

“Up There in the Mountain”: The Poetry of Humberto Ak’abal and
Life in a Highland Guatemalan Town

Hannah Crawford
SOAN 295
Prof. Jay Levi
March 7, 2008

Abstract

Humberto Ak'abal is the first Maya poet in Guatemala to achieve nation-wide and even international recognition. Because he writes of his experiences growing up as a Maya in the Maya K'iche' town of Momostenango, his poems are often seen as representative of the lives and beliefs of the entire Maya people of Guatemala. This ethnography is a study of the poetry of Ak'abal and the life in the small Highland Guatemalan town of Zunil. It attempts to compare the cultural themes found in the poetry and in Zunil to determine to what extent they are similar and different. This comparison is also used to write an ethnographically informed literary criticism of the poetry. The general conclusion is that although many of the ideas about nature, cosmovision, and language present in the poetry of Humberto Ak'abal are also present in the culture of the people of Zunil, these ideas are at times lost when the time comes to put them into practice.

Introduction

“*Si no fuera por la poesía/ el mundo ya se habría quedado mudo.*” This one-line poem, called “*El mundo mudo,*” is by the poet Humberto Ak’abal, a Maya K’iche man born in Momostenango, Guatemala. This poem makes a statement about the nature of poetry, and how it has been used to express feelings and ideas that otherwise would not have been able to be expressed. However, the reference to a world that has been kept mute also applies to the K’iche people and the Mayan culture in general, which has long been without a voice in Guatemala and in Western civilization. Because Ak’abal writes about life in his town of Momostenango, and because he has received an amount of fame and influence relatively greater than most Maya in Guatemala, his poetry can be seen as giving a voice to those who were previously mute.

Indeed, part of the reason Ak’abal is so famous is for his steadfast promotion of the rights of the indigenous people of Guatemala. In 2004 he was awarded the Guatemalan National Prize in Literature, but he declined to receive it because it is named after Miguel Ángel Asturias. He cited as the reason the fact that Ángel Asturias, a Guatemalan who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1967, also was the author of an essay entitled *The Social Problem of the Indian*. Ak’abal is outspoken against racism and a government that he sees as not doing enough to support and promote indigenous rights, but he is not bent on cultural seclusion. In addition to visiting other countries for conferences, he translates his own poetry from K’iche into Spanish to make it more accessible for everyone.

Writing about the life and culture in a Maya town in Guatemala, Ak’abal obviously intends his poetry to resonate with the people who live that life. Though Ak’abal states that “[*m*]e siento profundamente conmovido cuando mi propia gente se acerca para decirme que se siente representada en mi modesto trabajo,” he also says that he writes his

poems in first-person perspective “*porque no soy nadie para hablar en nombre de los demás*” (Ak’abal 1999:15) In other words, though he hopes his poems speak to his people, he does not presume to speak for them. Nevertheless, the fact is that as he is one of the few indigenous poets to be internationally recognized, Ak’abal’s poetry is one of the few resources an outsider has to gain a glimpse into the Mayan life. Therefore, it is often seen as representing that life. In reading Ak’abal’s poetry, one quickly learns what themes predominate the poems, including the simplicity of daily life, nature, and the K’iche language, among others, and the reader infers that these themes also dominate Mayan life in general.

These literary themes are interesting when looked at in relation to the “cultural themes” explained in James P. Spradley’s book *Participant Observation*. He explains that understanding all the cultural themes in a culture can be used to obtain a holistic view of that culture. He also states that “[i]n looking for universal culture themes, a rich source lies in fiction. The themes in a novel often reflect universal cultural themes and by examining them carefully one can find clues to themes in the cultural scene being studied” (Spradley 1980:153). The purpose of this ethnography, then, is to determine if the themes found in the poetry of Humberto Ak’abal are cultural themes for the Maya living in Zunil, a small Highland Guatemala town. What was learned from the themes found in the poetry of Ak’abal was compared to what could be discovered about cultural themes through research in Zunil, and this comparison was used to write an ethnographically informed literary criticism of the poetry.

Methodology

The three weeks (Feb 10- March 3) of field work that I conducted in Zunil, Guatemala, were spent interviewing, of course, but a good deal of the time was simply

spent observing life there and listening to what people wanted to teach me about their culture. For example, much of what I learned about daily life and worldview in Zunil was from what occurred in the lives of my host family and their closest neighbors while I was living with them. Going into the town, I expected to be researching many different cultural themes, including nature, family, love, poverty, and spirituality. I quickly learned, however, that the themes most present in the works of Ak'abal, and most talked about in the literary criticisms that I was able to get ahold of, were nature and the K'iche' language. These two themes presented more than enough opportunities for research in the field.

The formal interviews were conducted with the purpose of first establishing what kind of work the person did, whether *Ajq'ij* (a Mayan priest), healer, *comandrona* (midwife), teacher, or student, and what was involved in the work. Then questions were asked about the significance of nature and the K'iche' language in the work of the interviewee, then about what he or she perceived about views of nature and the language in the community in general.

Due to the fact that my host family, and that of the two other students living in Zunil, were all Catholic, I got a very Catholic view of the town. The town being observably very Catholic, however, (simply observe the well attended Friday *Procesiones* and the overflowing Sunday-morning Mass) this does not cause my findings to be unreasonably influenced by the views of a minority. I did interview two evangelicals (though I did not find out that one was so until half way through the interview), and all but one of the *akq'ijs* I interviewed were also Catholic.

Some of the biggest holes in this research were due to a lack of access to previously written critical literature on the poetry of Humberto Ak'abal. Though I did find two articles relating to nature and the K'iche' language, I was not able to get my hands on any

of the three works that I cited in my original project proposal. As a result, the literary criticism aspect of this ethnography is not as complete as it could be. In addition, due to lack of time on his part, I was never able to interview Ak'abal in person, though he kindly answered some questions by email. Though not interviewing him was a disappointment, his email answers to my own questions and those in interviews he had previously given to others were enough to obtain his opinion on his own poetry.

***“De puro pueblo”*: Daily Life in Zunil**

Much of Ak'abal's poetry is intent simply on giving the reader a view of daily life in an indigenous community. In the section of *Entre patojos* entitled “*De puro pueblo*,” one follows Ak'abal from the house, to the market, to the church, to the fiesta, through the streets to the fields and into the mountains. Because of his affectionate recounting of life in his village, and his willingness to describe the most ordinary of sights and occurrences, even a reader from the Midwestern United States is able to find sights that seem familiar in Zunil, Guatemala. For example, in the poem entitled “*De puro pueblo*,” Ak'abal celebrates some of the some of the daily sights in San Andrés Xek'ul, a town close to Zunil in the Highlands of Guatemala:

¡Qué chula,
parece güipil!

La iglesia
de San Andrés Xek'ul
vestida de fiesta.

¡Qué bien le quedan
las ventas de aguacates enfrente! (2002:89)

Here Ak'abal is doing exactly what is talked about in *The Legacy of Mesoamerica*: that if the writers in 20th Century Mesoamerica wanted to “represent national reality and aspirations through literary creations” they had to address “the Indian body and soul of

these nations” (Carmack et al 2007:481). In this poem Ak’abal describes the indigenous reality in a small town, and in Zunil these everyday sights were very recognizable.

Whether from the beautiful *güipiles* that almost every woman and girl in town wore, or the flowers decorating the entrance and path leading up to the church on Fridays, or the busy Friday corn market in front of the church, this poem could be describing exactly a Friday in Zunil. The poem captures exactly the almost comic juxtaposition of the sacred and the everyday that is often present in the town, and it celebrates the beauty of both.

As previously stated, many aspects of life in Zunil are recognizable in the poetry of Ak’abal. Often he will simply describe home scenes, such as a family eating *tamalitos* and coffee surrounded by their household animals in the poem “*Sentados sobre un petate*” (2002:95), an everyday occurrence in my home stay in Zunil. This poem does not have any excessive descriptive words or value judgments: it simply says, “this is how it is.” The people in Zunil are proud of their way of life, and were always happy to teach me about it. I learned how to *tortear* (make tortillas by patting them out between the hands), and to make *tamalitos*, *paches*, and *atol* of various types. I went with the family to the fields to wash onions. I participated in the Catholic procession through the streets every Friday. And with very few exceptions, people were glad to meet and answer questions about their way of life. In general, people had the same pride for their way of life that is found in Ak’abal’s poetry. There were aspects of it, however, that they were not as proud of, one of which was the pollution of their environment.

Nature and Cosmovision

Nature in the Poetry of Humberto Ak'abal

To get to Zunil, one must cross a bridge over a river. While doing so, one cannot help but notice the many vultures feeding on the trash clogging the water, and if one happens to be riding in a pickup, the smell is overwhelming. This image seems incongruous with the idyllic relationship often portrayed in Ak'abal's poetry, a relationship which many of the literary critics of Ak'abal's works have said pertains also to the Mayan world-view in general. It is not only foreign critics who make this claim; the introduction to *Raxalaj Mayab' K'aslemalil*, or *Cosmovisión Maya, plenitud de la vida*, written by several *sacerdotes Mayas*, says “[n]osotros, el Pueblo Maya, con nuestra cosmogónica manera de percibir, de ser y de vivir, somos milenarias hermanas y milenarios hermanos de las flores, de los pinos, de las aves, de los reptiles, de las codornices y de toda la diminuta e inmensa flora y fauna que la Madre Tierra ha dado” (Cochoy Alva et al 2006:17). To a Westerner who has been raised to see throwing trash in the river or the streets as indicative of an intense disrespect for nature, it would seem that the people of Zunil have lost the sister- and brother-hood with nature that is part of the cosmovision inherited from their ancestors. The question for a field researcher living in Zunil, then, is what are the similarities and differences between the views of nature found in the poetry of Humberto Ak'abal and in the traditional Mayan cosmovision, and those views found among the people of Zunil today.

The first critic to talk about Ak'abal's poetry and nature is Jorge R. Rogachevsky, in an article entitled “*La voz de la naturaleza en la poesía de Humberto Ak'abal.*” Written in 1994, it is in response to the critics who had talked about, either in praise or in detriment of, the supposed “simplicity” of Ak'abal's poetry. Rogachevsky claims that what Western

critics perceive as the simple language employed by Ak'abal is really just a function of a language and a worldview that, due to its very structure, can be reflexive about nature without the linguistic artifices that are so often present in Western poetry (this will be elaborated upon further in a later section). The task Rogachevsky sets himself to achieving in the article is “*exponer cómo su (Ak'abal's) lenguaje de la naturaleza es al mismo tiempo reflexivo*” (1994:3) and to move away from the Western concept that reflexivity can only be achieved through separation from nature, that is through artificial language.

Rogachevsky shows this by pointing out how natural elements in Ak'abal's poetry often assume “*características emotivas, cognitivas y comunicativas*” (1994:3). A good example of this is a poem found in *Entre Patojos*, “*Cuando sopla*”:

Cuando sopla
fuerte el viento,
los árboles abrazan
a las árboles.

Sus ramas se entrecruzan
y hacen el amor.

Al poco tiempo,
las árboles dan flores
y paren frutos. (2002:66)

In this poem, two trees can be seen falling in love and reproducing just as two humans might. In western literary criticism, this is called personification, or when natural elements take on human characteristics. This is not, however, what is happening in this poem. The trees are not stand-ins for human beings; rather, Ak'abal is writing about the interaction of the trees and the wind that results in the continuation of life. As Rogachevsky states, this is also a human experience, not because the human being projects his or her experience onto nature, but “*porque formamos parte de la naturaleza*” and are subject to the same natural laws and basic needs as everything else that is a part of it

(1994:3). In Western culture, he states, the people have lost their connection with nature, and in fact attempt to distance themselves from it, as they see themselves as more advanced than those cultures that are closer to nature. They view nature as beautiful, but something that needs human beings to speak for it. In Ak'abal's poetry, however, "*encontramos una naturaleza llena de significado que el ser humano necesita incorporar en su proceso creativo para poder valerse su potencial comunicativo*" (1994:4). There is knowledge contained in nature that a human being needs to open his or herself to receive. This is Ak'abal's work as a poet, through the human language to achieve the power found in nature.

Another article about nature and language in Ak'abal's poetry is by Emanuela Jossa, called "The Colors of the Earth: Nature and Landscape in the Poetry of Joy Harjo and Humberto Ak'abal." It was written in 2007, and she incorporates ideas found in Rogachevsky's article into her own. Like Rogachevsky, she states that Ak'abal has a "profound, intimate relationship with nature that all native communities of the American continent share at the everyday as well as cosmogonic levels" (2007:586). Because of this connection, she says, Ak'abal takes nature as the starting point to discover not just his literary voice and identity, but also his personal and cultural identity. After centuries of violence and marginalization in the politics and culture of Guatemala, he must look to the natural surroundings in the country. There, he finds his identity reflected in a way "neither fragmented nor displaced, and there is no need for him to mend fractures or to re-create spaces, because all places are complete in either their majesty or their simplicity, for they all belong to the poet and to the Mayan people" (586). There is a oneness between humans and nature that is based on reciprocity and communication, which is why Jossa, like Rogachevsky, says that the natural elements in Ak'abal's poetry take on emotional and

cognitive characteristics. One of the basic points of both of these critics is that the deep connection Ak'abal has with nature (maintained through the K'iche' language and world-view), is shown by Ak'abal writing into his poetry the knowledge and sense of identity which he finds in nature.

Pollution and Modernism in Zunil

Ak'abal himself has stated that “[l]a naturaleza es muy importante para mí y la relaciono con mi poesía, pero en el pueblo en general es una conciencia que se está perdiendo” (Ak'abal, Email interview Feb 25th, 2008). This certainly seems to be the case, at least at first glance, in Zunil. Talking to people in the town, the dirty streets and river are something that most people are aware of and regret, but for which they feel at the present there is no alternative. Clara¹, a first-grade teacher at the local elementary school, described how the teachers teach natural sciences in school. In lower grade levels they often grow a bean plant in the classroom to teach the life cycles of plants. The fourth through sixth graders, which are the highest levels in the school, go to the mountains to plant trees: that if you cut down a tree, you must plant two more so that it does not become a land without trees. They also have a garbage can in the classroom that they try to teach children to use. They teach a respect for nature, because “*la naturaleza es de nosotros*” (Interview Feb 28th 2008). She said that some children understand, but many do not, and that is why there is still trash in the streets. Another young resident of Zunil, María, said that though teachers do teach children in schools the appropriate ways to dispose of trash, children are more likely to simply follow the customs of their parents because it is often a *ladino* teaching in school, and they do not trust him or her.

¹ This is a pseudonym. All names of consultants in the paper will be such.

Several consultants also spoke about modernism and transculturation as a problem leading to an increased disrespect for nature. Pedro, a prominent *ajq'ij* in Zunil, spoke about the younger generation losing their respect for nature, mostly through their increased access to television and radio programs from outside of Guatemala that have disassociated youth from nature. This fits with Rogachevsky's ideas about the Western versus the Mayan view of nature: while the ancestors lived with nature, the younger generations are absorbing Western ideas about how to treat nature. Don Tomás, a healer and *ajk'ij*, mentioned that ghosts and bad spirits are often born in the trash of the river. In the past, he said, there were no bad spirits because there was no garbage. This, too, hints at a change that has occurred in the world-views of the people of Zunil in regards to nature.

In Humberto Ak'abal's poem *¿Y el río?*, Ak'abal talks about a river polluted, that in the past was beautiful:

El río se fue,
una pestilencia yace
estancada en su cause.

El río huyó
desde que lo dejaron sin árboles,
desde que enfermaran sus aguas.

Cómo hiede el camino
por donde antes caminaba agua clara (2006:17).

Ak'abal does not blame the pollution on anyone specific, instead referring to an anonymous "they" who have cut the trees and polluted the waters. What is present in this poem is mostly a regret for the stagnant, smelly river that was clear water in the past. The people in Zunil also show regret, and often an embarrassment, that their town and river have become so dirty. Though many people in Zunil blame this change on outside influence, they also blame it on other factors.

One person who gets the most blame is the *alcalde*, or mayor, of Zunil. As Ak'abal puts it in a poem entitled "*Cerro Pak'lom*," the village was surrounded by a beautiful environment "*Hasta que un alcalde sin cabeza/ mandó a botar todos los árboles./ Desde entonces/ qué triste se mira el cerro*" (2002:91). The previous *alcalde sin cabeza* was blamed for many things in Zunil, from a three million quetzal debt to a useless, expensive market constructed a couple kilometers outside of the city. Many people also blame the mayor for not doing enough to solve the trash problem. The school teacher, Clara, also stated that although they try to teach respect for nature in the schools, sometimes there is no alternative to throwing trash out in ways that are not good for the environment. She said that previous *alcaldes* have promised to institute garbage collection and recycling, but none have fulfilled their promises. She described the system in Almolonga, a nearby community, where a trash collection system has been successfully implemented. She voiced an opinion held by several of the consultants interviewed, that although it is the obligation of the people to throw away trash properly, it is more the obligation of the local government, because the people often do not have the money or the education.

Nawales, God (or gods), and the Energy of the Universe

Despite their acceptance of the existence of the trash problem at the present, if not the blame for it, people in general still claim a special link to nature, and even to the Mayan cosmovision of the past. People go "to the mountains" to work in their fields, to gather plants for healing, and to pray. Many people cited the simple proximity of the mountains and the fact that they were always present and visible, as the reason that nature is important to the people of Zunil. As Don Tomás put it, through her daughter's translation, how she must take her offerings to the mountains, "*para agradecer la vida, para ir agradecer las siembras, a las cosechas*" (Interview Feb 27th 2008). My host family went to the

mountains at least twice a week to harvest their onions or radishes while I was staying in their house, and vegetable farming is one of the main sources of income in Zunil. The people, then, are grateful to the mountains for their livelihood.

An interesting preoccupation in Zunil was the character of a person's *nawal*, or spirit. The *nawal* of a person is based on which of the 20 day names of the 260-day sacred Maya calendar one is born, and it is the "*significación*," or the meaning, of a person. By knowing the day someone was born, an *ajq'ij* can discover a person's personality, favorable days, and perfect matches in love. Juana, a prominent *ajq'ij* in Zunil, would not trust me until she had consulted her book of *nawales* and discovered mine. Even those people who are Catholic and claim to disbelieve *nawales* and traditional Mayan religion in general, are at least aware of these things. The night after my consultation with Juana, my strictly Catholic host family showed great interest in knowing my *nawal*, and even brought out a generic Mayan calendar sold in many stores throughout Guatemala, in order to see what it said about my *nawal*.

Nawales are also related to the energy of the universe. Not just humans have them, but also trees, plants, rivers, the air, and the sun or fire. Also, they can be weak or strong in energy, and that is how one *nawal* may exert influence over another (Interview Feb 26). For example, the *nawal* of the air could carry the *nawal* of a sickness. This is why, when praying, one must always pray to the air, as well as to God (Interview Feb 25). One must also ask the *nawal* of the mountain before removing rocks or trees from it. According to Antonia, a resident of Zunil going to University in Quetzaltenango, this is why a nearby

township was destroyed by a landslide: they were disrespectful of the *nawal* of the mountain.²

The knowledge of such things as *nawales* were often attributed not necessarily to parents, but to more distant ancestors. For example, Pedro said the work he does, with the Mayan calendar and natural curing, is from “*más que todo las creencias antiguas de nuestros abuelos*” (Interview Feb 26th 2008). Emilia stated that the ceremonies she performs in the mountains, giving thanks for crops, or asking for rain, were also preformed by “*nuestras antepasadas, nuestros abuelos, de antes*” (Interview Feb 27th 2008). Knowing how to thank the earth for what it gives one is an inherited knowledge. For the ancient Maya, the gods created humans and continued to give to them in the form of children, harvests, rain, sun, and other things. In return, humans were expected to acknowledge and give to them as well, often through bloodletting (Carrasco 1990:107) Though today there is no bloodletting, there are offerings of copal and candles, and prayers, whether to God, or to the *nawales*, or to “*Corazón del Cielo, Corazón de la Tierra, Serpiente Emplumada*” and the gods of fire and water found in the Popul Vuh (Interview Feb 27th 2008).

In *Entre Patojos* Ak’abal has a section of poems entitled “*Otras veces soy jaguar: Poemas que expresan la vida interior del autor; también se refieren a otras vidas, como las de sus nahuales*” (2002:149-158). In these poems, Ak’abal himself is transformed into a jaguar, a sparrowhawk, or a tree. Jossa states that “according to the Mayas, humans’ ultimate humanity resides precisely in their capacity for metamorphosis... a perpetual process of transformation takes place on a reciprocal basis” and the metamorphoses that Ak’abal undergoes in his poetry are “intended not to re-establish a lost oneness but, rather,

² Antonia (which is a pseudonym), was also Catholic and professed not to believe such things. She also said that during the landslide, everything was destroyed, except the Catholic church.

to recognize it” (2007:3). The reciprocal relationship with nature, as well as a view, if not of being “one” with nature, at least being a part of it, is still found in Zunil. Another aspect of life that has been passed down through the generations, remaining important in the life of Zunil and in the poetry of Humberto Ak’abal, is the language K’iche’.

“*En lengua k’iche...*”: The importance of the K’iche’ language

Language use in the community

Though many people in Zunil have learned Spanish, it is not uncommon to meet older people, women, and young children, before school-age, who do not speak it. The language of Zunil, in every aspect of daily life, from the house to the market, is K’iche’. It is spoken at the dinner table, and only occasionally would someone translate to Spanish for me, if they thought I might be interested in the subject. Humberto Ak’abal writes his poetry first in K’iche’, and then translates it himself into Spanish. He says that “*la lengua k’iche’ es importante porque encierra en sí misma un modo de mirar el mundo, tiene su propia manera de pensar*” (Email interview Feb 25th 2008). That the language is an inherent part of the culture and reflects the way of thinking and of viewing the world in that culture was an idea found also in Zunil, and there is a definite pride in the language. Clara, the teacher, said that they teach K’iche’ classes in school in addition to Spanish because “*es muy bonito, nuestro idioma*” (Interview Feb 28th 2008). Pedro said that the reason some people feel ashamed to speak K’iche’ is due to discrimination, and that they will often get treated like children or animals if they cannot speak Spanish. He, however, feels a pride in the language, which he associates as part of his identity (Interview Feb 26th 2008). In the community in general, there is an evident pride in the language. I was often taught random words in K’iche’ that people felt it was important for me to know. When I told people I

knew a little K'iche', they would often quiz me on basic words, and express delight when I got them right.

Despite all of this, there is some evidence of the loss of K'iche' in favor of Spanish. For example, one hardly ever hears a number bigger than *oxib* (three) in K'iche': all greater numbers are Spanish. Clara stated that the importance of learning Spanish was due to Zunil's proximity to Quetzaltenango and the need to do business there with people who would not be able or willing to speak K'iche'. It makes sense, then, that the numbers, used most often in business transactions, would be lost first. Also often sprinkled throughout speech otherwise in K'iche' would be connecting words, such as *entonces* and *por lo tanto*. Earlier statements bemoaned the negative effect of television and radio on ideas about nature, and it is easy to see how these for the most part Spanish language programs would have an effect on the local language. Still, while there are encroachments of Spanish into the K'iche' language, it is for the most part still very strongly in use in Zunil.

K'iche in the Poetry of Ak'abal

As stated earlier, Rogachevsky takes issue with the critics who talk about the simple language of Ak'abal's poetry. He explains that in Western Judeo-Christian tradition, Adam is the one who names all the animals, so that the human voice is the most important tool in naming something. In the K'iche language, however, words for things in nature are formed by a dialogue with that thing. For example, the word for a bird might be the sound of its song. Ak'abal's poem "*La pureza*" expresses the importance of this concept:

La voz de los animales
es el recuerdo
de la pureza del lenguaje. (79)

The most pure language, the most meaningful, is not that poetic language full of linguistic artifice found in some Western poetry, but that language taken directly from nature. For

Ak'abal, a poem made up entirely of sounds made by birds ("*Cántos de pájaros*") or one mimicking the sounds of rainfall ("*Ta'onik jab*"), would be the most poetic poem there is. The K'iche' language in general is the best language for him to write about nature, because the language itself is created from nature.

In Zunil, the idea of K'iche' being the ideal language in which to do certain things was present. For example, Pedro, Emilia, and Don Tomás all said that K'iche' was the only language in which they could do their ceremonies. As Pedro said, in K'iche', "*hay palabras muy dulces...como hacer una oración, o hacer un poema, es como así, en las ceremonias*" (Interview Feb 26th 2008). This view of the K'iche' language as one especially suited for prayers or poems because of the sweetness of the language, reminds one of what Jossa calls the "comforting function and consoling use of name, onomatopoeia and, ultimately, language" in Ak'abal's poetry. Because K'iche' words are formed from a dialogue with nature (which often simply involves the use of onomatopoeia), the name of something is often not only the name but "the very essence of the person or the thing or the place" (2007:600). Thus, when Ak'abal uses the name for something in a poem, or when Don Tomás invokes the 20 *nawales* in a ceremony, they are doing so with much more power than if they were to do it in Spanish. In addition, using the K'iche' language in these ceremonies connects them to their past and their culture.

Conclusion

Humberto Ak'abal's poetry celebrates the everyday life and culture of the Maya K'iche' people. In general, the people of Zunil shared this pride. Many of the ideas about nature, cosmivision, and language present in the poetry of Humberto Ak'abal are also present in the culture of the people of Zunil. In the case of nature and cosmivision, there is still a deep closeness with and reliance on nature in Zunil, and alienation from nature, as

manifested in the pollution of the town, is blamed on poor education, insidious foreign influences, or greedy government officials. The K'iche' language, as well, is still very strongly in use in Zunil, and any loss occurring is blamed on discrimination, or, once again the influence of foreign culture. The use of K'iche' in the town of Zunil is important in creating community, in maintaining a closeness with nature, and in achieving a link to their grandparents and even more distant ancestors.

Also, although nature and language are important parts of the culture of Zunil, also important are such things as family, food, community, and religion, all themes about which Ak'abal has something to say, but about which there is less critical literature at the present. Future in-depth research could easily be done to compare his ideas on these topics with everyday life in Mayan culture.

Acknowledgements:

For the opportunity to do the research needed to write this paper, not to mention to the comfort and welcome I felt in Zunil, I would like to thank my host family, Pedro, Emilia, and Juana Chay. I would also like to thank the many people who took the time out of their work and lives to talk to me. These people are, in no particular order, Antonia, Candelaria, Vilma Poz, Roberto Poz, Don Juan, and Rosa and Catarina Xic.

References Cited

Ak'abal, Humberto

2000 Con ojos después del mar. Mexico: Editorial Praxis.

2002 Entre patojos. Guatemala: Editorial Piedra Santa.

2006 Remiendo de media luna. Guatemala: Artesanales Tz'ukulik.

Carmack, Robert M, Janine L. Gasco, and Gary H. Gossen

2007 The Legacy of Mesoamerica. New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc.

Carrasco, David

1990 Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmovisión and Ceremonial Centres. Illinois:
Waveland Press, Inc.

Cochoy Alva, María Faviana, Pedro Celestino Yac Noj, and Isabel Yaxón

2006 Raxalaj Mayab' K'aslemalil *or* Cosmovisión Maya, plenitud de la vida.
Guatemala: Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo.

Jossa, Emanuela

2007 The Colors of the Earth: Nature and landscape in the poetry of Joy Harjo and
Humberto Ak'abal. *Journal of the Southwest* 49(4): 585-601.

Rogachevsky, Jorge R

1994 La voz de la naturaleza en la poesía de Humberto Ak'abal. *Encuentro* 13: 23-
27/30-31.

Spradley, James P

1980 Participant Observation. Australia: Thomson Learning, Inc.