil:

Don Francisco Tun . . . who is also a church minister, was talking to a group of people about Juan Aj Pop B’atz’ . . . he was telling them about the cave where he died, and about how he protected Chamelco’s people. He talked about girls making corn when the Spanish arrived . . . He also related that the first Mass was held in the Hermita del Soldado in San Luis. As he told the story, people asked questions and laughed . . .

Several elder men I spoke with during other visits to Chamil relate that they visit the cave in which Aj Pop B’atz’ died during planting and harvest times to ask his permission to work the land. In his memory, residents of this community leave offerings of candles, flowers, and incense at the mouth of the cave.

The question remains, though, as to why Aj Pop B’atz’ continues to have a strong presence in Chamelco more than 450 years after his death. Elsewhere, I explore Aj Pop B’atz’ as a model of Q’eqchi’ identity and as the producer of Q’eqchi’ authenticity. There, I argue that many Chamelqueños, especially those involved in the politics of the Maya resurgence movement, attribute the authenticity of Q’eqchi’ cultural practice to Aj Pop B’atz’s efforts to protect his people and preserve Q’eqchi’ culture in the colonial period. Exploring this idea, one 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.’ By preventing the Spanish from destroying local life, Aj Pop B’atz’ ensured the authenticity of Q’eqchi’ cultural practice for years to come.

The basket vendor, Don Rafael, whom I met in Chamelco’s market on September 6, 2006, further explained that Aj Pop B’atz’ was the town’s original ancestor, the grandfather to whom all Chamelquenos trace their decent, a sentiment echoed by many other community elders. My September 6, 2006, field notes record my conversation with Don Rafael: “I asked why Aj Pop B’atz’ is important and he said that he is an ancestor, a xeton. There were no people around then, and no towns. People didn’t know how to think. However, people learned how to think because of him. He was the original person on earth, the first person, he said. He is their ancestor, and this man stated that he is his grandson.”

As the town’s founder and “grandfather,” Aj Pop B’atz’ bequeathed to future generations of Chamelquenos the practices, such as ritual, agriculture, language, and indigenous dress, that define Q’eqchi’ life, many community members told me. Municipal official Huicho Sierra told me that Aj Pop B’atz’ “left a deep footprint in the community and through inheritance, and through tradition, and through descent, [his legacy] continues being passed down.” Many Chamelquenos, and especially those who follow Catholic or mayanista religions, identify Q’eqchi’ practice as the “inheritance” bequeathed to them by Aj Pop B’atz’. Aj Pop B’atz’ unified his community, establishing Chamelco as a thriving commercial town and center of Q’eqchi’ culture. His efforts in establishing Q’eqchi’ practice and protecting Q’eqchi’ identity elevate him to a heroic status at the forefront of Chamelco’s historical consciousness.

**Histories and Houses in Chamelco**

One institution that many Chamelquenos attribute to Aj Pop B’atz’ is the junkab’al. The junkab’al, literally “one home,” and used as the Q’eqchi’ word for family, connects all Chamelquenos, regardless of faith, to their ancestors. The junkab’al is made up of individuals connected to one another through various means. While the Q’eqchi’ sometimes use the notion of “shared blood” to establish kin relations, the junkab’al transcends consanguine ties to include mutual cooperation, trust, confidence, shared memories, and solidarity as the substance of kinship. Adoption, godparenthood, and employment also help create the bonds of kinship for many Q’eqchi’ families. Traditionally, individuals residing together or working together in places like the local market, participating together in ritual brotherhoods, or attending the same church, become kin through the memories they create and the friendships they develop. Today, however, due to changing economic and political circumstances in Chamelco, including the introduction of global capitalism and of new technologies, shared residence is no longer as strong a condition for establishing the bonds of kinship as it once was. Rather, using historical legacies and in particular, stories of the ancestors like Aj Pop B’atz’, many Q’eqchi’ construct the junkab’al as a flexible category that transcends time and space.

The literature on indigenous kinship has long argued that kinship is a symbolic system rather than a natural institution. Drawing on the model of medieval European houses, Levi-Strauss proposes the “House” as an alternative kin category for societies in which lineal descent cannot explain all kin relations. Levi-Strauss argues that the house is not an exclusive model of kinship, but rather encompasses lineal descent, affinity, alliances, and other established kinship systems. While many house members develop kin ties through some shared territorial affiliation, kin ties often transcend the physical boundaries of a house to focus on other locally important social criteria.

For all Chamelquenos, the house is the primary category of Q’eqchi’ kinship. The prominence of the house in Q’eqchi’ society presents itself in daily discourse. Linguistically, the Q’eqchi’ distinguish between those individuals with whom they reside, their junkab’al, and extended family,
komon. Even the word for family itself, junkab’al, glosses in Q’eqchi’ as, jun—“one,” kab’—“home.”

In contrast to one’s komon, with whom one interacts infrequently, the junkab’al is one’s closest family, due to their role in the shared activities of production, meals, and the physical proximity of shared residence.

To understand the significance of the junkab’al in Q’eqchi’ society, I asked many Chamelquenós of different ages, genders, and religions to explain the logic of the junkab’al and how people become a part of it. For many Chamelquenos, consanguineal ties bind them to others and form the core of the junkab’al. A former president of the Academy of Mayan Languages, Rodrigo Tz’ib’, explained, “It is undeniable that I would consider someone that shares my blood . . . to be family . . . this is the first way [to look at kinship]. The second way, one of two, to make someone feel like family, to consider some people as family, is . . . to have solidarity, companionship, cohabitation, and to share things.” Consanguinity helps to construct relations within the junkab’al.

Many Q’eqchi’ families also create shared substance by building solidarity, providing companionship, and creating shared memories. One man stated that:

One’s own behavior is what . . . makes him part of a family. For example, there are some people . . . who bear no blood relation to me . . . but we almost consider ourselves to be family . . . We all love each other, and when they come here, they are welcome, we serve them, give them a place to sleep. In other words, they are part of the family, without having anything to do with consanguinity. They have nothing to do with it, simply because it is rather a question of sharing with one another.

Common experiences, affection, and support become the shared substance of Q’eqchi’ kinship.

I analyzed the composition of fifty Q’eqchi’ families. This analysis revealed that while most families include a core group of individuals related through blood and marriage, many also identify others connected through social ties as kin. These individuals include adopted children, household employees, and godchildren. In my sample of Q’eqchi’ junkab’als, 32 percent of families recognized at least one family member adopted through some means.

In addition to adopted children, some Q’eqchi’ junkab’als include godchildren. While most Evangelical Q’eqchi’ do not have godchildren, many Catholic and mayanista Chamelquenos bring godchildren to live with them, giving them access to greater educational opportunities. Although godchildren may study at the night school or on the weekends, they work with their godparents during the day. Godsons provide manual labor, while goddaughters clean, make tortillas, and care for small children. Like adopted family members, godchildren join the junkab’al, developing solidarity through their work in the home.

Likewise, domestic employees can become junkab’al members by working and residing in the home. Performing household tasks, employees develop solidarity with other household residents and create the shared substance of kinship. While longtime household employees are trusted friends and confidants, however, they only become family when they reside in the home. One market woman, Doña Sara, told me that while several maids have worked in her home throughout her life, only one, Laura, became a part of her family. This difference, she said, stemmed from multiple factors: the length of time Laura worked with her, Laura’s affectionate behavior, and the fact that none of the previous employees had come to reside in her home, providing daily service only. By living with her family, Laura developed solidarity with Sara’s family, sharing in mealtime, errands, celebrations, and times of mourning. The memories and solidarity she achieved through these means earned her a place in the junkab’al.

Residing with the family, then, is an essential step in transforming relationships of employment into relationships of shared substance. In some cases, household employees residing with the family for a short period of time or working for the family during the day but returning to their own families at night never achieve status within the family. Their short tenure in the homes or their departure at
the end of each day does not allow them to share in the aspects of daily life in the home, develop the affection, or create the solidarity crucial to developing family relations.

While individuals develop shared substance with the junkab’al through such employment and the other means outlined above, not all family members have equal status within the house. Instead, a marked hierarchy governs relations between family members. Gillespie and Boon explain how such internal hierarchies may lead members to receive differential treatment within the family and access to the house’s estate. Though the Q’eqchi’ consider all members of their junkab’al as kin regardless of how they became a part of it, status differences emerge between house members, based on age, gender, the nature of their connection, and the length of time they have been a part of the family. In all junkab’als, for example, elder kin hold the highest status, earning the respect of younger kin.

Some Q’eqchi’ families demonstrate seemingly overt preferences for biological children or siblings. When I diagrammed the families of several of Chamelco’s marketers, for example, a few women failed to list adopted children or employees as family members. During later visits to their homes, I was surprised to learn that they had adopted children or even household employees that they called their children. As I sought to overcome this contradiction, I noted that in some cases the differential treatment that consanguineal kin receive leads them to develop higher status within the family than adopted kin and domestic employees.

While adopted kin and domestic employees often are incorporated into the family through local kinship idioms, they are often the lowest status members of the family. Some receive low wages for their domestic work while others receive no pay, receiving housing and meals only as compensation for their labor. They work long hours to assist other family members in daily chores and often continue working after others have gone to bed. They cook, clean, perform agricultural labor, chop firewood, and complete other demanding manual tasks. While they eat with the family, attend celebrations and other events with them, and are generally included in family life, they have little free time and instead work during nearly all waking hours. In some instances, they eat at separate tables from the rest of the family and sleep separate structures on the family’s land but outside of home. Though they sometimes serve as heirs for family land, statuses and titles, jewelry, clothing, and other properties, they often do not as elders chose to bequeath goods to family members connected through biological or affinal ties. The language of kinship provides a means for some Q’eqchi’ families to exploit adopted children and employees for personal gain.

While an apparent preference for blood kin shapes the interactions between and the status of household residents, I argue that this tendency does not stem from the fact that consanguine ties are more real than others, but rather from the long-standing presence of blood kin in the junkab’al. Unlike other family members who join the junkab’al later in life, blood kin reside in the family from birth. While adopted children can leave the family and move elsewhere following disagreement, biological kin rarely do since they have “nowhere else to go.” The length of time one has been a part of the house and their inextricable connections to it, rather than the blood ties themselves, serve as the basis of the junkab’al’s internal hierarchical order.

Traditionally, the physical home has served as the boundary that defines Q’eqchi’ junkab’als. The literal gloss of the word “junkab’al” as “one home” emphasizes shared residence as a primary factor in established Q’eqchi’ notions of kinship. Doña Sara explained the significance of house and land boundaries in Q’eqchi’ kinship, stating that while she lives in a house next door to her mother and siblings, they are a separate junkab’al, divided by the physical boundaries of their homes. She elaborated that other Chamelquenos identify them as one family, however, based on the proximity of their residences and the fact that they share a kitchen and host celebrations and undergo the responsibilities of daily life together. I argue that, in defining the boundaries of Q’eqchi’ junkab’als, shared residence is only one of many factors that create Q’eqchi’ shared substance.

Today, the role of shared residence in defining Q’eqchi’ junkab’als has changed due in part to the decrease in locally available employment, increased migration to Mexico, the United States, and
Europe, and the introduction of new global technologies, including cell phones and the Internet. Many Q’eqchi’ women whom I interviewed reported that one or more of their adult children had established their own independent residence while remaining part of the junkab’al through their continued interaction with it. Doña Valeria, the woman with whom I lived for most of my time in Chamelco, identified both her adult daughter, who lived in a separate, but nearby, residence in Chamelco and her adult son, who lived in Guatemala City, as a part of her junkab’al since they grew up with her. Their interaction in her household through their frequent visits, participation in family celebrations, and continued support and affection reinforced their role in the junkab’al, even though they no longer share a residence.

Several other Chamelquenos with whom I spoke further related that they had children who had migrated to the United States in search of better economic opportunities. These children still formed a part of their junkab’als because they sent money each month, kept in touch, and returned to Chamelco to help their families in times of need. In my conversation with Gloria, we discussed what happens when a junkab’al member leaves the home. She related that if one of her children left home to work, she would still consider him to be a part of her junkab’al if he continued to support the family. She noted that if he joined a gang or abandoned her family, she would no longer consider him her son. Gloria’s comments, among others reveal that one remains a part of the Q’eqchi’ family through his behavior and commitment to it, even when he can no longer share a residence. The increased use of global technologies, including cell phones that allow for inexpensive phone calls throughout Guatemala and to the United States, and the accessibility of Internet in Chamelco—both in homes and in local Internet cafés—make it easy for family members to connect virtually with their junkab’als and remain a part of junkab’al life even when they reside elsewhere.

Ancestors and the Shared Substance of Q’eqchi’ Kinship

Many Q’eqchi’ families further create the shared substance of Q’eqchi’ kinship with junkab’al members within and beyond the physical boundaries of Q’eqchi’ homes by telling stories of their ancestors. Though most people are members of two junkab’als—they are born into their parents’ junkab’al and form their own junkab’al when they move out, marry, or have children—they carry the memories of their ancestors with them, tracing the origins of their junkab’al back to their earliest ancestors. The history of houses and their members intertwine through the stories of ancestors, passed down from generation to generation.

Interviews with Chamelqueños of all religious faiths confirmed the role that memories of the ancestors play in junkab’al life. Gloria, for example, explained her grandmother’s wishes to remain a central part of the junkab’al after her death. Gloria recalled that when her grandmother bequeathed her land to Gloria’s own son, whom she recognized as a part of her junkab’al based on consanguineal ties and their shared interaction in daily life, she said:

[I want] my grandson to stay here in my place. He is going to stay here with you, and I am going to give him this piece of land . . . There he is going to build his house, and if one day he is going to bring children into this world, it will be in my place . . . The place where I work, the place where I worked . . . and this way, he will remember me.

Through the land she left behind, Gloria’s late grandmother remains a part of her junkab’al. Gloria highlights her grandmother’s role by sharing this memory with her children, including her as part of the shared substance that unites the junkab’al.

Like Gloria, other Chamelqueños use stories of their ancestors to unite their junkab’als across generations. I often observed people telling stories of their ancestors as a part of daily practice to remind their families, and the community at large, about the wisdom and contributions of their ancestors.
ancestors. Chamelco’s market women, for example, recount stories of their ancestors as a part of market life, reminding their peers, family members with whom they sell, and customers about the achievements of the ancestors from whom they received their stalls. Doing so not only helps to keep their ancestors at the forefront of Chamelco’s historical memory but also to reinforce their perpetual role in junkab’al life.

The prominent role of ancestors in the junkab’al is further reinforced by the Q’eqchi’ practice of celebrating deceased ancestors with a church service and a meal in the home on the anniversary of their deaths each year and on November 2, Día de los Muertos, “Day of the Dead.” Like many other Latin Americans, Catholic and mayanista Q’eqchi’ families believe that the spirits of their deceased relatives return on November 2 to rejoin the living. As a result, they must prepare their graves to assist in their return and welcome their returning spirits home.

During my 2005 and 2006 fieldwork in Chamelco, I participated in the celebration of Day of the Dead with several Q’eqchi’ families. During an early morning visit to the cemetery with one Q’eqchi’ family, we cleaned and adorned the graves of all of their deceased junkab’al ancestors, leaving pine needles, flowers, and candles on each grave. Returning home, we built an altar for the returning spirits. While each family’s altar varies, they share many common elements. Decorated with flowers, branches, fruit, and candles, altars typically display photographs of deceased junkab’al members and offerings of their favorite foods, kakaw, “cocoa,” and sodas, liquor, and cigars. The family gathers to eat and pray in front of this altar, which guides and feeds the hungry spirits of the deceased upon their return. This celebration provides a forum to honor the deceased and teach younger generations about them, keeping them as a vital part of junkab’al life. Though they celebrate them on these special days, many Q’eqchi’ families commune with their ancestors throughout the year by leaving their photos or personal possessions on household altars, giving them a fixed household presence. Thus, through the stories families tell and the celebration of the dead, the ancestors become a part of the shared substance that unites Q’eqchi’ families.

In addition to uniting families, ancestors provide the moral example upon which family life is based. Many Chamelqueños identify certain practices, including indigenous dress, ritual, and the Q’eqchi’ language, as the patz’ b’alaq, “inheritance,” bequeathed to them by their ancestors. People who honor the practices of the ancestors, such as those who hold ritual positions in cofradías or who are involved in the Q’eqchi’ language and cultural resurgence movements, ascend to high status positions through their connection to the past.

Aj Pop B’atz’ and the Junkab’al

Today, Aj Pop B’atz’ not only defines Q’eqchi’ indigenous identity for many Chamelqueños, but he also serves as the ancestor from whom many Q’eqchi’ families trace their decent. Catholics, Evangelicals, and mayanista community members alike recognize Aj Pop B’atz’ as Chamelco’s founder and the original Q’eqchi’ ancestor. In numerous public speeches and casual conversations, I heard community members refer to him as the grandfather of all Chamelqueños. In their interviews with me, several village elders in Chamelco’s rural community of Chamil identified himself as the “grandfather” of Aj Pop B’atz’. One village elder discussed Aj Pop B’atz’ as Chamelco’s most ancient ancestor, as recorded in my field notes from August 28, 2006. “He said that [Aj Pop B’atz’] lived to be more than 100 years old, like 150 years old. He said that [Aj Pop B’atz’] had a wife and children, and that all of the people of Chamil today are his descendants.” Another elder told me that although no living person is Aj Pop B’atz’s direct descendant, he is Chamelco’s original ancestor because of his work in creating Q’eqchi’ language and practice, and in founding the town. These practices, including agricultural rituals, cosmology, and language, are part of the shared substance that unite all Chamelqueños as kin.

Like other Q’eqchi’ ancestors, many Chamelqueños also honor Aj Pop B’atz’ as a moral exemplar for Q’eqchi’ families. In their oral narratives, they construct him as a wise, powerful, intelligent,
hardworking and compassionate person. Others emphasized his self-sacrificing nature, stating that he sacrificed having his own family to raise Chamelco and its people as his own. Chamelco’s former vice mayor elaborated on Aj Pop B’atz’s moral character:

The reason why people haven’t forgotten him is because . . . in first place, he wasn’t a failure, rather he was successful. He was successful, but since all the world would have wanted to see a warrior, he is our hero. He was a humble person, very wise, like our good ancestors, good town leaders. And what I believe . . . is that [Aj Pop B’atz] wasn’t muscular or strong . . . but rather he was a big person, one who was capable of directing his community . . .

Aj Pop B’atz’ models the values that ground Q’eqchi’ family life.

In addition to setting the moral example upon which Q’eqchi’ family life is based, stories of Aj Pop B’atz’ unite junkab’als. Living with two Q’eqchi’ families and visiting many more during my fieldwork in Chamelco, I often observed them sharing stories of Aj Pop B’atz’ with children during family celebrations, such as birthday or holiday meals, or around the dinner table during Sunday lunches.

While eating lunch one Sunday in 2006 with the Tz’ib’ Can family, I observed my good friends, Maya activist Rodrigo Tz’ib’ and his wife, Sara Can, share the story of Aj Pop B’atz’ with their children. Sunday lunches were a regular and important part of life in their junkab’al, as it was the one time each week that the whole family spent together. Rodrigo often travelled for work during the week and had only Sunday afternoons to spend with his four young children. Sara’s sisters, who lived in a house adjacent to theirs, worked in the marketplace, returning home late each night, and her mother was busy as the full-time caretaker for her ailing grandmother. Each Sunday, however, the whole family gathered in a longwooden dining structure, between their two houses, to share a meal, to talk about their weeks, and to discuss the town’s latest news. Though I never resided with Rodrigo and Sara, I became a part of their family early in my 2005 field work by sharing Sunday meals with them, and building the solidarity of kinship, each week.

In addition to strengthening family relationships, Sunday meal time played another important role in the Tz’ib’ Can’s family life: it was a time in which Rodrigo discussed Q’eqchi’ language and identity with his children. During many Sunday lunches, he talked with his children, and with me, about history of the Q’eqchi’ people and Q’eqchi’ cosmology. During one Sunday lunch, he shared the story and significance of Aj Pop B’atz’. His children, and all of his family sitting around the lunch table, listened intently to the tale of the father of all Chamelquenos. Afterward, we all discussed the role of Aj Pop B’atz’ in defining Q’eqchi’ culture and identity as the children asked questions about their oldest ancestor. This day, and Rodrigo’s continuing work on the revitalization of Aj Pop B’atz’, made a strong impact on his children, who I heard recite his story in casual conversations with one another and with me.

For Rodrigo’s family, discussing Q’eqchi’ culture during Sunday lunches generated the shared substance of Q’eqchi’ kinship for his junkab’al members, whose busy schedules limited their interaction during the week. Sharing the story upon which much of Chamelco’s history and Q’eqchi’ identity is based, Rodrigo’s family not only affirmed their consanguine connections through their descent from a common “grandfather” but also developed the solidarity that defines Q’eqchi’ junkab’als today. Memories of such experiences become a part of the shared substance of Q’eqchi’ junkab’als, uniting generations over time and space.

Like Rodrigo’s family, many of the Chamelquenos I interviewed recalled learning the story of Aj Pop B’atz’ from their grandparents, or other junkab’al elders, who shared it in the home during family events or quiet evenings in the home. This shared time with close relatives was among the most prominent family memories of many Chamelquenos. Through the memories they help create, stories of Aj Pop B’atz’ build solidarity between junkab’al members, becoming a part of the shared
substance of Q’eqchi’ families who share them with each successive generation. Thus, Aj Pop B’atz’ serves not only as a model of Q’eqchi’ morality and value but also as a model of Q’eqchi family life, who, as Chamelco’s original ancestor, creates the shared substance that unites Q’eqchi’ families.

Conclusions

During the community celebration of August 3, 2010, presenters in Chamelco’s first ethnohistoric symposium on Aj Pop B’atz’ spoke to more than 200 people in attendance about Aj Pop B’atz’s contributions to Chamelco’s history, his role as the “grandfather of the community” and of Q’eqchi’ practice, and his continuing significance in contemporary Q’eqchi’ life as the town’s original ancestor. Those in attendance listened to the presentations shared by their fellow Chamelqueños and by local historians and committed to honor Aj Pop B’atz’ each year on August 3 and throughout the year in daily practice. On this day, the town of San Juan Chamelco not only celebrated Aj Pop B’atz’ and the enduring legacy of Q’eqchi’ history but also the long-standing values and institutions, like the junkab’al, that define Q’eqchi’ life. By honoring Aj Pop B’atz’ and his contributions to Q’eqchi’ practice, Chamelqueños reinforce their connection to their historical legacy through practices they identify as his bequests. Coming at a crucial moment in Q’eqchi’ history (the struggle to rebuild Q’eqchi’ identity following thirty-six years of violence and amidst increasing global challenges), this celebration of Aj Pop B’atz’ reminded Chamelqueños of the institutions that round Q’eqchi’ life. By celebrating Aj Pop B’atz’ publicly on August 3 and daily through the telling of oral histories, Chamelqueños unite across religious divides to claim and perform shared substance from the town’s original ancestor.

Among the institutions celebrated during the August 3 celebration is the Q’eqchi’ junkab’al, or “family.” As a long-standing institution and the vehicle through which the community lives Q’eqchi’ personhood, the junkab’al encompasses individuals related through various means, including consanguine ties, adoption, marriage, and shared residence. Junkab’al members create the shared substance of kinship through the experiences they share, affection they develop, and the solidarity they achieve by sharing a residence or through regular interaction in daily life. The idiom of Q’eqchi’ kinship enables families to incorporate employees into their houses as kin while forcing them to work long hours for very low wages. A marked hierarchy structures relations between household members, and adopted kin and employees often hold lower status positions within the home. This hierarchy operates according to an apparent preference for blood kin; a closer analysis, however, suggests that status within the family may stem from the length of time one has been a part of the family rather than the idea that blood ties are more “real” than other types of relationships. Today, Q’eqchi’ junkab’als have flexible boundaries as members often establish their own residences locally or abroad, travel in search of better economic opportunities, or emigrate to the United States. As a result, new global technologies help family members to generate the shared substance of kinship across time and space.

As Chamelco’s original ancestor, Aj Pop B’atz’ serves as the historical figure to whom most Q’eqchi’ trace their junkab’als and the origin of Q’eqchi’ practice. As Chamelco’s “grandfather,” Aj Pop B’atz’ is a model of the value for junkab’als. Stories of Aj Pop B’atz’ construct him as a wise man who sacrificed himself to protect his “family”—the Q’eqchi’ community. The Q’eqchi’ families strive to embody Aj Pop B’atz’ in daily practice and attribute the practice that unite them as kin, and the junkab’al itself, to his protection in the colonial era.

Q’eqchi’ junkab’als also use Aj Pop B’atz’ to create a shared substance grounded in the legacy of the Q’eqchi’ past. Since many Chamelqueños recognize Aj Pop B’atz’ as their original ancestor, common descent unites Chamelqueños families on the most basic level. Sharing his story in the home or during family celebrations further creates the solidarity of Q’eqchi’ shared substance. This article demonstrates that Chamelqueños use historical memory and the politics of Maya resurgence
to reinforce the established categories of Q’eqchi’ life, including the junkab’al, and to define their indigenousness in the twenty-first century.

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Notes
1. I thank my Guatemalan collaborators, Sebastian Si Pop and Otto Chaman, and Chamelco’s mayor Daniel Bac for their support of the 2010 celebration.
4. Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), Monografía de Chamelco, Alta Verapaz (Guatemala: INE, 2002).
10. Edward F. Fischer, “Cultural Logic and Maya Identity.”


22. Agustín Estrada Monroy, El Mundo K’ekchi’ de la Vera-paz; Juan José Guerrero Pérez, De Castilla y León a Tezulútlan-Verapaz.

23. Real Cédula de San Juan Chamelco, “Archives of the Catholic Church” (San Juan Chamelco, Guatemala, 1555).

24. Aj Pop B’atz’s “miraculous” work in bringing the church bells back from Spain and in constructing Chamelco’s church in one night demonstrates the syncretic nature of his story. In several cases, I observed that the oral narratives I collected merged Aj Pop B’atz’s story with aspects of European Christian mythology.

25. I was unable to record conversations with many of the village elders with whom I spoke. As a result, I reconstruct these conversations using my field notes.


30. I have changed the names of all participants in my research to protect their identities.


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