

Awiix/Milpa: Corn and Ancestral Knowledge in Kaj Koj
A Reflection

Submitted by Michelle Banks
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Capstone Committee
Dr. Betsy Peterson, Advisor
Dr. Olivia Cadaval
Dr. Harold Anderson

Introduction: The Back Story

“*Sácame una mi foto, señor Michelle,*” someone will yell every time I pass a group of children. Take my picture, Miss Michelle... I’ll turn and everybody, except one of them, will take off running; she is the bravest – the most *chispuda*, brightest. She’ll stare at me, daring me to take her photo. I’ll raise my camera. She’ll laugh. Slowly her friends will creep back into the frame -- some of them with open smiles, others serious, all of them curious -- their faces full of wonder and light.

Taking photographs in rural Guatemala can be both beautiful and challenging. During *la epoca de violencia*, the era of violence, in the early 1980s, photographs were used by the military to identify those whom they suspected of being subversives. Although the war ended in 1996, for many that fear still lingers.¹ For others, there are concerns that their photographs will be sold. According to the critic and curator John Szarkowski, “paintings were made—constructed from a storehouse of traditional schemes and skills and attitudes—but photographs, as the man on the street put it, were taken” (Szarkowski 1966, 7). People take their images, and they aren’t sure where they go; their concerns are not completely unwarranted. Guatemala is one of the most photographed places in the world. There exists an abundance of calendars, postcards, and coffee table books by North American and European photographers -- many of them expats -- who make their homes in the country’s cosmopolitan centers and their living photographing rural people. I see photographs everyday -- the heads of turkeys sticking out from the basket atop of a

¹ From 1960-1996, Guatemala was embroiled in a violent civil war. Recognized as a genocide by human rights groups, because of the disproportionate number of indigenous civilians who were killed and disappeared, the conflict left more than 200,000 dead, hundreds of rural villages burned to the ground, and more than a million people displaced; the most violent period of the war occurred between 1979 and 1983. According to a UN supported truth and reconciliation commission established after the conflict ended, the vast majority of the killings were perpetrated by the Guatemalan military and other state sponsored forces.

woman's head, the flower vendors, the two boys playing in a puddle of water... I very rarely take the photos I see – I leave that to my students.

As an artist/educator who believes that culture and creativity play pivotal roles in transforming communities and individuals, and fostering social justice, I have always been mindful of the need to involve people who don't identify themselves as artists in the creative process. Over the last ten years, most of my creative work has been with rural communities in San Cristóbal Alta Verapaz Guatemala where I do photography, creative writing, and popular theatre projects with children and youth. My thinking about the intersection of the arts, culture, and social justice was shaped by my experiences as a young artist growing up in Washington, DC in the 1980s during the anti-apartheid movement, the Central America wars, and what some of us saw as the US's own war on the poor during the administration of former president Ronald Reagan.² I did popular theatre work using theories developed by the late Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal whose "Theatre of the Oppressed" was an artistic response to Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed." My teachers and mentors were progressive artists and cultural workers (many of them living in exile in the US) who used art as a hammer to shape reality.³ Even as I moved away from cultural work (I have been a school administrator and high school social studies teacher in Washington, DC since 1995), I continued to incorporate it into my teaching as oral history, digital storytelling and improvisational theatre.

In 2003, I began doing rural school support projects in Guatemala that included distributing school supplies, constructing latrines, and providing scholarships to girls. My

² Lionized by conservatives for his economic programs, which were aimed at cutting government spending, Ronald Reagan's policies created difficulties for many poor and working class people. His domestic legacy includes: tax cuts for the wealthy and big business, a decline in wages for working families, cuts in social programs, an increase in homelessness, union busting, and the deregulation of financial institutions (which some see as the root of the current mortgage crisis). In addition, his administration provided direct support to the Guatemalan government during *la violencia* (1979 -1983).

³ "Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it." –Bertolt Brecht 1898-1956

students in DC would fundraise to support projects in Guatemala and I (and on a few occasions my students) would travel there to administer them. While the work I was doing had some value, I could never shake the feeling that I was just responding to immediate needs rather than getting at the root causes of the social and economic marginalization faced by the communities I worked with. After doing that work for five years, I decided to return to my roots, so to speak, and focus exclusively on what Arlene Goldbard refers to as “community cultural development” as a way to empower communities to incorporate “principles of self-development rather than development imposed from above” (Goldbard 2006, 23). In other words, I want to support community development that is informed by the worldview of the people I live and work with. I aim to do that using art.

My decision to return to cultural work was inspired by the many stories I was hearing in my conversations with people in Guatemala about the loss of ancestral memories that are defining features of the communities I work with. These conversations led to the creation of Paat Itz’at (the House of the Artist/Sage), an arts and humanities project for rural children and youth based in San Cristóbal Alta Verapaz, which I started in 2008. Paat Itz’at aims to transform rural communities by nurturing the creativity of youth and recovering the wisdom and memories of *los abuelos*.⁴ The project’s name reflects the intersection between tradition, creativity, and learning that I believe are crucial elements of social change. In the Maya Poqomchi’ language *paat* is house – the place where traditions are passed on and children are nurtured. Among the pre-Colombian Maya, the glyph *itz’at* represented both the artist and sage.

Paat Itz’at challenges young people to play an active role in the survival and transformation of their communities, by reviving, documenting, and archiving ancestral

⁴ In Guatemala, the term *los abuelos* (the grandparents) is used to refer to living elders and ancestors, regardless of familial connentions.

traditions. I aim to do this by training young people as cultural workers who will develop arts-based cultural documentation projects with rural communities that can be used to seed and inform grassroots community development efforts. The project builds on the school support work I had been doing in Guatemala and reflects its evolution. Paat Itz'at's theory of change is rooted in three fundamental principles:

- Knowledge of the past is crucial to our ability to live in the present, and to envision the future;
- Communities have the right to tell their own stories and to safeguard their traditions and histories;
- Young people must play an active role in how traditions and history are carried forward.

When the son of a local musician, who passed away a few years ago, knocked on my door asking for a copy of the photograph one of my students had taken of his father, I realized how important this work could be. The young people are gathering memories and telling the story of this community, but it's the people who live the history who are the storytellers. While the work is still very much in its formative stages, Paat Itz'at has already developed a body of work that is a record of San Cristóbal's history and the intangible cultural heritage that is, in many instances, being lost. Every photo my students take, every poem they write, and every interview says these things are worth remembering.

This essay explores the cultural work I do with rural communities in Guatemala, and the development of the Capstone project "*Awix*: Corn and Ancestral Knowledge in Kaj Koj." Part one, is an overview of my photography and writing work with young people in Guatemala, and some of the organizations, individuals, and theories that have influenced what I do and how I do it. Part two focuses on the development of the Capstone project, how it was carried out and what I gained from the process. In the third section I'll attempt to discern how both the Capstone and my work in general are grounded in the theory and practice of Cultural Suitability. The fourth,

and final, section looks at my next steps and how this Capstone can contribute to my professional goals.

I. Ways of Seeing: Teaching Photography and Writing to Children

According to photographer and educator Wendy Ewald, whose Literacy-Through-Photography (LTP) program with children influenced my work in Guatemala, “the process of making images and writing about pictures is powerful and revealing in a variety of contexts and settings.

Providing children with an opportunity to master photography is to allow them access to expression” (Ewald 2001, 163). While I agree with Ewald’s assessment, I wonder if that is enough. Because the socioeconomic reality that people live in rural Guatemala can be so dire, it’s certainly easy to forget that the creative spirit also needs to be fed, but in the scheme of things is self-expression enough of a response?

As the introduction to this essay illustrates, photography can be a beautiful as well as a controversial and powerful medium; it can create a space to address and explore community issues, amplify people’s voices, and shape how we see the world. This is an evolving theory for me, which has emerged as a result of my work with rural children. Seeing the world through their eyes has encouraged me to reevaluate my worldview. Where I once only saw abject poverty, I can now see strength and resilience, which, if nurtured, can empower communities. What started out as a project that was focused on trying to fix what was wrong, has evolved into a much more holistic process, which recognizes the power of people and the central role that culture plays in community development. My students don’t just take photographs; they are honoring who they are and claiming their identity as Poqomchi’es. More importantly, they are resuscitating and reinterpreting important customs and knowledge that are rooted in the past, but

have value in present.

Antecedents/Influences

Although my primary discipline is theatre, I chose to begin my creative/cultural work in Guatemala using photography and creative writing. It's not completely clear why I decided to start there, I suspect I was looking for a medium where people could take more control over how they are represented -- both photography and writing have the power to do that. In addition, as Lykes contends, "coupling photographs and stories prevents the past from being effaced and, over time, through them, we construct a future out of the constructed meanings of the past" (ADMI 2000, 16). Through photography and writing, the young people I work with are able to create spaces for their communities to recover and reflect on what is valuable to them. This not only allows them to bridge the divide between the past the present, it also gives them the power to reframe it.

While I'd like to think that I am taking a radically different approach to this work, my influences are many; Ewald has been teaching photography and writing to children since the early 1970s, and my own introduction to photography came via a similar program when I was growing-up. In 1991, the photojournalist Nancy McGirr began teaching photography to children who lived and worked in the Guatemala City dump. That project, Fotokids, has grown into a training ground for photographers and media artists. As their website explains, Fotokids "helps small groups of Central American young people from the poorest of barrios develop useful, employable skills as a means of self-exploration, expression, and discovery" (<http://www.fotokids.org>). In addition, a number of NGOs in Guatemala have used the PhotoVoice curriculum to enhance the work they do with communities there. Like Ewald and

McGirr, PhotoVoice's mission is to "build skills within disadvantaged and marginalized communities using innovative participatory photography methods" (<http://www.photovoice.org>). A core element of the work we all do is a commitment to creating experiential learning opportunities, which is one of the things that make this work so powerful. In addition to encouraging innovative ways of thinking about and seeing the world, experiential learning supports the leadership capacity of those who are involved in the process by giving them tools to learn and grow.

Although photography is central to my work, my goal is to eventually include a variety of artistic disciplines. One of my models is Appalshop, which is based in Kentucky and has been around since 1969. Appalshop is an arts and education center committed to the idea that local cultures are made stronger when they have the resources to tell their own stories. According to their website, the center "supports communities' efforts to solve their own problems in a just and equitable way" (<http://www.appalshop.org>). Appalshop takes a more asset-based approach to development, which focuses on community resources rather than community problems. Goldbard suggests that asset-based approaches can potentially minimize "obstacles, which can also lead to discouragement if these turn out to be truly formidable" (Goldbard 2002, 138). While her concerns might be warranted, in communities that lack basic infrastructure and are faced with situations where change isn't forthcoming, drawing on the resources that communities possess is one way to develop local resilience and can be crucial to a community's survival.

The Process

I have been teaching photography and writing to children and young people in San Cristóbal since 2003. I generally work with a classroom of students because it helps me to avoid a system

of favoritism – everybody in the class can participate. The children range in age from 10 – 18 years old, but the number of students and the length of the workshop depend on the funds or supplies I have on hand. Although sometimes the actual workshops take place in the corridor of my house, I partner with schools or local community development councils (COCODEs). I made the decision to work with existing institutions for a couple of reasons. One of them is logistical -- it helps to facilitate access to a workspace. More importantly, these partnerships allow for grassroots collaboration on projects and give me a more credible presence in the communities where I work.

Because language is such a vital cultural marker, literacy in Poqomchi’⁵ is an important part of the work we do together. Like indigenous communities throughout Guatemala, literacy in the Poqomchi’ community is low -- 37.84% of the population of San Cristóbal is unable to read and write (SEGEPLAN 2010). That number, however, represents literacy in Spanish, which is the language of the educational system. Despite some efforts to develop a program of bilingual education in the schools, literacy in indigenous languages is significantly lower than it is in Spanish -- in the Poqomchi’ community it is estimated to be somewhere around about 1% (SEGEPLAN 2010). In an effort to support language preservation efforts, we partner with the Poqomchi’ Community Education Center (CeCEP), a Poqomchi’ language school and museum based in San Cristóbal, to implement literacy courses with students who participate in workshops.

Although all of the children I work with are able to speak Spanish, their skills and proficiency in the language vary. Facilitation of workshops is done in both Spanish and Poqomchi’; I explain an exercise in Spanish and my co-facilitator, Humberto Morán Ical

⁵ One of Guatemala’s 24 indigenous language groups; also refers to the Maya Poqomchi’ ethnic group. Poqomchi’ speakers are concentrated in the department (state) of Alta Verapaz in the municipalities of Kaj Koj, Santa Cruz, Tactic, and Tucuru.

translates it into Poqomchi'. We decided that it was important for participants to learn in their *lengua materna*, mother tongue, because it reiterates the importance of maintaining the language. An added benefit of doing the workshops in Poqomchi' is that it gives the young people the opportunity to engage in a shared process of teaching and learning; most of the Poqomchi' that I've learned was picked-up in workshops where the children take time to teach me how to say a phrase or a word.

While I don't use a specific curriculum (that's my next big project), I have been helped tremendously by Ewald's book "I Wanna Take Me a Picture" (2001), which is a guide for teaching photography and writing to children. Despite being a bit dated (it was written before digital became the norm) it includes useful technical information about buying cameras and setting up a darkroom, anecdotes about the process, and specific lessons plans for teaching both writing and photography. Many of the lessons I use in the workshops are adapted from Ewald's book, but I have also incorporated activities from popular theatre and education, and leadership development work I've done in the past.

One of the big issues is how to facilitate a process where young people begin to "see." Because books and other classroom resources are limited, instruction in rural Guatemala is heavy on dictation and copying. As a result, many rural students don't have opportunities to create or see beyond a very limited set of parameters. Our first workshop (as well as subsequent sessions) is always about seeing. I'll spread 8x10 black and white prints by photographers such as Ewald, Gordon Parks, Tina Modotti, Daniel Hernandez Salazar, Milton Rogovin, Sebastião Salgado, Dorothea Lange, and the late Nestor Hernandez (who was a mentor in Washington, DC) around our classroom and have them choose an image that they like and then explain to the group what they see. Most of them have had few opportunities to see photographs, so every image is an

adventure for them. One of the first things I find amazing is how intuitive they are when given the chance to explore on their own. During one workshop, one of the girls was fascinated by Salgado's photographs of displaced people in Ethiopia seeking shelter from military airplanes under trees. Although she was much too young to remember Guatemala's civil war, she described them as people hiding under the trees; perhaps the stories told by her parents or grandparents allowed her to understand that these were people fleeing.

During our time together, we study the mechanics of photography: framing, point-of-view, composition, etc. Despite our many conversations, the students' first photos are often a variation on the same theme -- very serious people standing very still. If they notice one of their friends taking a photograph, they all rush to take the same photo. Or if I praise a particular photograph, at least two of them will try to copy it. I explain that each of them has their own vision; what they see and what their friends see are different and their photographs should reflect their own vision and what they want to say. The more we look at their photographs and the work of others, and talk about what they want to say with their work, the more they begin to experiment. Once the children become comfortable, they are allowed to take the cameras home to shoot. In some cases they are asked to shoot based on specific themes such as family, nature, food, school, etc. and in others, they are allowed to just shoot what they see.

In the writing workshops, we explore storytelling and different poetry forms/techniques such as acrostics, metaphor, and haiku, and then use those forms to write about specific photographs. Because Spanish is the second language in the communities where I work, the children often struggle with very basic grammar and spelling. Like Ewald, I found that when students who had trouble writing "worked from a photograph that had something to do with their lives, especially a picture they had taken themselves, they were able to write more fluidly"

(Ewald 2012, 2). We usually start with very simple storytelling and then move on to more complicated genres, which are all very new to them. George Ella Lyon's poem, "Where I'm From," is the inspiration for the final writing exercise we do together. Lyon's poem is about the wisdom of places, our connections to landscapes and the culture that emerges from them. We read a Spanish translation of the poem together and then my co-facilitator will do a Poqomchi' translation orally. After discussing the poem in depth, students make lists of the people, places, things, and events that are important to them; they use these lists to weave their poems.

The workshops conclude with a community exhibit. We generally block off a whole afternoon (4-5 hours) so that anybody who wants to visit can find the time. The students welcome their parents and explain what we did during the workshops; we then allow parents, teachers, and other visitors to share their thoughts. This last step is an integral part of the whole process as one of the goals of this work is to create public spaces for communities to talk about what's important to them. Not only does it offer families and other community members the opportunity to recognize the children, it creates a forum for people to both see themselves and to publicly express their connections to the traditions depicted in the children's photographs and writing.

This work creates opportunities for people to see their lives using mediums that have been dominated by mainstream cultural images and values. By sharing tools that allow communities to determine for themselves how they are represented, they are able to openly explore and preserve the things they value. This encourages people to recuperate their relationship with their communities, their languages, and the places they hold sacred.

II. *Awix*: Documenting the Seasons of the Milpa

“*Awix*: Corn and Ancestral Knowledge in Kaj Koj” represents my ten years of living and working with communities in the northern department of Alta Verapaz Guatemala. The exhibit explores the centrality of the *milpa* (corn and/or cornfield) to the cultural life of the Poqomchi’ community of Kaj Koj (the Place of the Red Puma) or San Cristóbal Verapaz. *Awix* is both a celebration of the culture of corn, which is, according to the Maya, the substance from which human beings were made and a cautionary tale about the loss of ancestral knowledge. As the place where the vibrancy of Poqomchi’ culture is most evident and where the impact of its losses are most dire, the *milpa* reflects both the Poqomchi’ worldview and how that worldview is changing.

Poqomchi’ culture is inextricable linked to the culture of corn, but as the rituals and connections to the *milpa* as a physical space begin to disappear, the ramifications are much greater than a loss of a source of food; it suggests the complete loss of a way of life. The *milpa* is a perfect example of how places can order a society, but also how important it is to create mechanisms to guard the events and rituals associated with them. As Low notes, “without place conservation, the contexts for culturally meaningful behaviors and processes of place making disappear, cutting us off from our past, disrupting the present, and limiting the possibilities of the future” (Low 1994, 66).

Methodology

I had been germinating this idea to document the agricultural year since I completed my first photography workshop in Guatemala in 2003 and was able to use my work in the MACS program to explore the possibilities; different aspects of this project appeared in my class work

during my time in the program. In the early stages of developing the Capstone proposal, I found myself vacillating between focusing on the milpa and focusing on agriculture in general; early versions of the Capstone proposal mention “the agriculture year” while later versions mention “the *milpa*.” After a number of conversations with Poqomchi’ agronomist Humberto Morán Ical, who was one of the project co-curators, we decided that agriculture was too broad to cover in the six – seven months I had to complete the Capstone.

The Capstone builds on work that I started during the Introduction to Cultural Documentation and the Documentation Field Lab project I completed in the fall of 2011. I was actually living in Guatemala and was able to lay some of the initial groundwork for the project at that time. Most of my research, however, took place between January and June of the current year (2012). Over the course of six months, I took four trips to Guatemala to conduct in-depth fieldwork, which included coordinating the collection of photographs and data in my absence, and identifying and interviewing informants.

In addition to Humberto, my Guatemalan team consisted of four young people who ranged in age from 14 – 18 years of age. My lead fieldworker and co-curator was Leticia “Leti” Caj Cu (14) who shot photographs; logged and organized photographs, and video/audio recordings; conducted, translated and transcribed interviews; and wrote the captions for photographs. Leti’s participation, and the participation of her family, was invaluable. The other field workers were Victor “Vico” Yuja Lem (14), who also helped write some of the photo captions, Reynaldo Lem Pop (18) and Melinda Tzul Morán (15) who shot photos.

During my fieldwork trips to Guatemala, I would meet after school and/or on weekends with Leti or Vico to shoot photos, conduct interviews, log photos and recordings, and work on captions, translations, and other aspects of the exhibit. Unlike the projects that I’ve done in the

past, this exhibit wasn't the culmination of an actual workshop; it is a collection of old and new work. The young people who helped put the exhibit together were veterans of workshops I'd done in the past, and we didn't meet together as a group. The decision to work this way was strictly logistical. Because my work didn't permit me to be in Guatemala continuously during the implementation of the project, I was limited to short, intensive work periods. Between school, work, and household responsibilities, all of the young people had limited free time. In addition, only two of the participants were from the same community, which made transportation an issue.

While I had an outline of the kinds of work I wanted to include in the final exhibit, there were some things that emerged organically from the process. During a trip in February, I did a painting workshop with students from La Escuela Rural Mixta Cantón Las Arrugas, a primary school that serves four hamlets on the edge of San Cristóbal (La Reforma, Las Arrugas, Requenzal, and Wach Tuhq'); I have worked with the students and teachers from Las Arrugas on a number of different projects since 2004. Over the course of three days the students worked together in small groups to create paintings that depicted the different seasons of the cultivation of the *milpa*. It was during this workshop that I discovered how much Mario (who did the drawings for the exhibit) had grown as an artist. Like his sister, Leti, I've known Mario since he was two or three years old (I have included photographs of him and his younger brother, Tuk, when they were practically babies, working alongside their father in the *milpa*). Because encouraging creativity is one of the things I try to do, I decided to set him up with supplies to create his own interpretation of the different stages of cultivation.

A great deal of research about corn in Guatemala exists, but there appear to be very few, if any, written resources that focus specifically on the Poqomchi' community; as a result, most of

my research was done in the field. My principal informants were Vicente Morán Ical (Ma' Cen) and Juana Victoria Ical Cahuec (Ti' Toya) who are important culture bearers in Kaj Koj. Their participation and support for the project was both generous and encouraging. As one of the few families who continue to use the Maya calendar and perform ceremonies, which are tied to the cultivation of the *milpa*, Ma' Cen and Ti' Toya possess a wealth of knowledge about all aspects of Poqomchi' culture and are committed to continuing the traditions. Because of my personal relationship to them (they are my in-laws), I have shared in the cultivation of the *milpa*, cooking, and rituals/ceremonies for more than ten years. Throughout the process of developing the exhibit, however, I took on the very deliberate role of participant observer, which included asking questions and trying to understand the *milpa* from the perspective of somebody who was experiencing the traditions for the first time. My ability to know what to explore with my other informants emerged from my participation in the day-to-day with them. Ma' Cen and Ti' Toya provided the seeds that I used to develop question sets for interviews and the exhibit's thematic organization. They also helped facilitate my access to other people in the community who could offer important perspectives.

Leti and I conducted both formal and informal interviews with 15 people who ranged in age from 14 – 90 year old; most of the interviews lasted about an hour and in some cases we talked with people on two or three occasions. The topics investigated during the interviews included agricultural cycles, changes in the cultivation of corn, how customs are transmitted within families, cultivation rituals, stories and *dichos* (folk sayings), food preparation, how the *milpa* was cultivated during the civil war, climate change, and what corn means to the community. Informal interviews covered similar topics, but generally took place accidentally (e.g. over a meal or during an unrelated visit to someone's home). In some cases, I was able to

record these conversations, but generally the information was recorded in my field notes and used as reference material for later interviews.

While the level of secondary analysis was limited, there were some resources that shaped significantly the direction the exhibit took. The program book for *Sin maíz no hay país*⁶, which was exhibited in 2003 at the *Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares* in Mexico City, provided an overview of corn's role in shaping Mesoamerican culture. According to the editor, “*el maíz es un invento nuestro. Y el maíz, a su vez, nos inventó*”⁷ (Esteva 2003, 11). Corn, as we know it, emerged as a result of human intervention and was one of the elements that allowed Pre-Columbian societies in Mesoamerica to flourish. As a result, there is a powerful symbiosis between the crop and those who cultivate it. That relationship is reflected in how corn is cultivated and consumed, as well as the language of the *milpa*, which is very specific and detailed. Not only was it difficult (and in some instances impossible) to accurately translate some words from Poqomchi' into Spanish or English, it was also important to recognize in what context vocabulary was being used. *Milpa*, for example can mean cornfield (a plot with corn, beans or squash) or corn (while the crop is under cultivation), while *awiix* refers strictly to the physical space where corn, beans, and squash are planted (Morán Cal 2011).

Haste and de Cuester (2001), and Wilson's (1995) work with Maya Q'eqchi'⁸ communities offered some important insights into language, rituals, and other practices. While there are clear cultural and linguistic differences between Q'eqchi' and Poqomchi' communities, they are impacted by many of the same social, political, and economic conditions because they

⁶ Without corn, there is no country (trans. Banks).

⁷ Corn is our invention. And corn, in turn, invented us (trans. Banks).

⁸ Maya Q'eqchi' speakers are concentrated in Alta Verapaz and the Peten region, which borders Mexico in the north.

share the same geographical region. Chief among them is the centrality of the *Y'uq kix kab*⁹ to agricultural practices, the impact of the armed conflict on the culture of the *milpa*, and the role the Catholic Church has played in the syncretic nature of Maya cosmology. Their work provided a sort of framework for the development of question for the interviews. Because reference materials on the Poqomchi' community were limited, I sometimes referenced Q'eqchi' practices and traditions to determine their presence in the Poqomchi' community.

The Exhibit

Awiix is organized around four themes: *Gente de maíz* (People of Corn), *La milpa* (corn or cornfield), *La cocina poqomchi'* (the Poqomchi kitchen), and *Nuestros abuelos* (Our Grandparents or Ancestors). The themes were chosen after extensive conversations with the project contributors and are meant to project a picture of corn in both its spiritual and physical forms. While each section of the exhibit has the potential to stand alone, they are organized, in a sense, sequentially; they begin with the roots of corn and humans, and end with contemporary concerns about the future of the *milpa*.

The first section, *Gente de maíz*, explores the role of corn in the cosmology of the Poqomchi' people. Although the cultivation of corn is highly ritualized, very few people have carried on the stories that were once a part of the community's consciousness. In this section, Ma' Cen shares part of the creation story and a story told to him by his father about a neighbor who actually sees the "Spirit of the Corn" in his milpa. Raul Coc, who is Q'eqchi' from the Peten, shares a story he heard from his father when he was a child about why corn comes in different colors. Raul, who lives in Kaj Koj and has a child with a Poqomchi' woman, wanted to

⁹ Literally *hills/valleys*. In Maya cosmology, the Spirits of the Hills/Valleys are the guardians of a particular region or community.

preserve the story for his two-year-old son. Part two, *La milpa* focuses on the agricultural year and the sowing and harvesting of corn, beans, and squash. In addition to highlighting the reciprocal relationship between these three plants, this section also explores some of the rituals and traditions that are an integral part of their cultivation. Corn is food and the third section, *La cocina poqomchi'*, looks at the foods that are specific to Kaj Koj and when they are prepared. At the center of this section is the preparation of *nixtamal* and the *tortilla*, which orders the day-to-day of Poqomchi' women. The fourth and final section, *Nuestros abuelos* explores how the loss of traditions as a result of climate change, the economy, and the civil war have impacted the cultivation of *la milpa*. This section is composed of interviews and quotes from those who participated in the project.

One of my goals for this Capstone was to explore and develop some basic technical proficiency in web design. A colleague made himself available to answer questions and guide me through the process, but I did a great deal of the layout myself. While the decision to take this on added a different set of burdens to my work, this was something that I consciously made a decision to pursue as a learning experience.

Although I wrote the introductory text for the different sections, Leti and Vico wrote most of the photo captions. In some cases the captions were direct quotes taken from interviews or writing from workshops I've done with children. The captions were developed using a free-writing process; Leti and Vico looked at photographs and were given five – ten minutes to write about what they saw. We then chose which photographs to match the descriptions to. Many of the captions are written in the first person, which creates a conversational tone that reiterates the power of telling of the story from the perspective of the people who live the experience.

Because this is my first attempt to present our work in a digital format, we are now able to share it with an audience outside of Kaj Koj. This changes how the work is presented. During community exhibits in Guatemala, the people who are depicted in the photos are also the audience, thus “the story” is well known; the participants and the audience have a tangible relationship to the work and the cultural traditions. I’ve mounted two exhibits in Washington, DC (in 2004 and 2009), but they were both presented based on their aesthetic value rather than their ability to tell a story. This on-line exhibit brings together a group of photographs, videos, and writing that are thematically driven. As my work has become much more focused on encouraging communities to engage around ancestral knowledge and historical memory, telling the story and contextualizing the photographs for every audience is a primary concern.

III. Through the Lens of Cultural Sustainability

Despite its centrality to the Poqomchi’ cultural and ecological landscape, the *milpa* isn’t immune to change. Many of the conversations I had with the people who participated in this project began with *antes*, before. These exchanges, however, weren’t just romantic laments about a picturesque time that no longer exists; they spoke of real issues such as deforestation, the contamination of natural resources, drought, an increase in violent storms, and food insecurity. As the interviews from the final section of the exhibit show, many people relate these issues to the abandonment of the tradition of stewardship that manifests as respect for the *milpa* and the environment, which is an integral part of the Poqomchi’ worldview.

In addition to climate change challenges and environmental degradation, there are also significant concerns about how the loss of cultural identity and knowledge among members of the younger generation is disrupting the cohesiveness of communities and, by extension, their

relationship to the natural world. A recent publication by *Centro Ak' Kutan*, which surveyed indigenous families about cultural shifts in Alta Verapaz, mirrors many of the concerns that I found in my conversations with people.

*Nos da miedo pensar que estamos en el inicio del ocaso de nuestra cultura, porque estamos en oscuridad sin saber que camino podemos construir con nuestros jóvenes. Estamos perdiendo rápidamente los valores de identidad: nuestra relación con la Madre Tierra, con la naturaleza, con nosotros como personas, familias, y comunidades*¹⁰
(Centro Ak' Kutan 2012, 134)

Social disruptions within families and communities, and the loss of cultural knowledge can lead to individual and collective disempowerment, and hinder people's ability to protect and preserve their resources and environment, and important traditions. One of the goals of my work is to seed intergenerational dialogues that can mitigate the disruptions that occur when the past and the present collide. An important first step in that process is supporting a culture where people can affirm for themselves and for their communities that what they bring to the table is valuable. Because of the historical discrimination against indigenous people in Guatemala and the harsh socioeconomic conditions they face, there is a feeling among some families that their children will have more opportunities if they take-on the culture of the dominant society (Morán Ical 2012). As a result, a number of important identifying factors, such as the use of the Poqomchi' language and the cultivation of the *milpa* among young people, are being lost (Centro Ak' Kutan 2012, 61).

According to the program website, MACS aims to “teach students how to work closely with individuals and communities to identify, protect, and enhance their important traditions, their ways of life, their cherished spaces, and their vital relationships to each other and the

¹⁰ It frightens us to think that we are at the beginning of the decline of our culture -- we are in the darkness without knowing which way we can build with our young people. We are quickly losing our cultural values: our relationship with Mother Earth, with nature, with ourselves as people, families, and communities (trans. Banks).

world” (<http://www.goucher.edu/x33261.xml>). Without having a name for it, I’ve been doing an informal version of Cultural Sustainability work with this community for ten years. Goldbard’s explanation of the components of “community cultural development” is one that I found to be helpful with defining what I aim to do and what Cultural Sustainability means to me. According to Goldbard, community “acknowledges its participatory nature,” cultural “indicates a broad range of tools and forms in use in the field,” and development “suggests the dynamic nature of cultural action” (Goldbard 2006, 21). This way of looking at the intersection between culture and development lends itself to an endogenous approach, which is based on spiritual, environmental, and social beliefs, and allows communities to make choices about what’s important to them and how they want to develop.

Despite significant increases in development projects financed by the United States, European Union, and international financial institutions since the signing of the Peace Accords, which ended the Guatemalan conflict, in 1996 (IADB 2002), Guatemala continues to have some of the lowest social indicators in the Western Hemisphere.¹¹ Instead of continuing to fund projects that appear to have limited success, perhaps it’s time to rethink how projects are designed and implemented. As Nurse puts forward, “culture is more than just the manifestations of culture, for example, ‘the arts’, and should be viewed instead as the whole social order. From this perspective even the construct of sustainable development needs to be interrogated because particular conceptions of the global social order are prioritized in its various interpretations” (Nurse 2006, 33). Nurse suggests that it’s time to rethink the very narrow view of the world that is based on a one-size-fits-all model of development. This worldview tends to promote “western” cultural norms and a value system based on the status quo. What is lacking is a

¹¹ It’s estimated that 51 percent of Guatemalans live in poverty and over half of children under 5 years old suffer chronic malnutrition (Source USAID).

challenge to “the well-settled notion of sustainable development” (Nurse 2006, 36) and an understanding that development that isn’t rooted in culture isn’t sustainable.

Cultural traditions, that is, “ways of perceiving and acting in the world, and ideas about life and livelihoods, about participation and place, and about who is involved and how” (Marks 1994, 111) are central to discourse about Cultural Sustainability. While these factors certainly drive the work, challenging existing paradigms that value GDP over biocultural diversity, and consumption over conservation are its building blocks. If we impose the same set of values on every community, we have missed a fundamental, but often overlooked, measure of social justice: people’s right to live their lives in ways that honor who they are and where they come from.

As discussions about the role culture plays in the development of healthy communities becomes more routine, and as Cultural Sustainability takes its place among the other pillars of sustainability, it is my hope that a more universal acceptance of the idea that there are many ways of being in the world will begin to emerge. Perhaps this exhibit and the work Paat Itz’at does will offer some insight into one of those many ways of being, and a greater understanding of how important it is to the people who live it.

IV. Conclusion: Moving Forward

The goal of my MACS work was to seed Paat Itz’at. This Capstone project has two objectives that, I hope, will get me one step closer to that. Although I’ve worked with communities in Kaj Koj for ten years, I had nothing to show for it; this project is a chance for me to document and share what I do. During a management course my first semester at Goucher, I created a business plan for Paat Itz’at. One of the key objectives of the plan was to develop an

on-line exhibit to “market” my work to potential funders and community partners. Ironically, when it was time to decide on a Capstone project, I had some difficulty coming up with an idea. *Awiix* is that exhibit.

In addition to marketing, I want this exhibit to serve as resource for students, teachers, and organizations that work with rural communities. The information I have included here was developed with young people (particularly high school students) in mind, but it is my hope that it can be useful or interesting to anybody. In the coming weeks, my plan is to develop a strategy to share it with schools and organizations in other parts of Guatemala, Latin America, and the US. I am also negotiating with CeCEP, one of my community partners in Kaj Koj, to determine if they have the infrastructure to house digital copies of the interviews in their Poqomchi’ community museum. Before that happens, however, I still have some work ahead of me. The biggest gap right now is the issue of language; the exhibit isn’t completely accessible to Poqomchi’, Spanish, and English speakers. One of the beauties of working in a digital format is that it allows room to make changes as the need arises. I will be in Guatemala throughout the fall of 2012, and my plan is to complete the translation and to continue to flesh out what was started here.

Like the community exhibits I do in Guatemala, I chose to create an on-line exhibit as a way to allow people to join in the conversation; because of the nature of Cultural Sustainability, it’s crucial that these discussions aren’t just limited to the halls of academia or the annual meetings of development and aid agencies. Ironically, very few of the people who participated in the project have Internet and computer access, and many are unable to read and write. As a result, only a few of them are actually able to use the site. That said, I’ve always seen this project as the stepping-stone for a much larger community-based effort. Over the next year, my

goal is to develop a traveling version of the exhibit, which can be mounted in rural communities with limited infrastructure, and will initiate dialogue about some of the issues raised such as climate change, environmental degradation, and the loss of ancestral knowledge. The traveling exhibit will feature more oral recordings and photographs, and will include opportunities for people to participate in community cultural mapping exercises, and other activities that will allow them to add their own voices and visions to the exhibit. In this way, every person who engages with the work will be able to take part in the process.

I want this work to create opportunities for people to self-define – to tell their own stories, to gather their memories, to safeguard what is important to them, and carry it forward as they see fit. With that in mind, the goal is to eventually turn the work over to the young people so they can shape it to reflect their values and ways of seeing. We have a lot to do together before we get to that point, but Leti, Vico and many of the other children I’ve worked with over the past ten years have been apt pupils. Because this is an experiential learning process, they are acquiring skills (photography, writing, etc.) that nurture their creativity and encourage interaction across generations. As cultural workers, they will have both the practical and critical thinking skills to design and implement projects in schools and communities, and work with NGOs and others on seeding projects that don’t just incorporate the knowledge and traditions of *los abuelos*, but are driven by this knowledge.

At the center of Kaj Koj lies *Chi’choh* Lake. The name, which means “at the edges of the lake (*choh*),” actually refers to the town and its people rather than the lake itself. According to local lore, the lake was formed in the 1500s when a priest called up a powerful flood after being expelled from the town (Morán Ical 2012). In the Poqomchi’ language, tradition is expressed as *qa tijem choh* or what we have learned over a long period of time. *Choh*, which translates as

lake, is a metaphor for the profundity of the traditions that the ancestors have passed on from one generation to another. When young people look into the lake (or in the viewfinder of a camera) they can see the depth of those cultural traditions reflected on the surface of the water as well as their own reflections. Who they are mirrors what was learned over a long time, but it is altered by their experiences in the present. Who they will become and how their communities will endure reflect both of these realities.

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