

Meal Ixil Tenam, The Daughters of the Ixil People: Gender perspective on the processes of change in the contemporary religiosity of the Ixil Maya of Guatemala.

The project analyzes the role of women in the reproduction of traditional practices and cosmovision of the Ixil Maya in order to observe the socio-cultural processes that construct gender power dynamics in this community. Within modern Ixil women discourses, they associate everyday struggles and reference mythical characters, identifying their strength and authority as women. Among the most cited and dominant mythical character is Maria Maalkao, a mythical weaver and creator of the world and living beings, who appears in many contemporary contexts associated with the preservation and revitalization of the indigenous tradition. Her importance among the Ixil women and men is evident, given the complexity of problems that appeared on the aftermath of Guatemalan Civil War (1960-1996), in which they experienced genocide, as well as in the current era of the ongoing changes associated with globalization, modernization and westernized notions of development. Yet, due to various historical factors, local Ixil traditional belief systems have been threatened, and which are currently reshaping the concepts of what the traditional female and male roles mean. First, the history of Spanish Colonization and Christianization, forced resettlement of the population, and displacement of whole communities from the sacred context of their surrounding environment, has changed the traditional roles associated with gender. This process continued throughout the following centuries, such as the Liberal era of the Guatemalan government in the 1870s with the introduction and exportation of coffee. Today, the legacies and memories of violence and massacres of the Guatemalan Civil War, the growth of Evangelical churches in the Ixil Region, and the increasing presence of multinational corporations constructing hydroelectric dams and mining projects, are all impacting the region and thought within the local sacred landscape. These factors are shaping the roles associated to the traditional daykeeping ritual system bound to the complex of hundreds of sacred places located in the Ixil Region.

I have chosen this topic for my research because I believe it will be a valuable contribution to our knowledge about the ongoing changes that occur in rural indigenous communities, especially if it comes to the religious practices and traditional forms of power. The research also explains why development is not always what we consider it to be from our European point of view and that there are different traditional and brand new notions and concepts of progress that indigenous communities believe in.

The Ixil Region is located in the department of El Quiché in the western highlands of Guatemala in which approximately 88.6% of the population are indigenous. It consists of the three municipalities of Santa María Nebaj, San Gaspar Chajul and San Juan Cotzal, where they speak three variants of the Ixil language, which is one of the 30 Mayan languages spoken in Guatemala, Mexico, Belize and Honduras.