

A History and A Hope:
El Proyecto Chico Méndez and the Sowing and Dawning of
Community Development and Cultural Empowerment in a
K'iche' Maya Town

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8 March 2006
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SOAN 252

“Then the mountains were separated from the water, all at once the great mountains came forth. By their genius alone, by their cutting-edge alone they carried out the conception of the mountain-plain, whose face grew instant groves of cypress and pine.”
-Popol Vuh (1996: 66)

Abstract:

Susan Berger, in her article “Environmentalism in Guatemala: When Fish Have Ears,” laments that “the ecological movement in Guatemala today...lacks a strong grassroots foundation” (1997: 99). During my four-week field stay in the highland Guatemalan town of Pachaj, I encountered a stark exception to this rule. From February 1, 2006 to February 28, 2006, I lived and worked in the *aldea* of Pachaj; specifically, I volunteered for *El Proyecto Chico Méndez*, a community-based ecological restoration organization. However through extended work within the organization and conversations with members of the community, I found that its hopes and aspirations amount to so much more. Through the guidance of Armando Lopez and others over the last eight years, it has worked to combat the deforestation of the *municipio* of Cantel, planting tens of thousands of trees a year. Yet its true goal is not only the sowing and dawning of ecological beauty and stability in the Cantel area, but also the sowing and dawning of community development and K’iche’ cultural empowerment in this area as well. Through the introduction of a language school as well as an eco-tourism industry, the Chico Mendez Project hopes to branch out and blossom, all the while strengthening, and ultimately, sanctifying its roots both natural and cultural.

Introduction:

The *Popol Vuh*, the K’iche’ Mayan book of creation, gods, and kings, opens with the dawning of the world, culminating with the formation of the “mountain-plain” (Tedlock 1996: 66). This image of the mountain-plain describes in a phrase western highland Guatemala. It is a land littered and defined by jagged and winding mountain ranges, with small, rural hamlets nestled within the spaces between. The centrality to Mayan culture of both mountains and the forests part and parcel of them can be seen in both tradition and linguistics. Forests, trees, and most specifically cypress and pine, hold prominent positions in the opening paragraphs of the *Popol Vuh*. After the rising and creation of the mountain-plain, there appeared “instant groves of cypress and pine” (Tedlock 1996: 66). This fundamental connection to forests is echoed in place names as well. *Guatemala* literally translates to “*el lugar de los bosques*”¹ (Fidel, Lecture, 1-9-

¹ “The place of the forests”

2006); *K'iche'*, the specific language and cultural group examined within this paper, comes to "*muchos/varios arboles*"² (Puac, Conversation, 1-16-2006); even the town of central focus, *Pachaj*, signifies "*entre los pinos*"³ (Puac, Conversation, 1-26-2006). It is this cultural centrality, which *El Proyecto Chico Méndez*⁴ is working to reignite through the effort of reforestation. In the process, it hopes not only to re-green its world but in turn strengthen the surrounding economies and empower the *K'iche'* Maya culture. My investigation, and this resulting paper, addresses the beginnings, reality, and dreams of the *Chico Mendez Project* and specifically those of its heart and soul.

Armando Lopez.

Methodology:

My methodology for data collection and synthesis involved numerous conversations and interviews with members of the *Pachaj/greater-Cantel* area where I lived for the month of February, the 1st through the 28th, as well as conversations with two people out in *San Lucas Tolimán*. The bulk of my research was intimately linked to my volunteer work with the *Chico Mendez Project*. My meals (usually 7:30 a.m. breakfast, 12:30 p.m. lunch, and 7 p.m. dinner) and downtime were spent with my family; however, the majority of my days were spent working with the Project and the director of the Project, Armando Lopez. The hours usually ran from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; however, it was just as likely to start at 8:30 a.m. and at times not end until 7 p.m. The work involved mostly nursery maintenance, that is to say the creating and arranging of soil bags for seeds. Though more than a few times we would strike out to the neighbouring mountains for hikes, conversations, and the necessary collecting of *broza*⁵. From unstructured conversations as well as structured interviews, I gathered

² "Many/various trees"

³ "Among the pines"

⁴ The *Chico Mendez Project*

⁵ Organic fertilizer from mountains

information from Armando concerning ecology, philosophy, religion, and of course, Chico Mendez⁶. These dialogues occurred: 2-2, 2-3, 2-6, 2-14, 2-19, 2-20, 2-22, 2-23, and 2-26-2006.

For relevant supplementary, complementary, and contradictory information, I also got the chance to converse with several people from various governmental and non-governmental organizations. The first was Mary Kost, director of *Comida Para Vida*⁷, an organization working to promote healthy nutrition and community development in San Lucas Tolimán. The second was Toribio Chajil, director of *El Proyecto Genética Forestal Parroquial*⁸, the largest tree nursery and reforestation organization in Central America, located also in San Lucas Tolimán. Both of these conversations occurred 2-17-2006. And lastly, I spoke with Ramón Rixquiacche' Satey, the manager of protected areas for *el Departamento de Areas Protegidas y Medio Ambiente*⁹ (DAPMA) of the Cantel municipality. This interview occurred 2-22-2006 in Cantel.

Finally, I also spoke with members of my family on a regular basis on topics concerning everything from Chico Mendez to music as well as conversing with Project volunteers about their perceptions of the Chico Mendez Project. Relevant conversations to this paper occurred on 2-7-2006 with Doña Salvadora Colop; 2-23-2006 with Carla Asucena; 2-23-2006 with Malaquias Colop; and 2-22-2006 with various volunteers.

It was through these myriad dialogues and discussions that I was able to gather my information and, in the end, hopefully paint a picture of Chico Mendez, Armando Lopez, and their vision for their world.

⁶ From here out, I will interchangeably use "Chico Mendez," "the Chico Mendez Project," and "*El Proyecto Chico Méndez*" when referring to the Project. When I am speaking of the person, Chico Mendez, I will say so before hand.

⁷ Food For Life

⁸ The Genetic Forest Mission Project

⁹ The Department of Protected Areas and the Environment

Discussion:

The crowing of roosters in the early morn and argumentative canines discussing late into the night bracket what are otherwise quiet sun-laden days working and living amidst the golden fields, dusty dirt roads, and endless stares of a small hamlet in western Guatemala. The hamlet in question is an *aldea*¹⁰ of the Cantel municipality known as Pachaj where I conducted fieldwork from February 1st through the 28th of 2006. I lived with a family of within the community and volunteered throughout the stay with the *El Proyecto Chico Méndez*. Armando Lopez was my main contact and informant throughout the experience as I worked side-by-side with him for the better part of a month. Whether just meeting him for the first time or hauling *broza* off of mountains with him in the weeks to come, his countenance consistently was one of warmth, hope, and determination. Indeed, the first thing you notice is his face. The twinkle in his eyes matches his genuine gold-toothed smile. He is the founder and current leader of the Chico Mendez Project, and his dream is nothing short of a respective sustainable and prosperous organization, community, and natural environment; indeed, it is his Project's fusing of the sociocultural and natural, which in the end gives it such immense ideological power.

In current practice, however, the Chico Mendez Project is a reforestation organization whose stated mission is two part: 1) *El rescatar de los nacimientos y bosques de Cantel para las generaciones futuras* and 2) *Generar oxigena para todo el mundo*¹¹ (Lopez, Conversation, 2-2-2006). Goals of ambition and beauty, to be sure, and yet, Chico Mendez is a small organization. It subsists on minimal funds, and mostly through the volunteer efforts of Armando, his kids, and short-time college students. It currently has only two employees and struggles to pay even them. Why

¹⁰ Hamlet

¹¹ 1) To rescue the mountain springs and forests for future generations and 2) To generate oxygen for the whole world.

does Pachaj need this project, why does Armando fight to keep this dream alive, and how does he plan on accomplishing all this? The following sections will paint a picture of the environmental situation in Guatemala, the municipality of Cantel and the situation facing it, and lastly who Armando Lopez is. After these short sections, an in-depth investigation of the Chico Mendez Project will follow.

A Brief Environmental Picture of Guatemala:

The past 50 years in Guatemala have seen incredible environmental degradation realized in the name of state development and resource exploitation (Berger 1997: 99-100). Thanks to expansive agro-export, cattle, mining, and oil industries, deforestation and pollution are synergistic plagues on the Guatemalan natural environment. All told, with "a rate of deforestation ranging from 1,080 to 1,620 square kilometres per year," in the last thirty years "some 65 percent of Guatemala's original forests have been destroyed" (1997: 100). With the abuse of pesticides, oil pollution, and toxin production, air quality, water quality, and diversity of aquatic life have all diminished (1997: 100). Indeed, "the majority of Guatemalan river basins are now contaminated. More than 130 species of wildlife are threatened or endangered due to deforestation, increased air or water pollution, and the illegal but lucrative export of endangered species" (1997: 100).

The abuse of the social environment of Guatemala has often gone hand in hand with the abuse of the natural one. Guatemala today has the grossest unequal land tenure in Latin America, "with less than 2 percent of the landowners controlling 65 percent of the farmland" (1997: 101). Over the last thirty years, small farmers have seen the average size of their plot decrease from 1.70 hectares to 0.79. This is contrasted with the explosive growth and resultantly explosive environmental damage of the cotton, sugar, coffee, and grazing industries. Respectively, land for cotton increased by

2,140 percent; land for sugar, 406 percent; land for coffee, 56 percent; and lastly, land for grazing by 2,125 percent (1997: 100). This is all land which previously was forest. Finally and tragically, the destruction of the natural and social worlds within Guatemala found physical expression in the scorched-earth tactics and policies of the military government of the 1970s and 1980s. The Environmental Project on Central America concluded that these policies, which "destroyed more than 440 rural villages and killed 100,000 to 150,000 Guatemalans...devastated 'both ends of the human-land connection' and destroyed 'the cultural fabric which holds communities in a sustainable relationship with their resources'" (1997: 101).

It is this cultural fabric that the Chico Mendez Project hopes to mend in the future in order to bring its community back into a sustainable and proper relationship with its resources. The community of Cantel finds itself facing many of the same environmental ills as Guatemala as a whole; these ills are not small nor are their consequences minor as will be illustrated below. Deforestation is perhaps the greatest ecological threat facing Guatemala today, and its enactment and repercussions find their expression in the multitude of small agricultural communities throughout Guatemala, communities exactly like Cantel.

A Brief Picture of Cantel:

Cantel is a municipality of the greater department of Quetzaltenango. There are nine distinct parts of Cantel: 1) Cantel proper; 2) Chirri k'iak', Cho k'iak', and Tzol k'iak'; 3) Pachaj; 4) Estancia; 5) Xecam; 6) Tzuisuk; 7) Pasak Primero, Pasak Segundo; 8) Urbina; and lastly, 9) Tzuitzerib'al (Lopez, Interview, 2-20-2006). It is a community built economically on *los comercios de las fábricas y las obras de las artesanias*¹², the majority of which are *tejedores*¹³ of *ropa típica*¹⁴ (Asucena and Colop, Malaquias;

¹² The business from factories and products from craftsmen

¹³ Weavers

Conversations; 2-23-2006). Cantel has experienced rapid population growth from a population in 1965 of around 9,000 to a registered population today of 33,480. It is important to note that the actual population, however, is closer to 42,000, thanks to immigrant factory workers from neighboring departments such as Huehuetenango and Totonicapón. Of this population, 96% use *leña*¹⁵ and propane to cook, bath, and survive, in contrast to a mere 4% that uses solely propane. This population growth as well as this subsistence statistic show the situation in good relief, as an increase in resource and land needs for farming, wood, etc. result in substantial environmental compromises (Satey, Conversation, 2-22-2006).

Cantel has a total of 1,218,000 hectares of communal forest for community use; Armando notes that if one was to hike the communal *frontera*¹⁶, it would take between three and four days (Satey, Conversation, 2-22-2006; Lopez, Conversation, 2-23-2006). Of these 1.2 million hectares, 40% has disappeared. This deforestation has led not only to the loss of their forests' climate stabilizing properties and habitat for flora and fauna, but perhaps most importantly for the human populations dependent on these forests, it has led to an increase in erosion. This increased erosion raises the potential for mudslides and also importantly compromises the communities' *nacimientos de agua*¹⁷ through redirection or just plain loss. The importance of trees for forested ecosystems cannot be overstated, as their root systems stabilize soil levels and underground water ways, and when these root structures no longer exist, soil and water way stability is lost. Mudslides can cause catastrophic damage; underground water ways can change paths; or whole *nacimientos* can disappear to depths far from human utility (Satey, Conversation, 2-22-2006).

¹⁴ Typical indigenous dress

¹⁵ Firewood

¹⁶ Frontier, border

¹⁷ Mountain water holes

Lest one feels the threats posed by deforestation are not real, one need only visit San Lucas Tolimán and its neighbouring communities where three years ago a whole village was swallowed up and destroyed by deforestation-caused mudslides (Kost, Conversation, 2-17-2006). One need only go to Cantel. In 2001, a group was commissioned to count and access the water-holes available in the whole municipality. They found 125. Less than five years later, in 2005, only 120 remained. Ramón Rixquiacche Satey notes “estamos perdiendo un nacimiento por año¹⁸” (Conversation, 2-22-2006). Losing one water hole per year is not a sustainable or enviable situation for any community, and it illustrates the danger of deforestation and the need for sustainable community forestry practices.

While the municipality of Cantel had an unwritten conservation ethic for its community and *guardábosques*¹⁹ monitoring their communal forests in 1958, it wasn't until 1989 and later that the government of Guatemala stepped onto the stage and realized their national deforestation problem. With the passing of *La ley de áreas protegidas*²⁰ and *La ley forestal*²¹, it was now illegal, respectively, for community members to extract certain resources from those places protected as well as those places private or public and not protected. Satey remembers before these laws, in 1958, when groups would not honor their agreements with the government to pay the inhabitants for the extracted wood and reforest the areas they log; one such example claimed innumerable pina bete (an endangered species) for the chopper and shirked their responsibility to the community and to the forest. Now there is only “un desierto” (Conversation, 2-22-2006). With the advent of these laws, however, only certified loggers could extract wood from the forests, and Satey says relations are much better.

¹⁸ We are losing one water hole per year.

¹⁹ Forest Rangers

²⁰ The Law of Protected Areas

²¹ The Forest Law

The result has been a decrease in deforestation, and the majority of Cantel (60% of the 96% solely using *leña*) switching to cheaper, larger wood from the coast (Satey, Conversation, 2-22-2006).

This does not mean the situation is under control; indeed, both Armando Lopez and Satey were quick to point out that the future is anything but pretty. With the ever-expansive population mentioned above, the need for agricultural land and wood is still high and thus forest encroachment an ever-present reality. With 40% of the communal forests gone, the present situation of losing one water hole a year, and 40% at least of the communities of Cantel still using community wood, deforestation and all its manifestations are alive and well in Cantel, with the demand for it not going away any time soon. Indeed, my host mother, a supporter of Chico Mendez, Doña Salvadora, illustrated the dilemma exactly. When noting the importance of trees for Pachaj, she stated two reasons: "*leña y los nacimientos de agua*" (Colop, Conversation, 2-7-2006). And so, for even those families educated in the benefits of trees for their community, there is still the ever-present primacy of material needs. Firewood was mentioned first; at the very least, it is given equal status to the water-holes. This is basic survival logic. It also creates one potentially dangerous situation if left without sustainable control.

Besides logging, one of the other biggest causes of deforestation for the Cantel community is forest fires, those caused by kids camping, people smoking, loose fireworks, or even malicious intent (Lopez, Conversation, 2-2-2006; Satey, Conversation, 2-22-2006). One hundred percent of them are "*provocado por humano*"²²; there have never been natural forest fires in Cantel (Satey, Conversation, 2-22-2006). This threat merely adds another dimension to the fight for reforestation and makes Armando Lopez simply shake his head.

²² Human provoked

Through all of this we have seen the grave environmental threats faced by Guatemala and those problems reduced to microcosm in the municipality of Cantel. It is to curb this abuse and protect his community's welfare that Armando Lopez created *El Proyecto Chico Méndez*. It is now time to meet Armando Lopez, his Project, and his vision.

Armando Lopez and the "Sowing" of *El Proyecto Chico Méndez*:

Born in 1973, Armando Lopez comes from an old agricultural family whose ancestors helped found Pachaj in the early 20th century. One of six siblings, he is only one of two left living and working in Pachaj. Both he and his brother make a living as *corte*²³ weavers, striking a decidedly different path from their family. He began this work as well as cycling at an early age. Concurrent with this work, he also began to foster an appreciation for the outdoors. As the years went on, he began canonizing this interest in the practice of Maya religion. At eight, he began helping prepare ceremonies, and by 13 he was fully celebrating and participating. While his family has always been Maya practitioners, they do not come from a line of *sacerdotes*²⁴; this again is where he stepped outside of family tradition. Beginning 12 years ago, he started spending time with Maya priests; it was through working with them, listening to them, *walking* with them that he began his training. Nowadays, his teacher is mostly the natural world and spending time alone in the woods. Through this work and this life, his love and understanding of the outdoors found uncanny focus, depth, and meaning. He remembers to this day the teachings of his elders and one especially. That it is "*aquí*" *en los bosques donde "viene todo del equilibrio y conocimiento del hombre"*²⁵ (Lopez, Conversation, 2-26-2006). This spirituality has given him a strong sense of

²³ Indigenous skirt

²⁴ Maya priest

²⁵ It is "here" in the forests from whence "come all the balance and wisdom of man."

K'iche' cultural identity and empowerment, letting him proudly state, "Yo, sí, soy Maya²⁶" (Conversation, 2-2-2006).

Eight to ten years ago, he married his calling as a *sacerdote* to the work of practical ecology and restoration and joined an ecology group. It was through his work in this ecology organization with numerous other people that the notion and vision of Chico Mendez germinated; it was there that they decided to realize their dream.

The people involved at first specifically were three: Carlos Colop, Vicky Mendez, and Armando Lopez. They watched as their environmental/ecology group moved away from their practical ideas and turned instead to politics. They watched as their group danced with the devil, for they knew that the relationship between environmental organizations and politics is completely dependent on those in power and is at best a double-edged sword, for their support of you necessarily means your support of them (Berger 1997: 103, 104, 109; Lopez, Conversation, 2-22-2006). They chose instead in 1998 to start their own organization; one not tied to politics but instead grounded in ecology and practical reforestation. For while they supported the drafting of policy and the fight against pollution, they felt that, in the end, reforestation was what needed to be done, and someone had to do it. In their vindication, their ex-organization no longer exists, swallowed up by the power-money game of politics (Lopez, Interview, 2-6-2006).

They named their organization *El Proyecto Chico Méndez* after the Brazilian environmentalist and social justice advocate, Chico Mendez, who was assassinated on Christmas Eve, 1988. They chose this name because he was a man of action and a man of the people who chose not to fight with machetes and violence, but instead through intelligence and dialogue. It was this prime example of peace that said "*ni las armas,*

²⁶ I, yes, am Maya.

*ni la violencia, pero sí la inteligencia*²⁷ that they wanted to emulate, whose strength they wanted to channel, and whose fight they wanted to carry on (Lopez, Conversation, 2-2-2006).

Armando's parents couldn't pay for his schooling past 2nd basic, yet he says that he feels he has been educated in "*la Universidad de la Vida*"²⁸ ever since (Conversation, 2-23-2006). It was here that he and his friends gathered their ecological knowledge. With the help of his friend Oallo, who had learned as a boy from his grandfather, and his grandfather from his grandfathers, they began learning the right time in the winter to collect seeds, the proper length of time to lie them out to dry and open, and the proper combination of *broza* and ordinary soil to combine for optimal tree survival (a ratio of 6 to 10 sacks or wheel barrel loads, respectively) (Lopez, Conversation, 2-23-2006). For those eight years, Carlos, Vicky, and Armando dedicated their time, money, and energy with spectacular results, planting between 15-18,000 trees throughout the communal forests of Cantel every year; this amounts to between 120-144,000 trees all told. They made Chico Mendez a reality, as the organization eventually grew to 10 steady people in only a couple of years; and yet, it was not an organization with a sustainable economic strategy and given the economic situation of Cantel and Guatemala as a whole, it soon faced serious problems.

Within a few years, three had grown to ten, and yet within an equal amount of time, it dropped to five, and just as quickly, Armando Lopez found himself alone. The project was relying on donations from language schools and student groups. It could not find the catalyst necessary for economic self-sustainability, and the economic situations facing the rest of the Chico Mendez members soon collided with this reality. They said that they couldn't keep working for free, couldn't keep devoting their lives to

²⁷ Not guns, not violence, but yes intelligence.

²⁸ The University of Life

this Project when it couldn't even support itself; they had their own lives and own problems to think about. Money was and is not exactly a readily available resource in Guatemala. With that, they decided to leave Chico Mendez. Armando says he understands why they did what they did; he says that they had their own lives to live and think about. But in the end, he misses their support and hopes that once his Project becomes "*autosustainable*²⁹," they will come back and rejoin the fight (Conversation; 2-2-2006, 2-6-2006, 2-23-2006).

The need for a sustainable economic strategy looms over Armando every day. The survival of his Project, the vindication of the last eight years of his life, and the dream he nurtures in his very being depend upon its realization. His forests depend on this, and it is with this in mind that he hopes to expand his Project, including not only a reforestation project but also things such as a language school and an eco-tourism industry. These things have the intent of supporting the reforestation effort, but they have two side purposes as well: community development and cultural empowerment. The direction he wishes to take this organization and the manner he hopes to do so will comprise the remainder of this paper. But first, let us examine the current situation facing Chico Mendez; for only from here can one appreciate the magnitude of this dream and the beauty that will be its dawning.

The Current Situation and Limitations Facing Chico Mendez:

Currently, Chico Mendez is compromised for the foreseeable future of Armando Lopez; his two kids, Raul and Jorge, age eight and ten; and two employees. One employee named Tecum helps occasionally with *broza* collection; the other is Chico Vasques who works daily in the nursery mixing *broza* and soil and filling bags

²⁹ Self-sustainable

for seeds. His goal is 60,000 bags in two months; he fills at least 1,000 bags a day. (Vasques, Conversation, 2-23-2006)

Chico Mendez currently also has no money. With the need of paying ten *centavos*³⁰-a-bag to Chico, its budget is nonexistent and even paying these wages is nothing certain as Armando's constant preoccupation with it attests to. Indeed, *El Proyecto Chico Méndez* could not exist without the support of Xela language schools, student volunteers both young and old, and help from the greater community.

Annually, on average, Chico Mendez receives between Q200-300 (roughly \$30-40). This money goes to buying bags for seeds, sacks for *broza*, *racimientos* and other tools, and currently employee pay-checks; in short, everything Chico Mendez needs. The budget is usually boosted by benefit dinners and cultural nights in Xela, yet in reality those contributions are minimal, and the budget all told is tiny. The largest gift received was donated by a group of students from the University of North Carolina; they came to work with the catholic church and Chico Mendez for a week or two, asked what was needed to make the green-house viable, and in the end donated and purchased with Q2,300 the nylon necessary to wrap around the building. That was two years ago. (Lopez, Interview, 2-20-006)

It is groups of students like these that keep Chico Mendez afloat. The vast majority merely donate their time and energy rather than money, yet that time and energy is greatly needed. Through fall and winter, the Project is mixing and bagging dirt for seeds; starting in March and ending in April comes the seeding and germinating of *Pinus resinosa* (Red Pine), cypress, and alder (those trees most commonly planted by the Project); and then from May through July comes the community-based journeys to the communal mountains for planting, specifically transplanting, at *los nacimientos de*

³⁰ Guatemalan cents

*agua, Los Torres de Cantel*³¹, *Ilicham*³², *Jolom*³³, and *algunas montañas privadas*³⁴.

The work involves getting dirty, withstanding the heat of the sun, and often engaging in repetitive activities such as mixing, bagging, or carrying crates; it is work that is not glamorous, but necessary and necessarily hard. It is work that cannot be sustained by merely Armando and his kids alone, and that is why they petition for help from student volunteers. Whether kids from neighbourhood elementary schools coming for a day or college students coming for a week, the Project receives about two to three volunteers a month, or about 48 every year. The college volunteers fill bags, seed trees, collect seeds, organize dinners, and some even head out to Xela to publicize. The volunteers mainly come from five language schools in Xela and stay for an average of a week or two, though some for as long as 2 months. They originally hail usually from the United States, Europe, or Canada. They are currently the backbone of Chico Mendez and have been ever since its inception (Lopez, Interview, 2-6-2006).

Yet, one can not speak of the current subsistence strategy of Chico Mendez without mentioning its connection and collaboration with the community. Currently, Chico Mendez works with 18-30 families. These families, like the rest of the community cannot donate much if any money, nor can they devote the time to work in the field, yet what they can do is give lodging and food to the volunteers who can. The families are paid Q70 a day to house these students with Q20 of that being withheld to sustain the Project; a necessary step given the economic situation it faces. As for the rest of the community, their support comes not only in encouraging words (many of who would love to work for the Project if it only had a way to pay) but also in their help during the months of May, June, July, and August tree transplanting. This community

³¹ The Towers of Cantel, a mountain range defined by radio towers atop it

³² A mountain named after the K'iche' word for "cuñada" or "sister-in-law"

³³ A mountain named after the K'iche' word for "cabeza" or "head"

³⁴ Some private mountains

relationship is one the Chico Mendez Project cherishes and hopes to ultimately solidify institutionally (Lopez, Interview, 2-6-2006; Lopez, Conversation, 2-26-2006).

So what limitations does the Chico Mendez Project face in its fight to reforest its world? Well, as noted above, it is undermanned, under-funded, and indeed lacking a coherent sustainable economic plan. Yet there are more concrete things it lacks as well: a pick-up to haul its dirt, its trees, its supplies. The benefit of a truck would be extraordinary, reducing both human labor time and increasing immensely productivity. The Project also lacks a personal water irrigation system; currently it uses the unused community water during the off-hours late in the night. Not even speaking of an office, the truck and the water system are Armando's two most pressing needs for the Project; however, they do not come cheap. He estimated the cost of the pick-up to be around Q25,000, which he says is chump change next to the irrigation system, which would be Q50-70,000. All of which is money he doesn't have.

In the end, Armando Lopez muses, "*El Proyecto Chico Mendez es pobre, es pobre en la economía, pero es rico y fuerte en los ideas y en la vision*³⁵" (Lecture, 2-21-2006). It is now time to explore those ideas. For while he hopes to plant, if all goes according to plan, 50,000 trees this year, he notes that with a source of income the results would truly be staggering. As he hypothesizes, his face lights up, a smile spreads across it, and the power of his dedication can be felt in his words. With Q100,000, he estimates the Chico Mendez Project could plant 250,000,000 trees. and that thought would make anyone smile (Lopez, Interview, 2-20-2006). And yet, to continue as an organization, Chico Mendez will need to be more than merely strong in ideas; it will need economic strength and sustainable profits as well. This realization is where we are heading next.

³⁵ The Chico Mendez Project is poor, it is poor economically; however, it is rich and strong in ideas and vision.

The Dream and ‘‘Dawning’’ of *El Proyecto Chico Méndez*:

‘‘*Si yo exploto mi bosque, mi bosque necesita recibir las fondas necesarias para ayudarlo*³⁶’’ (Lopez, Conversation, 2-3-2006). It is this simple idea, that promotes not only a sustainable ecological strategy but poses the need for a sustainable economic one as well, that is currently the unending fight and mission of Armando Lopez. To make this dream a reality, Armando is brainstorming several additions to the reforestation project that currently comprises Chico Mendez. He is hoping to open a Spanish language school in Pachaj, as well as an eco-tourism industry branch of the Project, all with the end goal of sustaining his mission for ecological restoration, promote community development, and ultimately empower his people and K’iche’ Maya culture. Perhaps, since we have explored above the reforestation aspect of his organization, the first place to start would be his plans for community development and then move on to his goal of cultural empowerment, and in the end, see if we can’t connect it all back. It is these goals of community development and cultural empowerment, which comprise the *sociocultural* half of Chico Mendez’s natural-sociocultural fusion mentioned at the start.

Community Development through Chico Mendez:

One could argue that community development entails not only economic prosperity, but also perhaps a sustainably managed environment and a culture imbued with a sense of power and identity. And indeed, I would argue this. This is why the organization of Chico Mendez is such a power idea; every part influences and complements the other. A healthy environment will promote Maya identity while supporting a prosperous community. The means of Chico Mendez towards this prosperous economy will in turn promote a sustainable environment and a stronger

³⁶ If I exploit my forest, my forest should receive the necessary funds to help it.

K'iche culture. And the way Chico Mendez hopes to empower its people will in turn work towards promoting sound resource management and economic gain. All in all, it's a complementary, interconnected model, and that should not be forgotten through out all of this; indeed, we will come back to it.

Perhaps, however, the most recognizable indicator of development is economic growth, and the Chico Mendez Project with its language school, reforestation organization, and eco-tourism industry hopes to promote exactly that. Armando does not have glamorous dreams for his school; he wants something natural, built from native materials. The hope is that the school will employ not only adult teachers of Spanish, but of weaving as well. Armando's hope, which was realized on a small scale with the most recent group of volunteers, is to give students the opportunity to not only learn Spanish in Pachaj and volunteer time for the reforestation project, but also have the option of taking a weaving class for the week or two they are learning Spanish. They would learn how to make *cintas y cinturas*³⁷, a project that is of reasonable ease to learn and complete in the given time (Lopez, Conversation, 2-2-2006; 2-22-2006).

The group of volunteers from the language school *El Proyecto Linguistico*, only the second group to partake of this experiment in Spanish language instruction over a week homestay in Pachaj, expressed encouraging words for the idea of having not only a language school out in Pachaj, but also for the experience they had volunteering for an afternoon with the Chico Mendez Project and the prospect of continuing their lessons in *cinta*-weaving (Various volunteers, Conversations, 2-22-2006). And this is how it would be: a group of students coming in for a week or two at a time, taking daily Spanish lessons with the option of classes in weaving as well as the option of volunteering for the Chico Mendez Project. In fact, a week after this group left, the

³⁷ Indigenous head wraps and belts

head of that language school, *Proyecto Linguistico*, called up Armando; he wants to discuss starting a language school in Pachaj. All in all, the introduction of a Spanish school would not only give jobs to the many Spanish and weaving teachers in Cantel but income to host families as well; it would help keep workers and teachers in Guatemala and help keep families whole and together.

The second method of promoting community development would be the introduction of an eco-tourism industry branch of Chico Mendez. With a land awash with rugged mountains and exotic appeal, Pachaj is in many ways an attractive destination for those looking for something different. And yet, it is also that difference, which could be a deterrent. It is still an indigenous village free from tourists, much more so than even Zúñil or San Andres Xecul; it would take a special breed of tourist to want to venture to Pachaj and take part of its unique location and lifestyle. However, perhaps this exotic appeal, and especially the allure of the mysterious Maya, could be a bonus as well. All in all, the thoughts for eco-tourism activities range from mountain hikes for views of Lake Atitlan to horse trail rides. Afternoon or whole day and even overnight adventures in the mountains would be possibilities, with the added option of climbing trees with professional equipment, zip line courses through the mountains, and perhaps the most special: overnight camping trips with music, indigenous food, and a Maya ceremony at midnight. The idea would be to provide culturally real, personally memorable experiences. And yet, with this industry, it is important to remember what else will be provided: jobs for trail maintenance, tour guides, horse tenders, and more. It is an idea rich with potential and rich with possibilities.

All in all, the expansion of the Chico Mendez Project to include a Spanish school and an eco-tourism industry benefits the whole community of Pachaj/greater-Cantel as well as the reforestation project itself, with jobs of all stripes and varieties

needed for the two additional projects; volunteers provided from the Spanish school for the reforestation effort; and funds provided from it all to sustain the Project as a whole. And so, with that look at the community development aspirations of Chico Mendez, we merely have left to examine the cultural empowerment side of this Project. And it is here where the interconnected nature of the Chico Mendez Project truly shines, from the use of revenue-builders to promote Maya culture to the recognized inseparable spiritual link between the natural world and the human one and the hopes for ecological respect and management this link suggests.

Cultural Empowerment in Chico Mendez:

The first place where Armando hopes to promote K'iche' Maya culture is through the teaching and use of *ropa* and *comida*³⁸ *típica*. With the teaching of how to weave *ropa típica* in the language school, Armando hopes to open peoples' eyes to the beauty and complexity of traditional Maya weaving and give exposure to those people proficient in the craft. In the eco-tourism industry, he hopes to utilize *comida típica* for the hiking trips, specifically tamales, which are easy to transport, extremely filling, and ecologically-friendly to dispose of. The use of this type of food as well as the weaving/potential-selling of typical Maya dress would in turn shed light on and give the local people confidence and pride in their indigenous, Maya culture.

The second place, and perhaps a far more powerful method of empowering the K'iche' culture, would be through the cross-cultural experiences of volunteers and students living with indigenous families. Here students and volunteers would live with indigenous families of Pachaj; they would be exposed not only to the dress, food, and ideas of the family, but the social and temporal flow of the larger community. All in all, they would be exposed and immersed in Pachaj culture and the indigenous reality that

³⁸ Typical indigenous food

comprises it. And the prospect and power of this arrangement is not only something foreigners appreciate or are interested in (Asucena, Conversation, 2-23-2006; Estela, Conversation, n.d.). Indeed when asked whether she would like to see more of it, my host-sister said "yes;" and when asked why she thought so, she responded matter-of-factly, "porque convivimos juntos es algo muy bonito"³⁹ (Asucena, Conversation, 2-23-2006).

However, perhaps the most piece of cultural empowerment the Chico Mendez Project hopes to imbue within the Pachaj/greater-Cantel community is the sacred connection and proper and balanced relationship with the natural world that Maya spirituality rests on. I will first explore this notion in Maya antiquity and then show its continuation in the Maya community of Pachaj/Cantel today. Reinvigorating this sentiment within his community would not only promote Maya pride and the continuance of cultural roots, but it would also work to foster a proper and sustainable relationship to the greater natural world. All in all, this sentiment is the fusion of the natural and cultural that is Chico Mendez, and more specifically, Armando Lopez.

This connection to the natural world is seen perhaps most prominently in ancient Maya symbology with the notion of the "Flowering Mountain Earth" or "World Tree," which for the Maya of both Guatemala and Mexico is where the world's center is located, and more importantly, the location of all there was before this world and the beginning of all that came after (Carlsen 1997: 51-2). Specifically, the World Tree's primary manifestation is either a tree or a maize plant, showing an equivalent importance placed on maize as on trees, and most profoundly, the symbolic interchangeable nature of the two. This central tree is what gave life and substance to everything, from rocks and lightening, to deer and "even individual segments of time"

³⁹ Because living together is something very beautiful.

(1997: 52). All in all, it is "the source and endpoint of life" (1997: 52). It is the provider of all things and must be respected for "it is the root (*raiz*) of the world, it is ancient... The village cannot go on living without it because it is an original thing: it is tied to the beginning of the world" (1997: 52).

This connection to the natural world is seen more specifically in a one-to-one equivalence between humans and parts of nature, specifically in passages from the *Popol Vuh* and images from Palenque. This is noted in the *Popol Vuh* when One Hunapuh is killed in the underworld along with his brother, and his head is severed and placed in "the fork of the tree that stands by the road" (Tedlock 1996: 97). His head sprouts fruit on the tree where before no fruit was bore. Indeed, his head became a fruit, specifically a calabash, which today is known for its resemblance to a human skull, and in actuality is called "the skull of One Hunapuh" (1996: 97). The one-to-one relationship between nature and trees in particular and humans is seen again in the story of Blood Maiden where she is forced to trick the Dark lords into believing a ball of red croton tree sap is truly her heart. Indeed, it works, "its surface was soaked with gore, its surface glistened red with blood" (1996: 100-1). And lastly, this connection is seen in antiquity, perhaps most powerfully, in the graphic depictions at Palenque, where "aspects of human and vegetal life are combined" (Carlsen 1997: 63). "Vegetation [sprouts] from the heads of humanistic figures;" humans, corn, and trees become intertwined and inseparable on Foliated Crosses; and Maya rulers are seen sprouting from the Earth with glorious crowns of leafs (1997: 60-62). The fundamentally connected relationship between humans, trees, and life is made plain here.

Yet, most impressive and important to this paper is that this spiritual connection to the natural world is alive and continued today in the K'iche' Maya culture of Pachaj.

“*El medio ambiente y la cultura Maya son una y la misma*⁴⁰” (Lopez, Conversation, 2-14-2006). With this line, Armando asserts the powerful connection felt within Maya spirituality and Maya culture to the natural environment around them. In current day Pachaj, this connection is seen most prominently in the need for respect, the need for balance, and most prominently in the one-to-one relationship between the human world and the natural one.

Respecting life within *la naturaleza*⁴¹ can be seen in both current story and ritual. Specifically, Armando spoke of the story of *b'atan* or “*el lugar de agua caliente*⁴²,” a spot atop the mountain *K'iak*⁴³ where there used to be great springs of hot water. According to legend still told today, the waters were protected by a *Nawal* or guardian spirit in the form of a striped (possible banded?) snake. It was understood that the preservation and protection of these waters required respect for the snake; however, Maya influenced by evangelicals paid no heed and killed the snake. From then on, the water disappeared and flowed no more. Indeed, geologists have come to the spot, noted the past presence of water, and detected it kilometers below. When or if it will return, no one knows (Lopez, Conversation, 2-14-2006). The second current manifestation of respect for the natural realm comes in the form of respecting life through the banning of blood-use in Maya ceremonies. Armando Lopez notes that true *sacerdotes* do not use blood in their rituals because for them, blood, whether from humans, chickens, or anything, is sacred. It is this sacrality of blood, which illustrates their belief in the sacrality of life. This can be seen in their choice of altar placement as well, whether it be *Tzikin*⁴⁴, an altar below a stone shaped a bird, intended to grant freedom from

⁴⁰ The environment and the Maya culture are one and the same.

⁴¹ Nature

⁴² The place of hot water

⁴³ A K'iche' word signifying “El tirador” or “The thrower”

⁴⁴ A K'iche' word signifying “Pajaro” or “Bird”

troubles (Lopez, Conversation, 2-14-2006), or *B'ak'it*⁴⁵, an altar below a great oak tree. meant to grant strength and courage. This oak tree, coincidentally, also illustrates a powerful material-symbolic equivalence. Slivers of oak bark are used to create a tea to strengthen bones (Lopez, Conversation, 2-14-2006), much like praying in front of this oak tree is meant to strengthen your spirit; all in all, the oak tree is used to strengthen you physically and spiritually to the core.

The second major connection to the natural world, and specifically trees, comes in the Maya belief of the tree equalling equilibrium. This primacy on trees echoes both the World Tree and Palenque. Armando notes that "*arboles son nuestro equilibrio*"⁴⁶ based in their ability to provide oxygen, water, climate control through sun and shade, and then even provide you a friend when you die in the form of a coffin (Lopez, Conversation, 2-19-2006). This is an interesting melding of modern society (coffins and the science of ecology) and ancient, fundamental Maya beliefs.

Yet there is perhaps no stronger relationship between both ancient and current Maya spiritual beliefs concerning the connection between the human and the natural realm than the one-to-one human-to-nature correspondence still seen in Maya philosophy today. Currently in Pachaj, this continuation is seen in stories, place names, taxonomies, and rituals. The story, which illustrates this, was told to me by Armando. It is the story of the beginning of corn as told to him by his family. It speaks of five women walking into town; due to their dress, a group of men approached them, attacked them, and violated them. When people arrived the next day at the tragic scene, they were amazed to find the women not women at all, but rather *nawales* of corn, each corresponding to one of the five types: yellow, white, red, black, and *salipor* (Lopez, Conversation, 2-14-2006).

⁴⁵ A K'iche' word signifying "Altar del encino" or "Altar of the oak"

⁴⁶ Trees are our equilibrium.

The equivalence of people and natural effects is seen in place names as well, specifically the mountains surrounding the Cantel community. Rising up as the highest mountain around for miles, *Ilicham*, in Spanish means “*la cuñada*” or in English, “the sister-in-law.” The reason for this naming is unfortunately lost to those I spoke with. But perhaps a more powerful example is the range of mountains looming above the town of *Xecam* where there slumbers a giant. The range is called *Pra’noj* and means the legs of the guardian. *Pra’* signifies “leg,” and *noj* means “counselor or guardian.” The range is the legs of a giant guardian whose head falls somewhere short of *Nawala*. His name is *Nawalnoj*, which translates literally to “guardian chief or lord,” *Nawal* meaning “lord, chief, spirit.” The imbuing of spirit and form to a mountain range suggests strong human-nature equivalence and cross-over (Mauricio, Conversation, 2-12-2006).

This cross-over and equivalence is seen in taxonomy as well, specifically that of corn, whose spiritual and symbolic importance we have already seen with regard to the World Tree. Much like in Palenque, where trees and people sprout from each other, body-part taxonomy from both the plant realm and the human realm is equally interchangeable. Whether it’s the Tz’utujil Maya addressing their bodies in vegetal metaphor or an ear of corn or stump of a tree being given human anatomical characteristics, the primacy of a human-nature culture connection is seen linguistically. Specifically, Armando explains the anatomy of corn beginning with its “hair” or “*wiq*” as the silky threads atop; moving to its “head” or “*jolom*” just under those threads; dead in the middle you find its “heart” or “*uq’ush*,” and once you reach the end of the ear, you have hit “the end” or “*ushe*.” Importantly, he noted, they only use the middle, “heart,” when planting so as reap the strongest, best, biggest corn; much as with people, the heart is the most important part of corn (Conversation, 2-14-2006).

This use of human anatomy for plants is seen also in the tree stump, which they cover over with soil upon cutting so as to cover its "heart" and not let the spirit loose or embarrass the tree (Lopez, Conversation, 2-26-2006; Levi, Correspondence, 3-6-2006).

And lastly, this one-to-one spiritual equivalence between humans and nature is seen in recent Maya ritual. Armando notes that grandparents in the past would plant a tree upon the birth of a child for the life of that child; a new tree life for a new human one (Conversation, 2-26-2006). And my last example concerning this is something Armando noted while we were sitting next to *Tzikin* discussing Maya ritual and staring at the sun. He noted that true *sacerdotes*, good *sacerdotes*, those not engaged with *Xib'alb'a*⁴⁷, did not use salt in their ceremonies, only sugar. Salt is used in ceremonies to injure people and cut off their life. Much like salt in land causes infertility, loss of productivity, and negates the possibility of life, salt in the ceremony causes exactly the same thing merely with regards to humans. This use of salt illustrates a sound nature-human equivalence through the use of agriculture metaphor.

Armando Lopez once noted, "*Si no tenemos árboles, no tenemos la vida*"⁴⁸ (Interview, 2-20-2006). This illustrates his grasp of modern science, and specifically ecology, with the necessary relationship between trees, oxygen, and the current ecosystem subsisting in Pachaj. And yet, one of the first things he told me when I arrived in Pachaj was slightly different. He said, "*Si no tenemos árboles, no podemos ser humano*"⁴⁹ (Conversation, 2-2-2006). This touches upon the relationship mentioned above and the necessity of trees for aerobic life, yet I think it says much more. It suggests that without trees, we fundamentally can no longer continue being human. That somehow our very human-being is dependent upon the existence and a relationship with these trees. This statement, I feel, gets at the core of the Maya

⁴⁷ A K'iche' word signifying "la obscuridad" or "the darkness," and in the *Popol Vuh*, the Underworld

⁴⁸ If we don't have trees, we don't have life.

⁴⁹ If we don't have trees, we can't be human.

spiritual connection to the natural world, and of specifically, the proper human place within this relationship. Indeed, Armando Lopez, on the day of our last talk, mentioned what he wants his people and his culture to get out of Chico Méndez, besides the trees, besides the water, besides the money. He noted that, in the end, with the help of *El Proyecto Chico Méndez*, “*El Maya va a entender cuando abajo de un árbol, ‘Mi equilibrio, mi hermano*⁵⁰” (Conversation, 2-26-2006).

Conclusion:

“*Es un parte de la cultura Maya que nuestras raíces no mueren*⁵¹” (Lopez, Conversation, 2-23-2006). With this line, Armando Lopez hits upon the very vein of his organization and himself through a vegetal metaphor referring to human cultural roots. The Maya culture does not want to see its roots die, whether it be those teachings of the ancestors, the symbolic importance of their dress, or the trees surrounding and organizing their cultural world. His project works to preserve not only those roots natural, but those cultural as well.

In the end, Armando Lopez and the Chico Méndez Project are about creating a sustainable reforestation organization; they are about strengthening the Pachaj/greater-Cantel economies through jobs in teaching, eco-tourism, and more. But perhaps most importantly, they are about empowering the K’iche’ Maya culture of which they are a part. This empowerment will come not only from the weaving of *ropa típica* and indigenous families’ hosting volunteers, but perhaps most profoundly through the rekindling and remembering of the Maya religious connection to the natural world. That through the re-greening of the mountains around them and the hard work necessary for this realization, his community will once again foster a respect for and proper

⁵⁰ The Maya is going to understand when underneath a tree, ‘my balance, my brother.’

⁵¹ It is a part of Maya culture that our roots don’t die.

relationship with their natural world, this is the goal of Armando Lopez; this is the goal of *El Proyecto Chico Méndez*.

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